



WICKED  
EARLS FOREVER

TAMMY ANDRESEN

MEARA PLATT - LAUREN SMITH

ANNABELLE ANDERS - AUBREY WYNNE

BELLA MOXIE - AMANDA MARIEL

ANNA ST. CLAIRE - COLLETTE CAMERON

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# CONTENTS

## Earl of Hawke

Meara Platt

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Also By Meara Platt

## Earl of Zennor

Lauren Smith

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

About Lauren

## Earl of Standish

Annabelle Anders

1. Two Headlines
2. Sunday Afternoon
3. A loophole?
4. Monday.

5. [The Details](#)
  6. [Courtship](#)
  7. [The Father](#)
  8. [Too Easy](#)
  9. [Waiting](#)
  10. [Final Answer](#)
  11. [Betrayed](#)
  12. [A New Family](#)
  13. [At the Altar](#)
  14. [Revelations](#)
  15. [Together](#)
  16. [The Article](#)
- [Westcliff's story, Piccadilly Player,](#)

[Earl of Griffith](#)

Aubrey Wynne

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Aubrey Wynne](#)

Earl of Madness

Bella Moxie

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Earl of Stone

Amanda Mariel

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

About Amanda

Earl of Halsburg

Anna St. Claire

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Earl of Renshaw](#)

Collette Cameron

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Earl of Evermore](#)

Tammy Andresen

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

Chapter 7

Epilogue

Other Titles by Tammy.

A note to readers:



EARL OF HAWKE

MEARA PLATT

# CHAPTER ONE

*DORSET, England*

*August, 1828*

“BIRDIE, come down out of that tree.” Silas Winborne, Earl of Hawke, frowned up at his best friend’s sister who was attempting to hide from him amid the apple trees dotting Brightwood Hall’s park on this scorching summer’s day and doing a dismal job of it. “You know you cannot avoid me.”

Perhaps it was the heat that had Hawke out of sorts, for it was barely ten o’clock in the morning and already the air was unpleasantly stifling and damp. All he wanted to do was shed his clothes and dive into the cool, crystal waters of the river that flowed behind his friend’s house.

But that enjoyment was for later.

Right now, he had to deal with Lady Mariah Wren Chesterfield, whom he had dubbed Birdie years ago and the pet name seemed to have stuck since everyone called her that now. He had to get the stubborn hellion down out of that tree.

“I can see you plain as day, you little nuisance.” Her mass of copper curls stood out amid the green foliage and her long

legs dangled off one of the tall branches. “Must I climb up after you?”

“Don’t be daft, Hawke,” she called down from her perch. “We’ll both fall and one of us is likely to break a bone. Hopefully, it will be you. Then you and my brother can both remain at Brightwood Hall, miserable and nursing your injuries.”

He sighed. “Your brother did not fall off his horse on purpose. Nor did he intend to break his leg.”

She tossed an apple at him, hitting him on the shoulder, although he was certain she meant to hit his head instead.

*Irritating girl.*

She was almost twenty and doing her best to avoid the London marriage mart. Not that he blamed her for wanting to avoid that crushing meat display. But what was she to do with the rest of her life if she did not marry? Was it her wish to live as an appendage to her brother and his wife? Well, Grant was not yet married.

Nor was he, for that matter.

*Thank The Graces.*

He could hardly manage his earldom which was teetering on the edge of ruin thanks to his father’s wastrel habits, and could not imagine adding a wife to his burdens, especially one as contrary as Grant’s little sister.

“I’ll strike a deal with you, Hawke. I will marry whenever you marry. I think it is eminently fair. Why should I be the only one pushed forward when you and Grant are eight and twenty and have titles attached to your names? It seems to me, you ought to be the ones to set the example for me and wed.”

“This isn’t about your brother or me. It is about getting you properly settled while you are in your prime and able to attract some unsuspecting sod who will love you to distraction.”

She almost tumbled out of the tree laughing. “How romantic you are. Well, at least you mentioned the word love in your sentence. I am sure it was a mistake on your part. Still, it must mean something since this is the first time I have ever heard you consider the possibility of a love marriage.”

“I only mentioned it because you are foolishly adamant on your terms.”

“Foolish? Finding someone to love is not foolish. You are the stupid clot who will not consider it. My brother is no better. I am years younger than the two of you but it seems I ought to be giving you lessons on this topic. Do you not wish for a life fulfilled? You cannot take a business arrangement to bed or hold a marriage contract in your arms. It simply will not work.”

“Nor will marrying a pauper work simply because you love him. A man with no funds cannot put food on your table or a roof over your head, so kindly do not drone on about matters of which you know little.”

“Ha! I know more about it than you do. Are you still determined to find an heiress to marry? If you were so fixed in your purpose, then why have you not done anything about it yet?” She hit him with another apple. “Do you want to know what I think?”

“No. And stop tossing unripe fruit at me.”

“You want love and are not nearly so opposed to it as you claim to be. I think you are secretly holding out for the woman

who will steal your heart. My brother must feel the same way or he would have married that horrid, but exceedingly wealthy, Lady Imelda, when he had the chance last year.”

“Why are you still going on about me and your brother? Our situation is not at all the same as yours.”

“How is it different from mine? Would you not feel trapped and miserable in an unhappy marriage? I wager your wife would not be too keen on it either. And speaking of unhappy, what of your children? Would they not suffer to see their parents so badly wed?”

“Birdie, stop.”

“I will not. Perhaps you are right in some measure, for a man can take on a mistress and set her up in a fine London townhouse where he can visit her every night. He could even be so crass as to use his wife’s funds for that purpose. I can assure you, if I were that wife, I would find the biggest gun available and shoot that bounder straight through his unfeeling heart.”

He groaned. “You are such a sweet, delicate thing.”

“I am sweet, although perhaps not so delicate. Having to fight for my future has left me quite angry at the two men I love most in the world. Of course I am referring to you and Grant. How can you betray me in this way and go along with Grant’s wishes to be rid of me?”

“Birdie, the last thing we wish to do is be rid of you. We are trying to protect you the best way we know how, and that is to see you safely married to a man of solid character.”

“And solid pockets.”

“Yes, he must be able to support you in style.”

“Oh, and he will easily do that by running through my dowry. My point is, a woman must be very careful in choosing the man she marries because she is truly bound to him. She loses control of her wealth. Once they are wed, it becomes his to do with as he pleases. She is helpless and will be trapped in her unhappiness if he does not treat her right.”

She threw another apple and caught him squarely in the head. “Blast it, Birdie. I am not that bounder, so why are you taking it out on me?”

“Because you are going along with my brother’s plan.”

“To find you a good man who will give you a fine home, plentiful food, and a generous allowance so you will never want for anything in your life. Yes, that is truly wicked of me.” He removed his jacket and set it aside on the grass.

“Don’t you dare come up! I’ll push you down, Hawke. And why are you so callously ignoring my feelings? Why should a woman not be cautious? How would I not be trapped if he does not care for me? And why would I want to give my body to a man who does not like me? I certainly don’t want children springing from the fruit of that clot’s loins.”

“Enough, Birdie. I’m climbing up.”

“I’ll kick you in the teeth if you do.” She swung her leg as warning, a surprisingly fine leg, not nearly as thin and spindly as he remembered.

He climbed up anyway. “Women marry for security. It is up to the men in her family to negotiate the best terms to provide for her future.”

“And what is to prevent her husband from stealing it anyway? Who is to stop him unless her family maintains control of her dowry which will never be acceptable to the

wretched husband thief? What about you? Why do you wish to marry? I'm speaking of men in general, not you specifically. I already know your reasons."

"Mine are the same as most. We marry to increase our coffers and sire heirs." He cast her a wry smile. "Hopefully heirs who will be responsible and not run up gambling debts to dissipate the fortune we toiled so hard to build."

She laughed. "You are such a cynic, Hawke. It is one of the few things I like about you."

He supposed he had gotten quite a bit jaded over the years. Only, he was not the frivolous son piling up the gaming debts. His father had been the one to tear through the family wealth, leaving Hawke the task of rebuilding the earldom.

He would have to marry an heiress if he wanted to rebuild fast enough to enjoy the fruits of the restoration. Marrying for love would mean having to work hard to his dying day in the hope enough of it could be put back in shape for the son who would inherit from him...and probably gamble it away.

It seemed the Hawke generations moved this way. Competent grandfather, incompetent father, competent son, incompetent offspring. He was born the competent son. Which meant his own son would be a wastrel unless the family curse was broken.

In any event, he would have to marry within the next year or two, just as Birdie remarked. He did not want to end up a ridiculous old man marrying a child bride in order to sire said wastrel offspring.

Well, he was still a good many years from that fate.

He steadied himself on the branch below hers and circled his arm around her waist. "Fight me and we shall both fall to

our deaths. I promise you, I shall shift my body to make sure I land on top of you. If anyone is to be squashed, it will be you.”

“You are so chivalrous, Hawke. Let go of me and I shall climb down on my own.”

“No tricks?”

“No tricks. I give you my word.”

He released her because as annoying a little brat as Birdie may be, she was no liar. If she gave you her word, she would see it through to her death.

He was much the same.

Had he not promised Grant to see Birdie well settled?

She was pretty enough to do well for herself in London, if only she would learn to keep her impertinent mouth shut.

Well, he enjoyed their banter.

She always kept him on his toes.

But most men preferred a less opinionated wife. Birdie was too quick-witted and clever for her own good. She could walk all over most men.

No man liked to be stepped on, especially by his wife.

Or lashed to ribbons by her sharp tongue.

He made his way down ahead of her and then reached up to put his hands around her waist to help her down those last few branches. Her gown was not proper tree-climbing attire and the fabric was snagging on every exposed twig. “You’ve put on a little weight,” he said, surprised by her supple softness as he closed his arms around her body.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”



“That you no longer look like a starved puppy.” His gaze raked over her shapely form, his heart taking an unexpectedly faster beat as he realized just how nicely she had filled out. She smelled nice, too. His nose had grazed the damp skin of her neck while he helped her down and he’d caught the fruity scent of her. Like sweet apples at harvest time when their light fragrance was at their tantalizing peak. “You are starting to look like a woman instead of an awkward little boy.”

How long had it been since he’d seen her last?

It could not have been more than three or four months... well, she’d mostly been in hiding up in her room, and he and Grant had mostly been drunk in celebration of another Season successfully avoiding the marriage noose.

“A little boy?” She picked up one of the fallen apples and was about to fling it at his head, but he took it out of her grasp and caught her around the waist again.

He drew her up hard against his body, expecting more of a fight from her and was surprised when she gave him so little resistance.

Flames shot through him.

He did his best to douse them.

This was Birdie, the most sharp-tongued, irritating, untamable girl he had ever met.

He plucked twigs out of her gorgeous mane of hair. “You have a nest growing on your head. Are you hiding any robin’s eggs in there?”

“Ha! Very funny.” She tried to wriggle out of his grasp.

More flames shot through him as she rubbed against him.

This could not be happening.

She was Grant's sister.

His body should not be responding to her in this way.

*Blessed saints.*

He must be coming down with a fever.

There was no other explanation for it.

But he had promised Grant he would take her to London and see her well settled, and this is precisely what he meant to do. The sooner it was accomplished, the sooner he would be rid of her.

Well, he liked Birdie.

He wasn't trying to be rid of her, just see her properly married.

Not to him, of course.

He was to take on the role of protective brother, which meant no romantic thoughts about her, and he was never going to kiss her.

She turned to face him the moment he released her.

Her eyes were the color of blazing emeralds and her mouth was a beautiful pout.

*Botheration.*

When had she become so beautiful?

Not just beautiful, but breathtaking.

All her scrawny, gangly parts had suddenly come together to form this exquisite...no, it could not possibly be happening.

This was Birdie.

He needed to promise himself never to kiss her.

*I...*

Good grief, why could he not do it?

But this was Grant's sister.

*I will not...*

No, he still could not make that promise to himself.

Her eyes still blazed at him like fiery emeralds.

He sighed as his mind began to race through all the uncomfortable questions raised by his sudden and incomprehensible desire to kiss Birdie. There were a thousand reasons why he should not. It was a terrible idea that had to violate every best friend code of honor in existence. And yet, there was one reason to overrule those thousand reasons...he would never have a moment's peace in the entire span of his life if he did not taste her lush, ruby lips.

Which led him to more perplexing questions.

When was he going to do it?

Where was he going to do it?

What if he wanted to do it again?

Which, Lord help him, appeared to be a very real possibility because she was even more delicious than those apples she kept tossing at him.

Then there was also the destruction to be wrought by this one ill-fated kiss he was suddenly determined to have.

That he *had* to kiss her or else be haunted and possessed by his longing for the rest of his life was a complete and utter shock to him.

And yet, he could not deny the feeling.

What would Grant do to him when he found out?

## CHAPTER TWO

“MY NAME IS MARIAH WREN CHESTERFIELD,” Birdie said, glowering at her brother as he lounged on the settee in the parlor of their elegant country manor, Brightwood Hall, his broken leg propped upon a pile of satin pillows and a glass of brandy in his hand. The windows were open to allow in an almost nonexistent breeze off the river that ran behind their house. “I wish you two hounds would stop calling me Birdie.”

“Now, Birdie,” Grant said, his manner irritatingly condescending.

“And I wish you would send your friend home,” she said, tossing a glare at Hawke. “We do not need him here.”

Hawke laughed. “I see your years at charm school have paid off marvelously. What man will ever resist you if you speak to him this way?”

She turned on him, angry that he was so handsome and smug. Well, he could not help looking good enough to melt her bones. Still, his dark blond hair and eyes the color of molten chocolate were thoroughly annoying.

Yes, eyes and hair could be annoying.

Especially when capping a body of utter perfection.

Hawke was tall, trim, and muscled, and he knew women could not resist him. Which only made her question why he was not yet married.

He could win the heart of the wealthiest heiress in the kingdom if he truly wished to marry into a fortune. “I do not care what other men think of me. My only concern is for my dearest, darling brother. Grant, I ought to stay here and nurse you back to health. Is this not what any good and loving sister would do?”

Her brother and Hawke choked on their laughter and wiped tears of mirth from their eyes at that remark.

“Would do?” Grant was still wiping tears from his eyes. “Yes, Birdie. But you haven’t so much as offered me an extra pillow for my leg in the week since I injured myself. Do not pretend to nurse me now. You’ll probably do more damage than good.”

All right, she could have taken better care of Grant instead of quietly cheering over her mistaken belief it would postpone her debut for another year, at which time she would be almost one and twenty and could argue she was too old to be trotted out with the other young fillies for display.

In hindsight, she might have done a better job of hiding her glee over her newly found freedom to wander their estate without his constant vigilance. She had not counted on him asking his best friend and fellow marriage-trap-evader to take over the chore of sponsoring her come-out.

Hawke’s estate was next door to theirs and their families had been friends and neighbors for decades. The magnificent Hawke Grange had a sweeping overlook directly onto the English Channel, a splendid garden that attracted all manner of birds and butterflies throughout the seasons, and a

comfortable, cozy feel to all the rooms in the manor house that was a second home to her.

“Hawke, I am sure it is asking too much of you to take me on for an entire Season. Not to mention the months of preparation required beforehand.” She batted her eyelashes at him, hoping to appear charming.

He merely arched an eyebrow in response. “Do you have something in your eyes, Birdie? Why are you blinking them so dementedly?”

She sighed and tossed him a scowl.

He responded with a melting smile.

She tried to ignore the delicious effect he had on her. “You have so much to do at home, Hawke. It would be cruel of me to take you away from all your important work.”

Hawke Grange had an enormous library, a gorgeous ballroom that also doubled as a music salon for elegant concerts, summer and winter parlors, summer and winter dining rooms, and at least a dozen bedchambers, including the earl’s massive quarters that Hawke now occupied since he became earl.

The house was beautiful even in its faded glory.

Restoring it would have to wait because his entire estate was in dire condition thanks to his wastrel father. Hawke did not have the time to escort her around London when he had so many important responsibilities beyond merely repairing the house that required his attention.

“Not at all,” Hawke said, an eyebrow still arched in amusement. “You are a much needed distraction from my duties. I will enjoy helping you prepare for your debut. For this, you will require an entirely new wardrobe.”

“Grant! It is a ridiculous waste of your precious blunt. Are you going to allow him to spend your money in this spendthrift way?”

“Yes. Frayed muslin and faded cambric will not do for our Lady Bird.”

She gasped. “You cannot call me that! I know what sort of women are called ladybirds.”

“Lady Birdie sounds even more ridiculous,” Grant shot back. “We cannot call you that, either.”

“Here’s a radical idea,” she said, unable to hide her sarcasm. “How about you call me Lady Mariah. And my gowns are not frayed or worn down, but they are quite pretty as well as practical.”

“Or we could call you Lady Wren,” Hawke mused.

She gnashed her teeth. “That is still a bird.”

“But that is also your name,” Hawke pointed out. “*Mariah Wren* Chesterfield, as you remarked earlier. I haven’t forgotten who you are, much as I sometimes wish I could.”

“Why are you both so determined to keep a bird in my name? Is it some perverse game you two are playing? At my expense, I might point out.” She crossed her arms over her chest and tipped her chin into the air, hoping to look disdainful and impertinent while she frowned at Hawke. “Fine, I can also play this game. I could marry you, Hawke, and then I would be Lady Hawke. It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t think,” he and Grant responded at the same time.

She ignored both men. “I would even let you call me Birdie whenever we were tucked away in the privacy of your



enormous bedchamber.”

Both men gasped.

“What is so shocking about it? We would be husband and wife. While my dowry will not solve all your ills, it will go a long way toward restoring many of the assets your father dissipated to nothing with his drunken binges.”

Oops, perhaps she had gone too far.

Hawke did not look pleased.

Indeed, he looked angry enough to erupt like a volcano. “Are you through belittling me, Birdie?”

“I wasn’t belittling you at all. How could you think I ever would? You and Grant are the finest men I know. But I am serious. Why bother with London when we can settle things right here? I love your house and have always loved it, as you well know. My dowry is of sufficient size to restore the most run down parts of your manor and still have a little left over for whatever else you need fixed on your estate. I am not afraid of working hard beside you. Nor will I be a costly bride since I prefer running around in my old clothes. However, I will insist on one proviso in our marriage contract.”

Hawke ran a hand across the nape of his neck, still looking quite angry with her. “What is that proviso? Not that I care or will allow it to sway me in the least. You and I are not getting married, so put it out of your head at once.”

Obviously, he did care or he would not have asked.

Nor was she going to dismiss the possibility of marrying him.

She knew Hawke sometimes better than he knew himself.

He was going to blow up for certain over her next words, but she had better set the ground rules now if there was any chance they might wed.

Those chances were slim to nil, but not entirely hopeless.

She cleared her throat. “If you ever use so much as a farthing of my dowry to acquire a London townhouse for your mistress, I will burn it down to the ground with you still in it.”

Hawke tossed back his head and laughed heartily.

Grant merely slapped a hand across his forehead and groaned. “Birdie, you almost had me thinking the idea was not a bad one. I know Hawke, were he your husband, would always provide for you and protect you. But I doubt he wishes to attach himself to an ill-tempered Harpy who will be out for blood at his slightest indiscretion.”

“Slight? You call violating one’s marriage vows something to be shrugged off as unimportant?”

Grant rolled his eyes. “We are not speaking of a love match here.”

“Oh, I see. You two apes still think marriage is a business proposition and your wives won’t care if you sleep in someone else’s bed. Not that what a man does with his mistress can ever be considered sleeping. Tell me, do women enjoy being poked all night?”

Grant growled in warning. “Birdie! I’d put you over my knee and spank you if I could get off this settee and stand up without passing out in pain. Who taught you to use such vulgar language?”

“You did.”

Her brother sighed and sank back against the pillows propping his back. “It isn’t fair, you know. You cannot spy on us while we are drinking in my study and having our conversations. Men talk to each other differently outside the presence of ladies. Hawke, I apologize for my sister’s impertinence. Please, take her to London and do what you can for her. I beg you.”

Hawke’s eyes were glittering with mirth. “No need to beg. I shall take great pleasure in turning Birdie into a *ton* diamond.”

Grant snorted. “You think you can do this?”

Hawke nodded.

Her brother grinned wickedly. “Care to wager on it?”

Birdie gasped. “I forbid you to do any such thing!”

Hawke took one of her fisted hands into his grasp. “We are jesting, you little nuisance. No amount of polish will turn you into anything more enticing than a lump of coal.”

She punched his shoulder. “You insufferable clot! I can be a diamond if I want to be.”

He grabbed her other fisted hand and now held both of them in one of his. Up close, he was bigger and stronger than she realized.

Even his hands were big enough to swallow both of hers and keep them held together without effort.

He was handsomer, too.

His stern expression had her melting instead of frightening her, and there was a smolder in his dark eyes that sent tingles through her. “Then do it. Prove me wrong, Birdie.”

“Fine! I will be the most fabulous diamond London has ever seen. I...for pity’s sake, Hawke! You just tricked me, didn’t you? You purposely enraged me so I would agree.”

His lips turned up slightly at the corners. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

She slumped her shoulders and sighed.

The wretched man always seemed able to remain a step ahead of her. “But you cannot make me marry someone I do not love. Promise me, Hawke. I’ll behave,” she said as he pulled another twig out of her hair, “but you cannot give me to just anyone.”

“Love it shall be for you, Birdie. Love it must be. I’ll not have any of my friends shot or burned to ashes because they took a toe out of line.”

“You are still mocking me,” she said in dismay, wondering how she ever thought Hawke would understand. “But I daresay, you are the fool. What is so wrong with keeping to one’s wedding vows? Loving and honoring your spouse. Being faithful to each other.”

She understood Grant and Hawke needed funds to secure their estates. But they were both smart and hardworking, and had done wonders stepping into their titles and managing their difficult inheritances.

Hawke was now Earl of Hawke.

Grant was now Earl of Chesterfield.

Both had assumed their roles while in their early twenties. The deaths of their fathers so close in time had brought the two of them even closer together. They were friends, but considered themselves as brothers.

She was the awkward, younger sister always left out.

They had no idea how hard it was on her, never having a mother's guidance since her own had died when she was only five years old. Hawke's mother had been especially kind to her, but she was gone now, too. "I suppose Aunt Verity will serve as my chaperone?"

"Yes, this is what Grant and I had in mind." Hawke nodded. "She isn't the spryest, so we may be limited in our excursions. But I doubt you are eager to jump into the social whirl the moment we reach London."

She nodded. "I hope to avoid it as much as possible. Besides, I am not officially out yet."

"Nor are you close to ready to attend your first ball. Our local assemblies are nothing like those held in London. No, we'll have to start slowly and ease you into Town life. A few quieter parties at first. A tea. A picnic. A musical soiree."

"Musical soirees?" Birdie groaned. "Must we?"

"Yes, we must. They are not so bad when the host or hostess engages a professional singer or musician to entertain us. The ones to avoid are those where no professionals are involved. Unfortunately, this happens all too often. Listening to out of tune debutantes torture us with their shrill singing voices is a rite of passage for all of us. I shall be suffering even more than you because I have already endured countless years of this absurd ritual. My ears have yet to fully recover from Lady Marston's daughter destroying that Italian aria last year."

Despite her attempts to remain irritated at the two men, she could not. Especially not with Hawke. He had a way about him that always made her smile.

She cast him an endearing smile now. "All right."

“My townhouse is available for your use. Grant has no need to open up yours. I’ll stay at my club so there are no questions raised. I’ll stop by every day to take you out. The invitations ought to start coming in within a day of our arrival. I’ll sort through them and accept those I deem suitable. I shall be your escort everywhere you go.”

She glanced down at her hands which were still trapped in his.

He cast her a wry smile as he released her. “Our little bird is about to test her wings.”

She rolled her eyes. “Good heavens, Hawke. I am all grown up and quite able to fly on my own. London is simply not a place I wish to go. But I said I will do it, so I shall grit my teeth and bear it for as long as I can.”

Hawke glanced at her brother before returning his gaze to her. “I shall protect you, Birdie. All jesting aside. I know who the bounders are and will not let any of them get near you.”

It all began to sink in now.

Her life was about to change.

No more heavenly summer days tagging along with Grant and Hawke, for even though they had not particularly wanted her around, they were never unkind to her and rarely chased her away when she followed them.

In truth, they were remarkably accepting of her.

But they expected her to leave them now and set up her own household elsewhere in England.

Her heart was not ready to accept these changes.

Perhaps it was because she loved them both so dearly and could not imagine herself loving anyone else the way she did

them. Who else could she speak to so bluntly and never worry about how they would take it?

Grant had to indulge her because he was her brother and they were blood related.

Hawke never had to be kind to her or indulge her.

Yet, he always did.

And she could be quite the snippy brat, at times. Most times, if she wished to be honest about it...which she did not.

He always forgave her.

He was also the first to notice if she was sad or afraid and would always be there to comfort and protect her. "I suppose I ought to let Aunt Verity know the plan. When are we to leave for London?"

She was trying very hard to hold back her tears.

They would never stop thinking of her as a silly girl if she broke down now and cried.

Hawke was eyeing her intently, his gaze on her trembling lips. "Next week, I think. I'll need a few days to write ahead and reserve rooms for us along the way. Two nights until we reach London because I don't think Verity will hold up too well in the carriage. I dare not overdo it for her. I'll also write ahead to my housekeeper and have her prepare your bedchambers."

"Next week it shall be," she said with a snuffle. "We will be ready."

She turned to hurry out of the parlor, but Hawke caught her by the wrist. "It will be all right, Birdie. I promise you, and you know I never go back on a promise."

She nodded. "Let go of me, Hawke. I know you'll take care of me. You and Grant were never irritating in this way. I just need time alone to absorb these changes."

"All right." But instead of letting her go, he drew her to him for a hug. "Don't be afraid to grow up, Birdie. We all must do it sooner or later. I shall be with you every step of the way. I will not leave your side even for a day."

She laughed even though she was still on the verge of tears. "Can you stand me for that long?"

"Yes, you were never a nuisance to me...even if at times I claimed you were. Are we all right now?"

She nodded against his chest, for he still held her in his solid arms and she had leaned her head against him.

"We'll start preparing for London tomorrow. We still have a lot of work to do before we leave."

She glanced up at him. "What do you mean?"

He ran his fingers lightly through her hair.

At first, she thought he was being kind and gently putting order to her unbound curls, but she realized her mistake when he said, "You cannot run around London with your hair in an unfashionable tumble and birds nesting in the tangles atop your head, not to mention the mess you have made of your clothes. Why are the hems of your gowns always muddied?"

Had she thought him nice?

Well, he usually was.

But he was also competitive and determined when he caught hold of an idea. He did not do anything in halfway measures. Since he had agreed to ready her for the marriage mart, by heaven, he was going to do it and in his own Hawke



way. This meant she was not merely going to London. No, she was going to take the town by storm and have suitors lining up outside their door within days of her arrival.

Dukes, marquesses, earls.

Perhaps even a prince or two.

She was not going to be just another pretty debutante.

Hawke was going to make certain she was a diamond of the first water.

*The* diamond of the season.

She pushed out of his embrace. “You know, there are times I hate you, Hawke.”

“No, you don’t. You may disagree with my tactics, but you know I am always thinking of what’s best for you.”

“You are thinking of what you and Grant have determined is best for me. If you believe I am not going to fight you with every breath in my body, then the pair of you have another thing coming.”

Grant groaned. “Birdie, do behave. Can you not be biddable just this once?”

“No, not when it comes to my future. Besides, I know how to behave among the Upper Crust. I am not that dense. What is so wrong with my being true to myself whether here or in London? I will have my hair done up properly and take care not to soil my gowns or elegant slippers when we are there. But we have not left here yet and it was raining yesterday, so not everything had dried by the time I—”

“By the time you climbed your tree?” Hawke intoned.

“I was checking on a bird’s nest.”

Hawke tugged another twig out of her disheveled curls. “Which appears to have fallen on your head.”

“I thought men liked wild, unmanageable manes of hair on a woman.” She unpinned her tangle of curls and tossed her hair back, making a show of having it tumble long and loose down her back.

He was casting her that intent stare again.

Was it true? Did wild hair on a woman arouse men?

Even one as cynical and controlled as Hawke?

“I shall come by tomorrow to inspect your gowns, Birdie. Do not bother to start packing yet. Just set out the ones you would like to take. I’ll decide whether they ought to be returned to your wardrobe or packed in your trunk.”

“Grant! Are you going to let your friend talk to me in that highhanded manner?” She turned to her brother in desperation. Is this what her months in London were going to be? Hawke giving her orders and she obeying with a flutter of her lashes and an insincere smile?

“Of course, I am.” Her brother merely reached over to the small side table by the settee and poured himself another brandy from the bottle standing on it. “He’s your friend, too. And you will not find a better one. You cannot behave like an uncaged bird in London.”

“An uncaged bird? So you mean for Hawke to keep me trapped in a cage?”

“Stop responding to all I say with Shakespearean theatrics. First, you can never go about Town without a chaperone. There are parts that are quite dangerous.”

“I am aware. I have no intention of running on my own through Cheapside or the Covent Garden bordellos at night.”

“Lord, spare me,” her brother muttered, glancing up at the heavens before continuing. “Second, you will have rivals on the marriage mart, some of whom will stoop low indeed to see you ruined and knocked out of competition. You are beautiful enough to be considered a serious rival.”

“Beautiful?” Her genuine laughter was punctuated by snorts. “Is that so? You wouldn’t know it the way you two talk about me.”

“Third, you are a Chesterfield and a lady. You must never forget you are the daughter of an earl and sister to the current earl. Hawke is just making certain others know you are quality since you never go out of your way to make it evident. I will not have the gossip rags declaring you look like the Chesterfield’s flea-bitten cat.”

“Oh, now I am not merely a hoyden but a flea-bitten cat?” She made an obsequious bow, and then curled her hands into paws in front of her. “Meeoww...may I be dismissed now, your lordship? I hope you and your pur-r-rfect friend do not mind if steal away to lick those pesky fleas off me.”

Hawke emitted a choking sound.

Her brother took a hefty gulp of his brandy. “Gad, Birdie. Must you always be so sarcastic? If I did not love you so much, I would wring your neck.”

“If I did not love you so much, Grant, I would do the same to yours.”

Hawke’s deep chuckle resonated through the room. “Blessed saints, you are a handful. I’m not sure the *ton* will

survive you.” He rubbed a hand across his nape again. “In truth, I’m not sure I will survive you.”

“Oh, you will. This is the insufferable thing about you, Hawke. You seem able to read my thoughts and cut me off before I can carry out my plans. But I hope these detestable *ton* traditions fall by the wayside soon. How can they possibly survive into the next decade? Do you not see how false and decadent these horrid rituals have become?”

She expected a vehement denial, but Hawke surprised her by turning thoughtful. “England is changing and the old ways will soon die out. Your wish will be granted, but not for several years yet.”

Grant nodded. “One even sees it in our clubs. Membership is dwindling and some of what went on in the earlier days is no longer tolerated.”

“What went on?” Birdie asked.

Hawke cast her a gentle smile. “Not for your impertinent ears. You are far too innocent to be told the truth.”

She left the men to their brandies, something they never drank before late afternoon. But this morning was an exception, for Grant was bored and probably feeling quite miserable. Hawke, being his best friend, came over daily to help attend to the Chesterfield affairs Grant could not handle while confined by his broken leg.

In truth, it was good of Hawke and proof of what a true friend he was because his own estate affairs were plenty to handle and no one would have faulted him for declining Grant’s request for help.

Being Hawke, he came to her brother’s rescue before ever being asked.

She spared a final glance at him on her way out.

He would probably nurse his drink and hardly take a sip because his father's drunken ways had affected him more deeply than he ever would let on. She supposed this is why he felt such a dire need to be in control of everything around him.

She had never seen Hawke drunk and did not expect she ever would.

He would never let himself go.

Never put himself in a weakened position.

She went upstairs in search of her aunt. Verity was her father's older sister. Apparently, she had been quite pretty as a young woman. But her hair was gray now and her complexion marred by wrinkles. She had been a clever woman, too, but her sharp wits were now fading. She tired easily these days and appeared more scattered.

Birdie knocked lightly at her bedchamber door.

Verity spent most of her time in there now, only coming down to join her and Grant for supper. Hawke was also a regular at their dining table. Verity was quite fond of him, too. Birdie knew she would have no objections to being swept along with her to London in his company. "May I come in?" she called through the door.

Her aunt's maid opened it. "Good morning, Lady Mariah."

"Good morning, Helena. How is my aunt today?" She stepped into the room and saw the bed was empty.

"Moving a little slowly, but she is in her dressing room. I was just assisting her with her gown. Do come this way."

"Good morning, Birdie," her aunt said, casting her a genuinely warm smile.

“Good morning, Aunt Verity.” The two of them chatted about inconsequential matters while waiting for Helena to leave and provide them a moment alone.

Helena, being wise and sensitive to whatever a situation called for, made an excuse to scramble out of her aunt’s chamber. She walked out muttering something about freshening the gown Verity had worn yesterday, and shut the door behind her.

Birdie took the opportunity to tell her aunt of their plans. “So you see, Grant and Hawke have decreed we are to go to London next week.”

Her aunt nodded. “Oh, dear. That is quite an upheaval.”

Birdie took her hand and led her to one of the elegant chairs beside the hearth. “If it is too much for you, then I will let Grant know we cannot go. We’ll simply have to postpone my debut for another—”

Her aunt laughed. “We will do no such thing, you little scamp. Your brother is right. It is most important for you to start looking for a husband. You must not waste your life as I have done with mine.”

“Aunt Verity, why do you feel yours has been wasted? Are you not happy here?”

“I love it here. You and Grant are so good to me and give me enormous pleasure.” She held onto Birdie’s hand. “But what have I done with my life other than be a burden to my brother first, and on his passing, becoming a burden to Grant?”

“No, we adore having you with us.”

“Birdie, I do not want you to become like me. We are very much alike, you know. Smart-mouthed and able to think for ourselves. But given all my advantages in life, what have I

accomplished? I became lazy and resigned myself to a life as a spinster aunt.”

She put up a hand when Birdie attempted to protest.

“No, my dear. I am not unhappy with my lot. But you have more determination than I ever had. Do not squander it. There was a young man I loved...oh, so long ago. But he was already taken and my heart would not accept anyone else.”

“This is how I feel. I want to marry for love and not for any of those silly reasons Grant and Hawke are always spouting.”

“Those boys love you, Birdie. They will not accept any man who offers for you unless they are certain he is of the highest character and will treat you well. Nor will they ever accept him over your objections. They may lecture you endlessly about what a good choice he is, but if you say no, then it will be no for them, too.”

“I hope so.”

“Do not be so quick to dismiss a suitor. There are plenty of good men out there. Even if you decide that none of them will do, then make a plan for your own future. I have been happy here, but I could die tomorrow and no one will miss me.”

“Aunt Verity, we—”

“Yes, Birdie. You will mourn me, but you will never wonder how you will ever get on without me. I have not given all I should for you and Grant. Nor have I done much of anything with my life except sit in my bedchamber and write dull letters to my old friends. Dull because I have accomplished nothing useful with my time. I think this is my greatest regret. When I could not have this young man I loved,

I shut myself away and resolved to live out my days as an earl's spinster sister...now an earl's maiden aunt."

Birdie wanted to assure her that she was more than that, but her aunt would not listen.

"I could have involved myself in charitable work. Taken up causes. Assisted with the wounded soldiers or orphaned children. I could have joined a bird watcher's society or drawn the local flora and fauna for scientific research. But I did nothing beyond an occasional paltry gesture. We are so much alike in many ways and it worries me a little. Do not follow in my footsteps and hide away if you do not find love."

"I fully intend to make a life for myself with or without a husband."

Her aunt chuckled. "Yes, you have a boundless spirit I never possessed. We are different in this way. I was an independent thinker, but had I married, I would have been a biddable and obedient wife. My young man was a gentle soul who would have taken care of me and given me a good life. However, a man like that is not the right one for you."

"What do you mean?"

"You need someone who will encourage your ideas, challenge you to think, and never stifle you. Yes, you want him to be a good man, but he must also appreciate your goals and dreams and allow you to fulfill them. You can make a difference to others, for this is your strength. Do not sit back and let the world pass you by as though you are no more important than a speck of sand."

She cast her aunt a wry smile. "I am too mouthy ever to pass unnoticed. Especially when I am riled about something."



“Give your brother some credit. He knows what you need. This is why he will not trust you to anyone but Hawke. In truth, I think Hawke knows you even better than your brother does. At times, he knows you better than you know yourself.”

She sighed. “Well, he outsmarted me into agreeing to this London trip.”

“Birdie, have you ever considered Hawke for your husband?”

She laughed. “I suggested it to him and Grant moments ago. The idea was soundly dismissed. Nor will I have Hawke if he thinks to keep to his casual ways. I will not share my husband with other women. So, he is not in the running and I doubt he ever will be.”

Verity patted her hand. “Well, we shall see what happens in London, won’t we?”

## CHAPTER THREE

“GOOD GRIEF, Birdie. There isn’t a decent gown among all of these,” Hawke muttered the following morning while standing with his hands on his hips, staring at the pile of garments atop her bed.

He had just finished going through them and tossing each one onto the do-not-pack pile. Nor did she appreciate his comments as he dismissed one after the other, each time with a unique reason.

Hideous color.

Are you sure this is not your grandmother’s cast off nightgown?

This one looks like a child’s smock.

Too many bows.

Not enough bows.

“I beg your pardon? Are you done demolishing all I hold dear? These gowns are all lovely.” She glowered at Hawke, having to look up at the big oaf as they stood at the foot of her bed facing each other and ready to do battle.

“Are you going to be stubborn and fight me at every turn?” He sighed and then began sorting through the pile again. “Of course, you are. You wouldn’t be Birdie if you sat by sweetly

and uttered not a peep. All right, let's have another look. Perhaps one or two are salvageable."

"They are all salvageable. Besides, who appointed you London's modiste to the Crown? You don't know the first thing about women's clothing other than how to peel them off your paramours with your own sticky hands and overblown sense of prowess."

"Birdie!" Verity intoned, tossing her a frown. "Honestly, child. Enough!"

"Why should I hold my tongue when all he's done since arriving in my bedchamber is insult my taste in clothes. I would also like to point out that he is in my bedchamber, someplace no man has a right to be."

"Hawke does not count as a man," Grant said, then laughed at his own statement. "You know what I mean. He is like a brother to you. The point is, we are all in here trying to help you pack."

Her aunt was also in her bedchamber, and both she and Grant had been nodding in agreement to all of Hawke's inane remarks regarding her attire.

"What is so wrong with my gowns?" She tried not to sound hurt, but how could she not be humiliated by all of them?

"Suffice it to say, they are not suitable for London," Grant said.

"How are they not suitable?"

"You heard what Hawke said."

"And you sit there bobbing your head like a brainless puppet?" Oh, now she was lashing out at Grant.

She sighed. “Sorry. But would you not be outraged if Hawke went through all your garments including unmentionables and criticized them, too? What do I need with lace and silk chemises when no one is going to see me in them but me? Lace is itchy and silk makes me sweat.”

“Men sweat. Ladies delicately perspire,” Verity remarked.

“There is nothing delicate about what drips off me when I wear silk under my gowns.”

Hawke slapped a hand to his forehead. “I have never heard of such a thing. Are you being purposely difficult?”

“Yes.”

He tried to appear angry...well, he was angry. But his lips were also twitching to hide his grin because he never minded her defiance nearly as much as he claimed. “Then stop it at once.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why must I have silk and lace unmentionable? I know men behave like idiots at the slightest glimpse of lace, especially when it is peeking out from a woman’s bosom. But do you really want men staring at my chest...which happened to be nonexistent until six months ago when I suddenly inflated like a balloon? Well, two balloons.”

Hawke made another of his choking sounds.

He seemed to be doing a lot of that around her lately.

Grant groaned. “Honestly, Birdie. Hawke deserves battle pay.”

“Hah! He just has to stand beside me and keep the boundaries away. I’m the one who has to do all the work. Do you think it is easy to keep my opinions to myself and smile

prettily while some dolt of a duke not so subtly checks my teeth and rump?”

Hawke caught her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. “Are you through with your diatribe? May we move on? There’s still plenty to do to get you ready.”

“Do I get to pack my own practical and comfortable unmentionables?”

“Just a few to hold you until we get to London and purchase proper ones for you.”

“Hawke, seriously. What’s wrong with my preferring comfort over style?”

“There is nothing wrong with it in principle,” he said, obviously sensing her distress and deciding to gentle his manner. “But we are creating an entire package here, one meant to entice and allure. Everything matters down the finest details. Trust me, you will feel like a woman in silk and lace, even if no one but you ever gets to see what you are wearing under your gown.”

“Well, you certainly won’t get a peek.” She turned to Grant. “Are you in agreement with this hogwash?”

Her brother’s grin was infuriatingly smug. “Yes, Birdie. Hawke knows what he is talking about. You would do well to listen.”

“To a know-it-all rake? I don’t mind listening, but this is no lecture. It is a frontal assault on my pride. Are you satisfied, Hawke? You have made brutal fun of everything I own.”

He took gentle hold of her shoulders again and turned her to face him. “You know I would never make fun of you. But you’ve taken every one of my helpful comments badly and driven me to the point of exasperation. I’m sorry if I lost

patience and was curt with you. Your clothes are lovely, but more suited to our more casual life in Dorset. That is all I am saying. The *ton* can be cruel. They will not spare your feelings if you go about London looking like my housekeeper's poor country cousin."

He tucked a finger under her chin to hold her gaze to his. "Truly, I apologize if we were harsh with you. I know we are asking a lot. But you can do this. It is time you showed the world you are a diamond."

She cast him a grumpy smile. "One with a lot of rough edges."

Hawke grinned back at her. "Perhaps you need a little polishing, but the diamond is there. Unique and sparkling. Let me have another look at your gowns. I may have been too hasty in dismissing all of them."

This is why she liked Hawke.

He could be a clot, but he could also be the kindest man alive.

He drew out two gowns from the pile. "Well, these will do nicely for the more casual affairs. Afternoon tea. A shopping outing."

He had selected an ivory muslin with an overlay of sarcenet in a matching hue. The sarcenet was embroidered with wildflowers at the hem and bodice.

It was her favorite.

He must have known it.

Or sensed it.

He was rather good at picking up on her feelings.

He held the gown lightly against her body. “Quite pretty, actually.”

He cast her a melting smile. “All right, we are making progress. One gown now going onto the to-be-packed pile. This one, too.” He held up a forest green muslin. “That shade brings out the emerald of your eyes and the lustrous copper of your hair.”

“Lustrous?” She snorted out a laugh.

Hawke groaned. “Must I teach you how to laugh, as well? Honestly, Birdie. Where is that delicate trill of yours? Your laughter must flit on the wind like a lovely butterfly caught in a soft breeze.”

“That’s right,” Grant chimed in from his seat on her vanity stool, his busted leg stretched out before him and his crutches propped against the vanity. “Try it, Birdie. You cannot go to London laughing like a sow.”

“Thank you, brother dear. Any other pearls of wisdom you wish to cast before your swine of a sister?”

“Don’t get riled. I’m just trying to help. You have a pleasant voice, and as Hawke said, a charming lilt to your laughter when you are not trying to sound like a warthog.”

Hawke cleared his throat to regain her attention while he held up another of her gowns. “This morning gown is quite pretty, too. The mix of cream and brown suits you. I suppose this pale peach will also suit.”

He moved away and began to rummage through her drawers.

She raced to his side as he held up the only lacy chemise she possessed. “Stop! Put that back! Who gave you permission to search my personal belongings?”

He held the chemise up against her body. “This one goes on the pile. But it is the only one that will do for London and you’ll need a dozen more just like it.”

“Dear heaven, everyone will think I am your mistress if you walk into the modiste’s shop and start ordering lacy chemises for me.” She held up her hand when he began to protest. “Aunt Verity will come in with me. You will stand outside the shop with the carriage and horses.”

He said nothing, but his look revealed he would do no such thing.

Why was he so determined to control every stitch of clothing she wore, even down to the garters on her stockings?

She eventually wore him down so that he agreed to most of the clothes she had put out in the first place. As well he should since they were clean and in excellent condition.

“All right,” he said, rubbing his neck in obvious frustration, “let’s move on to your hair.”

“Do you mean my gloriously lustrous and bountiful mane?” She had not done it up yet, simply left it long and loose as she had done yesterday, purely for the purpose of irritating him as she now began to seductively toss it back and forth.

Hawke folded his arms across his chest and leaned a shoulder against the wall while she tried to beguile him with what she hoped was a seductive dance.

He watched her as she continued her impression of Salome and her dance of the seven veils, saying nothing as she slowly twirled around her bedchamber, flicking her hair against his chin and dropping imaginary veils in front of him.



He looked as bored as a man could possibly look without falling asleep. “Birdie, should I summon a doctor? Or perhaps a priest? Have demons suddenly taken possession of your body? You are moving about quite...strangely.”

Grant and Verity tried to contain their laughter but failed.

“Yes, Hawke. Go ahead and summon a doctor to heal your broken nose after I punch you and break it, you big oaf. Summon a priest, too. He will need to give you last rites if you open your smart mouth again and—”

Grant burst out laughing. “By heaven! You two ought to go on the comedy stage. I haven’t enjoyed a play this much in years.”

“Indeed!” Verity was mirthfully dabbing her eyes with one of her neatly embroidered handkerchiefs.

Hawke shook his head and grinned.

Perhaps she should have taken it in good humor as well, but it all suddenly became too much for her. Everyone wanted to change her, to make her become the woman they wanted her to be.

No one had a care for who she wanted to be.

The worst part about it was, she did not know who she wanted to be either.

She hurried out of the house, knowing neither Verity nor Grant could follow. This only left Hawke to avoid, which wasn’t going to happen since she heard his footsteps pounding down the stairs after her.

She quickened her pace to get as far as she could from Brightwood Hall.

When he continued to follow her, she took off at a full run.

Her heart was painfully beating in too fast a rhythm by the time she reached the bank of the river and sank onto the grass to have a good cry.

She heard Hawke approach and stop at her side.

He stood over her for a long moment, casting his shadow across her body. Then he sighed and knelt beside her. “Blast it, Birdie,” he muttered as he took her in his arms. “I know I am being hard on you.”

“Then why do it?” She turned to look up at him, blinking tears from her eyes to see him more clearly. The sun was behind him, casting him in a halo of light as though he were some sort of angel.

He was too wickedly handsome ever to be mistaken for an angel.

A constant breeze blew off the water and ruffled his hair.

Ah, yes. It was her hair that had started them on this path. She supposed her mane looked like a hornet’s nest after she’d made herself dizzy whipping it about in that stupid dance. Her wild curls now flailed in the wind and whipped across her eyes.

Hawke brushed them back with a gentle hand.

She eased out of his grasp and moved away to sit under the shade of an oak tree. It was a grand old relic that had sprouted from the loamy earth a century ago and stood proudly beside the edge of the river, its bountiful tapestry of leaves providing relief from the August heat.

Hawke followed and settled beside her. “Care to talk about what’s really bothering you?”

“Is it not obvious? I do not want to leave here.”

“I know, but you must, for your own good.” He took her back in his arms and now ran his knuckles lightly along her cheek.

“How is it for my own good?”

He emitted a long, ragged breath. “Grant did not wish to speak of this to you yet, but the truth will come out sooner or later.”

She wiped more tears from her eyes, brushing them away with the back of her hand. “What truth?”

“He is considering selling Brightwood Hall.”

“What?” She had been breathing hard from exertion a moment ago, but now she could hardly catch her breath at all. “Why would he ever do such a thing?”

“It is one of the few Chesterfield properties of significant value that is not entailed. The proceeds would go a long way toward restoring the rest of the estate and get the Chesterfield earldom thriving again. He knows how much you love the house and thought being married and established in your own household would soften the blow when you found out. He was going to sell it after you were happily settled with your husband.”

“And not before?”

“No, he cares too much for you to consider putting it up for market now.”

“What’s to become of Aunt Verity when he does sell?”

“She will go with him wherever he chooses to reside. You know he will never leave her homeless.”

She eased out of his arms and leaned her back against the ragged bark of the oak, needing the solid feel of its hard trunk

to hold her steady.

Her life was spinning out of control.

She closed her eyes. “Why will he not find an heiress to marry? Then he could hold onto our home. You and he are always spouting plans to do this very thing. Business arrangement. Build up your coffers. No need for love. But neither of you has taken the leap. Why not?”

“It is not quite that simple.”

She opened her eyes and stared at him. “Yes, it is. There are dozens of wealthy merchants eager to buy titles for their daughters, and their daughters are not all horrid, toad-like creatures. I’m sure you and Grant will find several who are very pretty.”

He rose and began to pace beneath the tree. “Perhaps we are not all that keen on a purely business arrangement. Neither Grant nor I feel right about just grabbing the money and doing with it whatever we please. We would owe some duty to the heiress, wouldn’t we?”

“Not the way you have always described this sort of arrangement. You get rich. She gets the title. You meet on occasion in a darkened bedchamber and get down to the business of siring heirs. Once she has provided them for you, job done. You never have to see each other again.”

“I never described marriage in this way.”

She watched him continue to pace. “Well, you certainly have never factored in love. Are you reconsidering? Thinking perhaps I was right?”

“Birdie, don’t rile me.”

“You are riling yourself. It is about time you gave more than passing thought to the idea of marriage.”

“You are wrong. I’ve given it plenty of thought, agonized over the right thing to do for years now.”

“And?”

“I am resolved to marry an heiress.”

His remark surprised her, for there was no way a man as thoughtful and considerate as Hawke would ever come to this conclusion. “I don’t believe you. What are you running from, Hawke? You were never cold-hearted and I refuse to accept that you would ever deal with marriage in this way.”

“It is not a matter of a cold heart. It is about being practical.”

“It is about running away from something that scares you.”

“Birdie, you don’t—”

“Do not dare tell me I don’t know what I am talking about. You forget how well we know each other. It is quite irritating, at times. All I am saying is that good men like you and Grant deserve to be happy. Why would you ever wish to deprive yourself of this?”

“It isn’t deprivation.”

“Then what is it?”

He walked away and knelt beside the river bank, his mind drifting away with the current. She walked to his side and sat next to him, for the first time realizing just how much she cared for Hawke and wanted him to be in her life forever.

She had always cared for him, but her affection had changed recently into a more womanly feeling. Indeed, what

she felt for him was so deep and powerful, she had come to realize she could not accept anyone else as her husband.

But how could she ever let on?

This was a terrible turn of events.

She did not want to be in love with Hawke.

Studying him now, as the sun beat down on the waves of his dark gold hair and the wind ruffled his curls, she knew what must have always been in her heart.

Sheer and utter love for this man.

He rose abruptly. "Come on, Birdie. Let's go back. Grant will be worried if I don't return with you soon."

"All right." She took his hand when he unthinkingly held it out for her.

This is how they returned to Brightwood Hall, hand in hand.

Each of them silent and lost in their thoughts.

She had no idea what Hawke was thinking.

But her mind was clearer than it had ever been. Yes, she would go to London. She would not put up a fuss when he ordered new gowns for her. Nor would she fuss over the more elegant styles for her hair. She would attend each and every outing he decided upon for them and be charming to all who approached.

At soirees, she would dance with every duke and earl who asked, and not mind when they inspected her as they would a prize horse. At dinner parties, she would engage in witty conversation with her partners and pretend she was rapt in whatever they had to say.

She would become the *ton* diamond he wanted her to be.

She would sparkle and shine brighter than any debutante ever to grace a ballroom.

And when he had turned her into his ideal, she would do all in her power to make him fall in love with her. She would no longer be the Birdie who climbed trees and shot back smart remarks whenever he riled her.

She would be exactly who he wanted her to be.

His to mold and sculpt.

His ideal woman.

How could he not fall in love with this perfect woman he created?

## CHAPTER FOUR

HAWKE and his party arrived in London at ten o'clock in the evening, the twilight hour when the city appeared at its magical best. At this hour, the sun cast its fading rays across the maze of rooftops and church spires so that they took on the dusky pink and gold hues of approaching night.

As the carriage made its way alongside the Thames, even the waters of that muddy river shone in those soft hues, the boats, ferries, and punts all seeming to float upon a shimmering sea of pastel colors.

Birdie peered out the window, doing her best to hide the wonder in her eyes. But Hawke knew her too well and was delighted by her fascination. To show any pleasure at being in London went against her battle plan. He understood she did not wish to be here and had expected a battle royal these past few days.

Instead, she had been surprisingly agreeable and cooperative.

Of course, this immediately put him on alert.

“Is it not a beautiful sunset?” Verity remarked.

“Yes, very beautiful,” Birdie said quietly.



Their carriage now turned off Park Lane and made its way to the elegant Mayfair square where his townhouse stood amid others of equal fashion.

Progress had been surprisingly slow for this late hour. His carriage horses were forced to slow to a walk while wending their way past pockets of congestion to avoid carriages and carts clogging the busier main streets.

Mayfair was blessedly quieter.

Only an occasional carriage passed by now and there was no one but them to be seen on the street as the carriage drew up in front of his London residence.

His trusted head butler must have been keeping an eye out for them. He was out the door and hastening toward them before Hawke had managed to hop down.

“I hope you had a pleasant journey, Lord Hawke. It is good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too, Tavistock. Is all in readiness for the ladies?”

“Yes, m’lord. All has been prepared to your specifications.”

He glanced at Birdie in time to see her eyebrows shoot up, no doubt curious as to what he had ordered for them.

She would find out soon enough.

Four footmen hurried out behind Tavistock, one immediately assisting Verity down from the carriage while the other three began to take down their assorted bags and trunks.

Hawke assisted Birdie himself, feeling ridiculously possessive and not wanting anyone else to lay so much as a hand on her. “I won’t stay long, but I want to see you

comfortably settled first. Tavistock and my housekeeper, Mrs. Kent, will attend to your every comfort. You have only to ask them for whatever it is you need.”

“Thank you, Hawke,” Birdie said and cast him the sweetest smile.

There she was, being pleasant again.

Was he wrong to be suspicious?

“I’ll be staying at my club for the duration. Tavistock will send a footman to summon me if something urgent comes up. Otherwise, I’ll join you for breakfast each morning.”

She nodded.

And smiled endearingly again.

Birdie was definitely up to something.

“I’ll be with you throughout the day on most days. I’ll merely sleep at the club but do everything else right here, especially my work. It is simpler this way. I do not wish to leave documents concerning my estates lying around the club.”

She nodded. “That is eminently sensible.”

She cast him yet another warm smile.

He would consider her irresistible if he weren’t certain she was planning something. He almost looked forward to having a first battle with her because a gracious and undemanding Birdie was quite rattling to his senses.

He realized he was still holding her.

Reluctantly, he let her go. “We’ll head to the modiste tomorrow morning after breakfast. I usually have it served at seven o’clock, but there is no need for that tomorrow. I’ll have

Tavistock set it out for us at nine. I'm sure you and Verity will be tired after our long ride and wish to sleep in."

She laughed. "I'll retire early and should have no trouble being down to breakfast earlier than nine."

"Not necessary. This later schedule will do for tomorrow."

"All right, but Aunt Verity will never join us. She won't ever leave her bedchamber before noon."

"Blast," he muttered, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck. "I didn't think...is there any chance we can get her down earlier?"

"No. Why is it so important?"

"The modiste appointment. The woman only had an eleven o'clock opening available, so I confirmed it."

"Oh, dear. We'll just have to reschedule."

"We are not going to reschedule. We are keeping that appointment."

"Hawke, do not be a stubborn nitwit. You and I cannot go in there together, as you well know."

"Stubborn? Nitwit?" Ah, there was the Birdie he knew and loved. *Blessed saints*. Not *loved*. But...never mind.

"It is a problem easily solved."

"How?"

He had not a clue yet. "Just be dressed and ready to leave after breakfast."

"You are not going to change her mind. Not even your sweetest sweet talk will move her on this matter." She sighed. "You don't believe me. Fine, give it a try."

They caught up to Verity who had already been escorted upstairs and was now inspecting her bedchamber.

Hawke made certain all was to her liking while Birdie darted off to check on hers.

“Verity, there is one matter to discuss before I leave you in the capable hands of Mrs. Kent.”

“Oh? What is that, Hawke dear?”

“I’ve made an eleven o’clock appointment for Birdie with London’s most popular modiste. It is the only one she had available. I realize it is earlier than usual for you...but do you think you can make an exception this one time?” He saw the implacable look on her face and knew what her answer would be before she uttered a word.

Verity never came down before noon, as Birdie had gloatingly remarked.

He should have known this.

She *never* changes her routine.

He did know this, but thought the old woman might bend a little to accommodate her loving niece.

“Oh, good heavens. That is too early for me. But there should be no harm in taking a maid to serve as chaperone.”

Birdie returned in time to hear Verity’s remark. She inhaled lightly and her eyes widened in feigned horror. “No, it won’t do. Perhaps it is sufficient for a walk in the park. But when acquiring an entirely new wardrobe? Absolutely not. Nothing less than a married lady of noble rank must accompany us or I shall be labeled a notorious ruin before we even start.”

“Done,” he said with a growl, not about to be bested by the smug, little upstart. Now all he had to do was reach out to a friend or two and ask to borrow their wives.

Birdie looked dubious and with good cause.

Well, he could not waste a moment’s time.

He was going to see the girl pinned and measured tomorrow even if he had to sell his soul to accomplish it.

He bid them good evening and ordered his driver to take him to the home of the Earl of Exmoor next. “Please be in,” he muttered under his breath as he tugged on the door bell. Exmoor and his wife would be annoyed by his presumption, but he would deal with their irritation later.

He just wanted to be allowed in to see them at this late hour.

To his relief, both of them were awake and had just returned from an evening at the theater. They seemed genuinely delighted to see him. “You are fortunate you arrived today and not earlier in the week or you would have been invited to Lady Mowbry’s musical recital. She is sponsoring her nieces in the upcoming Season.”

Hawke grinned. “Let me guess, they sang.”

“Hideously,” Exmoor said with a chuckle.

“They weren’t so bad,” Lady Exmoor chimed in. “The poor girls were scared and one’s voice tightens up terribly when one is scared. They could not reach the high notes, but they did a commendable job on everything else. Anyone could see they were sweet girls who really did not want to be shoved in front of a crowd of strangers.”

“Speaking of sweet girls,” Hawke said, although Birdie could not be categorized as that except for these past few days. “Chesterfield broke his leg and begged me to take his place escorting his sister about Town. She needs a good bit of work before she is presented. First and foremost, a new wardrobe. However, I made the mistake of arranging for an eleven o’clock appointment tomorrow morning at Madame Josephine’s.”

Lady Exmoor nodded. “She is the best.”

“Yes, well...Chesterfield’s sister is willing to go, but her aunt who is to serve as her chaperone refuses to come out of her bedchamber before noon.”

“And you need me to act in her place?” Lady Exmoor remarked. “I would love to do it. James can drop me off at your townhouse in the morning. Shall we say around ten? It will give me the chance to meet the girl and put her at ease.”

Hawke let out the breath he had been holding. “Really? Sophie, I am forever grateful to you for this. James, you as well.” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I thought I had planned everything so carefully, but we are not here even an hour and I already made that big mistake. You have saved Birdie’s entire Season.”

“Birdie?”

He groaned. “That is what I call Chesterfield’s sister. But her name is Mariah...Mariah *Wren* Chesterfield...hence the name Birdie. I had better get myself out of that habit. She is Lady Mariah.”

Sophie laughed. “That is a lovely name.”

“Yes, it is. But we never call her that. She will clobber me if I slip up and refer to her as Birdie in company.”

Now, both Sophie and James were grinning at him.

“Join us for supper tomorrow evening,” Sophie said. “It will be just us and a few of James’s friends and relatives. Nothing formal, just a perfect way to ease Mariah and her aunt into the London social whirl.”

“We’ll gladly attend.” Hawke nodded. “You are both more than generous. I do not know how I will ever make it up to you.”

James smiled. “Nonsense. It will be our pleasure to help you see her properly launched. Well, she is still several months away from that. Come, have a seat and let’s hear more about Lady Mariah.” He glanced down at his cane. “My leg is tiring. I really do need to sit down.”

Sophie immediately tucked her arm in his. “I have you, my love.”

She walked beside him as he limped into his study.

Hawke watched the pair, how they supported and cared for each other. He sensed how solid they were in their marriage, how deeply they seemed to love each other and how respectful they were of each other’s weaknesses.

Well, James was the weak one, if a scarred face and badly injured leg could be considered that. The leg in particular strained easily and had to hurt whenever he stood for too long. But you would not know it from looking at him.

“Hawke,” Sophie said once her husband was comfortably settled in one of the leather cushioned chairs beside the hearth, “by your worried expression, it seems she will need all of those months to ready herself.”

“She is not so bad as all that, but she doesn’t want to be in London and I’m worried she is plotting a quick return to

Brightwood Hall.”

“Well, hopefully Sophie can convince her to stay. Everyone falls in love Sophie the moment they meet her.”

Hawke nodded. “I’m sure she will. She certainly never listens to me. I suppose I have been a little rough on her, but she fought me on everything until a few days ago. In truth, this more compliant version of her scares me a little. I have yet to figure out what mischief she is really up to.”

James laughed. “I wish you good luck. I sense you’ll need it. As for me, I have my perfect Sophie. I give thanks for her every day. My life has been heaven ever since she came into it.”

The love James held for her wife was obvious. He was a fearsome looking man but turned soft as pudding when casting his gaze on her. His eyes lit up and anyone could see she was his world.

Sophie felt the same about him. She casually settled on the arm of his chair and rested a hand on his shoulder simply for the need to touch him.

Hawke noticed all of it, every little smile and tender gesture.

This is what Birdie wanted.

Why had he been too dense to understand the importance of it, especially to someone like Birdie who felt everything passionately?

They chatted a few moments longer before he bid his friends good evening.

James caught him at the door. “Where are you staying, by the way? It cannot be at your townhouse if the ladies are



settled there.”

“I’ll be at the Wicked Earls Club.” He laughed softly. “Not all that wicked anymore, I expect. In truth, it is a relief for me. I need to concentrate on Chesterfield’s sister and not meaningless distractions of the female variety made available to us at the club back in the day.”

“Well, move in here if your lodging arrangements don’t work out for you. We’ll enjoy having you with us. Of course, you may come and go as you please. In truth, having you here will be a great relief to Sophie. She needs to take her mind off our children. They are spending the month with my sister’s family. Gabrielle has five children and likely more on the way.”

“Dear heaven. Five?”

He shook his head and laughed. “Sophie and I can hardly manage our two and they are sweet as sugar, although our son can be a handful on occasion. I suppose our daughter has her moments, too. Our children were thrilled to join their cousins, but Sophie is now walking around with the saddest expression on her face. Your project will definitely distract her. In truth, she’ll enjoy helping you turn Birdie into a society butterfly.”

“Duly noted.” He and James exchanged claps on the back. “Thank you again.”

He rode off in his carriage to the Wicked Earls Club, his mind once more at ease. James and Sophie had invited him to stay on but he really did not want to impose on them further. However, he considered changing his mind when he reached the club.

The facade was a little more run down than he remembered. So were the rooms, as he soon found out. Well,

his would do for now. He was only going to sleep here and tend to everything else back at his townhouse, including his baths and shaves. Most of his clothes had been left back there already. All he needed for the club were a few garments and some toiletries.

The club was quiet so he went straight to his quarters.

He had just stripped down to his shirt and breeches when there came a light knock at his door.

“Hawke, let me in,” someone called in a sultry, feminine voice.

Lady Antonia.

What was she doing here?

He thought the club no longer permitted these Upper Crust dalliances to go on under their roof. Apparently, he was wrong.

He opened the door and was knocked off balance as she flew into his arms. “I missed you, darling.” She immediately began to run her hands up under his shirt to get it off him.

He stopped her by lightly grabbing her wrists. “Who did you come with tonight?”

She would not have been admitted had she arrived on her own.

“Crenshaw, but he drank too much at the gaming table and barely made it back to his quarters before falling asleep. I heard you arrive, so I left him snoring. He’s just down the hall but won’t ever know I am gone.” She was now trying to tug at his breeches. “Did you miss me?”

“No, Antonia.” He hadn’t thought of the beautiful young widow at all. “I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.”

“Still contemplating marrying an heiress? I’m surprised you haven’t chosen one yet. Are you back in Town for this purpose? Not that I care. Do let me ease your tension tonight...well, at least for this hour. Crenshaw is turning into quite the bore. He is getting married, did you know?”

“I had no idea.”

She shrugged. “Some rich cow from Hampshire. He plans to keep her in the countryside while he sets me up in a pretty townhouse in Belgravia. I already have my own place, of course. My late husband left me well provided for. But I might take Crenshaw up on the offer since Belgravia is the better address. He would have to purchase it in my name or I will not agree to the arrangement. He’s bought me a pretty necklace, too.” She tilted her neck so Hawke could get a better view of the diamonds at her throat. “He is desperate to keep me on.”

“And you don’t care that he will soon be married?”

“Why should I? This arrangement works quite nicely for me. I am quite the merry widow and enjoy being in control of my own life. However, I would leave him to become your mistress. When are you going to find your heiress and settle her in dreary Dorset?”

She rubbed her thigh against his.

He released her and took several steps back. “You think I would set up a mistress on my wife’s purse strings?”

“Do I hear disapproval in your tone? Since when have you turned moral? Was this not your plan all along? Did you and Crenshaw not laugh about this very thing last year? Crenshaw has followed through and his wife-to-be is quite content to become a countess and set up her separate household.”

“I wish you and Crenshaw every happiness tearing through his wife’s trust fund. You are most deserving of each other.”

“I ought to slap your face, Hawke. I don’t think I like your haughty attitude. Do not take that sarcastic tone with me. Who do you think you are? I may be a scandalous widow, but I make no pretense of who I am and what I want. But you and Crenshaw, you’ll be taking wedding vows in church, promising to honor and protect your wives, and all the while you’ll be standing at the altar and lying through your teeth.”

“Not something I am proud of.” He caught both her hands in his once again to stop her from running them over his body. “Good night, Antonia. Go back to Crenshaw.”

She stomped out.

He hoped she would not be trouble.

He tried to wash her perfume off him before retiring to bed.

He awoke early the next morning and made his way back to his townhouse. Tavistock was just getting to his post and must have noticed him striding up the walk. “My lord,” he said, opening the door and stepping aside to let him pass, “we did not expect to see you at this hour. The ladies are not up yet.”

“I did not think they would be. Have a bath brought up to my bedchamber.” He still reeked of Antonia’s perfume. “Let Dell know I am here and he is to assist me.”

Dell was his trusted valet.

He had not brought the man along on his last trip to Dorset, for he did not require pampering as most lords did. However, London had stricter standards. He could not demand perfection in Birdie unless he also rose to the same standard.

Starting with a bath.

He ought to have bathed last night, but the club was no place for it. Nor did he want Antonia or any of the other merry widows brought there by their frustrated paramours ogling him as he stood naked.

Not that he was bashful.

But it felt wrong to accept these casual tumbles while here with Birdie.

Nor could any of these women hold a candle to the smart-mouthed girl.

Anyway, he preferred the comfort of his own home. He had just tossed off his jacket, cravat, and vest when Dell scurried in. "Lord Hawke, let me help you."

"Just ready the bath for me. I am also in desperate need of a shave." He tossed off his shirt as he spoke, handing it off to Dell along with the other discarded garments.

"Your boots need polishing, too," Dell said, frowning down at his feet in disapproval. "Obviously, they did not take care of you at your club."

"No, Dell. It was my fault. I did not set out my boots for them or ask for a valet to assist me. I prefer you. All I am going to do at my club is sleep. I'll do everything else here. Wash up. Work. Dine. Just be ready for me early each morning."

"An excellent idea." Dell took pride in his work and he had been with Hawke for almost a decade now. "Here, let me take these down to polish while we wait for the bath to be brought up."

Dell hurried out with his scuffed boots and clothing, leaving Hawke alone for the moment.

He had settled the ladies in pleasant guest rooms down the hall. The bedchamber immediately next door to his would be his wife's chamber whenever he finally took the leap. He had thought to settle Birdie in there since it had more amenities than the other guest rooms and she needed to be fussed over.

But even he knew it was a terrible idea to put her this close to him even if he did not sleep there at night.

Not only were the countess quarters too close to his bedchamber, but there was an adjoining inner door where the earl and countess could pass unnoticed into each other's beds.

Six months ago, he would not have thought twice about putting Birdie in there.

But now, he would need bars and padlocks added to keep him out of her bed.

Dear heaven!

What was wrong with him?

Armed guards, too.

Birdie was too much temptation for him.

How had this happened?

Several minutes passed and no one had come into his quarters yet. He shook out of his thoughts, which were inappropriately about Birdie anyway, and opened his door to peer down the hall to see about the delay.

He had not even taken two steps into the hall before he bumped into Birdie.

*Blessed saints.*

He wore nothing but his breeches.

She was in a plain, white cotton nightgown that was not seductive in the least, but his body did not seem to understand this. His blood heated. His heart pounded. Pulses began to throb. “Blast it, Birdie. What are you doing wandering the halls?”

Her hair was tied back in a loose braid down her back.

She looked delicious enough to eat.

He knew just what parts of her body he wanted to nibble first and it was nowhere proper.

He groaned.

“What are *you* doing here?” she shot back. “I thought you were staying at your club.”

“I was...I am. But that is just to sleep. It is easier for me to do everything else here. Go away before my staff sees you with me. I don’t even have a proper shirt to put on.”

She grinned and poked his muscles. “You always were nicely built. May I not enjoy peeking at your body a little longer?”

“Peeking? You are gawking at me.”

“Perhaps. All right. But you must admit, you are quite nice to look at. By the scent of you, I would say other ladies found you nice as well.”

“There were no other ladies.”

She inhaled. “Come now, Hawke. That is no male scent on your skin. I can tell a woman’s perfume.”

“I was approached, but declined participation. All right? I cannot demand you behave if I won’t.”

“Do you mean you intend to remain celibate all the while we are here?” She regarded him incredulously.

He gave a curt nod. “Yes, Birdie. Don’t you dare smirk.”

“I cannot help it. Don’t frown at me. I think it is very gallant of you. I will go back to my bedchamber now. You might have given me fair warning you were here.”

She started to turn away, then shook her head and looked up at him again. “But since you are here, I know what I wanted to mention. What are we going to do about today’s appointment at the modiste? Should I force Aunt Verity to join us? I had better wake her up now if that is necessary.”

“No, I have it all arranged. Lady Exmoor is to join us. You’ll like her, Birdie.” He turned her around and nudged her down the hall. “Go.”

“I like your muscles.” She took off for her bedchamber laughing.

He wanted to be angry, but simply could not summon the slightest frown.

She looked adorable in her prim nightclothes.

His body agreed.

By nine o’clock, he and Birdie were downstairs at the breakfast table, both of them groomed and presentable for the day. In truth, Birdie looked remarkably pretty in her day gown with the embroidered wildflowers on it. Her hair was also nicely styled, her copper curls gently framing her face and bringing out the surprising delicacy of her features.

He tried not to stare as they sat across from each other, but it was hard to ignore her cat eyes and generous lips that dipped down at the corners in a sultry pout. “Lady Exmoor will join



us here at ten,” he said, hoping conversation might ease the heat he felt every time he so much as glanced at Birdie lately.

“I look forward to meeting her. I think it will be nice for me to have a friend while in London and she sounds very nice.”

“She is. So is her husband. He’s a Brayden. Have you heard of this family?”

“No, but I’ve hardly spent any time here until now. Brightwood Hall is where I’ve always considered home. I expect I will eventually meet Lord Exmoor.”

He nodded. “You will meet him tonight. Sophie has invited us all to dine with them. She has also invited some friends and family, but you needn’t worry. It ought to be a quiet supper. A perfect way for you to be introduced and get to know the Brayden wives. They are amiable and clever. I think they will quickly take you into their circle.”

Birdie sipped her tea and smiled at him. “Sounds lovely. I look forward to making their acquaintance. What gown do you think I ought to wear for this supper?”

He set down his cup of coffee and eyed her cautiously. “You want me to choose your gown?”

“Is this not what you insisted upon?” She nodded. “I have no idea what is appropriate. Is it not right that I should rely on your judgement?”

“Yes, but when have you ever listened to a word I’ve said without bridling or arguing with me?”

She took another sip of her tea. “Hawke, do you not want me to behave? Because I can still be stubborn and combative, if you prefer.”

A smile spread across his lips. “No, I like this new Birdie...well, I should get used to calling you Lady Mariah.”

“And I should get used to hearing that name on your lips. It does feel strange. But I am trying my best to cooperate.”

“I know you are and I appreciate it very much.”

Somehow, they found a dozen more things to chat about over their kippers and eggs. They planned out museums to visit and rides in the park, and were still talking at the breakfast table when Sophie arrived. Hawke suggested they move into the parlor, but Sophie waved him off. “Nonsense, let’s sit right here. I would love a cup of tea.”

He motioned for a footman to set out a place for her and pour her tea.

“Lady Exmoor, it is a pleasure to meet you,” Birdie said, casting her a sincere smile.

“As it is to meet you, Lady Mariah.” She settled in the chair Hawke had held out for her beside Birdie. “Now that formalities are out of the way, please call me Sophie and I shall call you Mariah.”

“I should love that.”

“So, we are to start you on a new wardrobe, I gather.”

Birdie nodded. “Yes, because Hawke believes my gowns are too simple for London. I think they are perfectly fine, although he is right about my needing several elegant ones for the more formal affairs we will attend. I have nothing suitable for those.”

Sophie turned to Hawke. “Then we ought to concentrate on those first, don’t you think?”

He nodded. “And...er...accessories for each.”

“That ought to be simple enough.” Sophie met his gaze. “Hawke, are you blushing?”

Birdie chuckled. “By accessories, he means my undergarments. He insists I must have silk and lace.”

“Birdie!” He sighed. “I was trying to be polite about it, but since Birdie...I mean Mariah, blurted it, there is no use denying. She needs to dress like a lady from top to toe.”

“More like inside and out,” Birdie muttered. “Only silk will do against my skin, according to Hawke. I’m sure I will develop a rash.”

He cringed as Sophie and Birdie both giggled.

“You will not develop a rash,” he grumbled. “Sophie, you must not indulge the girl.”

He needed her to be his ally, not Birdie’s.

He remained behind in the dining room while the ladies went upstairs so that Sophie could have a look at her wardrobe. He heard them chatting merrily and then heard their light footsteps when they hurried back downstairs a few minutes later. “We ought to be on our way,” Sophie said. “The modiste runs a tight ship and we don’t want to lose our appointment.”

When they arrived at the dressmaker’s shop, Hawke expected Sophie would now take over most of the chore of sorting through fabrics and selecting suitable designs. However, he was surprised when Birdie made several excellent selections on her own and then made a point of seeking his approval on every decision.

Her choices were tasteful and elegant, so he approved them all.

“Do not look so stunned, Hawke. I can be discerning when I want to be.” She cast him a delicious smile. “But I do enjoy irritating you. I think I must make a choice or two that will have you leaping off the divan in horror.”

“Gad, you are such a little nuisance.” But he laughed even though he refused to admit he was enjoying himself. Just being in Birdie’s company always made him smile, even if it was to sit for a wretched hour while she looked at fabric samples.

Sophie also had an excellent eye and Birdie did not seem to mind being overruled a time or two by her. Nor did she mind when Sophie agreed with him on the more personal items.

Afterward, he invited the ladies for light fare at one of the tea rooms near Hyde Park, but Sophie demurred. “I must get back home. You will join us tonight, Mariah. I look forward to meeting your aunt. You’ll meet some of my husband’s family. I know you will love them and they will love you.”

They dropped Sophie at her home and returned to Hawke’s townhouse.

Verity was seated at the small writing desk in the summer parlor, quill pen and writing paper in hand when they walked in. She set down both and smiled in greeting. “How was your excursion. I thought you would have to cancel, but Mrs. Kent said Lady Exmoor took my place. You seem to have enjoyed your time, Birdie. I’m so glad. Tell me about your purchases.”

“We did have a lovely time. Of course, nothing to show for it yet. The first gowns might be ready in a week or two.” She went on to describe her favorites down to the smallest, feminine details.

Hawke would normally be bored to tears by such a conversation, but there was something so charming about Birdie and the lively manner in which she spoke. Her eyes were alight and she had the loveliest expression on her face.

She was delicate and more feminine than he'd ever seen her.

Yet, she was still the vibrant girl he had always known.

He felt a pang of regret because he loved the impish child she had been. But she could not remain a child forever. He thought she would need time and training to blossom into a woman, but the Birdie he saw before him was exquisite and stole his breath away.

She was finer than any rose in an English garden.

He could see her managing the role of duchess with an easy grace.

He already knew she was capable of running Brightwood Hall. Thinking back on it, he had seen her do splendidly in the role of hostess there. Their country society was not as refined as that of London, but she knew how to entertain Grant's guests and charm even the most obnoxious among them...he supposed he counted among those.

"Hawke, have you nothing to add?" Verity asked, bringing him out of his thoughts.

"No, I think you have been caught up to our day so far." He rose and gave a curt nod to each lady. "If you will excuse me. There are papers awaiting my attention in the study. If the weather holds I'll take you both for a carriage ride in the park later," he said, glancing at Verity. "I'm sure you will encounter old friends. We are not expected at Exmoor's until eight this evening."

“That sounds lovely,” Birdie said and stared down at herself. “I would love a ride in the park, even if it is merely in a carriage and not on horseback. Should I change my outfit?”

“No, yours is perfectly fine for this purpose.”

He left them and retired to his study, but it was not long afterward Birdie knocked at his door which had been left slightly open. “May I come in?”

“Of course,” he said, getting to his feet and coming around to seat her in the large leather chair beside his desk. Birdie was of average height, but she looked quite petite against the chair’s tall back. “What is the matter?”

“Nothing serious. Since Aunt Verity was writing letters, I thought I would take a moment to write one to Grant.”

“That is a good idea. What is the problem?”

“Ah, Verity has use of the writing desk.”

He glanced at the careworn desk in the corner of his study. “You can use that one. My clerk isn’t here today, so he won’t have need of it. Shall I have my footmen move it beside Verity’s?”

“Would you mind?”

“Not at all. Anything else?”

She shook her head of neat, copper curls. “No, that was all. I wanted to let Grant know we arrived safely and have not killed each other yet.”

He chuckled. “He knows you and I will never hurt each other.”

The room felt empty once she was gone and it had nothing to do with the space left open by removal of his clerk’s desk.

He sank back in his chair with a heavy sigh.

What was he doing?

Having felt the loss of too many loved ones over the years, he had resolved early on to keep love out of his marriage plans. Marry rich. Marry someone intelligent enough that they would not breed idiots. Marry someone he could tolerate but never love.

Someone he might mourn but not be torn to pieces when he lost her.

Indeed, he was so certain love had to be kept out of the arrangement that he had shut down his heart completely.

Having lost an older brother and sister to the arms of death, he could not go through this agony again. One had died in a sudden accident and the other had died of a lingering illness. He did not know which had hurt worse, the sudden shock of loss or the agonizing helplessness in watching a loved one gradually fade away.

If not for Grant and Birdie, his childhood would have been quite awful and lonely.

But Birdie...he'd known her since the day she was born.

She had followed him and Grant around from the moment she could walk.

She was noisy and irksome, yet somehow always made him smile.

She put joy in his life, especially in the worst of times.

Even when he wanted to throttle her, she'd toss him an impudent look and he would be laughing again.

Why had he overlooked the obvious until now?

He had spent his entire adult life so determined to avoid the pain of death, he never considered the pain of losing a loved one to *life*. This is exactly what would happen if he allowed Birdie to marry another.

Indeed, his life would be a misery without her.

Not a day, a month, or year would pass without his missing her.

That agony would be relentless and unending.

He would feel it every time he saw her with another man, knew he could not take her in his arms or kiss her.

Her children would not be his.

Her smile would not be for him.

Indeed, what was he doing?

Why should he prepare Birdie to become the wife of someone other than himself?



## CHAPTER FIVE

HAWKE SHOULD HAVE REALIZED that a *quiet* Brayden dinner party with just a *few* family members in attendance meant a packed room of well over fifty guests. That clan alone numbered well over thirty, even if one merely counted husbands and wives and no children.

To James and Sophie, family also included a horde of Farthingales, since many of these Brayden men had fallen in love with Farthingale women. This was another irksome thing, these love matches on obvious display. Most of the couples in attendance had been married almost a decade or more, but one would think they were newly wed by the way they still looked upon their spouses with the fresh eyes of love.

And now Birdie was tossing him gloating glances because the happiness these couples felt for each other permeated the room and could not be overlooked. James and Sophie were a perfect example. James was wild for his wife and she doted on him. His brother, Romulus, a rugged captain in the Royal Navy, was no better. He simply adored his lovely Violet.

Hawke could go around the room and say the same about each couple.

In addition to family, they had a few friends present beside themselves.

Hawke forced a smile as they were introduced to several bachelor gentlemen a few years younger than himself. One was introduced to him and Birdie as Viscount Egremont. He vaguely remembered him from their school days when the young man was the Honorable George Palter.

Another was the Marquess of Cheshire, the son of one of James's friends who had fought beside him during the Napoleonic Wars. The friend had passed away several years ago and the son, Lucas Cheshire, was now marquess. "I remember you, Hawke," he said with an amiable smile. "You were a few years ahead of me and George at university."

He did not recall Cheshire at all, but neither man took offense when he admitted only to a vague recollection of either of them.

Cheshire turned to Birdie, his smile too avid for Hawke's liking. "Lord Hawke was legendary."

"He was?" Birdie asked, glancing at Hawke and tossing him an impertinent grin.

Hawke had no idea why the man should say such a thing. It was quite the compliment, but nothing he had earned. Yet, his companion was nodding in agreement and also added an emphatic, "Indeed, he was."

Birdie, of course, had to ask them to explain. "Do tell us why Lord Hawke has earned this remarkable reputation. My aunt and I are eager to know."

"Nothing scandalous, Lady Mariah," Lord Cheshire said. "I was merely speaking of his leadership abilities and his kindness toward us."

She arched an eyebrow. "Kind? Hawke?"

“Indeed, to all the underclassmen. He never took me specifically under his wing, but he would not allow the older boys to taunt us or be cruel. He took on some angry upperclassmen on our behalf. I expect they must have been abused in their first year at school and thought to carry on some of the more unpleasant traditions. *It has to end somewhere*, he would say when coming to our rescue. He had no fear, even when standing alone between us and that nasty group.”

“Hawke, that was most excellent of you,” Birdie remarked, casting him a sparkling smile. “Why did you never tell me this? Grant never said a word either.”

The marquess shook his head. “Of course, how dense of me. You must be Grant Chesterfield’s little sister.”

The avid look the rogue cast Birdie proved he was not thinking of her as anyone’s little sister but a delectable morsel he was eager to sample. “Even though Hawke always took the lead, your brother was often there to lend support. Please, convey my best wishes to him in your next letter. I assume you will write to him soon.

“Yes, I will.”

Cheshire could not take his eyes off her.

Nor could Egremont.

Well, she did look surprisingly enticing tonight.

The dinner bell broke up their conversation.

Hawke took Birdie’s arm while James, acting as host, led Verity to her seat. Cheshire and Egremont made their way to their own seats. To Hawke’s dismay, Cheshire turned out to be placed beside Birdie.

Had Sophie done this on purpose?

No, she must have been scrambling to reconfigure the seating arrangements since she had only invited him, Verity, and Birdie a few hours ago and not had time to give these revised placements sufficient thought.

He took his seat at the other end of the table beside Sophie, obviously a seat of honor that he would be churlish to begrudge.

If only he were not seated so far from Birdie.

Would she be all right?

Verity was not even close enough to her to be able to steer the conversation or warn Birdie if she was about to make a *faux pas*.

Well, James and his family would be quick to forgive her. As for Cheshire, he appeared besotted enough to think every word emanating from Birdie's lips was a pearl to be treasured.

Egremont was sulking, not pleased that Cheshire was her dinner companion.

"You are going to give yourself a crick in the neck if you keep glancing toward the other end of the table," said his own dinner companion, a lovely blonde with a lilting laugh. "We were introduced earlier, but I'm sure you do not remember me at all. My husband and I are actually the few here tonight who are not Braydens. I am one of the Farthingales. Well, formerly a Farthingale. I am now Lady Wycke."

She leaned back a bit and introduced him to her husband, the Earl of Wycke, who was seated beside her. This was not the usual etiquette, putting husbands and wives beside each other, but these Braydens were not the usual sort of family.

“We do not stand on formality at these private gatherings. Please call me Honey.”

He arched an eyebrow, for it seemed awfully informal. “Honey?”

She laughed. “Oh, you have such a lovely deep and resonant voice. It does sound too much like an endearment when you say it, doesn’t it? My name is actually Honeysuckle, but that is even worse.”

“I am quite comfortable calling you Lady Wycke.”

“Yes, that is probably best. My husband is Tom. That is simple enough.”

“Silas,” he said, extending a hand to the earl and a nod for his wife. “But everyone calls me Hawke.”

“I understand you are escorting Lady Mariah around London,” Lady Wycke said.

“Yes. Her brother injured himself and could not do it, so I took over the responsibility of preparing her for her come-out. Of course, that is several months from now, but she needed to acquire a bit of polish before the Season got underway.”

“Sophie told me about your excursion to the modiste. Apparently, Lady Mariah needs an entire new wardrobe. Sophie had a lovely time helping select her gowns.”

“Mariah enjoyed her company, as well. She did us a great favor.”

Wycke followed his gaze and studied Birdie for a long moment. “She looks perfectly lovely and does not appear to be having a problem handling herself at the supper table. Cheshire’s tongue is rolling to the floor. He’s obviously quite taken with her. Egremont looks dour. He cannot take his eyes

off her either. Do not be surprised if you find both of them at your door tomorrow. Those lads have been on the hunt for a wife since last year. Seems they have both set their sites on your Mariah.”

Lady Wycke nodded. “You may have underestimated her abilities. She looks quite well polished to me. What a charming smile she has.”

Hawke shook his head. “This is a side of her neither her brother nor I have seen before. She is usually a smart-mouthed, opinionated hoyden.”

“Are you suggesting she is too independent and difficult?” Wycke laughed. “I can see Honey adores her already. She’ll fit right in with the Farthingale ladies.”

“I hope so. I would like her to develop a circle of friends she can trust. I’ve heard enough about your family, Lady Wycke, to know you would be a good fit for her.”

“We are a bit older and married,” she said, “but I think she will enjoy our company. We can get rather dull when we talk about our children, but we’ll avoid those conversations whenever she is around.”

Hawke laughed. “Mariah won’t mind at all.”

Goodness, it was odd calling her that.

He shook his head and continued. “She enjoys family life, perhaps is a little too attached to hearth and home. She gave me and Grant no end of headaches in her effort to avoid the marriage mart.”

Wycke glanced at the other end of the table again. “She may have her wish and never make it there. I think either Cheshire or Egremont will snap her up well before the start of the Season.”

Hawke frowned.

“They are both excellent men,” Wycke remarked.

“That remains to be determined.”

“James would not have invited either of them if he did not believe them to be of the highest character. But,” Wycke said, more soberly now, “neither man stands a chance with Lady Mariah unless you step aside and give way. She is yours to lose.”

“Forgive my husband for speaking to you in such an inappropriately familiar fashion, but we have been through this ourselves. Love is a gift to be treasured. Perhaps having made such solid love matches for ourselves, we now see things more clearly than others do.”

“What is it you think you see, Lady Wycke?”

“Will you play coy and not admit there is a line of fire directly between you and Lady Mariah? Upon my oath, I am surprised this entire table has not yet combusted from the hot glances you give her when you think she is not looking. Let me assure you, we Farthingales are appallingly meddlesome. There is not a single one of us who is unaware of what is going on between the two of you.”

“You are mistaken.” He did not mean to offend her, but why in heavens name was she or her husband meddling in his affairs?

“I see. Is this how you intend to lose her? By denying she means anything to you?”

Her husband cleared his throat. “Honey, I think we’ve overstepped enough for one evening.”

“All right, but let me just say this. There is nothing worse than cluttering your head with excuses as to why you should not marry her. I speak from experience. Had my husband been less persistent in pursuing me, I would have lost this wonderful man I love with all my heart. Thank goodness he was too thickheaded to accept my rejections. Nothing is insurmountable when you love each other.”

“Duly noted,” he said with as much politeness as he could muster. “Truly, I do appreciate what you’ve said.”

She sighed. “But you are going to ignore our advice. I cannot blame you, I suppose. It is the height of presumption to give an opinion when one is not asked. And to a stranger, no less. But James has often spoken of you with admiration and you know he is not one easily swayed.”

They moved on to topics other than Birdie, so the rest of their conversation flowed easily and the meal passed quickly.

When it was over, the ladies retired to the parlor for tea and sherry while the men had their port and smokes.

Cheshire approached him at the first opportunity. “Lady Mariah is a goddess.”

*Seriously? Birdie?*

“I understand she is to have her formal come-out this Season. That is months away still. You cannot keep her hidden from me for so long. May I call on her tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Hawke, I—”

“We have plans for the rest of the week. Nor would I agree to your calling upon her without speaking to Lady Mariah first.”



“Understood. That is fair. I will give you my direction. I beg you to let me know as soon as you do speak to her. She must accept me, for she is an angel and has burned herself into my soul.”

“You are not winning me over with your nonsensical proclamations, Cheshire.”

“What I am trying to say, and quite awkwardly because I really have very little experience in such matters, is that my intentions are honorable and I would like permission to court her.”

“As I said, I will discuss this with Lady Mariah and give you my response in a few days.”

“I shall be in agony awaiting your decision.”

To Hawke’s dismay, he had a similar conversation with Egremont not five minutes later.

He was in a foul temper by the time he, Birdie, and Verity rode back to his townhouse later that evening. “Did you not enjoy the party?” Birdie asked. “I had the nicest time. The food was excellent and so was the company.”

“So I gather.”

Verity would not take her gaze off him. “What did not meet with your approval, Hawke? Everyone else had a lovely time. What a pleasant man the Marquess of Cheshire turned out to be. Egremont, too.”

Hawke grunted. “They both want to visit Birdie.”

“Truly?” Birdie clapped her hands. “My first gentleman callers! Isn’t this exciting? Hawke, you were so right about everything. I am no longer a child and it is past time I

acknowledged it and grew up. Why, many women are married and have children by the time they are my age.”

“What did you think of them, Birdie?”

“They were nice enough. Perhaps a little too ardent. I’ve never had a man fall at my feet before. And suddenly to have two. It is quite flattering, but...I don’t know. Perhaps a bit too rushed. What do you think, Aunt Verity?”

“A handsome marquess and an equally handsome viscount who seem enamored of you? You shall be the envy of every young lady this Season.”

Birdie shook her head. “I don’t think Cheshire or Egremont can be kept at bay for that long. Each one mentioned how urgently he wants to see me again.”

“I think they must be reined in,” Hawke said. “They are too quick to flatter for my liking. They have shown no restraint whatsoever. A man coming at you like that would suffocate you.”

To his surprise, Birdie agreed. “Perhaps allow them to pay me a call next week. What do you think, Hawke? But if they gush over me again as they did tonight, I think I will rule them out.”

Verity was surprised. “Birdie, you must not make so hasty a decision. One is a marquess and the other is a viscount. They may have pressed too hard tonight because they eyed each other as competition and did not want to lose out by saying nothing.”

“Which is why I shall give each of them another chance next week.”

Hawke escorted the ladies inside his townhouse residence and was surprised when Verity yawned and immediately

retired to her bedchamber. He turned to Birdie. "I suppose I had better go."

"Will you not stay a few minutes and share a drink with me?" She smiled and shook her head. "Well, I thought I would have some lemonade. I expect you would prefer brandy. I'd like to talk to you about these two gentlemen."

"Must it be now?"

"I'll stay up all night fretting otherwise. I won't keep you long. Do you mind terribly, Hawke? Do you have other plans? How stupid of me, I ought to have realized you—"

"No other plans, Birdie."

"Not other parties? Or other women to see? I thought men like you always had your discreet assignments at the ready."

He shook his head. "I told you, no women for me. No, not a one. You are all the woman I can handle. All right, I don't mind staying a while and talking to you."

He summoned Tavistock and asked for a pitcher of lemonade to be brought out onto the terrace. He led the way, lit one of the table lamps in the parlor, and carried it out with him onto the terrace.

The air was only now starting to cool and the light breeze felt quite pleasant.

The terrace overlooked a small garden and the floral scents added a lovely fragrance to the night.

He set down the lamp on an ornate, wrought-iron table tucked in a corner.

It wasn't long before Tavistock returned carrying a tray with the pitcher and two glasses balanced on it.

He set them on the table.

“Thank you, Tavistock. You needn’t stay up for us. I’ll return the pitcher and glasses to the kitchen before I leave.”

“I bid you good night then, m’lord. Lady Mariah.” He bowed to both and hurriedly left.

Hawke poured a glass for each of them, but did not afterward take a seat. He moved away from Birdie and casually leaned his hip against the balustrade while he sipped his lemonade. “What would you like to ask me?”

She smiled and joined him by the balustrade, not realizing how desperate he was to put a little distance between them. “I thought you would have something stronger to drink.”

“Is that a question? No, I imbibed plenty at supper. Perhaps a little too much for my own good. This lemonade will do just fine for me.”

She took a sip of hers and eyed him thoughtfully.

Too much wine, a luscious Birdie, and silver moonlight on a warm summer night were a dangerous combination. “Ask your questions, Birdie.”

There were myriad stars shining overhead.

Birdie’s eyes seemed to trap them all for they sparkled as brightly as those stars.

The apple scent of her skin mingled with the scent of roses from his garden.

He ached to kiss her.

When would there ever be a more perfect moment? The night felt exquisite, almost magical. He did not believe in such

nonsense but neither could he deny the powerful attraction he felt for Birdie.

She was meant to be his.

She must have known it from the moment she was born.

She took another sip of her lemonade and then glanced up at him. “Hawke, what shall I do if one of those gentlemen wants to kiss me?”

He had just taken a sip from his own drink and now choked on it. “Kiss you? I’ll kill the first one of them who tries it.”

She laughed. “Do be serious. What should I do?”

“I am serious.” The thought of another man’s lips on hers incensed him. Lord Wycke’s words came back to haunt him. *She is yours to lose.* He could not let this happen. “You are to refuse their advances firmly and with a single word...no. This must be your answer. *No.*”

“What if they persist?”

“Birdie, you are not a weak-willed peahen. A solid punch in the nose will deter them. But you can best avoid a confrontation by not allowing either of them to maneuver you alone. It is a scoundrel’s trick to isolate the innocent doe from the herd. Stay in a crowd and you will be safe. Avoid dark corners. Never walk out onto a terrace with either of them.”

“Especially a moonlit terrace? As I am doing with you?”

“That is not at all the same thing. You can be anywhere and do anything with me and know you are safe. You trust me and know I would never impose myself on you.”

“Are you not at all tempted to impose on me?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Should I be?”

“No, never mind. It was foolish of me to think you might like this new *ton* darling you have created.”

“Good grief. You’ve only had one outing and your new gowns have yet to be delivered. Hardly time for a major transformation from little wren to irresistible swan.”

“I see.”

She looked so disappointed, he felt like an utter beast.

“You are beautiful, Birdie,” he said, cupping her soft cheek. “You have always been a delight, utterly adorable even when irritating me to the point steam pours out of my ears. Were I one of those men and had just met you, I would be thinking of nothing but kissing you. Rest assured, I would have already kissed you because you are too tempting and I have just enough wicked in me not to care about proprieties.”

She cast him an aching fragile smile. “That’s a much better answer, Hawke. Thank you. You know your approval is important to me. I don’t want to disappoint you or myself. But there is still so much I do not know about men. How can I tell when is the right time to be kissed?”

“Are we speaking of Cheshire or Egremont? There is never a right time.”

It was an ape-like, possessive thing to say.

He had no intention of taking it back. “I don’t want you kissing either of them.”

He had a hard grip on his glass, but eased it before he squeezed too firmly and wound up with shattered shards dug into his hand. “You are never to allow...”

He sighed, knowing he was behaving like a dolt. “Perhaps after several months of knowing them. If you develop serious feelings for one of them, then we can discuss what you should do about it.”

“Only then? What if I wish to be kissed sooner?”

“No. Why are you suddenly so interested in kisses?”

“Is this not also a part of courtship? Aren’t kisses important in a marriage? But may I not kiss someone other than the man I hope to marry? You’ve kissed lots of ladies. Why should I not be permitted one or two men?”

“It is not at all the same thing. Those women meant nothing to me.”

“And you are proud of this?” She cast him a look of reproof.

“It was mutual use of each other. Most of my dalliances were with already married ladies and they were not looking for courtship.”

“I see. They only wanted you for your body? Just a quick release of passions?”

He was not liking this conversation at all. “Yes, that’s all it ever was for them and for myself. Men do not think of moonlight and romance. Men are hounds who are guided by lust. They will do anything to get a pretty woman in their arms. You must not be swayed by their flattering words. What Cheshire and Egremont are really doing is waging war and your innocence is the enemy they wish to conquer.”

She laughed gently, the sound as sweet as a melody. “So I am not to trust either of them if they try to take me in their arms?”

“Absolutely not. You are to punch them in the nose if they try.”

“What an odd and ridiculous circumstance. It never occurred to me that a man’s intentions when taking me in his arms were so sinister and nefarious. As for my innocence, I shall hold onto it quite firmly. In any event, you’re the only one who has ever held me in his arms and that was usually to catch me as I fell out of a tree.”

“You are no longer that little girl climbing trees. These men do not see you as a child but as a desirable woman. As I said, do not trust those clots. You owe them nothing, even if they begin to shower you with expensive gifts.”

She giggled. “Do you really think they will buy me gifts?”

“Yes, Birdie. Welcome to the marriage mart. You will soon find yourself surrounded by men who seek your affection and are not above stooping to bribery to gain it. They will call upon you with flowers in hand, sweets, trinkets, some of them quite expensive.”

“What sort of trinkets?”

“Jewels. A diamond necklace,” he said, briefly thinking of Lady Antonia. “Perhaps sapphires. You need not accept any such gift. Always be careful what you do accept and from whom. Even if you take a gift from one of your suitors, you still owe him nothing. Not a kiss. Not an embrace. Nothing. No matter how expensive his gift.”

“Should I simply decline them all?”

“I think it would be wise.” He pursed his lips in thought. “Eventually, someone will come along who steals your heart. He may have strong feelings for you, too. At that time, you and I will need to have a serious discussion about your future.”



She nodded. “That is sensible. I like discussing things with you, Hawke. We often end up shouting at each other, but we were never truly horrible to each other. Were we?”

“No, Birdie. You and I have never had a serious falling out.”

She nursed her glass of lemonade. “I think my heart would shatter if we ever did.”

He put his arm around her, probably not a good idea while hot desire and apish jealousy coursed through him. But he had to do something to relieve his ache and holding her seemed harmless enough. “We never will. Don’t get upset about it. You had a lot tossed at you this evening and you handled it marvelously. Just remember, if you ever are in doubt about what to do, come to me. I am right here beside you. This is where I shall always be.”

*Dear heaven.*

This is where he always wanted to be.

But how could he say anything to her now that she had other suitors? Would she believe him if he revealed his feelings for her? Especially after he’d been such an idiot on the subject of love.

Denying its importance.

Claiming he would never marry for love.

*Insisting* he would never marry for love.

Ridiculing the notion of a love marriage.

Would she believe him if he now declared otherwise?

“You and Grant have signs for each other whenever you want to escape from someone’s clutches. I’ve seen the two of

you watch out for each other in this way.”

“We can do the same, Birdie. It is quite simple. A tug on your ear or a little rub of your nose,” he said, tweaking her nose, “and I’ll know you wish to be rid of a particular gentleman who has engaged you in conversation.”

“What would you do to help me be rid of him?”

“Nothing to cause a scene. I’d merely swoop in and carry you away. I am a Hawke, after all. This is what hawks do with little wrens.”

She laughed. “But what excuse would you give him?”

“None required. All I have to say is that you are needed elsewhere, give a curt nod to the gentleman you are abandoning, and lead you out of the room.”

“I am needed,” she repeated softly. “That is nice. I wonder if anyone will ever really need me.”

“Of course, they will.”

“Verity spoke to me about this very thing before we left for London. She warned me not to be like her, not to waste my life and let it pass unnoticed.”

Hawke still had his arm around Birdie, liking how natural and comfortable she felt against him. She was resting her head against his shoulder and seemed in no hurry to draw away, no doubt feeling this same, easy companionship. “You will be noticed. But I understand what Verity means. She really has done nothing for herself, and certainly nothing to make a difference in the lives of others.”

“She said that she and I were very much alike.”

“No, that is wrong. I’m sure she was pretty when she was younger. You look a little bit like her. She is also an intelligent

woman, as you are. But the similarities end there. You are fierce, passionate, and forward thinking while she never was any of those things.”

“We’ll see where all my forward thinking leads me.” She glanced up at him. “What would you do if I came storming in one day all excited about a cause?”

He emitted a laughing groan. “You do this all the time. Do I not always listen? Sometimes we end up fighting over it. But I always let you have your way if it is not something dangerous...or something that would break your heart. You feel things so strongly, I worry about your getting hurt.”

“What do you think Cheshire or Egremont would do if I spoke to them about taking up a cause?”

“I don’t know. This is why you mustn’t rush into anything with either of them. You argued the point to me yourself last week. A woman is trapped for life if she makes an unhappy union. Not only trapped, but loses control of her assets. You can have no doubts about the man you choose to marry. If he loves you, he will wait until you are sure about him.”

She sighed. “Some men inspire confidence. Grant does. So do you. I cannot explain why I feel this way. There is an aura about you, one of strength and competence. I see you and I feel comforted and secure. Whatever my worries, I know I can talk them over with you and we’ll find a solution. I do not think either of those men I met tonight have it in them to inspire me the way you do.”

“You’ll learn more about them as time goes on.”

“I’ve made an important decision, Hawke.”

“About what?” He looked down and met her soft gaze.

“About who I want to have kiss me first.”

He frowned. “Are we back to that?”

“Yes, because I want to be kissed.”

And he was aching to do it. “A first kiss is something that ought to be special for you. I’ve told you, it cannot be with either of those two scoundrels.”

“I agree. It needs to be you.”

The glass almost fell from his hands.

He wanted to tell her the notion was ridiculous, but it wasn’t in the least. Had he not imbibed too much wine over supper because he could not get his mind off her and the unmentionable things he wished to do to her?

Bed her, of course.

But he wanted so much more.

He wanted to make a life with her.

A happy, loving life...which only proved what an arse he had been to give her a hard time about marriage all these years when she had been right all along.

“Hear me out before you dismiss the idea, Hawke.”

He nodded as he set down his glass.

It tipped over and fell off the balustrade into the shrubbery below.

He did not bother to retrieve it.

Tavistock would search for it tomorrow.

He stared at Birdie, having no intention of dismissing the idea. “I’m listening. Why must it be me?”

“Oh, how calm you are. That is very good. I was afraid you would shoot off like a fireworks rocket and be angry with

me for even suggesting such a thing. But it is clear as day to me that you must be my first.”

*First and only.*

Birdie was his and no one was going to touch her but him.

“Why is it clear as day, Birdie?”

“Because I trust you.”

He nodded. “Is this your only reason? Because you think I am safe?”

“Oh my heavens. Hawke, you are not safe at all.” She sighed. “That is a large part of the appeal. You are handsome and experienced. I think kissing you would be the most exciting thing ever to happen to me. You have the sort of look that captures hearts. Perhaps it is the smolder in your eyes. A little dangerous. A little naughty. Quite perfect. This is what I want, a first kiss that will leave me breathless and dreaming of you forever. It will be special and meaningful because it is you.”

“I am not going to give you lessons in kissing only to have you run off and use what I’ve taught you on other men.”

“I wouldn’t. You are missing my point entirely.”

“What is your point?”

She eased away and stared down at her toes. “Why must you be the densest clot ever to exist on this earth?”

He laughed. “All right, I’m a dense clot. Enlighten me.”

“If you have yet to figure it out, then I am not going to say anything. Well, just this. My heart has chosen you to be the one, Hawke.”

“Yes, you’ve just said. The one to kiss you.”

“So? May we get on with it? I know you think of me as a little sister, but we are not brother and sister.”

“Indeed, we are not.”

*Dear heaven.*

Where else was this going?

“Good, then you do not feel repulsed by the suggestion?”

“Of a first kiss?” He groaned. “No, Birdie. I am in complete agreement with you. It must be me and no other.”

She looked up and her eyes widened. “Truly? I was sure this would be a royal battle between us.”

“No battle.” He took her back in his arms.

She inhaled lightly. “Do you mean to kiss me now?”

“I doubt there will be a better time for it. Are you willing?”

“Blessed saints, yes.”

He tried not to laugh at her expression, that mix of elation, trepidation, surprise, and innocent yearning. “What must I do, Hawke?”

Other than look beautiful under the moonlight?

She had that handled rather well.

“Do you trust me, Birdie?”

He felt a shudder run through her. “I would not have asked you to do this otherwise. But this is all rather much for me and I am afraid I will disappoint you.”

“You won’t ever disappoint me.” He did not press her further, for he already knew how distressing this was for her.

Nor was he such a dense clot as not to understand how she felt about him.

She was in love with him.

She had always loved him.

He was the idiot who had taken a lifetime to realize how much he loved her in return. For all his talk of finding an heiress, he had never really gone about it seriously.

He did not want a life of ease with a dull, demanding woman who would look upon everything he restored and gloat to think it was only accomplished because of her funds.

Birdie was never the gloating sort.

Well, she was, but not in this way.

She gloated over harmless, playful victories.

When it came to serious matters, she was kind and comforting. Always the first to offer help and sincerely put her heart into that assistance.

He rather liked that her dowry would not be sufficient to buy him out of all his estate troubles. In truth, he meant to keep as much of it aside as he could for her use alone and replenish whatever little he might need as soon as he could.

It would mean a harder life for them, but they would not be impoverished. Working to build a life together would be the most rewarding thing he could imagine.

Waking to her smile.

Holding her in his arms.

Knowing the shape of her body and feeling its warmth as she lay curled by his side when they retired to bed each night.

Nor would they need to pass much time in London where one had to spend lavishly to keep up appearances.

He could feel the sparks between them, the lightning in the air despite not a single rain cloud present on this starry night.

She emitted a ragged breath and whispered again, “What must I do, Hawke?”

“Just close your eyes.” He lowered his lips to hers, now so close their breaths mingled. “I’ll take care of the rest.”



## CHAPTER SIX

BIRDIE HELD her breath as Hawke wrapped her in his arms, enveloping her in his dangerous heat. Was there ever a more exquisite feeling than the crush of her body along the solid length of his? He was built of rock and hard muscle, his body a magnificent flint which served to ignite her.

Melt her.

Which explained why her body felt boneless and now molded perfectly to his.

“I’ll take care of the rest,” he whispered, pressing his mouth possessively to hers and setting her ablaze with the soft, rhythmic grind of their lips.

Oh, how well she knew this man.

No timid first kiss or slow introduction, for nothing but scorching determination would ever do for Hawke. He had his manly pride, so if she wanted a memorable first kiss, by heaven, he was going to give her one that would set her aflame. There was no holding back on his part. He was going to conquer her, ravage her mouth in the most exquisite way, and demand her complete surrender in a firestorm of desire.

Yet, beneath all that heat and fiery arrogance remained the true essence of this proud, wonderful man. He would protect

her to the death and always honor and respect her so long as he had breath in him.

Yes, this was Hawke and why she could not help but fall in love with him. He would fight heaven and earth to keep her safe.

Hadn't he always been this way?

Trusting him now left her free to respond as he deepened the kiss and plundered her mouth with brazen abandon.

He pillaged and scorched her with his hungry need.

He set her soul on fire.

There was no mistaking the smoldering desire between them as his thighs pressed against her hips and her bosom flattened against his chest. His hands roamed toward her ripe mounds, grazing temptingly close. He was aware of her womanly attributes and maybe ached to touch her and explore now that she had a bosom large enough to noticeably soften against a man's chest and make him aware of her generous endowments.

He wouldn't yet, for Hawke was also extremely honorable and would not go beyond what he deemed proper even if he had her permission. She did not mind because this first kiss was almost more than she could take in. However, she wanted to cheer that she finally had a noteworthy bosom.

Was Hawke enjoying her newly blossomed, womanly shape?

His hands rode up her sides and one now came to rest just under her breast, so close that his knuckle grazed the underpart of the fleshy mound.

She arched into him, hoping he would forget she was Birdie and treat her with the same mindless need as he would any other woman.

She ran her hands up and down his arms, shockingly aroused by their muscled contours. Dear heaven, she had seen him without his shirt on hours ago and her eyes still had not popped back into their sockets after that exquisite sight.

Few men had bodies as taut and lean, or arms and shoulders as finely sculpted as his. Not that she had any experience, but even she knew few men could compare to him.

She inhaled the scent of his cologne, an earthy musk that had her body in tingles.

No wonder women liked to kiss Hawke.

He felt just as a man should.

He was kissing her with a passion she had never seen in him before, as though his control was on the verge of breaking and was now held back by the slimmest thread of restraint.

It was a heady feeling to know all this unleashed power was about to snap in a savage urge to claim her.

*Her:*

A week ago, she would have thought it inconceivable. But dear heaven, she wanted so badly for him to burn for her in the same way she did for him.

How lovely it would be if they burned to ashes together, each in fiery conquest of the other's heart and soul.

She wanted to be his forever.

Did he care for her as deeply as his kiss conveyed, or was this how rakes kissed and seduced?

No, it could not be just any kiss for him.

He had to like her or he never would have agreed to give her a first kiss.

For her part, she was always sensitive to his feelings, which often irritated him to no end. She could not be so stirred were he indifferent. No, there had to be something sparking and hot between them. He could not fool her with feigned desire nor would he ever stoop so low as to pretend he liked her in this way if he did not.

Even if this was all feigned on his part, she no longer cared. He was a master of this art and she was his willing student.

She simply would not allow herself to think of it as something more than a mere kiss. To be the object of his passion was one thing, a quite delightful thing. But it was not the same as a deep and abiding love over a lifetime.

He would have said something to her before this if he loved her. But until this very moment, he had not given so much as a hint.

Well, she would take this wonderful kiss for what it was and not think too hard about the future. This was her one chance, her first kiss, and she was not going to ruin it. She wriggled against him and pressed her lips more ardently to his because she wanted him to know how much she was enjoying the moment.

It was divine.

He was divine.

Her response was all the encouragement he seemed to need.

Emboldened - well, he was naturally bold - he touched his tongue to her lips, teasing along the seam of them. Yes, this is what his kiss was meant to be, a journey of discovery for her, from his first melting touch to this moment of deep intimacy.

She tasted lemonade on his tongue and the custard dessert served to end their meal.

She marveled they were now kissing with open mouths and their tongues were mingling.

It felt supremely decadent.

A moan of delight escaped her lips.

Her soft cry must have set off an alarm bell inside of him, for he suddenly tore his beautifully shaped mouth off hers and drew away. "I had better go," he said, sounding quite breathless.

"Why?"

He ran a hand through his hair and stared at her, his gaze wild and smoldering. "Goodnight, Birdie."

"But—"

"Save your questions for tomorrow."

She cast him a vulnerable smile. "But Hawke—"

"Tomorrow, Birdie." He turned abruptly and strode out, making not a single mention of the kiss.

Had he liked it?

Hated it?

How was she ever going to sleep tonight?

She resolved to fall asleep smiling because she could not control what he thought of it or her, but she knew exactly what

her feelings were.

This had to be the best first kiss any young woman had ever received from the beginning of time until this very day and probably beyond.

No matter what happened tomorrow, she would always have tonight and the memory of being swept in his arms and kissed with intoxicating passion under the silvery moonlight.

She awoke early the next morning and was seated at the dining table sipping a second cup of tea when Hawke walked in looking his usual, incredibly handsome self. “Good morning, Hawke.”

She sounded breathless.

*Dear heaven.*

She had wanted to sound nonchalant and hardly remembering what they had done last night.

He cast her the softest smile. “Good morning, Birdie.”

“It is a beautiful morning, isn’t it?” She set down her cup and tried not to look as though she were leaping out of her skin to know what he thought of the kiss.

How could she ask him straight out while footmen remained in the room? “Might we take a walk in the garden after we’ve finished our breakfast?”

“Yes,” he said, his lips still curved upward slightly in a smile. “I know you have a barrage of questions you are eager to toss at me.”

She nodded. “I do.”

But they spoke only of mundane matters while at the table and organized their schedule for today.

They were to do nothing this morning since Verity would not come down before noon and Hawke needed to attend to his estate matters. Birdie knew better than to interfere with his getting off correspondence to his estate manager and reviewing what other problems had come up since yesterday.

She offered to help.

“No, I can manage it. But we’ll talk after I roll up my sleeves and attend to the most pressing business matters.”

“All right.” While he worked, she would send off a thank you note to Sophie and let her know how much they enjoyed last night. “Hawke, would you mind if we reciprocated and invited James and Sophie for supper here later in the week?”

“It is a good idea, but wait a few days before issuing the invitation. We are bound to have more invitations ourselves and you may meet others whom you wish to invite as well.”

“Well, then for now I will just let her know how much we enjoyed last evening.”

They had another visit scheduled with her modiste, this time with Verity serving as chaperone since the appointment was for one o’clock. Since she and Hawke enjoyed long walks, they agreed to walk in the park after they finished with the modiste.

“I’ll take the carriage. Verity won’t mind watching us from her comfortable perch while we stroll along the Serpentine.”

“What are our plans for this evening?” Birdie asked.

“One of my friends has a box at one of the popular Covent Garden theaters. He cannot attend tonight and gave me his tickets. I thought you might enjoy seeing a play.”

She nodded eagerly. "I would love it. I have never been to the theater before. I know I will find it fascinating."

He grinned. "Another first for you."

"Yes. Oh, Hawke..." She wanted him to hurry up and finish his breakfast so they could talk in the garden.

He was so calm, she wanted to beat him over the head.

She was fidgeting and ready to burst.

He merely grinned.

The footmen finally left them alone for a moment as they cleared away the breakfast dishes. She leaped at the chance to press him with questions. "Are there any more firsts in store for me? I think I am going to enjoy every one of them so long as it is with you."

To her frustration, the footmen walked back in before he could answer.

Hawke finished the last of his coffee and rose.

She grabbed his arm and dragged him laughing into the garden. "Talk first. I won't keep you long. But my heart will explode if I have to wait for you to finish your work."

The memory of their kiss assailed her the moment they stepped onto the terrace. "This is where it happened."

He ran his thumb affectionately along the line of her jaw. "I know, Birdie. I was there."

She wanted to say something clever to him, but the words all came to mind at once and scrambled in her brain so she could not get any of them out.

How could he remain so calm?



He led her down the few steps into the garden which was not very big by Dorset standards but considered generous for London. There was a bench in the far corner and Hawke led her there now. He settled beside her, placing an arm casually across the back of the bench and stretching his long legs before him. "Go ahead," he said, casting her an endearing smile. "Now you can ask me your questions."

She nibbled her lower lip.

She noticed his response, an almost imperceptible heat in his gaze, but it was definitely there as he stared at her lip, the way it swelled and flushed each time she nipped it. Perhaps he was not nearly as unaffected as she believed. "How was I, Hawke? Was I terribly inept?"

"No, Birdie. You were perfect and our kiss was the nicest I have ever given or received."

"I thought so, too. Well, I have nothing to compare it to. But I doubt I will ever have another quite as perfect...except perhaps from you, if ever you were considering to kiss me again. You are not just saying it was good to make me feel better, are you?"

He laughed. "No, everything I've said is true. Was it every bit as lovely as you hoped it would be?"

"Very much so. I do not think any young lady has ever received a more perfect and memorable first kiss. I knew it had to come from you because of the feelings that needed to go into it, all the unspoken words and years of our friendship. Our trust and affection for each other. I felt all of it at the first touch of our lips."

"I'm glad. I wanted it to be meaningful and special for you."

“It was and I shall always treasure the moment. Even our surroundings were perfect. The silver moon and the dazzling array of stars. The scent of roses in the night air.” She edged closer to him and rested her head against his shoulder. It was forward of her, but he did not tense or bridle at the gesture, so she relaxed against him.

His body was firm and hot, his musk scent arousing as always. “Is there anything else you ought to teach me, Hawke?”

He laughed again, a hearty and resonant chuckle. “No, Birdie. That kiss was more than I should have given you. Nor should you be nestling against me now.”

But he tucked his arm around her to keep her close when she sought to move away. “I don’t mind having you near me,” he said, and she sensed a shift in the lightness of his tone. “Birdie, what do you hope for in a husband?”

*Sweet blessed Mother.*

Was this leading where she thought?

No, she was allowing her hopes and wishes to lure her astray. He could not be building up to a marriage proposal, could he?

She sat up and stared at him, her eyes wide and her heart in a rampant beat. Would this answer decide her future? Her eternal happiness?

She took a deep breath. “I hope for someone just like you, Hawke. This is what I want, but a Hawke who will love me and not treat me as a necessary evil to sire heirs. A Hawke who will be faithful to me and want me always by his side. Who will think of me as not only his wife but his friend and the mate to his soul. I would endure and sacrifice everything

for that Hawke. Every part of me would belong to him and I would toil a thousand days under a hot sun to build a life with him. I would never begrudge a moment of hardship so long as we were building a life together. It would always be bliss for me if I were beside that Hawke.”

He said nothing for a long moment.

Finally, he cracked a smile. “That is quite an answer.”

She groaned. “A typical Birdie answer, wasn’t it? I’m so sorry...it just poured out of me and I’m sure it was too stupidly ardent for you take in. But I cannot hold back how I feel about you. I wish I had better discipline over my thoughts and my tongue. My heart spills out whenever I am around you and I don’t know how to rein it in.”

“I always liked this about you, Birdie.”

“You did? You do?”

He nodded. “Most young ladies would have said they would like an earl with a large estate who would give them a generous allowance, a house in Town, and a fine carriage.”

She shook her head. “Oh, I never thought of that. You asked me what I wanted in a husband and I thought only about what my heart needed. Who cares about having a carriage when I hope not to remain in Town beyond the few months of the Season? I would require an allowance to run a household and provide for some extras for myself, but this is something you would give me without my asking because you have always been generous with me. It never occurred to me that I would have to beg you for pocket money.”

“You wouldn’t ever have to,” he agreed with a nod. “Nor was my comment meant as a criticism of you. It was a very

‘you’ comment and I liked it. Don’t ever stop thinking with your heart.”

She cast him a wry smile. “I don’t think I could change this even if I tried. You can put me in beautiful dresses and teach me how to flirt, but the soul of me will never change. It is all about feelings for me.”

She sighed and turned away. “And this is the one thing you do not want. You have been quite open and honest about it always. Marriage is a business arrangement for you, never an affair of the heart.”

He nudged her back to his side and turned her to face him. “I was utterly wrong about that. I told you I was reconsidering my position.”

She frowned, not certain...was he now resolved to marry only for love? “Hawke, do not keep me guessing. Are you in love with someone?”

“Yes, Birdie.”

“And you wish to marry this someone because you love her?”

“Yes, Birdie.”

She closed her eyes a moment and shuddered at the thought of her next question because he would shatter her forever if he cared for someone else. “Would this young woman,” she said, opening her eyes and gazing at him while she was on the verge of spilling tears, “that is...is it possible this young woman you love and wish to marry happens to be seated beside you at this very moment?”

His smile was broad and so deliciously affectionate. “Yes, Birdie. It so happens, she is.”

Her heart soared. “Dear heaven, are you serious?”

“Quite. This is why I had to leave so abruptly last night. I had to think this through. I had to sober up and be sure it was not the effect of too much wine and brandy clouding my head. So I stayed up into the wee hours, allowing the fog to dissipate. Come morning, I arose to a clear day and a clear head. All I could do was think about you.”

“And you decided you like me?”

“More than like you. Birdie...I am madly in love with you.”

“Dear heaven, I must be dreaming. Did you just say what I think you said? Would it be unfashionable of me to throw my arms around you and kiss you all over your face?”

He laughed. “Completely unfashionable but most acceptable.”

She kissed his freshly shaven cheek and inhaled the delicious scent of him. “What changed your mind? You and Grant were so adamant about finding heiresses to marry. And you were determined to put me on that odious marriage mart.”

“Not all that determined, as it turns out. I did not last a day watching you be courted by Cheshire and Egremont without turning into a jealous ape. I doubt I’ll make it through another day of this torment. I never considered myself a possessive oaf, but I never had something as precious as you I was afraid of losing.”

She grinned. “You think I am precious?”

He groaned. “Yes, Birdie. And do not tease me about it because this feeling is still too new and raw.”

“I won’t. I’m still too scared you will change your mind. But this feeling is old as the hills for me. I’ve loved you since the day I was born and will love you until the moment I take my last breath. But as for you, is it possible you merely had a gut response to interlopers invading your territory?”

“No, although this was my concern last night. But all doubt was erased when I awoke sober this morning. It is real.” He reached out and caressed her cheek.

“What comes next?”

His smile turned soft again. “I ask you to marry me. Will you, Birdie? I promise to be a faithful husband to you. I will never give you cause for worry about that. Nor will you ever come second to anyone in my heart.”

She held her breath as he drew her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. Then his mouth came down on hers for an intoxicating kiss. Deep, probing. Heartfelt. She put every bit of her heart into it as well.

He was in no hurry to end it, but finally he did. However, he did not release her, which was a good thing because her legs had turned to butter and would not hold her up. “We’ll have to write to your brother.”

She shook out of her languor. “Oh, dear. Do you think Grant will—”

“I have no doubt that he and Verity took advantage of his broken leg to set up this ruse to push us together. Not that you needed a shove in the right direction. I was the dense clot who needed not only a shove but to be hit over the head with the possibility that I would lose you if I did not admit the obvious. No more running from the truth for me, Birdie. I only ever denied it because I was afraid of my feelings for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve lost loved ones in the past...especially my siblings, and the pain of it tore me apart. I knew I would feel this same way if ever we married and I lost you. Even now, it is too much for me to think about. I am scared to death to lose you.”

“Hawke, you never will.”

He shook his head. “I hope not. Things happen in life. It is not always smooth and death can be sudden.”

She reached up and kissed him lightly on the lips. “Everyone must face this. We can only grab joy when it is offered to us. I intend to grab it by the fistful and live a life with no regrets. A life with you, for no one else can ever make me as happy.”

“This is what I came to realize as well. In trying to protect myself, I was depriving myself of the only thing I ever needed...you.”

He lifted her in his arms and twirled her around. “You’ll be good for me, Birdie. That big heart of yours will always keep me going.”

“I’m glad you think so.” She hugged him fiercely. “I don’t think anyone else would ever be so indulgent of me. And honestly, I know how to be a lady when the situation calls for it. But I so much prefer being myself.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Unrestrained and annoyingly opinionated?”

“Delightful and caring,” she said, knowing he was teasing her. “I would prefer to call it speaking from the heart.”

“All right, love. You should always speak to me about what you are feeling. I will never cut you off or refuse to hear

what you have to say.”

“Hawke,” she said, staring at him in wonder, “you just called me your love.”

He grinned. “Should I not?”

“I shall never tire of hearing it. I fall more deeply in love with you every time you open your mouth and say nice things to me. I don’t think anyone will ever know me as well as you do or appreciate me as much as you do...or tolerate me as kindly as you do.”

He still had her in his arms, and now lifted her up against him so that their bodies were crushed against each other from shoulder to foot. “I’m going to kiss you again. Verity is watching. Shall we place bets on how long it will take her to bolt downstairs to stop me from ravishing you?”

She laughed. “She won’t stop you. She’ll be waving her handkerchief and wildly cheering. Nor will I ever stop you. I have never been ravished before. I expect I am going to like it very much with you. I love you, Hawke.”

“I love you to pieces, Birdie.” He set her down but kept hold of her hands. “I should have known we were fated to be together when your parents named you *Mariah Wren*. I may be a Hawke and you may be a Wren, but we are birds of a feather, are we not?”

She laughed again, certain no young lady had ever been happier than herself in this moment. “I think we certainly ruffle each other’s feathers.”

He grinned. “I suppose we do. But I do love you and always will. No one else could ever be my countess. Lady Hawke...the name suits you.”



He kissed her again, and it was as perfect as Birdie knew her life would always be with this wickedly handsome earl.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*DORSET, England*

*September, 1828*

HAWKE AWOKE to another beautiful sunrise. The sun was particularly intense this morning and quite soothing as it shone over the English Channel. He had an unimpeded view of the calm, blue waters from his bedchamber, even from his bed when he sat up.

Birdie was still asleep beside him.

He felt a peaceful contentment as he'd never done before.

She was his wife.

His forever.

None of the work still left to be done to put his earldom to rights felt burdensome with her beside him.

He tried ever so carefully to ease his arm out from Birdie's grasp, but she stirred awake and smiled up at him. "Good morning, love," he whispered, kissing her softly on the lips.

"Good morning, Hawke." She sat up, her body pink and warm, and her eyes quite alluring with their sleepy droop. She

tucked the sheet around her body to hide her nakedness, an unnecessary modesty since he knew every intimate curve of her by now.

They were married a full week and had yet to get a decent night's sleep because he could not keep his hands off her.

Fortunately, she felt the same about him.

He rolled out of bed to prepare for the day.

“Must you get such an early start?”

“Yes, love.” He looked back at the tempting morsel that was Birdie. Her hair was loose and tumbling about her shoulders in glorious, copper waves. Her skin was the palest pink and so exquisitely delicate. He loved the feel of her beneath his work-roughened hands.

Or against his lips.

And the taste of her on his tongue.

There were times when his feelings for Birdie overwhelmed him. He could see the glow of love in her eyes as she watched him, and he did not think he could ever be happier than in this moment.

But there would be more moments, many more times for celebration and a deepening to their love as they built a life and raised a family together. Even now, she could be carrying their child. It was quite possible, for neither of them ever held back when they coupled.

“Grant and Verity are coming over for an early supper tonight,” she reminded him.

He nodded. “I’ll be home in time, love.”

She sighed. "I'll never get tired of hearing you call me that."

"And I'll never tire of waking to find you in my bed, usually wrapped around me and clinging like a barnacle."

She laughed. "I don't know how you can abide my snoring in your ear or poking my elbow into your ribs. I suppose this is why couples often prefer separate bedchambers."

"None of that for you and me, Birdie. I don't mind your taking up two-thirds of the bed even if you are half my size. Nor do I mind your pokes, kicks, or snuffles. I love waking to you beside me."

And waking to the heat of her lithe body wrapped in his and the soft give of her breasts against his chest.

"Care to go for a morning swim?" he asked when she joined him by the window to look out on their spectacular view.

"A splendid idea." She threw on her robe, hurriedly pinned her hair up, and tucked her feet into a pair of old slippers.

He tossed on his shirt and breeches, not bothering to tuck the shirt in or make himself in any way presentable. It was early yet and their few servants would only now be stirring. Even if he and Birdie were spotted making their way down to the beach, none of them would remark on it. She was his wife and they seemed quite pleased by the fact he loved her.

In truth, they probably considered him incredibly dense for resisting the obvious for so long.

He held Birdie's hand as they made their way to the water, but she was unusually quiet and seemed lost in her thoughts. "What's on your mind, love?"

She cast him a fragile smile. “I want this for Grant.”

Hawke grinned. “Don’t worry about your brother. He knows how to take care of himself. The cagey blighter did a fine job finding a husband for you, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but he must have known I was secretly in love with you. All he had to do was toss us together for a time and hope for the best.”

They reached the beach and he stripped off his shirt, quite liking that Birdie’s eyes lit up at the sight of his bare chest. “None of his plotting would have worked unless he suspected I was already in love with you, Birdie.”

He removed his breeches next and now held out his hand for her, hoping she would remove her robe and join him in a swim.

“What sort of woman do you think he would like?”

“Can we discuss this in the water?”

She nodded.

He helped her off with her robe, loving the way she blushed when he touched her. Well, he wasn’t helping her so much as ravishing her because he could not resist her luscious body. He lifted her in his arms and carried her into the water, keeping hold of her as they waded in deep.

Gentle waves crested around them and their foamy droplets glistened on Birdie’s shoulders and breasts. Lord, he loved the soft, pink shape of them. He kissed one lush mound, his lips tasting the sweet apple scent of her skin and the salty water.

He kissed the other, flicking his tongue across one taut peak. “My love, I am trying to stir you into a wild, grab-my-

hair and claw-at-my-back frenzy, but you seem a thousand miles away.”

She laughed. “I was thinking of my brother. I have decided to return the matchmaking favor.”

Hawke groaned. “Oh, no. That is a bad idea.”

“Why? I’ll wager I can find him the perfect wife. In fact, I think I know the very girl for him.”

“No. No, no, no...and no.”

She kissed him ardently on the lips, no doubt to shut him up.

She smiled up at him afterward. “So we are in agreement? We find Grant the right girl to marry?”

He sighed as they drifted upon the gentle waves, she still in his arms because he could not bear to let go of her. He adored having her in his arms. “You may take this chore on yourself. Do you mind if I warn Grant?”

“Go right ahead. Warn him all you like. It will do no good. This is the beautiful thing about true love. You cannot escape it.”

“I really despise loving you so much that I am willing to lose every argument.” He groaned. “Who’s the girl?”

She put her arms around his neck and held on tightly as a larger wave swept over them. “I’m not going to tell you. But I will give you a hint. Her brother may or may not be a member of your Wicked Earls Club.”

“That does not narrow it down for me. Most of the members have sisters they need to see wed. And you’ve said he may not be a member of our club. So that tells me nothing at all.”

She shrugged. “Too bad. That is all the hint you are going to get. Go ahead and tattle on me to my brother. He has been far too smug, lately. It will be fun to watch him sweat every time he is introduced to a young lady of marriageable age.”

“You are nefarious.”

She cast him an impish grin. “Perhaps a little. But I am just trying to be a good sister. Besides, you like that bit of mischief in me. Admit it, Hawke.”

The water swirled around them, warmed by the sun as it beat down. A few kestrels flew overhead.

The air was also warm and tinged with salt.

Birdie’s eyes sparkled.

“Yes, I do,” he said and initiated a little of that mischief himself.

*Hawk swooping in to claim his wren.*

“I love you, Hawke.”

“Love you to pieces, my Lady Hawke.”

END

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# CHAPTER ONE

*PENZANCE, England, April 1822*

“YOU KNOW what’s wrong with you, Trystan?”

Trystan Cartwright, the Earl of Zennor, arched a dark brow at one of the two men seated across from him at the table in the grimy little tavern.

Graham Humphrey, a blond-haired gentleman with gray eyes lit with dangerous mischief, grinned at Trystan. His companion was Phillip, the Earl of Kent, a solemn man with a nature so honest he made up for Trystan and Graham’s roguish ways. Graham and Phillip were two of his most trusted friends, the only ones who could rein him in when his recklessness began to spiral.

“What?” Trystan asked, his tone laconic as he lifted his glass and downed the scotch within it.

“You’re bored. You get testy when you have nothing to do,” Graham observed.

“He’s not wrong,” Phillip added. “And often, what entertains you is not anything I would recommend.” He

hesitated before continuing in a more careful tone. “What you need is a wife.”

Trystan snorted. “No, not yet. Perhaps not ever. Wives can be useful, but they are hardly entertaining. They are shackles that bind men to early graves.”

“Wives can open doors that men cannot,” Phillip said sagely. “Take a woman with breeding who has been raised to be familiar with the ins and outs of society, women like Audrey St. Laurent or Lady Lennox, who have a knowledge of business and politics. They have a vast amount of power and influence in not just feminine circles.”

“But what do I need with power and influence? I have plenty already,” Trystan replied. “Besides, you can turn any woman into a society creature. Feed her the right lines, put her in the right clothes and she’d fit like any goose with a gaggle of geese.”

“Are you joking? You can’t take just anyone and turn them into a lady. Ladies are raised from birth to think and behave a certain way,” Graham argued.

“Maybe that’s the problem. Perhaps I’d rather converse with a street urchin than another boring lady of society. They all bore me.”

Graham chuckled. “You need a *mistress*, not a wife, obviously,” he said, and took a swig of his ale. “Mistresses are amusing, but they require funds to keep them happy. My last mistress cost me a townhouse and half the jewels in London to keep her happy.” Graham frowned, as though he hadn’t really considered the cost until that moment. That was to be expected. Graham rarely gave anything much thought. He simply did what he wished and damn the consequences. It was why he and Trystan got along famously.

Trystan sighed. "I'm afraid even mistresses bore me." His gaze wandered over the shabby little tavern. Its grubby wallpaper was peeling in places, the tables needed more than a good scrubbing, and the man they'd paid for drinks looked as though he had gone a few rounds in a pugilist match.

Trystan preferred their usual club, Boodle's, but they were far from London and bound for his home in Zennor, which meant reputable places shrank in number the further they strayed from civilization. Zennor, despite its rural location, wasn't all that bad; Trystan could admit that much. His ancestral home was built near the coast of Cornwall, and he liked the way the wind swept in off the sea and how the deep blue water burst into white foam as it careened into the rocky cliffs that banked the sea.

As much as he enjoyed the pleasures of a city like London, he felt an undeniable draw to his home, the many rooms of the rambling manor house full of memories of an adventurous, though sometimes lonely, boyhood. After his mother passed away when he'd been but a boy of ten, he and his father had grown close. He'd learned to appreciate the land and the home that had only a few years ago become his when his father had suffered a stroke and joined his mother.

After his father's death, Trystan had taken to the life of an earl with relative ease. He did not squander his family's fortune on drink, gambling, or other vices. His recklessness came in the form of what entertained him... usually something that would cause Phillip to frown and lecture him on responsibility. His two old school friends were the proverbial angel and devil on his shoulders, offering temptation and temperance in turn, which in its own way was an entertainment.

Trystan swept his gaze over the tavern again, this time taking in the occupants. Everyone here came from a hardscrabble life. Most looked to be dockworkers or sailors. It was possible even a few pirates still sailed into the seaside village.

As aristocrats, Trystan, Graham, and Phillip stood out from the crowd, and because of this they were earning more than a few curious looks from the more brutish men who huddled by the hearth on the opposite side of the room. The speculative looks these men were sending his way could result in trouble, which only made Trystan smile.

Perhaps these men would attack them in hopes of getting some coin. Wouldn't that be a nice change of pace? He could do with a good brawl. He had studied for years at Jackson's Salon with the best boxers in London, and had even managed to give the legendary Earl of Lonsdale a few good swipes.

Graham waved the barkeeper over to bring them more ale. "What you need, my friend, is a challenge."

"I do, but I cannot think of a single thing that could hold my interest." He played with the rim of his cup, gently stroking a fingertip along its smooth edge.

"How about a wager?" Graham said.

Phillip rolled his eyes. "You two and your bloody wagers. Didn't you learn anything the last time when you freed that bear in that dogfighting ring?"

Trystan laughed. "I've never seen so many men run and scream like children when that poor beast got free." he said. "You have to admit we did a good thing, though, Phillip. That bear should never have been held in chains and forced to fight like that."

Phillip closed his eyes and rubbed them with his thumb and index finger. “As much as it pains me to admit it, yes, but the only reason no one was mauled to death was because of that Scottish fellow who was there to calm it down. If he hadn’t had such a gift with animals, you both might have been killed, and the beast as well.”

Trystan remembered that night all too well—and the surge of power he’d felt at freeing the beast and watching it chase the men who’d tormented it. But Phillip was right, the bear would have eventually killed someone if Aiden Kincade hadn’t been there to soothe the creature and trap it in a coach outside the warehouse where the beast had been held captive.

“All’s well that ends well. The bear is now in Scotland and we’re still here to wager yet again on something ridiculous.” He was, however, far from convinced that there was anything new he could bet on that would entertain him for long.

A serving boy brought them more ale, slamming the tankards down hard enough that the ale sloshed out of the cups.

“Ho, there! Watch it, boy!” Trystan snapped at the lad.

“Watch yerself, milord!” the boy countered sharply and stalked back to the bar.

“Impertinent lad,” Graham observed. “As I was saying—”

There was a loud crash near the bar. The boy had tripped and a tray of mugs now lay shattered on the ground.

“Daft fool!” The barman swung a hand and cuffed the boy across the face. The boy crumpled to the floor with a sharp cry of pain.

Trystan, Graham, and Phillip all tensed.

“He was impertinent, but he didn’t deserve that,” Graham said.

“Do that again and I’ll sell you to the whorehouse!” the barman roared. He kicked the boy’s ribs as the lad got on his hands and knees to collect the pieces. He fell onto his back and his cap dislodged, sending a tumble of long dark hair down in a messy, oily tangle.

“Bloody hell... It’s a girl,” Trystan murmured to his friends as they all stared in amazement at the creature on the floor. She was small, dirty cheeked, not the least bit attractive, and had a waspish tongue, but she was still a girl and shouldn’t have been hit like that.

“You try to sell me, and I’ll cut your bloody heart out and sell it to the bleedin’ butcher, you bastard!” the girl shot back at the barman. Despite his best intentions, Trystan found himself smiling at the girl’s courage.

“There’s a girl with fire in her belly,” Graham said. “That’s a female who would never be tamed into a quiet, biddable lady of society.” he laughed, but Trystan wasn’t laughing.

He stared at the girl as she picked up a piece of broken mug and hurled it back at the barman. The clay shard smashed against the wall next to the man’s balding head. Then she ran outside before the bellowing pig could catch her.

For a second the taproom was silent. Then everything went back to normal, laughing and jeering and drinking. The little hellion was gone and no one seemed to care.

“Fancy that. A drink *and* a show,” said Graham.

Trystan’s lips twitched as he stared at the door the girl had vanished through a moment before.

“Christ, he has that look again,” Phillip muttered.



Graham was less concerned and looked hopefully at Trystan. “What is it? What’s your idea?” He knew his friend too well.

Trystan leaned back in his chair, a smug smile now spreading across his face as he gripped his mug of ale.

“I wager I can turn that whelp of a girl into a proper lady in one month.”

“*That one?* The hellcat who threatened to cut a man’s heart out? I just said you couldn’t possibly make a girl like that a lady,” Graham sniggered. “You might want to be careful she doesn’t cut yours out.”

“Yes, *that one.*” Trystan smiled wickedly at the thought of such a challenge.

“If you turn her into a proper lady, one to rival a duchess like Emily St. Laurent, I’ll pay you two hundred pounds.” Graham volunteered the vast sum of money as if it barely mattered.

“Throw in that black-and-red racing curricule and your fastest pair of geldings, and I’ll take that bet,” Trystan offered.

Graham eyed him thoughtfully. “What if we make it more interesting? Lady Tremaine’s ball is in a month. If you bring that girl to the ball and she fools everyone, you win. But if *anyone* sees through her disguise and you fail, you owe me...” Graham drew out his next words in wicked delight. “The deed to your hunting lodge in Scotland. I rather fancy it.”

“High-stakes indeed, just the way I like it.” Trystan chuckled. To have so much to lose only heightened the excitement of the wager, and his friends knew it.

“Now, hold on a minute,” Phillip interjected. “This is a *woman*, albeit a rough and ill-mannered one. We must set

some rules for propriety's sake.”

“Rules?” Graham scoffed at the same moment Trystan replied, “Propriety?”

“Yes,” Phillip insisted. “If you both do as you're planning, that woman will be under your control, Trystan. You will be responsible for her. That means you cannot turn her into a mistress or take advantage of her. You must think about her future. What reason does she have to accept your terms, and what will you do once the wager is over? Toss her back into this bar and tell her to carry on as before?”

Trystan laughed. “You honestly think I'd take advantage of *that* creature? Lord, Phillip, I have standards. I thought she was a bloody boy, for Christ's sake. The little hellion has nothing to fear from me. I shall not touch her. Not even if she begs me and not unless I lose my own sanity.” He was still chuckling at the thought. He had his pick of women to share his bed, and certainly wouldn't choose a bloodthirsty guttersnipe like the creature he'd just seen.

“Good.” Phillip relaxed. “You *both* must deal with this girl with some sense of decorum and chivalry.”

Trystan snorted, and Graham only laughed into his mug of ale.

“Enough talking,” Graham said. “Get to it, Trystan. Claim the girl, and let's be on our way.”

Trystan stood, took his time dusting his waistcoat off, and then he walked over to the barman. He braced his arms on the bar and leaned forward to speak to him.

“Was that hellion whelp yours?” he asked the man.

“Whelp?” The barman seemed confused by the word.

“Yes, the girl you kicked like a starving dog.”

The heavyset gray-haired man scratched his chin, eyes narrowing in suspicion at Trystan. “What if she is mine?”

“Then I wish to buy her from you.” Trystan expected the man to show at least a minor concern for the girl’s treatment or at least pretend to care what Trystan might do with her, but he didn’t so much as ask about Trystan’s intentions.

“How much are you willing to pay?”

Trystan stared at the man before he reached for his coin purse and tossed fifty guineas on the table.

“There’s fifty,” Trystan said.

The man smacked his lips and decided to press his luck. “I could make double off her if I sell her to the whorehouse, plus profits on top of that.”

“No madame at a brothel would split any profits with you. She would buy the girl and that would be the end of it. You and I both know it. And she certainly wouldn’t pay you fifty guineas for that girl.”

“Throw in another five then. She is my stepdaughter, after all, and I love her dearly.”

Trystan let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m sure you do, old chap.” He slapped another five guineas down beside the rest. Then he returned to his friends at the table and finished his mug of ale.

“How much did she cost you?” Graham asked, trying to hide his devil-may-care grin.

“Fifty-five guineas.” He wouldn’t miss a single coin, not with the excitement of his wager to look forward to.

Graham whistled. “Expensive girl.”

Phillip looked heavenward and cringed. “You two are absolute barbarians.”

“Perhaps we are, but what a challenge this will be.” Trystan smiled with relish. “I assume you’ll come with us to watch over the girl and play her nursemaid?”

His friend gave a weary sigh, but there was a hint of humor in his eyes. “I suppose I had better. Although, I would argue, you two are the ones in need of a nursemaid.”

Ignoring Phillip’s remark, Trystan looked about the taproom. “Now, to find the little hellcat...” He started for the door and his two friends followed. He was a little more drunk than perhaps he ought to be, but he was quite looking forward to the adventure of turning this hellcat into a fine lady.

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BRIDGET RINGGOLD HUDDLED against the side of the tavern, cloaked in shadows while she nursed her wounds. Her stepfather’s blow had split her lip, and her ribs ached. She’d be damned lucky if they weren’t broken. Her chest would be purple in a few hours after the kick she’d taken. Blood filled her mouth with a foul taste, and it stung each time she ran her tongue over her lip.

She shivered against the brisk fall wind that blew in off the sea. She wished desperately she could sneak back in the kitchens and warm herself, but the odds of her stepfather finding and striking her again were too high. That meant she would be sleeping in the stables tonight.

Bridget needed to find a way out of this town and into a new life, one that did not involve spending time on her back in a brothel. She was old enough to be on her own—nineteen, in fact—but had few decent options open to her. She could cook a little, could clean a bit, but not well enough to earn a decent living at either. She'd had plenty of men offer her marriage, but none of them were good or decent men. One had almost certainly been a pirate. If only her mother had been here to offer advice, to help her find a way in life either by counsel or helping her find someone to share her life with.

Her mother had died ten years ago, leaving Bridget with a beast of a stepfather. She'd been too young to learn any skills that a woman ought to learn from her mother and had been too busy just trying to survive the dangers of living with a man like her stepfather.

Pushing away from the side of the tavern, she crossed the cobblestone courtyard and ran into the stables. The loft above was quiet and no one ever came up there, aside from the occasional stable boy who forked down hay for the horses. Bridget climbed up the ladder and crawled through the haystacks until she found her nest made of blankets that formed her bed. She had nicked the blankets here and there over the last year from drunken travelers not minding the belongings in their coach while they went into the tavern for a drink.

She checked for the cloth bag that contained her few treasures, something she did out of habit every night before she settled into sleep. The comb and the mirror had been her mother's, along with several shillings she'd made by whittling wood into the shape of animals.

People passing through Penzance seem to like her figurines. She'd managed to sell or barter three or four of them each week for the last few years, which gave her a little money to afford extra food and clothes as she had grown older. She never wore dresses. Aside from the expense of having gowns made, it was easier and safer to wear clothing meant for men. The locals knew she was a woman, but with a grimy face and hair pinned up beneath a cap, she managed to avoid the interest of most men who passed through the tavern while she served drinks.

Even those fancy gents tonight hadn't known when she'd served their drinks. She'd been watching them too, out of the corner of her eye, and had been rather nervous when her stepfather had ordered her to take more ale to them. But she'd done what she'd always done when she got nervous—she overcompensated with confidence. She couldn't afford to be a fragile flower; she couldn't fake her strength or confidence.

But that had been a mistake. The three men had paid more attention to her because of her impertinence than she'd meant them to. They were a handsome lot, with their finely embroidered waistcoats and polished boots that gleamed in the lamplight. Even the one who'd come in leaning heavily on a cane had been a handsome fellow. Men shouldn't be *that* attractive, Bridget thought with a frown. Especially the one with dark hair and honey-brown eyes. He had an intensity that she didn't like one bit, as if he could read anyone's thoughts simply by meeting their gaze. That one was dangerous.

"But I'm out here, and they're in there," she murmured to herself. No one ever disturbed her up in the loft, because no one thought to look in the haystacks.

She busied herself by inventorying the rest of her possessions, which included a small carving knife that was tucked away in the back of the bag. Once she was assured her treasures were safe, she settled down to sleep and tugged her blankets up over her. She heard the horses below, nickering softly as they ate oats and hay. The scuttling of mice somewhere on the rafters, rather than frightening her, assured her she was safe. Mice always moved about when no one else was around.

She had closed her eyes and started to drift when the scurrying mice stopped and the stables turned quiet. A moment later, low voices whispered to each other from below.

“She must be in here. I saw her cross the courtyard as we came out,” a man said. His cultured voice was one she recognized, belonging to one of the fancy gents. His voice was smooth as warm brandy, and she remembered his eyes were the same color. Bridget slid free of her blankets and moved silently along the floor of the loft so she could peer over the edge. Three men stood in the center of the stables, looking around.

Bridget ducked down as far as she could to avoid being seen by them.

“Trystan, no one’s here,” one of the other men said.

“She’s here,” the first man said with a soft chuckle. “Aren’t you, little hellcat? Come out, child! I bought you from that wretch who claims to be your stepfather, and I’m here to discuss your future.”

“Trys, you’ll scare her. Tell the girl what you plan to do for her first, or she’ll think you mean her harm,” one of the men argued.

The loft vibrated as the man began to climb up the stairs of the ladder. Bridget would have shoved the ladder away and sent the man crashing to the floor, but that would leave her no easy way to escape. If she tried to make that drop, she would most likely break an ankle or her neck, and she was injured enough as it was.

Thinking quickly, she dug through her bag until she found her whittling knife. It was a small blade, but it could still cut them if they tried anything. But her best chance was to not be seen at all.

The man reached the top of the loft, searching the dim, hay-strewn platform. It was just dark enough inside the stables that he might miss her.

*Please don't let him see me, please.*

She held her breath, and the blood roared so loud in her ears she couldn't hear much else.

“Gotcha!” With his feet still planted on the top rung of the ladder, the man lunged for her. Bridget scrambled back, but one of his hands gripped her ankle and dragged her toward him. She kicked at him with her foot and caught his chin. He grunted in pain but didn't let go. Instead, her fight seemed to light a new fire in him. He climbed fully into the loft and dove at her. Bridget raised the knife just as he landed on top of her, and she felt the blade scrape across his arm.

“Christ, she has a knife!” The man bellowed as he pinned her flat on the floor.

He grasped her wrist, stopping the hand holding the knife, and pressed it hard against the floor beside her head.

“Let go of it, hellion!”

“No!” she spat.



“Let go!” His grip tightened to the point of pain, forcing her to drop the knife. His grip instantly eased and the pain vanished.

“Er... I say, Trystan. Let's be quick about this,” one of the man's friends said. “It looks as though we're kidnapping this girl, when that's not really the case. I don't wish to be here long, lest we find ourselves in trouble. Our coach is ready.”

Trystan stared down at her, the hard angles of his face too perfect for any man, especially one as wicked as the devil himself.

“Listen, little cat,” he growled. “I bought you tonight from that swine who claims to be your stepfather. I have no plans at all to hurt you, except to spank that ass of yours if you dare to stab me again.”

“I ain't no whore!” Bridget spat angrily. “Don't you dare touch me!”

“Of that, I'm very aware,” he replied. “And that's not why I bought you. Come down with me, and my friends and I will explain just what I plan to do with you.”

Bridget didn't want to go anywhere with a man she didn't know, let alone *three*.

“Go to hell,” she snapped, but she was all too aware that he was fully on top of her and could do anything he wished to her if he wanted. His weight didn't crush her, but she was fully pressed into the floor by his body, trapped and helpless. Something wild fluttered in her lower belly that made her feel strange.

“Graham, find some rope, please. The little cat refuses to withdraw her claws,” Trystan shouted over his shoulder to one of the two men waiting below.

“Miss...” the third man’s voice gently called out. “We really mean you no harm.”

Bridget spat, “You’re trying to bloody nab me. Ain’t nothing innocent about that.” Her protest was silenced as Trystan rolled his eyes and shoved a wadded handkerchief into her mouth.

“There, that’s better.” He grasped both of her wrists in one hand and dragged her toward the ladder. She fought valiantly, and he soon seemed to realize he could not force her down the ladder. He peered over the side of the loft and then before she could stop him, he scooped her up and tossed her.

She screeched and a second later landed in a wagon of hay just below. Trystan climbed down the ladder and pulled her from the hay.

“Rope, Graham.” Trystan held out his hand.

The one not leaning on a cane passed Trystan a coil of rope, which her captor used to bind her wrists tightly together. Then he held her still, with one strong hand gripping her arm. She was trussed up like a sheep for slaughter.

“We need to get her into the coach. I don’t want that barman changing his mind. She’s got too much spirit to end up in a brothel,” Trystan announced.

Confused by his words, she stumbled along as Trystan pushed her to follow his two companions into the waiting coach. She panicked, trying to spit out the gag. Her bag, her things... all that she had in the world was still in the stables. Tears streamed down her face, and one of the men noticed.

“We aren’t going to hurt you,” said the one who used his cane to walk about. His eyes were gentle as he looked upon her. “Please don’t cry, Miss. Everything will be all right. Now

please, don't scream. I give you my word no one will hurt you." He removed the handkerchief from her mouth just as the other two men sat down. The dark-haired devil named Trystan chose the seat directly beside her, and she was suddenly warmed by the heat of his body.

"Please—please, milord. My bag... I ain't got nothing else."

Trystan lifted up her cloth bag. "You mean this?"

She sighed in relief. "Yes, that's the one."

"I'm tempted to search it for weapons," he mused as he started to open the mouth of it.

"Trystan, really. Give the girl some peace, will you?" the kind one said. Then he turned her. "My name is Phillip Wilkes. I'm the Earl of Kent."

"An earl...?" Bridget said, relaxing a little. On the one hand, it seemed inconceivable that a man of high birth would mean her any harm. Then again, it also meant if they did, there was nothing anyone could do to stop them.

"That's right. The man beside you is Trystan Cartwright, the Earl of Zennor."

"Two earls? They just handing out titles to anyone these days?"

Kent smirked and nodded at the third man. "And that is Graham Humphrey."

"Not as fancy as your friends. No title to wave about?" she taunted. Graham's gray eyes narrowed on her.

"Some of us don't *need* a title to wave about. Some of us are wicked enough without it," Graham warned her. But something about him didn't scare her like it should have. He

seemed like a man who would tease a woman and make her laugh, rather than threaten her.

Trystan burst out laughing. “Lord, what fun this will be!”

“Fun? What do you plan to do with me?” Bridget demanded. “I’ll not share your bed if that’s—”

“Heavens, no! On that we agree,” Trystan tutted before he dramatically shuddered. “No, no, my little hellcat. Graham and I have made a wager, about *you*.”

Bridget didn’t like the sound of that. Wagers were made by either bored men or desperate ones, and she didn’t want to be involved with either.

“I have one month to turn you into a proper lady, Miss... Lord, I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Bridget. Bridget Ringgold. And wot do you mean a proper *lady*?” Bridget echoed, drawing out the word. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I am bored,” Trystan supplied.

A bored gentleman. It was as she had feared.

“I ain’t no doll to dress up and play with,” she argued.

“It’s ‘am not,’ and yes, you are my doll, girl. I *bought* you. For the next month, I will dress you and teach you to do things that I want you to do. In one month’s time, you will walk, talk and look the part of a duchess, by God. By the end of all this, you will likely be able to catch some man in a parson’s mousetrap, and you will have a far better life than the one you currently have. You will be singing my praises instead of trying to turn me into a pincushion.”

She plum forgot she had pricked him with her blade, but he didn’t seem to be hurting.

“You ain’t hurt none, milord. If you was, you’d be bleeding all over the blooming place,” she pointed out sourly, secretly wishing she’d had better aim and had stabbed his heart.

“I *am* hurt, but I’ll deal with it later.” He nodded toward his sleeve, and she realized that she’d cut through his coat and down to his flesh. Even in the dim light of the coach, she could see he was bleeding now. If he was hurting, what sort of man could hide a pain like that? Bridget fell into a worried silence.

“Trystan is right,” Kent said. “In a month’s time, you will have a whole new set of skills. I expect you will be able to find a man to propose to you who can offer you a fine life with fancy gowns, a coach at your disposal, and a life without worries. Wouldn’t that be lovely?”

She shot Kent a sour look. “An’ who says I need a man?” she fired back.

Graham was the one who laughed this time. “Christ, you’re right, Trystan. This is going to be fun.”

Fun for them, perhaps, but Bridget wanted no part of this silly wager. She’d take advantage of a roof over her head and food while she planned her next move. Perhaps she’d nick a bit of that fine silverware the toff no doubt possessed and start a new life with the money that silver would fetch her. Then *she* would be the one laughing.

## CHAPTER TWO

BRIDGET BIDED HER TIME, although that proved difficult. She never was good at being patient. It was one of her numerous failings, and she was all too aware of that as she fought her natural urge to fidget. They traveled another three hours and just as dawn crested the horizon, their carriage made a stop at a coaching inn to allow the horses time to rest.

“Tell me we’re staying a while, Trys.” Graham grumbled like a weary child.

“We could push on,” Trystan suggested.

Much to Bridget’s amazement, he seemed unaffected by his lack of sleep, while Bridget, Graham, and Kent were all fighting to stay awake.

“We could.” Kent stuffed a fist against his mouth as he fought off a yawn. “But honestly, I am exhausted. We haven’t slept since we left London. Staying here for a few hours won’t hurt us.”

Bridget yawned as Kent had. “I could go for a bit of shuteye too, milord. Been working all day and night serving gents like you and getting nothing but my ears boxed for it. I ain’t had no proper rest in ages.”

“I agree, let the girl rest,” Kent said diplomatically. “We could travel again around noon. It would give us six hours or so to recover.” Kent was by far her favorite of the three men. She’d decided to think of him by his title, because he was a true gentleman, unlike the other two toffs who made her spitting mad.

Outnumbered, Trystan let out an aggrieved sigh. “Very well.”

He leapt out of the coach and spoke to the driver. Graham followed him. Kent shared a sleepy smile with Bridget, then climbed out and turned to offer her his hand. Bridget stared at her bound wrists as she got to her feet and stood at the opening of the coach.

“Careful, my dear. Allow me,” Kent said. He changed his mind about taking her hand and instead gently grasped her waist and eased her down to the ground.

“Thank you, milord,” Bridget said, feeling strangely bashful. She’d seen gentleman help ladies before, but she’d never been one of those ladies. For a moment, Kent had treated her like she was, and there was something rather mystifying and pleasing about that.

In the pale morning light, she saw Graham trudge wearily toward the door of the coaching inn. Trystan handed their coach driver a few coins and then clapped the man on the back with a gloved hand before turning their way.

“Let’s go inside, Miss Bridget. Are you hungry? I could have some food brought to break your fast,” Kent suggested.

“I’m near starved to death. A bit of vittles would do wonders.” In truth, her stomach had been grumbling something fierce for the last several hours.

Kent winked at her. “Then a bit of vittles it is.”

Despite her distrust of these three aristocrats, she had to admit that Lord Kent was gracious enough to treat her kindly and not like a piece of property, unlike Trystan. She shot a glare at her darkly handsome tormentor, who followed behind them.

When they stepped inside the common room of the inn, they found it empty except for a few bleary-eyed travelers.

“I’ll secure our rooms,” Trystan told Kent. “You stay with her.”

Kent led Bridget to a table and waved a maid over to place an order.

“Please bring us four servings of whatever you have.” Ken slipped a number of coins into the maid’s palm. The young woman’s eyes widened, and she rushed away with a happy grin.

Bridget raised her bound hands and dropped them dramatically on the table with a thud, then met Kent’s startled gaze.

“Will you untie me, milord? Or do you intend to feed me with a spoon?”

Kent considered her request, then reached across the table. With deft fingers, he undid the knots and freed her hands. Bridget rubbed her wrists and gave Kent a thunderous look as he collected the rope and coiled it up before setting it on the table between them.

“I assure you, this is all just for some harmless wager. In a month, you shall have a fine wardrobe and a small dowry to offer any man who might fancy to marry you, or you can go



and live your own life. It must be better than the position you had at that wretched tavern.”

He wasn't wrong, but Bridget had always hated the idea that a woman's place in the world was defined by the men around her.

“It may have been wretched, milord, but it was *my* wretched. Now you've gone and taken me away from me home, kidnapping me like you did.”

Kent chuckled wryly. “Trystan is not a man to do things properly or even logically.”

“He's a toff, just like you are. Rich men like him are used to getting their way, an' don't like takin' no for an answer.”

Kent conceded the point. “True. But he's a good man, I assure you. You will only benefit from his lessons on how to be a proper lady.”

She snorted ungracefully, and Kent's eyes twinkled with amusement. The maid returned with two plates laden with roast beef, eggs, and a questionable fish-based dish. Bridget helped herself to the meat and eggs as well as the bread, leaving Kent to fend for himself with the plate of fish. He ate it without complaint, but when Graham and Trystan joined them, he was quick to offer them some of his remaining meal.

Graham poked at the fish with a fork. “What's this? Kippers?”

“I'm not quite sure. It's edible,” Kent said. “But not that appetizing.”

Bridget continued enjoying her own food, but her chewing slowed when she realized Trystan was watching her with a calculated gleam in his eyes that she didn't care for one bit.

“Slow down, Bridget. No one is going to take your food away from you. You’re eating like a wild animal.”

Her cheeks were puffed out with food. She was used to getting only scraps of whatever was left after the customers were asleep for the night, which was never enough. Food, at least decent food that she could afford, was always scarce. Even the old hound that hung out behind the inn sometimes ate better than she did. Trystan scooted closer to her at the table and reached for the fork she held in her fist, gently prying it from her hand. She swallowed the food in her mouth so she no longer resembled a chipmunk.

“Do you know how to read?” he asked.

“Course I do,” she snapped proudly.

“Excellent. There’s some intelligence in you, after all.” He held out her fork to show her. “Do you see how I’m holding it? Pretend you are going to write. I pray I’m not too presumptuous to assume you can write as well?”

She nodded. “My mom taught me my letters when I was little, but after she died I ain’t had no time to practice.”

“I see...” Trystan sighed softly. “That at least tells me where your challenges will lie.”

“I’ll have you know I can read an’ write better than half of Penzance,” she shot back. “My mother raised me right an’ as best she could, God rest her soul.” She’d never needed to eat properly or speak properly before, yet here she was with these gents showing her that she was doing not just one thing but *many* things wrong.

“I’m sure she did,” Kent agreed in the soothing tone. “But it’s easy to learn.”

Bridget doubted that. She'd grown up most of her life speaking, acting and eating a certain way. If these men thought she could completely change herself in less than a month, they were fools.

“Let's try eating the *correct* way.” Trystan's large hands placed the fork in her fingers and adjusted her grip. Feeling humiliated, Bridget attempted to hold the fork the way he'd shown her. Thankfully, he turned his focus back on his companions, leaving her briefly to puzzle over this new way to eat.

“Have you thought of the story you'll spin when we take this girl to Lady Tremaine's ball? We'll have to explain her presence in some way,” Graham said as he pulled one of the plates of food toward himself.

Trystan sliced a bit of his roast beef and took a bite. “I've been thinking about that.”

Bridget did her best to imitate him, watching carefully how he used his utensils. He did it with a gentlemanly flair that looked easy, but her fingers felt awkward trying to hold the fork and knife the way he did.

“My great aunt, Lady Helena, will be an excellent chaperone. She lives nearby my estate at the dowager cottage.”

Graham snickered like a little boy. “Not that old woman who is half-deaf and carries around that absurd ear trumpet?”

“Yes, *that* aunt.” Trystan ignored Graham's glee. “I have a distant cousin in Yorkshire who's quite a bit older than me and avoids society like the plague. I'll say this child is his daughter and that I've agreed to introduce her to society for the season.”

“That should work,” Kent agreed. “We'll have to make sure Bridget knows your family tree well enough to maintain

whatever story you concoct.”

Bridget tried to listen while she continued to practice holding the fork the way Trystan showed her. It felt awkward and far less effective in getting the food from her plate to where it belonged—in her mouth. Frustrated, she finally dropped the fork with a clatter on the plate and crossed her arms over her chest, scowling.

“Finished already?” Graham said. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Do that again, and I will put you over my knee. Act like a child, and I shall treat you like one,” Trystan warned, his whiskey-colored eyes blazing.

Bridget swallowed and ducked her head. It was better to play meek around that one, or else he might do exactly what he promised. Bridget’s belly was still mostly empty when the men stood up. Their own plates were cleaned of food, but a few pieces of bread had been left behind. She reached out and snatched the bread and shoved it in the pockets of her shabby coat when the three men weren’t paying attention.

“Time to sleep.” Graham stretched and left the others without a word for his room.

Kent lingered behind. “How many rooms did you—?”

“One for you and Graham, and one for me and the whelp to share.”

“Trystan...” Kent protested.

“She’ll run the second she has a chance. Won’t you, little cat?” Trystan asked.

Bridget, unprepared for the man to guess her secret plans so easily, wasn’t able to hide her reaction. She froze, eyes wide

when Trystan tried to take her arm.

“Hah, see? The little cat had every intention of escaping, didn’t you, pet?” Trystan’s dark chuckle made Bridget narrow her eyes.

“I ain’t your pet,” she hissed. “Call me that again and—”

“And what?” Trystan towered over her, his dark hair falling over his brow. She had the sudden urge to brush it away with her fingers. Startled and more than disturbed by that passing urge, Bridget stepped back. Being so close to him made her stomach tumble. She almost felt queasy, but not in the usual way. She gulped and looked away, breaking the eye contact. She’d let him win this little battle, but she was determined to win the war.

“You’re sure you can take care of her?” Kent asked. “And by that, I mean be polite to her?”

Trystan and Kent stared at each other a long moment. “I will treat her as well as she treats me. If she acts polite, I shall be polite.”

Kent’s shoulders sagged. “Just don’t kill each other, that’s all I’m asking.”

Trystan shot him a devil-may-care grin. “I promise we’ll both survive the night. We’ll see you back down here at midday.” Trystan nodded to Kent as he firmly grasped Bridget’s arm and dragged her upstairs.

She was pushed unceremoniously into an empty room with two small beds. Without a word, Trystan removed his coat and dropped it over a chair, then rolled up his sleeves. He grabbed the end of his bed by its wooden headboard and hauled it across the room until it blocked the door from being opened.

*Bleedin’ hell... The man thought of everything, didn’t he?*

“There,” he muttered with satisfaction as he studied the barred door. Then he started to unbutton his waistcoat and let it drop off his shoulders. Stunned, Bridget half-crouched behind her small bed, watching him. She had seen a few half-undressed men in her day, mostly drunks being dragged out of her stepfather’s tavern. But none of them were built like this one. He had a body carved of marble and seeing him bare his flesh was different somehow than seeing those other men. That fluttering in her belly grew stronger, and she flattened a palm on her abdomen, trying to soothe away the strange sensations.

Tristan pulled his shirt over his head and stood there, the cloth draped loosely over his arm, the olive skin of his chest showing off the hard plane of muscles that made Bridget a little dizzy to look at. He was positively indecent, standing there half-naked. A thin red slash marred the skin on his left arm, and a little blood had smeared where the fabric of the shirt had rubbed the wound.

“See something that interests you?” he asked with a dark chuckle.

“Not. At. All.” She pronounced each word with clear disgust.

Tristan chuckled. “Your nose wrinkles when you lie,” he observed.

He tossed his shirt over the single chair in the room and sat down on his bed to remove his boots. When he was done, he crossed the room to the washstand where a porcelain bowl and a pitcher of water stood in front of a small mirror. He washed the blood off his arm and studied the scratch in the mirror.

“I pricked you good, didn’t I?” she said with a bit of pride.

“*Pricked* being the key word,” he agreed. “Thank heavens you have no cutthroat talents to worry about. I don’t think it will bleed much more now.” He said this more to himself than to her. “Get into your bed, hellcat, and sleep well. You’ll need it. Once we reach Zennor, you will begin a vigorous training in all aspects of being a fine born woman. The quicker you learn, the more you can rest, but fail to learn and it will be that much harder for you.”

“Why are you doing this?” she dared to ask.

“Because I refuse to lose my bet to Graham. I rather like my hunting lodge in Scotland, and I should hate to lose it to him simply because you refuse to eat, speak and act like a lady.”

Bridget didn’t doubt that this man would run her ragged if she wasn’t careful. He seemed like a man possessed of more energy than most.

She peeled the bed covers back and climbed in, still fully clothed. She wasn’t about to give the man a chance to take advantage of her. She shut her eyes, listening to his bed creak as he lay back and let out a slow breath. Bridget weighed her chances of escaping out the window against him catching her. Somewhere between the planning of her first escape plan and her tenth, she drifted off.

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TRYSTAN WAITED until he heard the girl’s breathing even out, then finally allowed himself to relax. He was certain she would have tried escaping, but he suspected she’d got very little sleep while living and working at that tavern, just as she had gotten very little food. She wasn’t malnourished, but she

certainly had not been getting enough to eat. That had been evident earlier, when she'd been shoveling down food at a pace he hadn't thought humanly possible. She'd even squirreled away a few bits of bread in her coat pockets for later.

He would make a lady of her. And while the training would be rigorous, he would treat her far better than she'd been treated at the tavern in Penzance. Once they arrived at his home in Zennor, he would have her bathed and scrubbed clean and her measurements taken for the dressmaker, then he would fully assess the challenges he was facing. He lay awake a while longer, planning and plotting how best to win the wager. He couldn't let Graham take his favorite hunting lodge.

Trystan didn't feel all that tired, not like the others. He was possessed with energy from the passion this new enterprise gave him. He couldn't wait to see the faces of the men and women at Lady Tremaine's ball when he presented Bridget to them. His little hellcat would be transformed into a gentle English rose, a demure creature in the most exquisite clothes, and her voice would be a sultry caress upon every man's ear. Gentlemen would come to blows fighting for a spot on her dance card. The women would either be green with envy or desperate to become her friend. She would be a true *original*, and London society simply adored originals. Trystan would have a secret laugh at fooling all of London by training a wild hellcat into acting the part of a lady.

A smile curved Trystan's lips as he imagined his triumph at the ball. Graham knew better than to make a wager against him like this. While he was a master of trouble and a reckless rogue, he was also well trained in etiquette and all that went with being a titled lord, more so than Graham. As a firstborn son, he'd received the training of the heir of an estate, whereas



Graham, as the spare in his family, had less oversight from his parents in such matters.

Trystan slept four hours and then woke fully rested. He was careful not to make any sounds as he got dressed. The girl was still asleep, and he rather liked how quiet it was when she wasn't shouting at him or pricking him with that little blade of hers.

Tempted by the realization that he could get a better look at her while she slept, he tiptoed over to her bed. He braced one hand on the headboard so he could peer down at her. Smudges of dirt covered her face, and her oily hair was tucked up in a mess of pins beneath the cap which had fallen from her head as she slept. He rolled his eyes. She hadn't even washed up before bed.

But something about her face intrigued him. She wasn't beautiful, no, but she was interesting. With a pert chin, heart-shaped face and tilted eyes with long dark lashes, she had a mixture of features that were pleasing. Her lips were not too plump, nor too thin. Her face had character. A man could look at her and be fascinated all day watching how her expressions would change.

Some women had very little expression. They sat primly with blank, demure looks that did not move Trystan to passion or even casual interest. Such women were completely uninteresting to him. And women *ought* to be interesting. They were the fairer sex; their allure and mystery were supposed to be irresistible to men. And yet far too many were little more than pretty statues to him.

The few women he admired were unafraid to engage in political, economic, or even philosophical discourse. But most women held their tongues and played the part that society

expected of them, which always left Trystan deeply disappointed and bored.

Whenever he took a mistress, he gave her his conversation, his time, his interest, his engagement, not simply his body in her bed—although the latter seemed to be what most of them were interested in.

The little hellcat shifted in her sleep, and then her eyelids suddenly fluttered open. The sleepy, delightful drowsiness vanishing as she realized he was towering over her while she lay in her bed. She swung her fist and walloped him soundly in the eye.

“Bloody hell, woman!” he roared as he fell back a step and clutched his eye. Pain radiated from his eye socket down to his cheekbone. It was definitely going to bruise, and Graham was going to crow about it for the next few days.

“What were you doing leaning over me like that, you big galoot?”

“Galoot?” He repeated the word with disbelief. The mouth on this little creature—and her colorful vocabulary—were going to have to be corrected.

“You deserved that, you did. Leanin’ over a woman like that.” She sat up, fists still raised.

Trystan cursed under his breath and turned to the washstand. His eye was red and his face was starting to swell around it. Graham would never let him live this down. Kent would be more understanding, but he’d no doubt chuckle over this a little too much.

“It was *your* fault,” Bridget went on. He clenched his fists and closed his eyes, only to wince at the pain.

“Use the chamber pot if you need to and come to the taproom downstairs when you are ready to leave,” he said, instead of all the colorful expressions just waiting to be fired back at the little hellion. He moved the bed out of the way and left the room so she could see to her needs alone.

He found Kent and Graham already awake and eating a bit of lunch.

“Where’s the chit?” Graham asked. “Did you lose her already?”

“No, of course not.”

“Trystan...” Kent began. “Is your eye...?”

“The hellcat hit me,” he said in a tone that did not welcome follow-up questions.

Graham, who had been drinking a mug of ale, spewed it over the table as he choked on laughter. Kent looked more concerned than amused.

“Is there... er... a *reason* that she struck you? You weren’t doing anything untoward, were you?” Kent dared to ask.

Trystan arched a brow. “I was merely trying to get a better look at the scamp. She’s half dirt beneath those clothes of hers. I thought she was sleeping peacefully, so I wanted to get a closer look at her, but she woke up and saw me leaning over her and *wham!*” He slapped the table with his palm and Graham scrambled to catch his mug before it toppled over.

“And where is she now?” Kent asked.

“Using the chamber pot, and then I suspect she’ll try to climb out the window.” He reached across the table, stole the fresh apple off Graham’s plate and took a bite before he stood and walked to the door of the coaching inn. As he stepped

outside, he lingered beneath the eaves of the slanted roof. His room was just above where he stood. Kent and Graham joined him as he waited patiently.

“Maybe she—” Graham began, but Trystan raised a hand, silencing him.

A moment later, the roof creaked above them and then a pair of legs appeared over the edge followed by the body of the little hellcat as she hung off the roof’s edge, then dropped to the ground with more grace than Trystan had expected.

“Ahh, Bridget, there you are. Excellent.” Trystan stepped out from the shadows and grasped her arm before she could bolt. “How thoughtful of you to join us just in time to board the coach.”

“Bleedin’ hell!” She shrieked and tried to pull herself free.

Trystan gave her bottom two light swats with his palm, which made her jerk and glare at him, but he saw a heat of another kind in her eyes. The little cat might not know it herself, but she liked getting love pats to the bottom. He was surprised by that she would keep him guessing, this one, and that made this whole adventure worthwhile.

“Kent, please fetch provisions that we can eat on the road.” He then escorted Bridget to the waiting coach and pushed her inside. His left eye was swelling shut, and he decided he would spend the remaining journey to his estate planning Bridget’s punishment in the form of her first lessons of being a lady. The thought brought a wicked smile to his lips.

## CHAPTER THREE

*SO THIS IS ZENNOR, is it?*

Bridget stood in front of the steps of a fine house, bigger than any she'd ever seen. It was built of craggy gray stones that made the medieval manor feel a bit like a castle.

She had never been to Zennor even though it was less than seven miles from Penzance, the town where she had spent her entire life. On the way here, she had traveled through a beautiful, yet desolate countryside and she had found herself falling in love with the rolling hills and jutting cliffs she'd seen. Now she was rather fascinated by Trystan's home as well.

She could do without the owner of course, but his home? She could spend the rest of her life exploring the rambling manor house. She didn't allow herself to be fascinated with the house's owner. She'd been essentially kidnapped by this man and his friends, and they promised they'd treat her right, but she wasn't free to leave. Yet she was admittedly charmed by this place and was tempted to stay, to see what it was like living in a grand house like this.

The ride here had been mostly silent for her. The men had talked with one another, using grand words and speaking of places she didn't know. Even when the Lord Kent had

attempted to engage her, she'd held her chin away from them and looked out the window, determined to have her fill of the countryside as it rolled by. She didn't want them to think she was enjoying this journey so far from the only real place she'd called home.

She'd also been distracted by the heat radiating off Trystan, which had warmed her cold body and left her more than aware that even in her silence, the man was watching her, studying her as if he was thinking of all the things he'd do to turn her into a lady. The fancy-pants was fooling himself though. Still, she was tempted to try to play the part of lady if it meant living in this house for a while.

"Well, ain't she a beauty?" she sighed as she looked up dreamily at the front of the house.

"She is, *isn't* she," Trystan said, his voice softening as he stood beside her. "The original house was medieval, of course. You would never know it, given the many improvements made through the generations."

"You don't say? Medieval, is it?" Bridget smirked at his haughty tone.

He spared her a sidelong glance she couldn't interpret. "You *will* find it more than adequate. It has been thoroughly modernized, full of all the creature comforts one could possibly desire."

Bridget didn't know why a posh lord would require *comfortable* creatures, whatever those were, but it was clearly something he was proud of. She'd known very little comfort in her life, except perhaps the warmth of the hay in the stables. Still, she felt the ancient pull of this place deep in her bones. Perhaps it was the way fine chestnut trees lined the path to the house like a forested arrow, or the way the sunset glinted off

its many windowpanes. All of it was surrounded by the roar of the sea somewhere beyond the house, which made it feel somehow endless. Like it was a place at the edge of the world, or perhaps at the *beginning* of it.

She had a sudden flash of an old memory of her mother sitting across from her on the floor of a bedchamber with a book of maps laid out between them. Her mother had traced the shape of the ocean at the edge of the map.

“Some people used to believe the world was flat. When they reached a certain point on the map, they would simply drop off into an abyss.”

“Why?” young Bridget had asked.

“Because some people cannot believe in things they do not see. They cannot see beyond the edges of a map, so therefore it must end there. Anything else would be beyond their imaginings. But...” Her mother smiled secretively. “*Some* people can see past the edge of the map and go all the way around the world and then, when they come back to the place they started, they have learned about themselves and the world.”

“Did they learn everything about the world?” Bridget asked.

“No,” her mother laughed. “No one can know everything. There will always be plenty left to discover, and that is the gift we have living on this earth. We have the ability to endlessly explore and learn, and allow us to grow into better people.”

The memory faded, and a fierce heartache overtook Bridget. She placed a palm against her chest. She would've given up all the mysteries of the world just to have her mother by her side again.

A man stepped out of the front door and came down the steps to greet them. “My lord.” He was a tall, lean man in his early fifties, but held an air of strength and grace as he moved.

“Ah, Mr. Chavenage,” Trystan replied. “Please prepare two guest rooms for Graham and Philip and one room for Miss Ringgold.” Trystan’s lips curved in a crooked grin as he glanced between her and Mr. Chavenage. If the man was shocked by Trystan’s orders, he didn’t show it.

“Yes, my lord. And Miss Ringgold is...” The man eyed her speculatively.

Trystan crossed his arms, gave her a thoughtful, assessing type of look, creating a burn deep within her. Bridget glared at him.

“A project. Please tell Mrs. Story to meet me in my study for instructions about the girl’s care.”

The man nodded and went back into the house while two strapping young men in footmen’s livery came down to the coach and began removing travel cases from the back.

“Who was that?” Bridget asked Lord Kent in a quiet voice as Trystan and Graham proceeded into the house.

“Who?”

“That chap, Mr. Chavenage.”

“Oh,” Kent chuckled. “That is Trystan’s butler. He runs a most efficient house, a good man.”

“And this Story lady?”

“Mrs. Story is the housekeeper. They are both fair and kind so long as you treat them the same.”



Kent was gently giving her advice as to her behavior. Bridget made a note not to cross Mr. Chavenage, or Mrs. Story.

“Shall we?” Kent offered her his arm. She stared at it. “Loop your arm through mine and rest your hand here.” Kent gently placed her hand the way he wished her to. She’d seen this done before of course, but she’d never done it herself with a man.

While she was perfectly fine to walk without aid, there was something nice about holding onto Kent’s arm. He braced himself on his cane as they climbed up the steps. The inside of the house was beautiful, more beautiful than anything she’d ever seen in Penzance. Dark wood paneling covered the lower half of the rooms and was accented by silk wallpapers in various colors, changing from room to room. Gilded sconces lined the walls. Portraits, dozens of them, filled the corridors and trailed up the large staircase.

“Who are they now?” she asked as she studied the fine lords and ladies upon the walls.

“Two or perhaps three centuries’ worth of Cartwrights. Trystan’s family.”

She scrutinized the features painted in layers of oil as she hunted for Trystan’s dark hair, whiskey eyes and olive skin, but didn’t find them.

“He sure don’t look like any of ’em,” she said.

“No, I don’t,” Trystan said as he exited a room at the end of the corridor. “My mother was a Romani woman who the locals say bewitched my father into marriage. Thankfully, it was a happy one.” He smiled as he said this, and it softened his face in a way that tugged at her heart.

“Your mum was a gypsy?”

Trystan’s eyes hardened slightly. “Yes.” His reply was curt. “Now, come here if you please.”

“I *don’t* please.” Bridget clung tight to Kent’s arm even though he escorted her straight to Trystan.

“This is my study.” Trystan nodded at the room she’d been shown into. “Sit down.” He took her by the shoulders, steered her toward a large leather armchair and pushed her onto it. “And *stay*,” he added firmly.

A caustic retort died on her lips as she noticed a tall, slightly plump woman staring at her. She wore a dark gray cloth gown and stood next to the large ornate desk inside the study.

“Bridget, this is Mrs. Pearl Story, my housekeeper. You will call her Mrs. Story unless she tells you otherwise. Mrs. Story, this is my little hellcat, Bridget Ringgold.”

The housekeeper stared at her. “This is the one ye want me to clean up, my lord?” Her voice had a Scottish accent that Bridget wasn’t used to hearing.

Bridget bristled.

“Yes, clean her up and find a spare dress from one of the maids. We’ll have a dressmaker brought to the house tomorrow to measure her for a decent wardrobe. Until then, whatever you can find that fits her will do. And burn the clothes she’s wearing. I never wish to see them again or smell them.”

“Oi! You can’t take my clothes and *burn* them!” she cried out. “They’re all I got.”

“Hush your shrieking!” Trystan barked. “Mrs. Story will dress you in *new* clothes, something that will suit you better than these *rags*.” He waved a hand at her soiled garments.

Those *rags* had cost her two months of animal carvings as well as her tavern wages.

“I bought them. They’re mine!” she snarled. “You can’t take what I work so hard for and—!”

“Easy, girl.” Mrs. Story’s Scottish accent thickened slightly. “No one will burn anything.” The housekeeper shot Trystan an exasperated look, then turned back to Bridget. “We’ll clean them up, mend any tears, and give them back to ye.”

Trystan and Bridget glared at one another in a silent but heated battle of wills.

“Now, listen here, Bridget. You are to go with Mrs. Story and do whatever she says. If you give her any trouble, you’ll deal with me.” His tone brooked no argument.

“Come along, Miss Ringgold,” Mrs. Story said in a gentle tone. “Let’s wash ye up a bit before dinner.”

Bridget followed the housekeeper, eyes wide as she continued to take in the expansive house. She was truly going to stay here?

“I’ll show ye where yer room is. His lordship usually has a bath first thing when he arrives, but we’ve been putting the hot water in yer chambers instead at his request.”

She followed the housekeeper up the stairs and down another hall until the woman paused and opened the door. A pair of maids were busy putting fresh sheets on a massive bed with four spindle posts carved with flowers. The wooden headboard was also carved with more flowers, painted in an

array of bright colors, as though a garden had magically grown from the wood. She wanted to reach out and touch it. Bridget fancied for a moment how long the work must have taken to carve such a beautiful bed. She was almost tempted to try carving something like that herself.

“This is where ye’ll stay,” Mrs. Story said with a little smile. “’Tis one of his lordship’s favorite rooms in the house.”

Bridget noticed her cloth bag resting on the floor by the bed and snatched it up before one of the maids could nick anything from. She clutched it protectively against her chest.

“How many do I share this with?” Bridget asked. She bet she could sleep with at least another three girls on that bed, but she would prefer to sleep on the floor if it was more than that. She tended to stretch her hands and feet out when she slept sometimes and didn’t want anyone boxing her ears in the middle of the night when she accidentally bumped someone.

“How many?” Mrs. Story echoed in puzzlement.

“Yes. How many of those girls do I have ta sleep with in this room?” She nodded her head at the maids.

The young women paused in their task of smoothing a satin rose coverlet over the bed and then burst into giggles.

“Oh... I see,” Mrs. Story sighed. “Mrs. Ringgold, ye’ll not share this room with anyone but yerself. Ye’ll sleep in that bed alone.”

“Alone?” *In that huge thing?* Bridget started to laugh at the ridiculous notion, but when she realized Mrs. Story wasn’t laughing with her, she stopped. “It’s all my own? Truly?”

“Yes. Now leave yer bag by the bed. No one will steal anything, I assure ye. And come over here.” She opened a door that blended into the wall by using a small latch and led

Bridget into another room. This chamber was much smaller and had no bed. There was a large copper tub, with steam rising off the surface of the water inside.

“Is this where we’ll wash me clothes?” she asked as she clutched the collar of her shirt.

“No, this is where we wash *ye*, love.”

“Me?” Bridget shrieked and started to back away, but two of the maids were already there to block her exit.

“Yes, Miss Ringgold. If we are to make a lady of *ye*, that means you must bathe. Fine ladies do not smell of stables or pigsties. Nor do they have an inch of dirt on their skin.”

“Then give me a cloth and a bowl of water. I’ll drown in that! I’m not using no tub.” She stared at the large, steamy copper contraption. It could swallow her whole body inside it.

“No, *ye* won’t and yes, *ye* are.” Mrs. Story grasped Bridget’s arm, and suddenly her clothes were being tugged off by the maids until she was nearly naked.

Bridget let out a bloodcurdling scream.

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TRYSTAN JOINED his friends in the billiard room, where Kent and Graham were already playing. He walked over to the drink tray resting on the sideboard and prepared himself a glass of scotch.

“I trust both of you are settled in?” he asked.

Graham nodded as he bent to line up his shot. “Yes, thank you. Chavenage always takes good care of us.”

Trystan hid a swell of pride. He had chosen his staff well, and they never disappointed him. He couldn't wait to see how Mrs. Story dealt with the tavern hellion.

"Where's the girl?" Graham asked.

"Being shown into her room and taking a hot bath. Mrs. Story usually prepares one for me when I return from my journeys, but the girl needs a good scrub more than I do."

Trystan sipped his scotch and enjoyed the taste of the expensive liquid burning the back of his throat. Then he retrieved a cue stick and joined his friends. But before he could start a round, a scream from upstairs echoed down the corridor.

"Bath is ready," Trystan said, half to himself.

"What the devil is that?" Kent asked.

"I'm sure it will stop any moment," Trystan said with confidence.

Only it didn't. With a growl, he thrust his cue at Kent.

"Excuse me a moment." He stopped out of the billiard room and hastened up the stairs, following the sounds of screams and splashes. A battle seemed to be occurring in the room he had given the girl. He entered the bedchamber and headed straight to the dressing room door, pounding his fist against it.

"Mrs. Story, are you all right?"

There was another screech and he heard Mrs. Story bellow like a bear.

"Sounds like a bloody zoo," he muttered to himself, then shouted, "I'm coming in!" and opened the door.

The dressing room floor was soaked in water. A bar of soap drifted lazily along the puddle of water past the copper bathing tub. Two of his upstairs maids stood in the corner, drenched clear through to their petticoats. Mrs. Story was braced over half the tub, wrestling with Bridget, who still wore that dirty white shirt of hers.

“Stay still, you ridiculous girl!” yelled Mrs. Story.

“Get your hands off me!” Bridget’s face was streaked with dirt, which had only just started to loosen and drip down her face. She looked an absolute fright.

“Everyone out for a minute, *please*,” Trystan growled.

The maids needed no convincing. They nearly tripped over each other trying to escape. Mrs. Story reluctantly released Bridget, straightened, smoothed her hair back into place, and marched past Trystan, chin held high. He closed the door behind him and stared at Bridget, who sank deeper into the soapy water when she realized she was alone with him.

“She was attackin’ me!”

He took two steps toward her and held out a hand. “You will take off that shirt at once.”

She removed the shirt and held the dripping bit of cloth out to him in a trembling hand. The second he gripped it, she ducked her bare arm back into the white soapy water as she curled her arms around her bent knees, hiding what little he might have glimpsed of her body.

“Now, you *will* allow Mrs. Story to wash you until your skin is pink as a peach. Then you will put on the clothes she gives you, and I will hear no more screaming. Is that understood?”

Bridget gulped. “But milord, she—”

“Tonight, you will feast on wonderful food. You will be so full you might need to be rolled out of the dining room. Then you will be tucked into that bed in the other room and sleep so deep that you won’t even dream.” He softened his tone, realizing he might need to use reason upon the unreasonable. “Bridget... you have been gifted a warm bed and meals for the next month. If you are too much of a fool to see that as the gift it is, then you will be shown to the nearest village and given enough money to get back to Penzance so that you may sort out your rather grim fate on your own.”

He stepped closer to the tub. “I paid that man who calls himself your stepfather fifty-five guineas to release you into my care. Do you know why?” Bridget shook her head. “Because he is the sort of man who has no qualms about *selling* you. Men like him will force girls like you to do what they want, or they will sell you to others who will.”

“To a man like you.”

Trystan barked a laugh. “Hardly. A man like me has no interest in a woman like you. Not for *those* reasons.” He crouched down by the side of the tub. “I paid him, but *not* to buy you, although I’m sure your stepfather sees it that way. No, I *invested* the money. I have invested it in *you*, Bridget.” His voice softened a little, but he held her gaze. “If you become a lady and fool everyone at Lady Tremaine’s ball, you will become a free woman of means. Imagine that for a moment.”

He didn’t miss the way goosebumps rose on her skin, or how she trembled a little. “You can marry well or rent a place to live in a safe town and start a proper life. If you’re clever, you may even find a way to help other girls as I have helped you. Take my lessons seriously, and you shall take the



wardrobe, the training and the nice bit of money I shall give you at the end as a payment for your part in this wager. Do you understand?" He didn't want this girl to focus on the way he'd paid for her like property. He wanted her to focus on her future, on the fact that she was in charge of her destiny now and could change her fate for the better if she only stopped fighting him.

The naked young woman in the copper tub stared at him with lavender eyes, and for a moment he saw past the dirty scamp she was to the creature which lay inside her, one that held such an exquisite fire to live a life of meaning and passion. Yes, *that* was the woman he had bet his money on.

"I—I understand, milord." Her lavender eyes were large and luminous, and he forgot what he'd been saying as his heart gave a strange little flutter in his chest. He gave himself a little shake to clear the flowery feeling from his head.

"Good. Now, Mrs. Story will come back in and help you. Once you get used to bathing, you might find you like it. The hot water eases the ache of weary, tight muscles and gives you time to reflect on your day in peace and quiet. It's a privilege to experience a thing that many others never will. Please be more respectful of my staff who provide such a thing for you."

Bridget's brows rose a little, and he could tell by the guilt-stricken look on her face that he'd made an impression on her.

"Very well. I'll leave you to Mrs. Story, and we shall see each other for dinner in a few hours." With that, he left Bridget alone to think while he returned to his game of billiards, assured he would have peace at last.

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BRIDGET DIDN'T MAKE a peep of protest when Mrs. Story returned. She allowed the housekeeper to rinse her hair, wash her face with a cloth and scrub the rest of her body, even the bottoms of her feet, which tickled enough to make her laugh. Trystan had been right. The hot water was terrifying at first, but now it felt rather wonderful. She was limp as a rag, and it was a delightful feeling.

“We'll have yer hair cut fashionably tomorrow. I'm rather good with scissors,” Mrs. Story bragged, but she said it with an amused chuckle when Bridget wrinkled her nose.

Bridget didn't care about her hair. It was a nuisance. The few times she'd tried to cut it with her little knife, she made a mess of it so she'd let it grow, which was almost as annoying. It now reached the middle of her back.

“There now,” Mrs. Story said. “It's not so bad, is it, love?”

“No,” Bridget mumbled.

The housekeeper retrieved a large towel from the washstand in the corner and held it up. “Stand up and wrap this around you.”

As Bridget stood, the chill in the air clung to her skin, making her shiver. She took the towel and wrapped it around herself like a cloak, glad to feel warmer.

“Step out onto this so ye don't slip.” Mrs. Story laid another towel down on the floor. “Then follow me.”

She followed the housekeeper into the bedchamber and sat where instructed in front of a vanity table. Mrs. Story used a comb to untangle the knots in Bridget's hair, which took a long time, then she showed her the clothes she had brought for Bridget to wear.

It took the housekeeper several minutes to demonstrate all the bits of underclothes before Bridget felt confident she knew how to wear them. She dried off and let the housekeeper help her into the clothing. She did not like the way the petticoats rustled around her legs or how the skirts hindered her walking. She'd never be able to dash about, the way she did in trousers. However, when she finally caught a glimpse of herself in the looking glass, she blinked in surprise.

She looked... well... almost pretty. Her hair was still a little wet, so Mrs. Story had braided it and twisted the braid into what the older woman called a chignon on the back of her head before securing it with some hairpins. The blue gown she was given was a simple affair by toff standards according to the housekeeper, but Bridget thought it was the loveliest gown she'd ever seen. It was a beautiful color and did something rather enchanting to her eyes. She'd never seen them shine so bright before, nor had her skin looked so luminous.

“Now ye look like a lady and a right pretty one,” Mrs. Story said with a smile. “Let's get ye downstairs and surprise those silly men, eh?”

Bridget took one more peek at herself and bit her lip before she smiled back at the housekeeper and nodded. She barely remembered the last time she'd worn a dress... It had to have been about the time her mother died.

As they descended the stairs, Bridget felt vulnerable in a way she'd never felt before. She clutched her skirts in one hand, so her feet could find the steps easier in the little black slippers she'd been lent by one of the maids. The baggy masculine clothing she'd always worn before had made her feel safe, hiding her femininity. Now she felt she had no way to hide at all.

“My lord,” Mrs. Story said to Trystan and the others once they reached the dining room.

Bridget ducked behind the housekeeper, rigid with dread at how Trystan might react to her appearance. She did not want to be yelled at again.

“Where’s the little cat?” Trystan asked.

“Hiding behind me, I suspect.” Mrs. Story turned and stepped aside, forcing Bridget to face the three men who lingered by the large mahogany dining room table.

They all stared at her and continued to stare for so long that she wondered if she’d grown a second head or something. Graham finally broke the silence by dropping the glass of brandy he was holding. It hit the floor, the liquid splattering all over the carpet.

“Christ!” Graham picked up the glass, blushing. “She cleaned up all right, didn’t she?” he said to Trystan. “Assuming she’s able to learn your lessons, you might just win, blast it!”

Kent elbowed Graham in his stomach. “Miss Ringgold, please allow me.” He walked over to one of the chairs that had a place setting in front of it. He pulled back the chair and gestured for her to sit. She stole a glance at Trystan, who was watching her with an intense but approving look. He nodded encouragingly, and she sat down in the chair before Kent pushed her in and then took the seat beside her.

Trystan sat at the end of the table, and Graham chose the chair across from her. The four of them occupied only one end of the vast dining room table, leaving over a dozen other seats empty.

“Do you usually dine with lots of people, milord?” She nodded at the mostly empty table.

“Not often. But a few times a year, I host a country house party and we fill up every chair,” Trystan said.

Bridget turned her focus to the elaborate place setting. She had two glasses, several forks, knives, and spoons. When a footman placed a bowl of soup in front of her, she discreetly watched Kent. She was used to simply lifting the bowl up to her mouth, but she had a feeling with all the spoons lying about, she'd be chastised if she didn't use one. He took the farthest spoon away from the bowl. She reached for her own spoon in the same spot.

“Now, you should always work your way from out to in,” Trystan explained. “The servants will only lay out the silverware needed for your various courses. We'll talk more on dining habits tomorrow. Tonight, you will simply mirror Kent or myself. Pay close attention to the type of silverware we use when we eat certain foods. If you have questions, you may politely interrupt to ask, but you will do so properly. If you speak with incorrect grammar, I will correct you and you will repeat the question appropriately.”

“Yes, milord.”

“*My lord*,” Trystan corrected, enunciating.

“*My lord*,” Bridget mumbled. Trystan arched a challenging brow until she repeated the correct response more clearly.

“Good. Now you may enjoy your soup.”

Bridget decided to forgo any questions so she could focus on eating correctly, and more importantly, eating enough. She wanted what Trystan had promised her, a belly so full that she would have to be rolled out of the room. The soup was

delicious, but she had no idea what kind it was. The next course was some sort of game bird served with hearty potatoes. That was a fine course indeed, and she loved the taste of it so much she nearly abandoned her silverware to pluck the bones off the plate and chew the last bits of meat off them. But she caught Trystan watching her, his eyes sharp as a hawk's. He kept up his share of the table conversation with ease, yet rarely took his eyes off her.

By the time dessert was delivered— a soufflé, as she was told in a whisper by Kent—her belly was definitely full and the stays that she been forced to wear were pressing against her ribs and back.

She was terribly tired. Her fight in the bath and the last day or so of being a bundle of nerves had taken their toll. She covered her mouth with a fist to hide a yawn and, after a glance at Trystan, who was not paying attention to her, she put one elbow on the table and placed her chin in her palm and briefly shut her eyes. A little nap, just a minute, and she'd be right as rain...

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TRYSTAN NOTICED the moment his charge fell asleep in her chair at the table.

“Did she just...?” Graham began.

“No, no, this won't do,” said Trystan. He was about to shout something before Kent held a finger to his lips.

“Hush. Let her sleep, Trys,” he whispered. “The poor creature is exhausted. Imagine for a minute the constant state of fear and dread she must have had up until today. Now she is

in a safe place with a full belly. Let her have this one night of rest.”

“Well, I can’t exactly let her sleep in this chair all night, now can I?” As his friends stood up, he was about to shake her awake so she could walk up to bed, but something inside him stayed his hand. He looked to Kent, who cocked his head, telling him what needed to be done without uttering a word.

“Blast your soft heart, Kent.” Instead, he gently slid her chair back and caught the girl up in his arms, cradling her against his chest. She didn’t even wake at the movement.

“I’ll put her to bed and see you both in the morning,” Trystan told his friends.

Kent placed a hand on his arm as he passed by.

“Give me your word she’s safe,” Kent said.

“Of course she is,” Trystan said. “You know my taste in women.”

“I do, but men can stray from their taste for the sake of convenience,” Kent replied.

“I am no cad. I made a promise to you. I won’t break it,” Trystan said, his tone hardening. Why on earth did Kent think that this little hellion tempted him? She frustrated him. A lover didn’t drive a man mad with irritation.

He carried the girl up to her bedchamber and laid her down on the bed. He was tempted to undo her clothes himself and not bother his servants, but knew Kent would have a problem with that. So he rang the bell cord for a maid. As he waited, he brushed a single loose lock of hair back from the girl’s face. Once clean and dry, her hair was silky and carried the faint scent of roses from her bath. He stroked a fingertip down her nose, which had a slight upturn at the end like an impish fairy.

The girl was going to be trouble, he could feel it, but at least he was going to be entertained.

An upstairs maid named Marvella appeared in the open doorway of the bedchamber. “Yes, my lord?”

“The girl’s fallen asleep. Please help her out of her clothes and tuck her in.”

“Yes, my lord.” The maid gave a shy smile as she passed by.

Trystan left Bridget to the world of dreams, and he went downstairs to his study to plan the lessons required to win his wager.



## CHAPTER FOUR

BRIDGET BURROWED DEEPER into her makeshift bed in the hayloft and let out a contented sigh. She was cozy as a bug nestled in a rug. Her stepfather wasn't shouting at her, and no one was making noise in the stable below her. It felt too good to be true—

Her eyes flew open. She stared at the plump white pillow cushioning her head. Then her gaze shifted beyond the pillow to the walls, which were painted with an array of wildflowers. Her hand held onto a rose coverlet. There was no sign of hay in sight.

*Wait, no, this is too good to be true...*

The memories came back to her slowly. She glanced around, taking in the opulent room. The last thing she remembered was having dinner with those three fancy gents. Had she fallen asleep at the dining table? She must have. She certainly didn't remember waking up to go to bed, so how—?

Her thoughts were interrupted as Mrs. Story entered the bedchamber with a tray of food balanced against one hip.

“Good morning, love. Time to sit up and eat. Then ye must come down and meet with the modiste in a few hours.”

“The mo-what?” Bridget pushed back the covers as she sat up, but before she could get out of bed, the housekeeper placed the tray on her lap.

Eggs, warm buttered toast, and marmalade sat on the plate. Their tantalizing aroma drifted up to her nose, making her stomach grumble.

“The *modiste* is a dressmaker,” Mrs. Story explained.

“Oh...” Bridget wasn’t looking forward to wearing more dresses. They were pretty, but a bloody nuisance to walk in.

“Can I wear my trousers today?” she asked.

“It’s dresses for now, love. If ye’re to dance in a ball, ye need to be comfortable wearing them. Now, eat up. Tomorrow, one of the maids will bring ye yer breakfast and help ye dress.”

Bridget ate quickly, not leaving a single crumb on her plate. Then she let Mrs. Story help her into the blue gown she’d worn to dinner. The moment she had her slippers on, she was escorted downstairs to the library. It was the most beautiful place she’d ever seen. Book spines with gold lettering glowed in the bright morning light.

“Wait here for his lordship,” the housekeeper instructed.

The second she was alone in the library, she made straight for the ladder with wheels on the bottom and climbed up to get a look at the largest books on the highest shelf. She reached the top and gasped as she saw dozens of other bookshelves all in a row beyond the current shelf. She had never seen so many tomes in her life. Trystan had to be bleedin’ rich as to afford so many books. It would have taken her a year of carving figurines to afford even one of these tomes.

The painted ceiling caught her attention next. She tilted her head back and saw dozens of angels playing among the clouds. Their wings had been painted with such care that it looked like she might be able to reach out and touch them if only the ladder were just a little bit higher.

“Bee—you—tiful...” she drew out the word in wonder. This library was heaven, and the ceiling had clearly been painted with that in mind.

“Like them, do you?” A deep voice startled her and she lost her balance, losing her grip on the ladder.

Bridget fell, but before she hit the hard floor, something soft cushioned her. Trystan grunted. She stared up into his eyes as she realized he’d caught her in his arms. The man had saved her from falling, like a dashing hero from the book of fairy tales her mother had read to her as a child. One of the few times she’d really been around books was as a child when her mother would read her stories.

“Perhaps try not to take flight next time. You’re no angel yet.” He let her down gently on her feet. She was still clutching at his chest, her fingers fisting his waistcoat. The heat of his body against hers set her on fire, and a masculine scent that clung to his clothes made her want to lean in and breathe deeply to memorize it. No man she ever spent time around ever smelled good like this. Most reeked of dirt and sweat. That funny tingling in her lower belly started up again. She thought of how close he’d been to her last night when she’d been as naked as a babe in that copper tub. Yet this felt different because he was holding her in his arms, gently this time, not dragging her out of a hayloft. Is this what it was like to be a lady? To have a fancy gent hold her in his arms like this?

“You told me you can read,” Trystan said when Bridget finally forced herself to step back from him.

“I can. My mum taught me. She was very clever.”

“I wonder if that’s the reason.” He stroked his chin thoughtfully as he studied her.

“What’s the reason?”

“Your mother. Your speech slips often, but most of the time it’s somewhat proper. Did your mother speak like those men in Penzance or more like me?”

“Like you,” she admitted, not quite understanding his point.

“And your father? Your real one, not that brute from the tavern. What of him?”

“I never knew him. He died when I was a babe. Mum said he was a solicitor. She always said he was educated and a kind man. She loved him dearly. When he died, my mum had no other family or money, so she had to marry *him*.” Bridget spat the word.

“You mean the brute?” Trystan clarified. Bridget nodded.

“Interesting. Well, that gives me hope, Bridget. You came from a home with proper speech. It’s very deep in here.” He leaned forward and tapped his index finger against her forehead. “All we have to do is *jostle* it out of you.”

Jostle? He meant to shake her?

“There won’t be *no* jostling,” she warned in a loud voice.

“There won’t be *any* jostling,” he corrected.

For a moment they stared at each other in silent challenge before she spoke the words again correctly.

“Now, soften your vowels,” he said. “Take your time before speaking. Your accent is worse when you fly off the handle and start shouting like an angry peahen.”

“*Peahen?*” she repeated in rage, even though she hadn’t the slightest idea what a peahen was. “Are you saying I squawk like a chicken?”

“No, little cat, you shriek like a female peacock, or rather a female Indian peafowl, to be precise. But I suppose you’ve never even seen a peacock before, have you?”

“I have,” she argued. “In a book. Big, pretty bird with a tail full of colors.” She crossed her arms and raised her chin, proud of that fact. She doubted anyone else in Penzance knew what a peacock was. That book of fairy tales had plenty of wild animals and she’d learned their names. Lions...tigers...peacocks...elephants.

“Well, good. That’s one less thing to teach you.” He turned away from her then and walked over to a nearby shelf and selected a handful of books. Then he set them down on a reading table.

“You will sit and read to me. You will practice sounding like your mother. Imagine she is reading with you. Do you understand? We will practice this until the dressmaker arrives from the village.”

Bridget reluctantly slid into a chair at the reading table and reached for the nearest book he’d set down before her.

“Does it matter where I start reading?”

“No, it doesn’t. Choose wherever you like. I wish to better understand what I have to work with.” Trystan, seeming restless, paced the length of the library as she began to read. She thumbed through the pages, seeking words she felt

confident she could read aloud and stopped as she found a poem. She'd always liked poems.

*“I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.”*

SHE PAUSED and glanced up to see Trystan's pacing had slowed. He seemed calmer.

“Keep reading.” He waved a hand for her to continue.

*“Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.”*

BRIDGET CONTINUED to focus on the words, thinking about how her mother would have sounded as she pictured the stars

dancing in the sky just like in the poem.

*“The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought.”*

MOVED NOW by the spirit of the words, Bridget continued with more confidence.

*“For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.”*

SOMETHING DRIPPED off the tip of her nose and she wiped at it, startled to find it was a tear. For a moment, she had felt her mother there with her in that room as she'd read. How had she forgotten how beautiful words could be?

A hand settled on her shoulder and gave it a light squeeze.

“Well done. I believe I have an idea of all we’ll need to correct in the coming days. Oh, don’t look like that. Chin up. You did far better than I expected. Language and the ability to read and speak are gifts to be cherished.” Trystan’s words of praise were softly uttered. As she closed her eyes, she felt as if she were actually *dancing* with daffodils all around her.

“Choose another,” he said more brusquely. “And this time, remember to pronounce the letter H. It’s *heart*, not *’art*. Think of the sound when you laugh. *Ha, ha, ha*. Use that sound.”

“I *did* say it with a *ha*,” she protested.

“If you did, it was so faint none but a church mouse would hear it. Do not treat it like an apostrophe. I wish to hear the ‘huh’ this time, understood? Begin.” He resumed his pacing.

Bridget sighed and read a dozen other poems, each time receiving new instructions from Trystan as to what to correct next, until they were interrupted by Mr. Chavenage in the doorway of the library.

“Miss Phelps is here, my lord.”

Trystan nodded at the butler. “Show her into the drawing room and have tea served. We’ll join her in a minute.”

“Yes, my lord.” The butler glanced at Bridget before disappearing.

Bridget closed the book and stroked a fingertip lovingly over its cover. “Is Miss Phelps the dressmaker?”

“Yes, and not a moment too soon. I fear you are getting entirely too comfortable in that simple blue dress.” Trystan started for the door. “Come along, little cat. We have a wardrobe to make for you.”



She left the stack of books behind with a surprising reluctance. Now that she was surrounded by books, she didn't want to ever leave this room. After her mother died, Bridget had pushed away her desires for anything that reminded her of her mother, including books. Not because she wanted to forget, but because in order to survive, she had been forced to adapt her mannerisms and behaviors to escape the notice of the men that spent time at the tavern.

“Are you coming?” Trystan called out from the doorway.

She looked at him, studying him the way he always seemed to study her. She was arrested by the sight of his broad shoulders and chest that tapered down to his trim waist. He wore no coat, only a white shirt, trousers and waistcoat. The waistcoat was a deep burgundy with silver embroidery around the pockets and collar. He never seemed to wear anything overly fancy, but his clothes were as finely made as could be. His dark hair was lightly tousled, and he cast off an air of elegant carelessness that was surprisingly seductive.

Bridget had never really thought about men in that way before. But now she couldn't seem to get it out of her mind. What would a man like him look like if he was naked in a bath and she had been the one to stare at him? She'd seen his bare chest once before, but now she was curious to see the rest of him. How would it feel to have him press her up against the wall the way she'd seen men do with women outside the tavern late at night? She imagined Trystan coupling with her in the dark like that, to see and *feel* all of his olive skin bared in the moonlight while he—

“Stop dawdling,” Trystan said sharply, and she rushed after him into the corridor.

When they entered the drawing room, a middle-aged woman with dark red hair was setting out collections of colorful sketches on a nearby table. Behind her lay swatches of fabric in dozens of different colors.

“Miss Phelps.” Trystan spoke with a gentle charm he’d never used with Bridget. The woman straightened and smiled.

“My Lord. Thank you for your kind letter. I’m delighted to help you with your cousin’s young ward and build a proper wardrobe for her.” Miss Phelps turned her gaze to Bridget, who was surprised to see the woman was smiling at her.

“Miss Ringgold, please come and sit by me. I should like to show you some fashion plates. I want you to be excited about your new wardrobe. A lady should feel confident in what she wears as well as comfortable.”

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TRYSTAN BIT his lip to hide a smile of triumph. The moment Miss Phelps had uttered the word *comfortable*, the little wildcat was ready to eat out of the palm of the dressmaker’s hand. He leaned back against the wall and kept out of their way while Miss Phelps showed Bridget dozens of fashion plates, patiently explaining her need for different types of gowns.

“You’ll need day gowns, evening gowns, walking gowns, carriage dresses, riding habits, a court gown, and, of course, ball gowns. Then there are hats, gloves, stockings, shoes, boots, stays, chemises—”

Bridget’s eyes went wide as the list went on, and Trystan couldn’t stop grinning at his hellion’s befuddled expression.

“I need all that?” she asked in a frightened voice. It held only a hint of the accent she’d had earlier that morning. His lessons were already paying off.

“Of course,” Miss Phelps said as she shot Trystan a slightly confused look.

“Miss Ringgold has had very little opportunity to go out in society. The poor thing’s been rather sheltered and isn’t familiar with all of the types of gowns a woman out in proper society would need.”

That comment brought Bridget’s claws out, but she only scowled at him. He continued to smile like a doting older brother.

“Not to worry, Miss Ringgold. Step up on the stool, if you don’t mind. I shall get your measurements and be on my way. I believe I can have most of your wardrobe ready in a week.”

Miss Phelps produced a small stool with legs that folded out. She set it down and Bridget climbed up on it. She gave Trystan a glimpse of her dainty ankles when she lifted her skirts to let the dressmaker take her measurements. As he stared at those ankles clad in white stockings, a flash of fire shot straight through his body.

Not even when he’d been a much younger man had the glimpse of ankles ever affected him like that. He cleared his throat, and both ladies turned toward him, expecting him to speak.

“Er... I’ll leave you to discuss the remainder of Bridget’s wardrobe. Bridget, come find me in the dining room when Miss Phelps has finished.”

He made a hasty exit and met his friends as they came in the front door. Graham and Phillip had gone riding that

morning. Phillip leaned more heavily on his cane than normal, and Trystan felt a sting of sympathy for his friend. Riding was no easier on Phillip than walking. Movement of any kind pained the his bad leg.

“Glad to see you back,” Trystan said.

“Where’s the girl?” Graham removed his riding gloves and glanced about.

“Being fitted for her new wardrobe.” Trystan invited his friends into the dining room for a light luncheon.

“How did things go this morning?” Phillip asked.

“Better than expected,” Trystan said. “The girl’s father was a solicitor and her mother, while not titled, was well educated. It’s less a matter of teaching her new ways to speak than it is of reminding her of the old way she spoke before her mother died and she was forced to live with that brute at the tavern.”

“Her mother died? That must have been very painful for her,” Phillip said sympathetically.

“I suppose so.” Trystan had honestly not given much thought to the girl’s background or her feelings. The girl had been more of an experiment, a joke to play against high society. He made a mental note to attempt to think a little more about her feelings in the future, as long as it didn’t slow down his ability to win the wager.

He, Phillip and Graham settled in the dining room for lunch and made small talk about their friends back in London, discussing the latest scandals Graham’s older brother and his friends were involved in. As they were finishing up, Bridget rushed in.

“Have I missed lunch?” she asked, breathless, her cheeks flushed with excitement. Trystan couldn’t help but picture her

beneath him in a bed with that same expression as he made love to her. And just like that, he was hot all over again. He plucked a finger in the collar of his neckcloth to loosen it, and looked away as he counted to ten in Latin. Nothing like a dead language to kill a man's lust.

"Eat quickly, then join us by the stairs," Trystan said as he left the room. He needed to take charge of himself.

*It's only that she's had a bath and a new dress. Any woman would be improved by such things. A man can appreciate an earthy creature and feel a little lust, but it doesn't mean anything.*

She simply drew his fire, either from her wild behavior or because she simply drove him to frustration with her arguments. All he needed was a bit of relief. He was between mistresses at the moment and that, too, was part of the problem. He was not the sort of man to visit a brothel, at least not in rural Cornwall. It was a pity those Romani that visited his land last fall hadn't returned. He would have gladly talked his way into any one of those raven-haired beauties' beds. But they weren't here. Bridget was. He didn't like to admit that Phillip had guessed the girl would prove a temptation.

*Damnation! She's an experiment. A wager. I do not want to take her to bed.*

When Bridget showed up at the stairs, he had his weapon of choice ready. Graham and Phillip joined them, both keen to watch the disaster Trystan expected to face with his next lesson.

"Take this." He handed Bridget the slender book he'd been holding onto. She accepted it suspiciously.

"Are we to have more reading lessons?"

“No, you are to have *walking* lessons.” He pointed to the top of the stairs. “Go to the top step, place that on your head and walk down to me without letting it fall. You may not touch the banister.”

Bridget let out a long-suffering sigh, her lavender eyes narrowing as she marched up the stairs, grumbling.

“You know... I’ve never seen any woman learn to do this trick,” Graham said. “Not even my sister Ellen, and she’s quite graceful.”

“Well, not all women need to practice grace. This creature has spent too much time swaggering about like a lad in a tavern.”

“*Creature?*” Bridget cried out from the top of the stairs. “You bloody toff.”

Trystan ignored her. “She must learn to soften her movements, as well as her words.” He crossed his arms and shouted upstairs. “Now, walk down, Bridget.”

The girl stood on the top step and placed the book on her head. It took some time to find the right angle to balance it. Then she took a step down. The book immediately slipped off and crashed to the floor. She let out an unladylike curse.

“Again,” he commanded. “Without the swearing, if you please.”

The girl tried again and again for over an hour and a half. She finally made it halfway down before losing the book, but by then she was trembling with frustration and exhaustion.

“Trys, let the girl breathe a moment. Even *I’m* tired of watching her,” Graham complained. He was lounging on the bottom few steps, his legs crossed at the ankles, idly tapping the toes of his boots together.

Trystan walked up to the middle of the stairs and took the book from Bridget's hand.

"You're *rushing*, little cat. Each time you reach this spot, you move the slightest bit faster. That's what's causing you to lose the book. Do. Not. Rush." He tapped the tip of her adorable little nose with those last three words, then placed the book back in her hands.

"Once more. Truly concentrate. Then you may rest." When she started to turn away to go back up the steps, he caught her wrist gently, causing her to look back at him.

"Think of your mother this time. Think of what it means to float, as if you were descending to me from the top of the clouds. In this moment, you are a princess. You are grace and elegance itself. You have no reason to rush. The world is happy to wait for *you* to arrive." Then he released her wrist and returned to his position at the bottom of the stairs.

This time, Bridget took a slow, deep breath. She placed the book back on her head.

"The world waits for you," he whispered under his breath, and he sensed she heard him. The tension in her shoulder seemed to vanish and she held her arms out from her body only slightly as she began to descend the stairs.

Trystan held his breath, captivated, as he watched the girl float as if she was indeed riding a cloud down toward him. He could barely see her feet move, so gentle and controlled were her steps. When she reached the bottom, she slowly lifted one hand to catch her skirts and then she dipped into a curtsy. The book stayed exactly where it was supposed to be on top of her head. Trystan's lips parted in shock. He hadn't expected *that*.

"By Jove, she's done it!" Phillip cheered.

The spell broke and Trystan took the book from Bridget's head. She looked up at him with hope and excitement in her eyes, and damn him, he wanted to praise her until he lost his voice. But he couldn't do that.

“Er, yes. Well done. Tomorrow we start a new lesson. You may have the evening off, except for dinner, of course. I have letters to write. We must acquire invitations for you to a few places before the ball so that we will be ready for Lady Tremaine.” Then he left Bridget at the foot of the stairs, ignoring the flicker of envy he felt as his friends showered her with praise. He knew now that he must keep his distance, lest he make a mistake and do something foolish like kissing the little hellcat.

Kissing her would be very bad indeed.



## CHAPTER FIVE

BRIDGET COULD SCARCELY BELIEVE ALMOST a week had passed since she'd arrived at Trystan's home in Cornwall. The days had flown by with startling speed thanks to the intense lessons that kept her busy from dawn to well past dinner every night. On the sixth day, she awoke to the sound of Mrs. Story and the maid Marvella whispering excitedly to each other.

Marvella had been helping her dress each morning, and Bridget had formed an easy friendship with the young woman. But she was still far too sleepy to understand why the maid and the housekeeper were fussing about in the room while she was trying to sleep.

"They're here, love. They're here! Get out of bed, silly girl!" the housekeeper exclaimed as she and Marvella carried in a stack of large boxes. Silly girl was, as Bridget now understood, a term of endearment the Scottish woman used for her, and she no longer minded when the woman said it. It simply made her smile and stretch.

Mrs. Story and Marvella set the boxes down on the foot of the bed. Bridget pushed her covers back before climbing out and joining them to examine what they'd brought.

"What's here?" She tugged on one of the fat red ribbons that bound up one of the large boxes.

“Your clothes, child! Miss Phelps just had them delivered.” Mrs. Story chuckled and lifted the lid of the box.

Tucked in layers of delicate paper was a bright green gown embroidered with wildflowers in an array of colors. She glanced between the walls of her room and the flowers on the dress with more than mild curiosity. Trystan had offered his opinions to Miss Phelps about some of the dresses, but she hadn’t remembered him asking to have one like this made. She wondered if he had sent extra instructions to the dressmaker.

Mrs. Story, Marvella, and Bridget unboxed the rest of the dresses. It took quite a while to put away the clothes in the tall armoire opposite Bridget’s bed.

“May I wear the green dress today?” she asked the housekeeper.

“Yes, love. Marvella, she’s in yer care now. I must return to my duties.” The housekeeper winked at them before she departed.

Marvella, being close to Bridget’s age, had taken to caring for Bridget like a friend or even a sister. Bridget, having had neither of those in her life, found herself enjoying the experience. Marvella retrieved the gown and laid it out on the bed for them to sigh over again.

“Miss Phelps makes gowns just as well as any modiste in London,” Marvella said. “I should know. I used to work at His Lordship’s townhouse in London. I was always running errands to the different dressmakers.”

“You left London to come here? Why?”

Marvella bit her lip, her pretty face suddenly a shade paler. “Well, let’s just say I feel safer here in the country. Not all men

are as gentlemanly as His Lordship. It's easy for a woman to get caught unprepared and... hurt."

Bridget understood far better than Marvella knew. "Did you get hurt, Marvella?"

The maid sniffled and wiped at her nose. "I almost did. I was running an errand, you see, but His Lordship happened to be coming home and saw me being accosted by a man in the mews a few townhouses away. He rescued me and took me straight home, after he... dealt with the man."

"Dealt with him?" Bridget asked in a whisper. "He killed him?"

"What? No! No, he just gave him a thrashing. The man was moaning quite dreadfully by the end of it, and then His Lordship forced the man to apologize to me! Can you believe that?"

"No, I can't. He's always been such a bully to me."

Marvella sighed. "He's trying to make you a lady, to give you a chance any girl like me would die for. You see that, don't you? The chance you've been given? How good it is?"

"Yes," Bridget reluctantly agreed. "So what happened after that man attacked you?"

"His Lordship offered to let me come here to work rather than in London. I was glad for the change. The young men here are sweet. One of the footmen here is even courting me, with flowers and all." Her cheeks warmed with a pretty pink color, and Bridget was glad Marvella was doing so well.

"Speaking of flowers, Marvella... Does Trystan, I mean His Lordship, like wildflowers?" She nodded at the dress that lay on the bed in front of them.

“Yes, he does. So did his father. Something to do with His Lordship’s mother, I think. She was a gypsy, you know. Positively wild, they say, but in a wonderful way. The older staff who remember her simply adored her.”

Bridget nodded. “Both of His Lordship’s parents are gone?”

“Yes, his mother died when he was very young. His father loved him so dearly and they grew even closer after her death.”

Bridget had so many questions, but Marvella didn’t have a lot of answers, because what Bridget wanted to know was private and personal to Trystan, and not the topic of gossip for his household staff.

The gown Miss Phelps had made fit far better than any dress she borrowed from Marvella, who was several inches taller than her. The maid helped her with her hair, pulling it back with a green ribbon at the nape of her neck. Mrs. Story had trimmed Bridget’s hair several days ago, and the effect had been marvelous. Bridget had discovered it wasn’t so troublesome to have long hair, after all. When her hair was clean, it turned soft and silky to the touch. She loved to sit and run her hands through it at night after Marvella had brushed it to a beautiful shine.

She also had to acknowledge that Trystan had been right about the hot baths. They were wonderful. She wished she could have one every night, but she didn’t want those poor footmen carrying buckets of hot water up and down the stairs just for her.

“There, all done.” Marvella smiled at Bridget in the vanity mirror’s reflection as she rested her hands on Bridget’s shoulders.

“I’m ready?” she asked.

Marvella laughed, her brown eyes twinkling. “I certainly hope so. I can’t think of more to do. You had better find His Lordship. I’m sure he has your next lesson planned.”

The entire household had been informed of Bridget’s purpose in being here, that she was part of the wager that existed between Trystan and Graham. Bridget still wasn’t exactly pleased to be at the center of a game between two bored gentlemen, but she had taken Trystan’s words to heart. At the end of this, she would have a different life, a *better* life. That was worth fighting for.

Bridget left her bedchamber and found the butler, Mr. Chavenage, walking down the corridor.

The butler bowed politely to her as if she were a grand lady. “Ahh, good morning, Miss Ringgold.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Chavenage, where’s Trystan—er—I mean His Lordship?”

“I believe he is in the dining room.”

“Thank you.” She proceeded to the dining room and found Trystan adjusting the placements of various silverware. Kent and Graham were also with him, both seated and relaxed, the picture of gentlemen of leisure.

“Ahh, good, there you are,” Trystan said without even looking up at her. “We shall be revisiting dinner behavior today. Sit.” He pointed at a chair and she walked toward it. Then she stopped, her hands resting on the back of the chair as she waited for Trystan to notice her dress. She had chosen the one that she was convinced he had designed, and she wanted to see the appreciation in his eyes for how she looked in it.

Kent glanced between her and Trystan before politely clearing his throat. “You look beautiful today, Miss Ringgold.”

“Thank you, Lord Kent,” she replied in her most practiced, cultured tones.

“Doesn’t she look well, Trystan?” Kent prompted.

Trystan was hovering over the place settings a few chairs away and barely even glanced at her. “Of course she does. The gowns I had designed for her cost a fortune. It would be impossible for her to look poorly.”

The callous comment hit Bridget like a dagger to her heart, but she wasn’t a soft little creature like the ladies Trystan was no doubt used to. Years of living on the edge of society had made her tough. Yet the hard words that came to her lips died before she could say them. She remembered what she had been promised at the end of all of this if she behaved. Shouting at the foolish man would have made her feel better, but it wouldn’t help her achieve what she needed. If she didn’t know better, she might even have thought this was a test to get a rise out of her. Unfortunately, Trystan truly was *that* oblivious to the feelings of those around him.

“Sit, little cat.” Trystan finally turned his attention on her. “We have a dinner party tomorrow evening at my great aunt’s home near here. I need to be sure that you can handle the dinner. Let’s begin your test.”

She slid into the chair and waited for him to begin. He started to pace as he so often did. She’d never met a man with so much energy, but it was an energy that drove him to restlessness.

“You have just received an invite to dinner in two weeks. How soon do you send your reply and why?”

“I send my reply within a day because the mistress of the house will need advance notice to have enough food prepared and the table set for the appropriate number of guests.”

Trystan nodded in approval. “Now, it’s the night of the dinner. How soon or late do you arrive?”

“It is best to arrive about fifteen minutes before the...” How had Trystan phrased it? “Allotted hour for dinner?”

“And what if, by some misfortune, you are late?” Graham cut in with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. He was seated across from her and was leaning back in his chair, one arm draped around the chair next to him.

“I...” She hadn’t studied much about being late because Trystan had drilled it into her that she wouldn’t *dare* be late. She continued more confidently. “A lady could perhaps be late up to half an hour? But a gentleman cannot be late at all. It’s inexcusable.”

Graham seemed mildly disappointed that she knew the correct answers. “Shame on you, Bridget. You aren’t supposed to be this clever.”

Bridget didn’t think she was being clever. It was simply logical to remember that women were given a bit more leniency in social appearances than men. Her lessons had shown her how long it could take to get dressed compared to men, so if they were a little late due to issues with their wardrobe, that seemed acceptable.

Trystan resumed his line of inquiry. “Bridget, when you arrive at the home where you are attending dinner, which room do you go into first?”

“The drawing room.”

Trystan braced his hands on the back of the chair next to Graham, who was forced to drop his arm from it. “And who goes first?”

“Who goes into the room first?” Bridget fidgeted in concern. She hated remembering the order of preference for entering a room. It was difficult because it changed every time depending on who was present at the time.

“Yes.”

“The ladies enter first, and it is considered poor behavior for a lady and gentlemen to enter side-by-side.”

“And?” Trystan’s gaze focused intensely on her face, making her squirm further. Sitting still was so difficult when he looked at her like that. “How is the order of entry determined? What order do they go in?”

“Yes, tell us this,” Graham interjected. “If you have Trystan, Kent and me in the drawing room and it’s time to go into the dining room, who enters the dining room first?” He grinned like a wolf who had spied a lone sheep on a hillside with no shepherd about.

“Who would go first among the three of you?”

“Graham,” Kent warned, “she won’t have to know that—”

“I suppose that it would be between the two earls as to who would enter based on either their age—older in age first—or perhaps the gentleman who has been an earl longer?” She tried to ignore the rush of panic she felt by guessing. “But I do know that of the three men”—she stared at Graham with a little more pleasure now—“you would be *last* as the gentleman with no title.”

Kent burst out laughing at the sour expression on Graham’s face. “She’s right. Graham, tell her she is.”



“She is,” he muttered.

Even Trystan was smiling, and Bridget preened a bit.

“Trystan, who would go first between us?” Kent asked once he stopped laughing.

“I actually don’t know. We’ve always just made a decision in the moment, haven’t we?” Trystan observed with a soft chuckle. “I may have to consult my book on *Etiquette for Gentlemen*.”

“You do that,” Graham snorted, his good humor restored. “Now, aren’t we supposed to do dance lessons today? Dining conventions are *so* tedious.”

“Later,” Trystan said. “Now, Bridget, what are the two types of dining customs?”

“Er... they are *à la russe* and *à la française*.”

Trystan nodded at the table of empty plates set out on the sideboard. “And what are the differences?”

“The *à la française* has only three courses. They would be laid out in a specific pattern on the table. There would be soup, fish, and meat. Entrées would be first, then meat, then dessert is third. For *à la russe*, it is simpler, with the dishes laid out on the sideboard. Servants will bring the food to the guests, who will serve themselves before the dish is taken to the next guest. There are less dishes served in each course, but more courses are served overall.”

“*Fewer* dishes,” Trystan corrected. “Dishes are countable. Now, let’s say you are given bread.” He reached for a vase of flowers on the table and plucked a large bloom off one of the roses and placed it on the plate in front of her.

She plucked up the flower, moving it to her left. “I take it and move it to my left side.”

“And do you cut it with a knife or tear it apart with your hands?” he asked.

This was a trick question. Logic suggested tearing with her hands was uncouth, but in this case, it was actually the opposite. The knife was considered inappropriate.

“I rip it in half with my hands.”

“Good, and what two topics are forbidden to discuss during dinner?”

“Religion and politics.”

“Good lesson for life, really,” Kent said, half to himself.

“Correct,” Trystan praised. “Now let’s have luncheon and practice everything you’ve learned. After that, we’ll begin our dance lessons,” Trystan said before he rang for the butler to bring them lunch.

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“SHE’S DOING VERY WELL for only one week,” Kent said to Trystan as they entered the small ballroom that graced the west wing of his family home.

“She is, but there is much that can be thrown at her that we can’t plan for. I must try to think of everything.” Trystan knew how unpredictable dinners could be, despite the rules they were all taught to follow. It would be worse if one of the guests smelled blood in the water, as it were. There were those who, if they suspected something was not quite right with Bridget, would test any sign of weakness in her facade.

“You never complimented her this morning,” Kent said. The tip of his cane tapped softly on the floor as they followed Graham and Bridget into the ballroom.

Trystan’s gaze roved over Bridget’s figure. She had chosen to wear a dress that he had added to Mrs. Phelps’ order shortly after their meeting. He had made a few additions based on his own preferences and what colors he thought suited her best. Green made her eyes glow, and he did adore flowers on a woman’s gown. In his eyes, women and flowers shared a sacred connection. Perhaps it was his mother’s gypsy blood, but because of her, he’d seen women and nature as intrinsically linked and therefore believed a woman should be surrounded by nature’s beauty whenever possible.

His mother had adored wildflowers. After she had died, rather than hide from her memory, he and his father had embraced that adoration together to remember her. They had redone several rooms in the house, including Bridget’s room, to make it resemble a wild English garden.

“She looks perfectly fine,” Trystan finally said to Kent. “Bridget doesn’t need me to tell her that. She knows very well that gown suits her.”

Kent looked up at the ceiling and let out an exasperated sigh.

“A small compliment here and there wouldn’t go amiss.”

“It certainly would. The little chit is already far too brazen. I do not need to add to her confidence. She has plenty of it.”

“Does she?” Kent let the question hang in the air before he left Trystan’s side and joined Graham and Bridget. Graham said something and the girl laughed, her tone full of delight. Something stirred inside Trystan. A woman’s laugh was

always pleasant enough to hear, but something about Bridget's laugh touched him differently. He couldn't help but think of long nights in bed with her, seeking her ticklish spots just to hear that laughter from her.

He dragged a hand through his hair and grit his teeth, shoving back the unwelcome rise of desire within him.

"Let's start with the quadrille," Trystan announced, his voice harder than he meant it to be, but it had the desired effect of breaking up the couple and getting them down to business.

Graham gave him a curious look but stepped back, allowing Trystan to stand between them. Trystan explained to Bridget how the dance worked, and he demonstrated the lady's steps.

"Kent, keep a rhythm for her," he suggested. Kent began to tap a beat with his cane.

"Graham, show her the gentleman's steps."

When he felt confident that she could try it, he let Bridget and Graham dance. Bridget concentrated hard and counted her steps, but after a while she relaxed and soon she was beaming triumphantly as she danced as well as any girl who'd studied with a master.

"Very well. You've mastered the quadrille."

"Trys, let's show her a few country dances, just in case," Graham suggested. "Knowing Lady Tremaine, she might ask for a few of those."

"Good point," Trystan agreed. Soon they were showing her quite a few silly but highly entertaining dances that involved a lot of hopping, clapping, and swinging about. Then he gave the girl a moment to rest and had Mr. Chavenage bring them some water to sate their thirst before they continued.

“Now, about ballroom etiquette,” Trystan began.

“Er, Trystan, you forgot to teach her the waltz,” Kent interrupted. “I know it’s unlikely that she’ll be allowed to dance it without permission from Lady Tremaine, but better to know it than not, eh?” Kent seated himself in a chair by the wall, resembling some benevolent knight from the days of King Arthur. He held his cane with his hands resting on top of the handle like it was a sword.

“I’ll show her the waltz.” Graham took Bridget into his arms and the girl stiffened at the sudden nearness to the man, stumbling along as he all but dragged her around the floor in his enthusiasm.

Trystan shouldered his friend out of the way. “I think you’d better let me show her.”

He put a hand on Bridget’s lower back, then placed one of hers on his shoulder. At the brief meeting of their hands, something burned hot inside of him. He attempted to bury the feeling as he grasped her other hand in his. Her eyes widened a little.

“Move closer, I won’t bite.” He gave her a gentle nudge, moving his hand at her hip to around her back and pressing her close enough that their bodies almost touched.

“Now,” he continued.

Her lips parted and her tongue wet her lips... lips that suddenly looked very soft and kissable. He’d never really thought about her mouth before, but now he was fixated on it.

“Now?” she whispered,.

He refocused on the lesson. “Now... right... The key is to be graceful and effortless. You do not want to appear like a dancing master, nor do you want to be rigid and count every

beat. You want to dance as though you've danced all your life in a garden beneath the waxing moon, the scent of orchids in the air and moonflowers blooming around you. Dance is poetry in motion, and you must become that poetry."

She nodded, a look of deep concentration softening the expression in her eyes. He believed she was *seeing* that garden he spoke of in her mind, and for one moment he, too, imagined that they were in a garden beneath the moon.

"What do we do next?" she asked, her husky whisper caressing his ears.

He swallowed and again forced himself to focus. "Follow my lead. One, two, three. One, two, three." He counted as Kent tapped the rhythm with his cane. Trystan began to hum one of his favorite waltzes as he took a step backward and she followed his lead.

After a few moments, he forgot where they were as they whirled together around the room. He held the fiery beauty in his arms and she looked up at him, her eyes never leaving his. *This* was the magic of the waltz. It allowed a man and a woman to feel the heat of each other's bodies, let them feel close enough that they almost shared heartbeats.

In that instant, Trystan forgot the wager, forgot everything but this woman in his arms. His lips were curled in a hint of a smile and her gaze was dreamy, as if she'd only ever lived atop a hilltop of the most exquisite wildflowers. She was luminous, her beauty beyond words, and that feminine mystery all women possessed clung to her like the stars clung to the night sky.

He was going to kiss her. He was going to find out just how those lips tasted...

Trystan leaned in ever so slightly, and Bridget's eyes closed as their noses brushed.

"Ahem..." Kent said the word quite clearly and rather loudly from behind Trystan.

Then reality crashed back in, and he released her so quickly she stumbled.

"So... now you know the waltz," he said matter-of-factly. *Distance*. That was what he needed to keep from kissing the damned little cat. "Kent, why don't you explain dance cards and how the master of ceremonies works?"

He hastily stepped into the hallway outside and leaned back against the wall, catching his breath. What the devil had he been thinking? He almost just kissed the little hellion in full view of his friends and—

And that was not acceptable at all. It didn't matter how perfect she danced or how she felt in his arms. It didn't matter how much he wanted to taste her lips and so much more. It didn't matter because he *couldn't* allow it. He could not have a dalliance with such a girl. For one thing, he had made a promise to Kent.

He also didn't want the girl to develop any expectations. If he kissed her, it might mean a promise of something in the future. This was why he never dallied with innocent young women. He much preferred courtesans as mistresses. Or lustful widows. They knew the situation was only one of mutual pleasure. It wasn't as though he wanted to take a wife—and taking one with her background would cause no end of grief for him *and* the girl. He could withstand the scandal, of course, but she would be ostracized by others once the truth came out, and never be invited to anything social.

His mother had suffered that fate and it hadn't been easy. As much as he loved to break the rules, often to do it simply for his own pleasure, having a woman, especially one he married, suffer that fate was something he was not willing to do.

*Some rules, even I cannot break.*



## CHAPTER SIX

SOMETHING WAS DIFFERENT. Bridget knew it, and it worried her. Yesterday, when she had danced with Trystan, she had lost herself in the moment and done as he had told her to. She *became* the waltz. She had been moonlight, flowers and music. And for one brief moment, Trystan had been right there with her, the magic of the waltz transforming them from two beings into one.

She had never experienced that before, except perhaps with her mother when she was young. They had been reading a book together about faraway lands with names like *India*, and the story had come alive like some wonderful kind of magic. Being connected to Trystan had been just as wonderful, but in a different way. There was something about dancing this way with him, feeling the heat of his body against her own. She wanted to dance with him again and again until she was dizzy from the delightful twirling.

But today, Trystan was avoiding her. When they weren't at lessons, he was locked away in his study with orders not to be disturbed. During her lessons, he was more abrupt in his dealings with her than ever. His distance shouldn't have bothered her. The man drove her mad, after all, with his commands and constant quizzing. Yet it did bother her, and it *bothered* her that it bothered her, and *all of this* was a *bother*.

“Men,” she muttered as she stomped ungracefully upstairs to change for dinner that evening.

She was a nervous wreck, as she was about to meet Trystan’s infamous great aunt. Graham had made no small number of jokes about the woman, her poor eyesight and even worse hearing. Trystan had endured the teasing with an amused expression, yet whenever he had spoken of his great aunt, he’d sounded rather fond of the old woman. Whether that was because she was his last close relative or because he genuinely liked her, she had no way to tell. Regardless, Bridget actually desired to make a good impression on her. But rather than give any helpful advice, Trystan had drilled her over and over on various topics about the weather, which was the only subject she was permitted to discuss this evening.

When she tried to protest, pointing out how dull she would appear if all she could talk about was the weather, Trystan had arched one dark brow in challenge.

“Oh? And do you know anything about the economy, philosophy, literature, or the arts?”

The hurt this remark caused her must have shown on her face, because he quickly amended his words.

“When we have more time, I’ll teach you anything you want to know.”

“Anything?” she asked.

“Anything. But since we do not have time for that tonight, you must stick to topics that require very little studying. The weather and someone’s health.”

Graham had unhelpfully begun a discussion on the different types of clouds, which only confused her greatly. She couldn’t remember the difference between cumulus and

nimbus. By the end of the luncheon, she'd become properly muddled and more than a little angry.

As she dressed for the dinner, she clung to her anger over her fear for as long as she could. Anger she could control; her fear she could not. Marvella chose a purple gown with Van Dyck sleeves and pale pink satin rosettes trimming the hem of her skirts. Bridget had designed the gown herself with Miss Phelps. She wore slippers to match the rosettes, and pink ribbons pulled her hair back in a loose Grecian fashion.

The effect was quite stunning. She was confident even Trystan would find no fault with her appearance. Bridget still couldn't get over her image each time she saw herself in the looking glass. She truly did look the part of a lady. She only wished she *felt* like one.

When she came downstairs to meet the gentlemen for their coach ride to dinner, fear was beginning to win out, and she was doing everything to hide her trembling. What if great aunt Helena discovered she wasn't a proper lady? Would she be tossed out and forced to walk home?

Kent and Graham spotted her first. She could hear Trystan's voice outside as he spoke to their coach driver.

"Everything all right, my dear?" Kent asked when she reached the bottom of the stairs. "You're very pale."

"I am a little nervous," she admitted.

Trystan appeared in the doorway. "Nervous? You have nothing to be nervous about, little cat. You've been excellent in handling everything we've thrown at you, so stop your silly worrying. Come along. We mustn't be late." He walked out the door again and waited for her to follow.

Kent offered Bridget his arm, which she gratefully accepted. He escorted her to the coach, then Trystan gripped her waist from behind and lifted her up into the coach. She squeaked in surprise.

“Oh hush, I’m simply trying to get you in *quicker*,” Trystan said as he gave her bottom a tap, which made her leap into the coach.

“Oh! Why, you odious—” But before she could lay into him, he placed a gloved fingertip on her lips and silenced her. Then, with a gentle hand on her shoulder, he pushed her down into her seat before he sat down beside her. She pulled the hood up on her dark purple cloak, refusing to look at him. She made conversation with Graham and Kent instead over the twenty-minute ride.

Halfway there, the coach rolled over a dip in the road and she was flung into Trystan’s lap as the coach teetered to one side. Trystan caught her in his arms, securing her against him when she cried out.

“There, there. I’ve got you, little hellion,” he said with surprising gentleness. Her arms were wrapped around his neck, and they stared at each other for a long moment. Then he cleared his throat and slid her off his lap. She went back to ignoring him for the remainder of the journey.

When they arrived at Lady Helena’s home, Graham and Kent exited first, followed by Trystan. He once again caught her by the waist and lifted her down from the coach.

“Now, don’t be nervous,” he murmured. “If you feel stuck regarding what to do or what to say, just look to Kent or me. We shall help you.”

“What if Lady Helena discovers who I am? She might toss me out.”

Trystan tapped her nose with his finger. “She already knows. I told her when seeking to add you to the dinner party.”

“She knows?” Bridget gasped in horror.

“Oh, she won’t mind. She knows I am always finding ways to amuse myself. This is no different. She was rather curious about you and this whole endeavor when she wrote back to me.”

Curious? Bridget wasn’t sure that was as comforting as Trystan meant it to be.

“Now, come along and stop fidgeting.” Trystan escorted her up the stairs to Lady Helena’s home, an old stone manor house, much like Trystan’s but smaller in size.

Lady Helena was Trystan’s father’s aunt. She was seventy-two years old and hadn’t ever married. She had been given the house by her father, Trystan’s grandfather, and managed it over the years as its mistress.

The staff welcomed them warmly. Bridget allowed Trystan to remove her cloak, and she relished the brief comfort of his touch on her upper arms. Then, nervously, she followed the butler as he escorted her to the drawing room. The men followed behind. Inside the drawing room was a small party of five guests—two couples at least two decades older than her and an older woman. It was this woman who stood, and Bridget went to greet her.

“Thank you for the invitation, Lady Helena. It is wonderful to meet you.” Bridget dipped into a light curtsy.

“You’re quite welcome, my dear. *Quite welcome.* Allow me to introduce you to my other guests.”

“This is Mr. and Mrs. Babcock. They have come from the estate next to mine. And this over here is Mr. and Mrs. Rutledge. They are my neighbors to the south.”

“It’s lovely to meet you all.” Bridget greeted the two couples the way she had been instructed.

She was relieved when Trystan, Kent and Graham made their introductions and they conversed easily with the guests, allowing her to fade into the background for a moment. She remained quiet, absorbing the way the discussion flowed. It seemed to come so easily to everyone, especially Trystan. Despite his often brusque demeanor with her, he was charming and smooth with his great aunt’s guests.

Bridget took advantage of the conversation not being directed at her so she could study Trystan’s aunt. Despite the woman’s age, she looked younger than Bridget had expected, given Graham’s jokes, and appeared rather spry for her age. She did have a small ear trumpet in her lap and held a quizzing glass up frequently, peering through it at everyone, but she was not the old, clueless woman Bridget expected to meet. When Lady Helena turned that quizzing glass on her, she saw the cunning gleam in the woman’s eye.

“Come here, my dear.” Lady Helena waved Bridget to an empty chair beside her. Bridget sat down, relieved that the others were still involved in their own conversation.

“Bridget...” Lady Helena tested the name upon her tongue. “Hmmm. A lovely and strong name. That’s good. You need to be strong to handle my grandnephew. He’s a scoundrel, but if you outlast his troublesome side, you’ll find he can be quite the gentleman.”

Bridget would have argued her point, but she recalled what Marvella had said about Trystan thrashing that man who had

accosted her.

“You need not be so quiet, my dear,” Lady Helena continued.

“Er... my apologies, but I was told only to speak of the weather and other people’s health. Are you well, madam, and do you think it will rain tomorrow?”

Lady Helena snorted. “I’m *old*, Bridget, that’s enough about my health. And as for the weather, I don’t leave the house, so I rather don’t give a damn. What I want to know is how you ended up here with my grandnephew. He told me that you were under his tutelage for language and lessons in etiquette. But knowing Trystan as I do, there is more to it than that.”

Bridget shot a glance at the other guests, who had gathered at the far end of the room to talk.

“Don’t you worry about them. They can’t overhear us from over there.”

There was something about Lady Helena that Bridget trusted immediately.

“Well, it’s a rather long story.”

“I did mention I’m old, didn’t I? Try the short version.”

“Well, Trystan found me working in a tavern in Penzance and bet his hunting lodge that he could convince everyone I was a lady.”

“He *what?* I suppose you had better give me the long version, after all.”

Bridget told Lady Helena her story and managed to finish just as the butler announced dinner was ready.

Lady Helena reached over and squeezed Bridget's hand. "We shall talk more on this later."

Bridget glanced at Trystan. It seemed her test was about to officially begin. She let Lady Helena lead the women into the dining room, and she was last before the gentleman queued up behind her. Trystan was the first to enter after her, and his hand briefly touched hers, giving it the faintest squeeze. She was so startled by the welcome but unexpected touch that she almost tripped.

She was guided into a seat by a footman and when she noticed the other ladies remove their long evening gloves, she followed suit and tucked them away. Then she placed her napkin in her lap and prayed she could make through the dinner without embarrassing herself.

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THE GIRL WAS DOING WELL, *splendidly* in fact. If he hadn't grown so accustomed to her small tells, he would never have known how nervous she was. She presented herself as a poised lady whose manner was the very essence of calm. He had been seated next to Bridget by some luck, or more likely, his aunt's clever planning, given that Bridget might need Trystan if she ran into any difficulties.

As the first course was served, Bridget carefully emulated everyone around her and said very little.

"Miss Ringgold, you hail from Yorkshire, don't you?" Mr. Babcock inquired. He was the gentleman seated to Bridget's left.

"Yes," she replied, but did not elaborate further.



“Cold country up there,” Mr. Babcock continued. “I hear they’re looking into growing a larger textile industry there. More and more cotton, is what they’re saying.” Mr. Babcock waited for her to reply and for a second, Trystan feared she would freeze when she failed to find a way to relate cotton mills to the weather or Babcock’s health.

“Er... yes. I believe we are hoping to match the Midlands in cotton production soon. Given that cotton makes up close to forty percent of Britain’s exports, it would be wise to follow the Midlands’ example and expand that economic growth. But my concern lies in the working conditions of these factories. We spent so much time and energy on the advancements of the technology in the mills, but we haven’t taken any steps in making the mill *safer*. If we do not take care, the Luddites might rise again, as they did in 1779.”

There was a heavy silence, and Trystan sat dumbstruck.

Mr. Babcock raised his glass to Bridget. “Quite right, Miss Bridget, hear, hear. If we better the working conditions, workers will safely produce more cotton, which will benefit us all.”

Trystan, thankful of his control, managed to hide his shock. How did the girl know *anything* of cotton mills or Luddite uprisings? They hadn’t covered that in any of their lessons. He felt someone watching him and glanced around to find his great aunt staring at him. She had that quizzing glass raised and her eyes were pinning him down. He quickly drank a full glass of wine and focused on the conversation, ready to dive in and discuss cotton mills if necessary.

The rest of the evening went well, with thankfully no new surprises. When the ladies left to return to the drawing room, the men stayed behind to smoke cigars and enjoy some port.

Trystan felt confident Bridget could handle herself without him for a short while.

When the gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing room half an hour later, Bridget was engaged in a lively conversation with the other women, who were listening raptly to her. Mrs. Rutledge was fanning herself and she looked both scandalized and delighted all at once.

Deeply concerned at whatever lurid tavern tale Bridget must be sharing, he started toward them. He only managed to catch the tail end of Bridget's story.

“And then islanders made the pirate lord their chief.”

“What? The cannibals?” Mrs. Babcock gasped.

“Yes. But then he realized they were likely going to eat him soon, as they did all their chiefs, so he—oh hello, Trystan.” Bridget smiled at him as he stopped close to the cluster of women. He couldn't let Bridget finish whatever story she'd been telling. Heaven knows how a story about pirates and cannibals would end if he let her continue.

His great aunt sighed. “Ahh, Trystan, I suppose you want to go now, and deprive me of Miss Ringgold's wonderfully entertaining company. Bridget, dear, you will have to come and visit me for lunch next week.”

“Yes, Lady Helena,” the girl immediately agreed. She thanked the older woman and followed Trystan as he escorted her to the hall where footmen waited with their their cloaks. Graham and Kent joined them, and they piled back into the coach for home.

“Well, that was well done of you, Trystan. Not a single incident,” Kent said.

“It was indeed. We are proceeding well.” Despite the rather lurid story the girl had been sharing, the women seemed to like her and the men had been impressed with her surprising knowledge of the cotton industry. Trystan smiled smugly. The wager was well on its way to being won.

“How the devil did you know so much about cotton, Bridget?” Graham asked.

“Yes, how did you know?” Trystan asked.

She looked between them, and gave a little shrug. “I may have worked in a tavern but I always paid attention to things people said.”

“Well, you were quite brilliant,” Phillip praised. “I think you could become a good economist with further study.”

“You truly think so?” she asked him.

“I do, perhaps once we’re all done with this ball business, Trystan could teach you more relevant things. You’d do that wouldn’t you?” Phillip asked him.

“Yes, of course, if the girl wants to learn, I’ll teach her anything.” He was rather serious about that, and it was already giving him wonderful ideas about how his next wager could be to present Bridget in the house of lords disguised as a man and have her speak. The thought made him grin wickedly.

When they reached the house, Trystan was in a good mood and wished to celebrate. As a result, he forgot to assist Bridget out of the coach. When he turned back to help her, Kent had already helped her out of the conveyance. Bridget was quiet and he guessed she was exhausted from the evening.

“Go on up to bed, Bridget. Get some rest,” he told her, then left for the billiard room with his friends.

The other two men had gone in ahead of him, but something made him pause and look back down the length of the corridor. The girl was *not* going upstairs. She stood in the hall, very still, her cloak still about her shoulders. She suddenly turned and walked out the open front door, leaving Mr. Chavenage to look on in confusion. The butler called her name, but the girl didn't come back into the house.

"Would you like a brandy, Trys?" Graham offered from the billiard room.

"Start without me. I'll return in a moment." He hurried down the hall toward his butler.

"My lord, Miss Ringgold has just left—"

"Yes, I saw, thank you." He stormed out into the night after his troublesome pupil.

The moon was bright overhead and the sky full of stars, making it easy for him to spot Bridget as she walked down the gravel path that led around the side of his home. He realized at once where she must be going.

With a growl, he charged after her and caught up just as she entered the stables. He grasped her arm and pulled her to a stop. She whirled to face him, her expression alit with feminine rage.

"You should be in bed. We have more work to do tomorrow." He held her wrist and she pulled against him, trying to free herself, but the attempt was only halfhearted.

"I wasn't *ready* to go to sleep," she fired back. "I needed to clear my head before I bloodied your *bloomin'* nose." She was all fire and fury. Trystan was fascinated by this outburst.

"Whatever for?"

“Because you didn’t tell me *I* did a good job tonight. You and the others were too busy congratulating yourselves. *I* made tonight a success. *Me!*” She yanked on her wrist again, but Trystan still held her firmly and she only succeeded in pulling herself into him so that their bodies collided. He caught her hip with his other hand, steadying her. The hood of her cloak fell back and her breath escaped in a rush.

Perhaps it was the fire in her or the scent of warm hay on a chilly spring night, but something unfurled and spread its wicked wings inside Trystan.

“Sass me again, Bridget, and you will regret it,” he warned.

“Sass *you?*” She hissed and stomped on his booted toes. With a low growl, he spun her around and shoved her cloak aside as he pinned her against the stable wall and smacked her bottom. She shrieked in anger rather than pain, because he hadn’t hit her hard at all.

“I’m not a child! You cannot treat me like one.” She wrestled with him, but he kept her trapped between him and the wall.

“No, you’re definitely not a child.” He gave her another four light swats before his hand paused on her bottom. He was breathing hard.

His own body was as electric as if lightning had struck him. She looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes lit by the hanging lamps in the stable. He saw a sensual hunger in her, that ancient need that often could not be captured in words, but only freed by actions of the flesh.

“Keep looking at me like that and I’ll kiss you,” he warned, his voice rough and a little deeper than normal. He

felt more a primal animal than man in that instant.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Bridget fired back. “You’ve made it quite clear you consider me beneath you.”

“You should be so lucky.” The burning match tossed between them had hit tinder. He turned her around to face him and pinned her against the wall a second time. He cupped the back of her neck, holding her head as he leaned down, his mouth slanting over hers.

Her lips were as soft as he’d imagined. Bridget’s mouth parted beneath his and he delved deeper, his tongue seeking hers. She jolted in his arms as if surprised, and then softened. There was nothing more exquisite than a woman *melting* against him, but to have this woman felt richer, deeper somehow than any other experience he’d had.

He threaded his fingers through her hair, loosening the coiffure and all its carefully placed pins until her hair tumbled over the backs of his knuckles, tickling his skin. Lord, he loved her silky hair. He wanted to feel it caress his chest as she rode his body from on top while he lay beneath her.

The punishment he had intended with his kiss changed somewhere between Bridget’s first soft moan and her second. He didn’t relent in his kiss, but he gentled his ravishment of her mouth. Trystan slid one hand down her body to cup her bottom and squeeze it. Bridget rocked up on her toes and curled her arms around his neck, clinging to him. Emboldened by her reaction, he lifted her up and nudged his thigh between hers as he bunched her skirts up. She whimpered and gasped against his lips.

“Ride me,” he encouraged as he urged her to grind herself against his thigh by pressing his palm against her bottom.

Then he was kissing her again, and she responded eagerly. She rocked on him, rubbing herself against his thigh. He growled, hard enough that his cock felt as if it would rip his trousers apart. He gave her bottom another light smack and Bridget cried out, her arms tightened around his neck as she climaxed.

Trystan kissed her softly now, far more sweetly as she began to tremble. Had she ever been with a man? He'd never thought to ask her. He suspected she hadn't, and something in him warmed at the thought that he had been the one to show her how to find pleasure. When she finally stilled from her trembling, he tucked his fingers under her chin to make her look up at him.

“Are you all right?”

Those lavender eyes were losing that dreamy look and beginning to widen. “What the devil did you do to me? I—” Then she shoved him and jerked her skirts back down.

Now he felt his own temper rising. “What did *I* do?” He was still hard and desperately wanted to find his own release. The chit had the gall to be furious at him when she'd found her own pleasure?

Bridget's gaze dropped and she saw the effect their kissing had had on him. With a ruthless gleam in her eyes, she raised her skirts and brought her knee to his groin in a swift thrust.

His eyes bulged. Something had happened. It was bad. But it hadn't fully registered yet. He was barely aware of her rushing out of the stables and back toward the house.

He groaned, and took two steps after her, then fell to his knees. It was as if he was drained of all energy. Such an odd sensation, he thought, because he had no power to speak.

Then the pain hit. He swore he could see his own body as though from far above as he fell to his side and the true meaning of *suffering* hit him.

It was several minutes before he could think clearly again.

That hellion was going to be the death of him. But deep down, he knew he deserved that. And he also knew Kent was right. He was tempted, but he feared it had nothing to do with the convenience of her being here and instead was something else that he dared not name.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

BRIDGET STUDIED the fine chestnut gelding the groom had brought out of the stables. Kent and Graham smiled at her puzzled expression.

“He’s for *me*?” she asked. “To ride today?”

“To ride *any* day,” Kent corrected. “I bought him for you. He’s a gift since you’ve been doing so well in your lessons. Besides, you ought to have a horse to get around once the wager is over.” Kent’s eyes twinkled as he leaned on his cane. The pain that so often shadowed his features faded beneath his joy and excitement. Bridget couldn’t believe that he had bought her a *horse*. The quality of the beast alone told her it was an expensive creature that she never would have been able to afford on her own. She peeped beneath her lashes at Trystan, who stood close by, scowling.

She was the one who had the right to scowl, not him. After what had happened last night, she was the one who was furious. To spank her like a child was bad enough, but to make her enjoy it and enjoy what came after and then to be so bloody arrogant about... well, *everything*.

“*I* should’ve bought the girl a horse,” Trystan grumbled.

“Well, you didn’t. Nor would you have thought of it on your own,” Kent said, his unwavering joy intact. “Bridget,

come over and pet him so he can learn your scent.” Kent urged her to join him by the horse. “His name is Beau. He’s two years old and the most dapper prancer you’ll ever see. I can’t wait to see you ride him in Hyde Park.”

“You’ll be the envy of every lady and gentleman,” Graham said. “This is a fine beast. I helped Kent choose him.”

She reached up and petted the horse. The beast bumped her hand in greeting. She shot Graham an appraising look while she stroked Beau’s nose. “I didn’t think you wanted me to win your wager.”

“Wagers aside, every lady deserves a good horse. Besides, even though I don’t wish for Trys to win, that doesn’t mean I’d want to punish you. You’ve been an awfully good sport indulging in our whims. You deserve something for dealing with us ‘spoiled fancy gents,’ eh?” He chuckled.

Beau’s dark brown eyes stared into hers and she felt a sense of peace wash over her. She’d heard that horses were like that.

“I love horses, but I’ve never ridden one.”

Trystan joined them, his face incredulous. “But you lived in a bloody stable.”

“I only slept there so no one could find me. Men would get deep into their cups, and it’s easier to kick a door in at the tavern than climb a ladder. But I’ve never ridden a horse, not once.”

“Then today you will learn.” Kent beamed at her. “Riding a horse is a freedom that you will soon become addicted to.” He then turned to Trystan. “Doesn’t she look smart in her new riding habit?”

Her burgundy velvet riding habit had a matching hat that perched on her head, decorated with a lovely pheasant feather. She loved how she looked in it, but hadn't realized that putting this on meant she'd be getting on a horse. She'd been too busy spinning around in front of the mirror, admiring her reflection like a silly magpie.

"You know very well she does," Trystan said grumpily. "Come here, Bridget. I will help you." He grasped her hand and pulled her toward him. She was so focused on the feel of his hand that she didn't realize he was lifting her up until her bottom plopped down into the saddle. She was suddenly frozen with fear as her legs dangled off the same side of the horse. She was sitting almost sideways on it, which didn't feel the least bit steady or safe.

"Bridget?" Trystan's voice sounded strangely distant. All she could really hear clearly was a ringing in her ears, and all she felt was the thud of her heart as it beat hard enough to break free of her chest.

"I..." She was too afraid to move, let alone speak. She sat fairly high above the ground, and the horse felt huge, powerful, *dangerous* beneath her body. What if it threw her off and then trampled her? What if it fell over and crushed her under it?

"Perhaps I should..." Trystan began, but rather than finish his thought, he mounted up behind her.

The feel of Trystan's strength and the support of being able to lean back against him settled her whirling, panicked thoughts like a murmuration of starlings landing upon the ground all at once.

"Better?" he asked.

“Y—yes. I was just a little frightened,” she admitted, her voice still shaking.

“Don’t be, little cat. I’ve got hold of you now. I’ll teach you what you need to know.”

Somehow their quarrel last night and the wondrous, almost frightening pleasure after that had changed her. Not that she could say how exactly. All she knew was that she felt less upset with him than she had last night... and oddly more comforted by him.

Kent and Graham mounted their horses and began to trot ahead of Bridget and Trystan.

“Riding sidesaddle is a lesson for another day,” he said. “Pull your left leg over, that’s it, good girl. Lift your skirts up so you can straddle the horse. Since I’m using the stirrups, you just hold on to him with your knees.”

She lifted her skirts and let her legs drop down the sides of the horse, then lightly pressed her knees into the animal’s flanks, securing the grip of her body on the horse. It felt much more stable than the way she’d been sitting before, where she’d been half perched on the beast’s back.

“Why do women ride the other way?” she asked him.

“I’m afraid you’d find it a rather silly answer,” Trystan hedged as he nudged the horse forward with a light kick.

“Tell me.”

“Society... polite society at any rate—” he began

“You mean *men*,” Bridget cut in, having a suspicion where the subject was headed.

“Er, yes. Well, they do not think women should feel... how should I put this? They are concerned a woman might feel

*aroused* by the motion between their thighs. And also, men can't see so much of the women's legs when they ride sidesaddle."

"Oh, that does sound silly," she agreed. She pictured so many women falling from horses because they had to sit in such an uncomfortable and unstable way. All because of what some *men* thought.

"I actually agree, but then again I think a woman *should* feel pleasure if they wish and I believe I have the right to enjoy seeing her lovely legs if she chooses to bare them." He chuckled, the rich sound rumbling from his chest into her back. Bridget liked Trystan when he was relaxed and not busy giving orders.

Graham rode down the road at a gallop while Kent kept his horse beside Trystan and Bridget as they walked down the drive that led away from the house. The avenue was lined with chestnut trees bright with new leaves that danced in the light breeze, the sun soft and warm upon Bridget's face. Despite the distant clouds, she could smell the clean scent of fresh rain and guessed that they would have a shower soon.

Trystan began his lessons again, and Bridget found this classroom on horseback preferable to the dining room table or the library. Despite her growing love of Trystan's books, she loved being out in the world far more.

"Now, we should discuss some behavior you will need to learn for when you are in town," he began.

"Where shall we start?" Kent asked.

"Walking, I should think," Trystan continued. "Bridget, are you listening to me?"

“Yes.” She shot a little smile at Kent, who seemed to notice that she’d been daydreaming. He returned the secretive smile.

“There are fashionable hours to go to Hyde Park when walking and being seen by others in society is your desire. Between the hours of five and six o’clock in the evening...” He droned on about fashionable hours for various activities, and she stopped listening. It was only when he pinched her bottom that she jerked and sat up straighter and focused again.

“No walking alone as a young unmarried woman. You must have an approved chaperone with you. If you are married, you can walk with a companion who does not need to be a chaperone. Now, if you see someone you are acquainted with and you wish to acknowledge them, you must allow the person with the higher rank to acknowledge you first, unless it’s a man. Even if he’s a duke, *you* are the lady and you have the power to acknowledge him first. As a lady, you always have the right of recognition before any man. The only exception would be if the gentleman had long-standing intimate or familiar acquaintance with you.”

This was a *little* more interesting than the rules of fashionable hours.

“How do I acknowledge someone?” she asked. She doubted she would ever recognize anyone, but it was worth asking.

Her hands held lightly onto the reins of the horse now. Trystan’s hands also held the reins, their fingers brushing occasionally as the horse walked along. Sparks of awareness danced up her arms. She tried not to think of his hands being bare of gloves and swatting her bottom, but the mere thought of it sent waves of desire burning in her lower belly.

“A lady will give a slight bow or an inclination of her head. A gentleman will bow and lift his hat entirely from his head. If he merely touches the brim of his hat at you, that is unacceptable,” Trystan continued, completely unaware of her thoughts.

“Would you thrash a man who did that to me?” she asked in a teasing tone. Kent laughed.

“I might,” Trystan said quite seriously. “Respecting women is the highest form of civility. You are the fairer sex and deserve such treatment to reflect that.”

If Kent hadn't been there, she would have asked Trystan about whether spanking a woman and then kissing her the way he had was respectful. She'd love to see him react to that. The man would likely splutter about and then spank her again. She bit her lip to hide a smile at the thought. She was starting to realize that a frustrated Trystan was a passionate Trystan. Perhaps she'd been too quick to get upset with him. After all, she'd rather liked everything that had happened last night. She'd wanted to deny that at first, but now she couldn't.

They rode another fifteen minutes touring his lands before she spotted an old set of ruins half hidden in the woods.

“What is that?” She pointed at the ruins.

“Part of an old Saxon church,” Trystan said.

“Can we go see it?” Bridget asked, excited.

“Go on, take her, Trys. I'll catch up with Graham.” Kent urged his horse toward the distant figure of Graham still cantering across the field.

She and Trystan went on alone. When they reached the edge of the stone structure, he slid out of the saddle and helped her down. For a moment, his hands lingered on her waist and

hers on his shoulders. She gazed into the warm whiskey brown of his eyes and once again was filled with a forbidden hunger for him.

“About last night,” he said slowly, his tone soft and hesitant. “I must apologize for... for what I did.”

“Spanking me like a child and then kissing me... and all that followed?” she asked. Neither of them moved. The air felt suddenly charged, as if a building storm was above them.

“Well...” His lips twitched as he fought off a devilish smile. “I only apologize for my *tone* when I spoke to you. I stand by all the rest, hellcat.” Trystan released her hips and they walked toward the ruins. The way he said hellcat this time was less of an insult and more of an endearment.

“Yet you spanked me like a child!” she protested.

“That had nothing to do with treating you like a child. I know full well you are a grown woman.” Trystan’s voice deepened and Bridget shivered, but not from fear.

“Then what did it have to do with?”

Even though no one was around to hear them, she somehow knew her question was going to prompt a discussion of a forbidden nature and she glanced about. They stopped by the entrance, where there was a low wall a little higher than her waist. She knew he was stalling as he leaned on the crumbling stone wall and studied the foundations. Part of the structure still stood, but much of the rest had crumbled.

“Trystan, please, you must tell me.” She stood beside him, raised her skirts and attempted to hop up on the lower part of the wall, but it was too high. After watching her frustrated attempts, he picked her up and set her down on the wall so she



sat in front of him. He placed his palms on either side of her hips, their faces only a few inches apart.

The breeze teased a lock of dark hair across Trystan's forehead. His features held such a beautiful contrast between the hard planes upon his face and the wild softness of his thick, dark hair.

Unable to resist the urge, she reached up and brushed the hair out of his eyes. He caught her wrist, holding it gently. She wished that neither of them were wearing gloves because she wanted to feel his skin on hers. As if hearing her thoughts, he slowly removed his gloves, then hers. Then he stroked the inside of her palm with his thumb. The simple touch was seductive in a most hypnotic way.

“What we are teaching you, all of the manners and dance lessons, it's only half of what it means to be a lady. There is so much you need to learn about men and what men want. More importantly, you need to learn what you *deserve* from men.”

“In bed?” she guessed, her breath quickening.

“Yes, but also in life.”

“I don't wish to marry.”

“Then you are indeed a silly creature,” he sighed. “I don't wish to marry, but my station affords me that luxury. For you, it only closes off opportunities you would not have otherwise.”

“Because it is a man's world,” Bridget muttered.

“It is what it is,” said Trystan. “Now, let's pretend that for one moment you dance in the arms of a handsome man at Lady Tremaine's ball and you feel a flutter in your belly...”

She recognized what he meant, that sensation that sometimes was so overpowering she almost felt dizzy. But in

her limited experience, he was the only man she'd ever felt that for. She'd not experienced it with Kent or Graham, and they were both just as handsome as Trystan.

“Society teaches you that women do not have or *should* not have any desires or pleasures. But that is a lie. Women's bodies are designed like those of a goddess. You are creatures born to feel the most exquisite of pleasures. Your body is a map rich with pleasurable destinations, and when a man and woman come together, it can be truly beautiful. It can be beyond anything you've ever dreamed. With the wrong man, it might be uncomfortable, unpleasant, and possibly even distasteful.” He let go of her wrist to reach up and stroke the spot just behind her ear, which sent shivers down her spine. She squirmed.

“You still haven't explained why you spanked me,” she reminded him.

His lips twitched.

“There are games men and women play, interesting positions they can try and toys to use...”

“Toys?” She couldn't imagine what he meant by that. “Like dolls?”

He chuckled sinfully and shook his head. “No, not like dolls.” He took her wrists in his, encircling them with his own strong fingers until he was controlling her hands. “Imagine me holding you like this. You cannot escape me as I kiss you in places like this...” He leaned in to kiss her lips and then he moved up to her neck, nibbling and then nipping at her ear. He flicked his tongue along the shell of her ear, and she shuddered and gasped as a heavy throb between her thighs suddenly overwhelmed her.

“How does that make you feel, little cat? Does it make your thighs tremble? Does your secret place between your thighs ache for something you do not yet understand?” The naughty words whispered in her ear made her whimper.

“Y—yes!”

He bit the lobe of her ear lightly, but the little sting was too much. “Trystan,” she begged, but she wasn’t sure what she was asking.

“Do you know what you need?” he asked as his hold on her wrists tightened slightly. “When you feel your body under my control, to know I’m the master of your pleasure? It excites you, doesn’t it? A good man will know how to give you what you need, like the occasional spanking. You need no master to command you to live your life, but you *might* need a man who proves he is worthy of your fire and your surrender.”

“My surrender?” She wasn’t sure she understood, but it was hard to think beyond the vivid, erotic imagery his words painted.

“When you surrender in those moments of pleasure, you will become that man’s master. *You* hold the control. A good man only appreciates his own pleasure when he’s certain he’s seen to yours.” Trystan kissed the hollow of her throat and she threw her head back, gazing up at the storm clouds building above them. It was as though her arousal had built the storm, which any second would unleash itself upon them.

He paused in his kisses to whisper in her ear again. “But you must be careful, little cat. The wrong man would break you, not set you free.”

“Trystan... I need... I need...” She wished she knew what to ask him for. “*Please...*”

He let out a shivery sigh of his own. “I have a confession to make,” he said. She looked at him with pleading eyes as he struggled to admit what he felt. “You are the most irresistible woman I have ever met. You have no idea what you do to me.”

She shifted closer to him in desperation. “If it’s *anything* like what you’re doing to me, then I have some idea.”

He smiled, and it broke the last of her restraint. She squirmed on the wall ledge and spread her legs as wide as the riding habit would allow. His smile vanished, and he switched his hold on her wrists to one hand before he slid his other hand up her skirt to touch her where the ache was most fierce. She gasped as his fingers traced the folds of her sensitive flesh. His eyes darkened with desire as he eased a finger into her.

“Oh God...” She moaned at the foreign feeling of that gentle penetration. She loved it, no hated, no... she *loved* it. He withdrew his finger and then pushed it in again, deeper this time.

“So tight,” he whispered, his voice raw with lust. “You’d grip my cock like a fist, wouldn’t you?”

He lowered his head, his lips settling hungrily over hers as he continued to penetrate her with his finger while kissing her, and yet she needed more. Her soft pants between kisses deepened as he added a second finger to the first. He quickened the pace and his kiss deepened, his tongue thrusting in time as he showed her what pleasure was.

“That’s it, little cat,” he growled, “show me your passion, show me you *belong* to me, and I shall be yours.” Something about the words, about belonging to him even as he held her prisoner... it was all she could take as that building hunger peaked. She shattered inside just as the skies above them let loose its storm.

She rode wave after wave of pleasure as Trystan continued to push his fingers into her, but far gentler now. He slowed his kisses and rested his forehead against hers. She felt a powerful connection spring into being between them as the rain pelted against their heated skin.

He withdrew his hand from her skirts and then lifted her down from the wall, but her legs shook so much that she didn't dare move. Trystan scooped her up into his arms and carried her toward a part of the ruins that still had a small roof. He set her down, then went back out into the rain and returned, leading her new horse into the high-ceilinged structure with them.

“We had best wait out the storm here,” he said.

She rubbed her hands together, shivering from the rain that had soaked her red riding habit.

“Cold?” he asked.

Bridget nodded. Trystan came over and eased down onto the ground, then joined her and pulled her into his lap. He wrapped his arms around her, warming her with his body heat.

“Promise me that someday you'll choose a man who will see your value.” Trystan murmured the words into the crowd of her hair.

“Someone like you?” she dared to ask.

The silence was a beat too long. “No, little cat. I'm not the one for you. There are far better men out there. Men who will set fire to your world with adventure and passion.”

She laid her head on his chest, closing her eyes. She dared not say what she felt, but it was clear she was not the woman he wanted, not in that way. He was simply her tutor, nothing

more. That realization chilled her more deeply than any spring rain could.

When the storm passed, they left the old ruins. She wondered if perhaps these ruins had once been a place for the old Celtic warriors to offer sacrifices, because it felt as though her heart had been opened upon the altar there, and left to bleed out.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

TRYSTAN WASN'T sure if the fleeting pace of the next three weeks had been a relief or a punishment. He had managed, through sheer determination, to stay away from Bridget in situations that could have ended with her flat on her back and him inside her. Trystan rather suspected it was Kent's blasted protective nature and watchful attitude that had truly kept him at bay.

That day of the rainstorm, when Trystan and Bridget had returned to the house disheveled and soaking wet, he had guiltily avoided his friend's inquiring gaze. Graham had teased him as if he had seen nothing worrisome in the time alone the two had shared, but Kent had instead become ever more vigilant after that day.

Now it was all coming to an end. Now was the moment everyone had been waiting for, the night of Lady Tremaine's ball. After tonight, he and Bridget would be free of the wager... and of each other.

They had arrived at his London townhouse five days ago to settle Bridget into the city. She had been overwhelmed at first, but as always, she had surprised Trystan and adapted to the London's pace with ease. They had taken her riding in Hyde Park and let her eat ice cream at Gunter's. They'd taken

her shopping for a dress suitable for Lady Tremaine's ball and, against Trystan's wishes, they'd also snuck her into Tattersall's dressed as a boy.

He hadn't wanted to risk her being discovered as a woman in that auctioneer house where females were forbidden, but later he was glad for the excursion. Seeing the girl's face as she'd walked among the rows of some of the best horseflesh in London had been worth it. She'd enjoyed every minute of watching the rich and powerful vie over the most amazing horses England possessed.

But all of those adventures had now come to an end. Only the ball remained, which was starting in the next half hour. The training they had pushed her through in the last month would be put to the test tonight. Trystan had prepared for this moment by putting on his superfine black coat, favorite gold waistcoat, and breeches. He now stood at the foot of the stairs, waiting for Bridget to join them.

"You know, I *almost* hope she wins tonight," Graham said as he tugged at the edges of his coat to straighten it out.

"She will win, I have no doubt of that," Trystan said with confidence. Even he would have believed she was a lady if he had never met her before tonight. He'd done a masterful job of putting her through her paces like any good racehorse in preparation for Ascot. He was thoroughly impressed with the progress she'd made. She had passed every test he had contrived and more.

"She will have us there to offer guidance," Kent said to Trystan.

"You know, Kent, it's rather unfair that you sided with Trystan. If I win, I won't invite you to my new hunting lodge for a full year," Graham said.



Kent clutched his chest. “Oh, how you wound me, old friend. But in truth, I didn’t actually side with Trys,” he said.

“Oh? Then whose side are you on, old boy?” Graham demanded of him.

“Why, Miss Ringgold’s of course,” Kent said as if that explained everything.

Trystan chuckled. The three were still teasing each other when Graham suddenly stopped talking and looked at something behind Trystan and Kent, his eyes as round as saucers.

When he turned around, Trystan for the first time in his life simply forgot to breathe. The woman descending the stairs so effortlessly was a vision of divine beauty, so much so that it seemed a crime to even look upon her.

The silver gown had a glittering gossamer outer skirt that shimmered in the lamplight with every step Bridget took. At her throat rested a single chain with a star formed by a cluster of diamonds. Her hair was pulled up into a soft tumble of curls and small, matching diamond stars clusters were pinned into parts of her coiffure. It looked as if the constellations had fallen from the night sky and taken it upon themselves to bind her hair back with celestial care.

Trystan had pondered at length what her ball gown and hair should look like for tonight in order to create the right effect for the *beau monde*. But the idea he had in his head was no match to the flesh-and-blood vision standing before him. She wore two white gloves up to her elbows and carried a slender fan in one hand. Her other hand held onto the train of her gown as she descended the stairs. She studied their faces in silence, waiting for comment or criticism, but none of them,

had anything to say. Trystan could only blink and continue to stare at her. He could have stared at her for the rest of his life.

Her lavender eyes settled on him. “Are we ready to leave?” A footman brought her a blue cloak and she wrapped it around herself just the way a lady who’d worn fine cloaks for years would. One loose curl from her hair caressed her cheek and he found himself jealous of that curl, wishing he could touch her skin the rest of the evening.

“Er...yes.” Trystan finally found his tongue. He offered her his arm once she had donned her cloak. They walked out to the coach and he helped her inside, his friends following close behind.

“Are you ready for this evening?” Kent asked Bridget once the coach started toward Lady Tremaine’s.

“Yes, I believe I am,” she replied. Her soft tone was sweet, confident. To his surprise, Trystan found he missed the brash, outspoken, wild creature she had once been before he had taken her and changed her into this beautiful lady. She was poised and graceful with remarkably innocent eyes that reminded him of that time they had waltzed together, as though she had danced only ever in moonlight and surrounded by flowers. She was magnificent, yet at the same time, he wondered if he done something terrible by destroying the hellion inside of her.

He had planned to use her as a way to thumb his nose at his fellow aristocrats, and prove that anyone could be trained to act like they’d been born into high society. He’d wanted to show the *beau monde* that they were no better than a hellcat like Bridget was... but the truth was, he’d come to believe that she was better than they were. She was honest and fearless, and now he feared he’d taken both those qualities from her.

*She's better this way. She'll have a future this way*, a voice whispered inside of him. But the thought didn't erase his guilt or disappointment. The thing he had loved about her was that she wasn't fashioned from some clay mold, as other women in London seemed to be. She had fascinated him on every level. Bridget was an endless mystery. But now she seemed to be no different than any other woman, and it was *his* fault. She was far more beautiful, of course, but the fire within her was nowhere to be seen. She'd lost that spark, all because of him and his silly wager with Graham.

And as that realization hit him, he had a terrible thought. If Bridget had been changed in such a way, what if all the other women he'd known in his life, the ones he'd thought boring and inspiring had also been...changed. Perhaps nearly every woman in high society was forced to give up their dreams and desires and play the part of obedient, subservient daughters, sisters or wives. All of them had their uniqueness erased by society's expectations.

*Dear god...* If that was the case, he was a damned cad forever thinking of them the way he had. His own bloody hubris could very well have made him just as bad as any other man when he could have been encouraging his female acquaintances to come out of the shells society forced them to hide in.

Trystan snuck a glance at Bridget who sat quietly in the coach, her gaze a thousand miles away, and he made a vow in that moment to not judge any woman again the way he used to.

When they arrived at Lady Tremaine's, they removed their cloaks and Trystan led her with pride toward the ballroom. The master of ceremonies was waiting for them. As they stood

in the line to be introduced, a tall, fair-haired man walked past them. Bridget sucked in a breath and froze, her face draining of color.

“What is it?” he asked her.

“That man. The handsome one with pale blonde hair. He has stopped at my father’s tavern several times. I’ve spoken to him when I’ve served him and he was always very observant, not like the other men who came into the tavern for a drink. He might recognize me.” She tried to slide her arm free, but Trystan placed a hand on hers, and gave her fingers a light, supportive squeeze.

“Just a moment, my dear,” Trystan said. “He will not recognize you. Even I do not. Your transformation has left no doubt in the minds of those who know you that you are a lady, like all the others in this room. It is simply a fact now. That creature you once were in Penzance is gone. He cannot possibly guess about your past.”

Trystan studied this man who was a threat to his wager and silently cursed. He knew the fellow. They ran in similar circles and had been schoolmates as boys.

And then, as if the charming devil had heard his name called, the man turned and spotted Trystan. He shot Trystan a sardonic look before his gaze settled on Bridget. Curiosity blossomed on the man’s face.

The master of ceremonies waved Trystan and Bridget forward, and they took their place as their names were announced.

“Lord Zennor and Miss Bridget Ringgold.”

“Chin up, little cat. You own the world tonight,” he said in a whisper and she lifted her chin higher, as serene as any

duchess.

Trystan escorted Bridget to Lady Tremaine, where Bridget was greeted by the hostess. Lady Tremaine was a fine woman in her early forties, a clever yet compassionate widow.

He and Bridget performed the niceties of small talk with Lady Tremaine before she began summoning men to sign Bridget's dance card. She informed those who gathered that Bridget was the ward of Trystan's cousin from Yorkshire.

And of course, the last man in line was the man he and Bridget had wanted most to avoid. The man flashed that smile of his at Bridget. It was a smile that broke hearts all over London.

"Trystan, I must beg an introduction to your charming cousin's ward."

"Bridget, this is Mr. Rafe Lennox."

"It's lovely to meet you, Mr. Lennox," Bridget said.

Rafe bowed and kissed Bridget's gloved hand.

"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you," he said. "May I claim a dance?"

Bridget didn't say no, because she couldn't. A *lady* never refused to dance unless she was unfamiliar with the steps and therefore might embarrass her partner. It was one of the lessons that had been drilled into her over and over.

"Of course. It seems I have a couple of spots left." She lifted her card up and Rafe produced a small pencil, writing his name down for one of the dances.

"Until then, Miss Ringgold," Rafe Lennox promised.

Bridget nodded. Once he left, she let out a small and audible sigh of relief.

“As I said, he did not recognize you.”

“He might if we spend more time together. Mr. Lennox was not shy to talk around me, and often asked questions about the goings-on around Penzance.”

“All you have to do is survive one dance with him.” Trystan put his name down on her card for the final dance of the night. “Here comes Kent. Stay with him for a moment while I bring you something to drink.”

Trystan headed for the refreshment table to collect glasses of arrack punch. As he walked through the crowds, he heard dozens of people whispering questions as to who the mystery beauty was who had been brought to the ball.

Trystan couldn't help but smile to himself in satisfaction.

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BRIDGET CLUTCHED her closed fan with a trembling hand as she stared at Rafe Lennox's back. He was all the way across the room, engaged in conversation and not paying any attention to her. But she was still terrified that he might recognize her. He had visited the tavern frequently in the last two years, and she'd always served him. Most men of his rank did not ever look at the boys serving them their ale, but he had. His blue eyes could see anything and most likely saw everything. How on earth could she fool him? He would realize who she was, and there was a chance he would tell Lady Tremaine just who she really was. She wasn't entirely certain he would tell Lady Tremaine, but the possibility frightened her enough to worry about it.

The scandal would be the end of whatever hope she had for a better future, and Trystan would be drawn into a scandal when he came to her defense. And he would come to her defense, she knew that. Somehow, in the last month, the arrogant nobleman had come to care for her, though not nearly so much as she had come to care for him. But he cared enough that he wouldn't want to see her embarrassed or publicly humiliated.

Kent stayed by her side while Trystan fetched her a glass of punch, but the dancing began as he was on his way back. She now had to face the first gentleman on her card, who came over and claimed her for his dance. He was a handsome man with kind eyes and he spoke of his home, a place called Falconridge. She enjoyed learning about his home and he, in turn, asked her about her home. She had to keep her answers vague. Luckily, she knew a bit about Yorkshire thanks to Trystan's lessons on the subject.

She managed to relax a little while she danced with Lord Falconridge, conversing well with the man. And then she was returned to Trystan and Kent, and gratefully accepted her punch.

This continued with the others one by one, and with each dance, the facade she kept up required less effort and felt more natural. By the time the seventh dance ended, Graham came to claim her for his dance and carried with him unexpected news.

"Try not to panic," Graham said softly once they were a safe distance from the other couples. "But everyone here tonight is most curious about you."

"Why?" Bridget fought to keep panic showing on her face or in her voice. "Are they suspicious?"

“Not at all. They believe you are from the north, a part of the country that most of London thinks is cold, dreary and, frankly, a bit barbarous. But you come in here looking absolutely stunning, and it has them asking questions. You do know that you look singularly beautiful tonight, don’t you? Every man in the room wishes to know who you are. And every woman is eyeing you with envy. They wish to know your entire life story. You see the potential for disaster, do you not?”

She peeped at the room around them, noting how many people were indeed looking at her.

“Oh dear, what should I do?”

“Three weeks ago I wouldn’t have given you any advice, seeing as I very much would like to own Trystan’s lodge in Scotland, but I’ve grown rather fond of you and have no desire to see you embarrassed. Surprising, isn’t it?” He chuckled. “And because of that dreaded weakness, I will give you my advice.”

He paused before continuing. The dance was ending, but she didn’t dare rush him.

“My advice... is that you’re doing fine. Not even Rafe Lennox will suspect a thing, because you *are* a lady, Bridget. No one could believe anything otherwise.”

He winked at her and when the dance ended, she spun to face the very man who had caused her so much concern tonight.

Rafe gave her a leonine smile as he offered her his hand.

“I believe I’m next?” He closed his fingers around hers and she was led back out for the next dance. The two faced each other across the line of dancers, and he bowed to her as



the music began. This particular dance kept them apart for half of the time and back in each other's arms for the other half.

“Miss Ringgold, I must confess, I had the strangest feeling we've met before. We have, haven't we?”

Bridget's heart pounded hard, but she kept calm. She was a lady. Nothing could ruffle her if she didn't let it. They were separated for a moment by a pair of dancers, then came back together.

“No, I'm sorry, but we haven't met until tonight.”

“Really? Perhaps you remind me of someone then. But who?” His bemused smile didn't ease her fears. “Everyone is just as curious as I am. You've created quite the stir tonight.”

They parted once again as they circled around another group of dancers before coming back together.

“I could swear that we've met, though,” he persisted. She answered his searching look with a polite smile.

“I would have remembered, Mr. Lennox. You have quite the presence.” She gave him a flirtatious smile.

He grinned at her, sensing she was up to something. “I rather like you, Miss Ringgold. I'm sure that I shan't be the only man interested in you.”

As the dance finally ended, he bowed over her hand and suddenly smiled. “I remember now...”

It took every ounce of her will not to flinch and pull away.

“Remember what, Mr. Lennox?” she asked.

“You remind me of a friend of my brother's. Anna Maria Zelensky. The Princess of Ruritania. Have you met her?”

“No, I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure.”

“Pity. I think you and Anna would like each other. She was in London last fall, and now she’s in Scotland with her husband. He’s a friend of mine, Aiden Kincade.”

None of those names meant anything to her, and she worried that he noticed her lack of reaction.

“She is a quiet beauty, but there is a fire in her, a ferocity of spirit that I sense you have as well. You may be from Yorkshire, but you could pass for a princess. It was a pleasure dancing with you, Miss Ringgold.”

“And you, Mr. Lennox.” She beamed at him as she realized she had passed the ultimate test, one she never could have prepared for in advance.

Once Rafe left, she had a chance to drink another glass of punch before Trystan claimed her for the final waltz.

“The room was abuzz with talk,” he said as he held her in his arms.

“Oh? About what?” She feigned innocence, even though she knew what he was referring to.

“Rafe is telling everyone that you remind him of Princess Anna of Ruritania. And gossip being what it is, more than one person now suspects you are a princess in disguise. That means you’ve done it. Now be at ease, little cat, and waltz with me. I’m quite tired of seeing other men having you in their arms when I’ve waited nearly three hours for this pleasure.”

Trystan smiled at her and she felt rather dizzy. She’d waited all night for this waltz too. As they began to dance, an unexpected relief swept through her like a surging wave over the shores of Zennor.

“We won the wager,” she whispered in excitement.

“We did.” He grinned back at her. “And now you will sleep tonight and dream of a fresh start,” he continued.

Yes, she would dream of it, but that dream held a note of bitterness, because that future wouldn't have him in it. Tonight was perhaps the last time she would ever dance with him. Bridget was resolved to enjoy herself as much as possible, and she tried to savor her victory. But all too soon, that perfect dance with her perfect partner came to an end.

“Are you ready to go home?” he asked.

She was weary now that her final test was over at last. She could sleep for a week. “Yes, take me home, Trystan.”

They found Kent and Graham near the doors leading out of the ballroom. Their party bid good night to Lady Tremaine, who insisted that they must bring this most charming girl back to call upon her soon. With the blushed murmur that she would be delighted too, Bridget and her three escorts departed and headed home.

When they arrived at Trystan's townhouse, his London butler, Mr. Fydell greeted them. Kent gave the butler the good news.

“Trys has done it. He's won the wager!”

“Yes, yes, all praise Trystan,” Graham grumbled. but he was smiling as he pretended to be annoyed.

“Well done, my lord,” Mr. Fydell exclaimed to his master.

Bridget couldn't believe it. It had happened again. She slid out of her coat and was completely ignored by the gentlemen as she walked upstairs to her bedchamber. As she reached the door, she realized that the men were celebrating downstairs and no one had asked her to join in. It was just like the night they had dined at Lady Helena's dinner party.

She entered her room and found Marvella waiting up for her. Marvella helped her undress for the night and Bridget collected her jewelry, putting the diamonds into a small velvet case. Something about the act of putting away such shining beauty, to be stored away until it was needed next, finally set her off.

Gripping the case, and wearing nothing but her chemise and housecoat with slippers, she stormed down to the billiard room where the three men were drinking brandy and laughing about their success at fooling one of London's most clever rakehells.

"Little cat, what the devil are you doing up? Go to bed, you silly creature." Trystan waved her off before he took a long drink of his brandy.

She tamped down the building rage inside her. "These are for you. I assume they should be returned if I leave tomorrow morning." She left the diamond box upon the green baize surface of the billiard table and walked out of the room, leaving a thunderous silence behind her.

She was halfway up the stairs when she heard Trystan shout her name, but she didn't stop until he caught her at the top of the staircase.

"Why, you ungrateful creature," he said, as he tried to push the diamonds back at her.

"I am not ungrateful. I am *tired*." She let the box fall to the floor between them and headed for her bedchamber.

"Bridget, come back at once. We are not done talking."

She sped up and had just reached her room when he joined her at the open door. The maid blinked in surprise at the pair of them as she pulled the covers back on the bed.

“Please leave us, Marvella,” Trystan ordered, his tone as hard as the diamonds he held in his palm.

“Miss?” Marvella asked Bridget with concern.

“Go on to bed. I’ll be fine,” she reassured Marvella.

Marvella swallowed hard and then nodded before she left. When the door clicked shut behind them, Bridget felt her fury clash with Trystan’s in a blinding storm, but neither of them moved.

“These diamonds were a gift,” he said, his tone dangerously soft. “You were the most brilliant and beautiful woman at the ball tonight, and we have spent what I thought was a most agreeable time together. You earned the diamonds. You should keep them.”

“Earned?” The word made her think of a future spent lying on her back. “How *dare* you —?” She raised her palm to strike him. He caught her wrist, preventing it.

“I didn’t mean it like that, and you bloody well know it.” He continued to hold her arm and stepped closer. “Keep the diamonds. I have no use for them.”

“I don’t wish to keep anything that you paid for, not any longer. I will only take what I brought with me—”

“Now you are being a fool.”

“Fool?”

“Yes, a fool. If you left with only what you’d brought, all that you’d have are those boy togs to wear,” he growled. “We had an agreement, an understanding. Everything you have been given has been earned, not some act of charity to turn your nose up at. Only a fool would toss all that away because they’re upset with me. Never mind the fact that I don’t even

know *why* you are upset. Now go to bed. You'll feel better tomorrow. Tomorrow we can settle the accounts and you can move into a quaint little cottage that I have ready for you. It will—”

“I don't want to go to any *bloody* cottage. Leave me alone!” she snarled. His calm, callous talk of her leaving drove her to a new level of pain, and she started to cry despite her deepest not to do so. “*Please...* just leave me alone.”

But he didn't. He pulled her into his arms, holding her tight, his lips pressing against her ear.

“There, there, little cat.” He soothed. “I didn't mean to upset you. *I'm* the fool. You did wonderful tonight and you deserve a night sky full of diamonds,” he said, and his tenderness somehow made how she felt worse and her crying grew louder. “Hush now, or I'll have to kiss you to make you feel better.”

When she couldn't stop weeping, he lifted her face up and his lips found hers. The simple connection left her feeling grounded, like a tree sinking roots into soil so deep that no storm could ever tear it away from that bit of land it stood upon. This man had become her soil, the earth that she could dig into safely, to grow and thrive through the mightiest of storms.

His mouth moved tenderly over hers, and she slid her arms up over his shoulders to hold onto him. A soft thud at her feet made her think only dimly of the diamonds that he must have dropped, but she cared only for Trystan's kiss.

He walked her backward until she was up against one of the bedposts. Then he slid her housecoat off her shoulders, and she stepped free of her slippers.

“Stay,” he said to her before he left her briefly to retrieve one of her extra hair ribbons from her vanity table. When he came back, he stood in silent question, holding up the ribbon, and she answered with a desperate little sound that made him kiss her again. She didn’t know what he meant to do, but she trusted him. He pressed her back against the bedpost again, then bound her wrists with the ribbon and lifted them above her head before he tied the rest of the ribbon to the post. She was helpless and her body throbbed almost painfully with need.

“You’re so beautiful,” Trystan murmured as he smoothed his palms down her arms from her wrists to her shoulders. She trembled, feeling vulnerable as he gazed at her, a wolfish gleam in his eyes.

“I feared I’d lost that brazen part of you that burns with fire, but here it is. I found it and I dare not lose you again.”

He loved that part of her? The part that had frustrated him so often? Something about that made her heart blossom with warmth and left her dizzy with joy.

He unfastened the ribbons of her chemise above her breasts and then, gripping the material in his hands, he wrenched it apart, ripping it clear down to her upper belly. She always found her bodily curves bothersome, but as he gazed at her, she finally welcomed the fullness of her breasts.

He cupped one in his hand and brushed his thumb over her nipple, then lightly pinched it. She groaned as a searing heat shot straight to her womb. He bent his head to her other breast and took her nipple between his lips. The tug on her sensitive peak sent a flood of wet heat between her thighs. She clenched them together, trying to erase a throbbing that only deepened. He moved his mouth to her other breast, sucking until she was

impossibly wet. He stood before her still fully clothed while she was nearly naked and tied to the bed. Why did that make her so feel so wild and excited?

Trystan removed his coat and unfastened his neck cloth, draping them both over the nearest chair. Then he folded the sleeves of his shirt past his elbows to expose his arms as he returned to her. He leaned in, kissing her lips while he teased her nipples with his fingers. Then he fisted his hand in her hair and held her head still as he delved deeper into her mouth, his tongue lightly thrusting into her mouth as his other hand slid up her thigh until it reached the folds of her sex. He didn't tease her this time. He simply thrust his fingers in, ruthlessly penetrating her where she craved it most.

“Tell me now if you want to stop...” he warned as he lifted his head from hers. His fingers were still deep inside her and her channel throbbed around them. Bridget lifted her hips, trying to push the fingers deeper.

“Tell me yes or no, Bridget. Yes, and I will claim your body right here, right now. No, and I shall release you and tuck you into bed and let you sleep.”

She knew what her answer was, knew it, and had no hesitation. No matter what happened after, she would have this moment to remember.

“Yes... Trystan... yes,” she begged. “Teach me this...” She needed him to teach her to make love more than she needed anything else in her life.

His whiskey-brown eyes darkened and he curled two fingers inside her, hitting a secret spot within her that made her eyes roll back in her head. He stroked that place until she was quaking with desire. Then he withdrew his hand and knelt at her feet. He ripped the rest of her chemise open and bared her



body fully to his gaze. He kissed her belly, then her abdomen, then he lifted one of her legs and rested it on his shoulder as he opened her to him.

“Trystan, what are you do—” She ended her question on a shriek as his mouth settled on the top of her mound and he sucked.

“Oh no...” she moaned as he began to lick her folds. She’d never imagined a man could do that down there, and it felt *unbelievably strange and wonderful*.

His hands cupped her bottom from behind and he spanked her twice, the little smacks only making her wetter. His tongue slid into her and she begged for him to take her, to give her what she needed, whatever it was. He only chuckled against her burning flesh before he continued to lick her.

Then she came apart in an explosion like she had at the old Saxon ruins, bursting open and then being knitted back together piece by piece. She sagged limply against the bedpost, but he stood up and shrugged off his waistcoat and then removed his boots and opened his trousers. His thick cock sprang free, jutting toward her, massive and daunting, but she had no energy to speak, to ask if he would even fit inside her.

Trystan lifted Bridget up against the bedpost, her legs widening around him as he pinned her against the wood. Then he guided himself into her and thrust deep, hard, the pain of his entry intense but brief before he sank too deep for her not to feel the rest of him filling and stretching her. His forehead touched hers as he held himself very still within her, their breath mingling.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked as if he was fighting a battle to hold still.

“N—no, not much,” she replied in a whisper.

“Good, because now I’m going to make love to you, little cat. Do you understand? You will be a toy for my pleasure. I will use you for my desires and I will make you almost perish with your own pleasure.”

The thought of Trystan using her like that... like a toy, yet seeing to her own pleasure... made her desperate to climax all over again. She squirmed between him and the bedpost, trying to get closer.

He chuckled, the sound dark and delicious as he withdrew and rocked back into her. His eyes studied her face, for what she wasn’t sure, but he seemed satisfied before he deepened his next thrust and quickened his pace. His hips began to buck against her over and over, his cock surging deep into her as her body shook with the force of it. It felt *glorious*.

The power of their union made her feel wild and unfettered with passion despite her bound wrists. It was the most exquisite thing she’d ever known. She could moan and claw like the hellcat she was. She could embrace the battle of their union and his conquering of her body because it was her choice to surrender to this wild part of herself. There was no shame, only mutual respect for their pleasure.

He rammed deeper into her, his kisses tasted of hunger, and it seemed to go on forever, this intense duel of kisses and frenzied mating. When his mouth finally broke apart from hers, he turned his face toward her neck, biting her shoulder as his hands gripped her buttocks and clenched hard. He hammered her over and over, and when the dam finally burst she couldn’t even scream. She was overwhelmed with the orgasm that roared through her. Spots danced across her vision and she went limp again. Trystan pounded against her for

another few strokes before he shouted her name. Something hot filled her and she clenched her thighs tight against his hips, holding him to her, feeling the need now more than ever to stay connected to this man.

Trystan panted against her ear and then lightly kissed her cheek. For a long moment, neither of them said a word as he embraced her with impossible tenderness. Then he carefully let her legs drop from his hips and unfastened the ribbon from the bed post, freeing her arms. She rubbed her wrists, unconcerned with the faint red marks left on her skin. When he eased out of her body, she feared that he would leave her to sleep, but instead he went to wet a cloth in the basin on the washstand and came back to her. He cleaned between her thighs. She was too tired to be embarrassed at the bit of blood she saw him wipe away. She shrugged off the rest of her ripped chemise and pressed her fist against her mouth, stifling a yawn. Trystan pulled her into his arms and kissed her sweetly. If she hadn't been so tired, she might have cried again.

“In bed now, if you please.” He gave her bottom another light spank and then nudged her toward the bed. She collapsed onto it, fully naked, and lay on her stomach. She watched him clean himself with the cloth, and he removed his trousers and stockings. When he came back to the bed, he was fully naked.

“Move over, hellion. I plan to sleep and I wish to hold you.”

With a sigh of contentment, she slid over and let him get beneath the covers before she joined him, and they cuddled in his embrace.

“Tomorrow we must talk. But tonight... tonight...” He didn't finish.

Bridget was glad. She didn't want to know what he would have said.

Tomorrow would be here soon enough, and she would face her choices then. For now, she would pretend that tomorrow wasn't ever going to come and that she would stay here with Trystan in bed forever... happy and free.

## CHAPTER NINE

TRYSTAN HAD MADE a terrible mistake last night. He felt the weight of that error as he finished writing his letter to Bridget. It reminded her in no uncertain terms that she had no future with him. He'd had his old seaside cottage made ready for her in the past week. He'd decided to give it to her free and clear—that way, she need not worry about finding a place on her own.

In the letter, he'd explained about the cottage and how she should be ready to leave for it soon. Then, if she wished to find employment somewhere, he'd write her a letter of recommendation that was bound to assure her of getting whatever position she wished. Trystan promised he would send along her wardrobe, her new horse and some staff to take care of her and the property. It was his desire to reward her for her part in the wager and that she need not worry about seeing him again. She was free to do as she wished now. But why did even thinking about her being gone from his life cast a gray, listless pall over his future?

He folded the letter and crept back into Bridget's bedchamber. To his relief, she was still asleep. He placed the paper on the pillow beside her and then, on an impulse, he took the bloom of a rose from a nearby vase and placed it on top of the letter. Bridget sighed softly and turned in her sleep,

her hand sliding across the bed where he had lain. He would have given anything to crawl back beneath the covers with her. But if he didn't walk away now, he might never manage it.

“Goodbye, little cat,” he whispered. Then he saw one last diamond star cluster still pinned into the coils of her hair. It winked in the sunlight, reminding him of every incredible moment they shared last night, from dancing at the ball to making love and feeling truly free with her.

He suddenly found it hard to swallow as he backed out of the bedchamber and closed the door. He turned around and came face to face with Marvella, who had a stack of fresh linens in her arms. Her eyes widened a little at the sight of him slipping out of Bridget's bedchamber.

“Er... good morning, Marvella,” he said rather quickly. Then he fled downstairs, retrieved his coat and hat, and told his butler he was bound for his club. Bridget would read the letter soon enough and leave. That would be the end of it.



THE CONVERSATION TRYSTAN had promised to share with her the morning following the ball never came. When Bridget woke up, she found the bed empty and a letter with a lovely, deep red rose laying on top of the pillow where his head had rested the night before.

With a trembling hand, she cupped the rose in her hands and brought it up to her nose to take in its scent. Then she laid it down and opened the letter.

*BRIDGET,*

*I made a mistake bedding you last night. No, hellcat, I do not regret the second of our time together. I only regret that I cannot give you more than one. My mistake was caring too much for you despite not being able to give you what you deserve. A life as a countess would not make you happy. You would face hardship and judgment at every turn once the truth was known, and I could not bear to watch you struggle and suffer.*

*I have left a packet for you with Mr. Fydell. It contains the deed to the cottage where I wish you to live, and I have told Fydell that Marvella may go with you and still receive her same wages. The cottage will have a cook, a butler and a few other servants to help you. It has ten bedrooms and should give you plenty of room to bloom like any flower will with space and sunlight.*

*I know you must be furious with me, but rest assured that if any consequences come from our night together, I will provide you all that you need to live and keep yourself and our child healthy and happy. Please know that you have given me something to remember. I shall hold our night in my heart forever.*

*Yours,*

*Trystan*

SHE STARED AT THE LETTER, so much of it overwhelming to her. But the thing that kept drawing her focus over and over was... *the consequences of their night*. She drew in a shaky breath and placed a hand to her belly. Was a child growing within her? She knew next to nothing of such womanly matters.

Despite her years of rough living, she was in many ways far too innocent, yet *he* had known the risks last night. She could have slapped him for that, if nothing else. If she was with child, she would *make* him know the child. She would not let their baby grow up without knowing its father. He would face that situation whether he liked it or not.

Bridget sat in bed a long while, staring at the letter until she felt she had memorized it. Marvella quietly tidied up the room, leaving Bridget to her thoughts until finally she rose from her bed.

“Are you all right, Miss?” Marvella asked.

“Yes... no. I honestly don't know. Trystan has given me a cottage to live in, and he said he would let you come with me and still pay your wages. Do you wish to come?” She desperately hoped Marvella would agree. The lady's maid had become her friend in the last month they had been together.

“I would be happy to,” Marvella came over and put an arm around Bridget in a hug. “Why don't I bring you breakfast?”

“Thank you.”

Bridget got dressed after a small meal, then had a discussion with Mr. Fydell about the documents to the cottage. With some guidance from him, she planned to have things packed and one of Trystan's travel coaches made ready to leave that afternoon.

She was finishing up her goodbyes to the London townhouse staff when Lord Kent arrived. He and Graham, she had learned, had gone to their own London townhouses after she had interrupted the brandy celebration in the billiard room the previous evening.



Kent removed his hat and waited in the entryway with her. The servants slipped away to give them privacy.

“You’re leaving?” he asked, his gentle eyes full of concern.

“Yes, Trystan has told me to retire to his cottage by the sea, but I have other things to do and I thought it best I leave straightaway to do them.”

“Other things?” Kent smiled, but the expression held a hint of sorrow. “Dare I ask what they are?”

She smiled back at him. “Oh... I think I have a few more adventures to stir up before I let Trystan make an old spinster of me. Is it all right that I take Beau with me?”

“Of course. He is my gift to you.” Kent rubbed his thumb over the silver handle of his cane. “Would you like some company on these adventures? I could go with you.”

She reached up and placed her palm on his cheek. “You have always treated me like a lady, Lord Kent. You cannot know what that means. But now I need to explore the world on my own and learn what this new version of myself is capable of. But you can do something for me.”

“Name it.”

“Take care of Trystan. I fear that he will be reckless. Do not let him get hurt.”

Kent held out a hand to her and she placed her palm in his.

“Until we have the fortune of meeting again, Bridget.”

“Phillip,” she replied, feeling almost shy now at using his given name. She supposed she really was a lady. Whatever unruly creature she had once been, with crude language and rude manners, she was changed. There was a part of her that

grieved the loss of her old self, and she'd once feared that Trystan's lessons had left her useless, but they hadn't. She would still be a lady, but she would set her own rules for living. She wouldn't play the role of a quiet little spinster in a cottage by the sea even if it did have ten rooms and sounded more like a palace. She would visit it soon, but she wasn't about to confine her existence there, Trystan's wishes be damned.

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***TWO MONTHS LATER...***

Trystan stared at Mr. Chavenage. "What the devil do you mean, she never arrived at the cottage?"

His butler squared his shoulders, keeping calm in the face of Trystan's fury. It was one of the reasons he paid Mr. Chavenage so well. The man handled Trystan's mercurial moods with grace.

"Mr. Gaythan, your butler at the cottage, wrote to me this morning when I inquired about Miss Ringgold staying there. He said she never arrived."

"And why am I only hearing about this *now*?"

"She wrote to him shortly after the staff arrived, explaining she would come at some point before the summer ended and not to worry about her until she arrived."

"Not to worry?" Trystan shredded the nearest letter in front of him to pieces. Thankfully, it was only a missive from Graham, which he had already read before his butler had come into the study.

"Why didn't you inquire about her sooner, Chavenage?"

His butler gave him a rather frustrated look. “Well, given how close the cottage is, I rather thought *you* would have visited her yourself, my lord.”

*Well, damnation, the man has a point there,* Trystan silently admitted.

He had given Bridget that cottage to keep her close, but he never planned to *visit* her. That would have been highly improper as well as dangerous to his heart.

“Where the devil is the girl if she hasn’t been there at the cottage?” he asked, not exactly expecting Mr. Chavenage to answer him.

“I haven’t the faintest idea, my lord. She has sent *these*, however, to Mrs. Story.” The butler proffered several short letters. They bore locations from Edinburgh to Brighton Beach.

“She sent these?” He studied Bridget’s handwriting in the brief stories she’d written to the housekeeper.

“Apparently. Mrs. Story didn’t know the girl was not supposed to be out exploring, as it were, so she didn’t think to mention she’d been receiving the letters until this morning when I discussed all this with her.”

“*Exploring,*” Trystan muttered as he examined the letters. She certainly had been, if the quickly jotted stories were true. She’d been swimming at Brighton Beach, touring museums and monuments in Scotland. She’d even sailed along the south of England in a cutter ship and toured the Isle of Skye in the north of Scotland. She was learning to speak French from Marvella, who had learned to speak the language years ago. The two girls planned to visit France at some point. He’d given Bridget a good deal of money when he’d created an

account for her through a bank that a friend of his owned, and he hadn't bothered to check on what she'd done with the money. Clearly she'd gone on adventures with it. And rather than staying furious... he felt intrigued and oddly amused.

Trystan realized he was actually smiling. The little hellion had proved him wrong. He thought he had molded her into a swan like all the other women in London. But he hadn't. She'd *always* been a swan; he'd merely shown her she could fly. He felt a sudden pang of regret that he was not with her. He would have loved to see her in a bathing costume as she collected shells and felt the sea caress her skin. He would have laughed with her as he listened to her stories while they rode through the Highlands on Beau's back.

"My little cat is *living*," he said, his throat oddly tight.

"My lord?"

"Er... return these to Mrs. Story. Tell her I want to know the *moment* she receives another. I might be able to find Bridget's location, or at the least catch her trail." He tapped his stack of unopened letters thoughtfully with his finger. "I think I shall go see my great aunt this afternoon. Please have my horse saddled."

His butler left him alone, and he took a moment to collect the shredded remnants of Graham's letter. After he had won the wager, Graham had immediately offered his racing curricle and his team of horses as payment, but when Trystan had given it a few days thought, he declined to accept it. Graham had insisted on the trade being made, but Trystan had finally met him for drinks at their club and explained why he couldn't accept. Graham had helped Bridget almost as much as Trystan and Kent had in her preparations, and it was not fair to take the

winnings when the man had gone out of his way to help Trystan win.

In the end, Graham accepted this and they drank whiskey in companionable silence by the fire, but after a moment his friend smiled wistfully and said he wished Bridget was there with them. Her absence felt so strange after she'd been so constantly present for over a month.

Graham was right. He had grown accustomed to the girl. For all the time they had spent in study and practice, there had been so much more that had happened—all of which he now fondly remembered. She would cuddle up in the chair opposite him by the fire and read a book while he read his own. Graham and Kent would play chess, and sometimes the four of them would play whist or faro. He couldn't count the times in the last two months that he'd wandered the halls of his home in Zennor and chased the ghosts of her memory. As much as he wished it, his memories could not resurrect her spirit.

She had settled right into his life as if she'd always been a vital piece of it. He'd never realized that until now, how she'd become crucial to his day. He'd *enjoyed* living with her under his roof. Such a curious thing, really. But what could he do? He couldn't marry the girl, couldn't put her through what his mother had endured. He couldn't risk having her spirit broken. She should be living her own life, just as she was doing now.

An hour later, he rode toward Lady Helena's home and was shown inside by his great aunt's butler. Helena was in the conservatory cutting roses. Her spectacles were perched on her nose and the light purple gown she wore was shielded by an apron dotted with soil stains. She greeted him with a hug and a kiss on his cheek.

“What is my favorite nephew doing here?” she asked as she cut another rose and tucked it in a vase on a nearby table.

“Well, I don’t honestly know.” He supposed he’d come because he’d needed to talk with someone who loved and cared about him, yet he also needed someone who would be honest.

Lady Helena chuckled. “Well, you do look lost,” his aunt said. “And where’s my darling Bridget?” she asked.

“Bridget?” he echoed.

“Yes, she always comes to see me when you do.” Lady Helena continued cutting roses.

That was certainly true; he’d taken to visiting his aunt twice a week in the last month and Bridget had adored coming along. She and Helena had gotten along famously, and the sight of their heads bent together in discussion always made his chest tighten and flood with warmth.

“Oh... she’s gone.” He had a sudden need to unburden himself to his great aunt.

“Gone?” Helena repeated the word with clear fear that something had befallen Bridget.

“She’s left...I mean. The wager is over and she’s gone out on her own, just as we’d always planned.” It was the truth, but why did saying those words leave such a terrible, hollow ache in his chest? By leaving, she’d taken not only herself but part of his own soul away, and all he had were memories that simply weren’t enough. He’d been lying to himself for weeks now, saying he didn’t care that she was gone. But he bloody well cared.

“Tell me everything, dear boy.”

She handed him a pair of shears, and he took up work beside her, cutting roses. He'd always liked such a task. His mother had taught him well how to attend to growing things. As they cut roses side-by-side, Trystan told Helena all that had happened at the ball, how Bridget had come off as regal as a princess and how she fooled everyone, even the cunning Rafe Lennox who had met her at that old tavern several times. When she was finally done, she removed her gloves and set her shears down.

“So now my little cat has wandered off, and I don't know where she is, or even if she is safe. It has me deuced worried because—”

“You love her,” his aunt finished.

“I cannot—”

“Do not lie to me, Trystan. Nor should you lie to yourself. I'm far too old and yet my ears, as deaf as they are sometimes, still cannot abide to hear a lie about love.” She removed the gardening apron from her dress and set it on the table, then fixed him with a motherly stare.

“Aunt Helena, I—”

“What is the harm in admitting you love Bridget? Will a bolt of lightning strike you down?”

“I rather feel like it might,” he grumbled. “Admitting something like that... It's, well, it's not done, is it? Only fools fall in love. I can't marry for love and I have no desire to marry for advantage either, so where does that leave me?”

“Rather *alone*, I should say,” Helena said quite bluntly. “While there's certainly nothing wrong with being alone—I've quite enjoyed my solitude—you on the other hand would be a

damned fool for walking away from the love of your life. And what's wrong with marrying for love? Your father did."

"And look at what happened to him." Trystan set his shears down on the table a little too forcefully. His great aunt's eyes narrowed behind her spectacles.

"What happened is that your parents were very happy. They loved each other and had a wonderful son."

"But it didn't *end* happily," he reminded her. That old pain of loss dug its claws into him again. "Mother was shunned by everyone in father's social circles."

Helena nodded sadly. "Because she was a Romani. Yes, I am aware."

"She was treated as an outcast, and it drove her to an early grave. I suffered enough as a boy, being teased about my gypsy blood. But now I'm grown, and it doesn't bother me one bit what others say. But father... He never was the same after losing mother." He had *never* spoken so openly in his life about something so painful, but now that he'd started, he couldn't seem to stop.

"Don't you see? The truth about Bridget would come out, and then she would face the same situation as my mother. I would marry her in an instant but... but I can't stand by and watch her break the way my mother did. Yes, she fooled everyone at Lady Tremaine's ball, but that facade cannot be maintained forever. She would be laughed at, ridiculed, *destroyed*. I couldn't bear to witness that."

Helena stared at him. "Have you bothered to talk to Bridget about your true feelings? She's not nearly so much like your mother as you think."



“Of course I haven’t. I didn’t want her to think there was a chance of marriage when there isn’t.”

“Trystan, dear,” she said more gently. “Your mother was a wild and carefree creature, the same as Bridget, but she was also a delicate flower. Your father knew that when he married her. He took the risk of sharing his life with her, and so did she. But Bridget is not the same. That young woman has had to fight to survive her entire life. She’s thrived in situations when others barely hang on. She’s *not* a delicate flower. She’s an oak with deep roots. She wouldn’t let anyone push her out, not like your mother. Besides, if anyone dared give her the cut direct, I imagine that a wide circle of men and women who are fiercely loyal to you would do the same to those who would dare cut your wife out of society. She has protectors—she has *you*—but most importantly, she has *herself*. A strong woman cares not for the opinions of others, but only her opinion of herself. That is where confidence comes from, and when someone carries confidence as a shield, the barbs and arrows of the insecure and jealous find no weak spots to strike.”

Trystan stared in awe at his great aunt. She was right, and he had been too afraid to admit it because he was not ready himself to admit he had fallen in love.

“Well then, what are your plans, dear boy? You cannot stand here pruning roses forever, no matter how much I may enjoy your company.”

“Er... no, I suppose not.” He stared hopelessly down at the pair of shears he had placed on the potting bench.

“Don’t just stand there. Instead of running away from her, go after her.” Helena threw a gardening glove at his face. It smacked him, and he just managed to catch it before it fell to the ground.

“I have no idea where she is. She could be anywhere in England. And what if she doesn’t want me? What if she doesn’t need me?”

“Do you want her to need you?” Helena asked.

He was silent a long moment. “I only want her to love me...but I’ve been so terribly commanding towards her. What if she thinks I am commanding her to come home like some trained spaniel?”

At this his aunt laughed merrily. “Heavens, where do you come up with such nonsense? Bridget isn’t a spaniel and you know it. That girl has a lovely bite to her, like any good wildcat. You never tame or control a creature like that. You feed it, care for it, love it and eventually one night, you’ll find it’s snuggled up in your arms, content as a kitten.” She cut another rose and placed it in the vase, then stepped back to admire her work.

“Why did you never marry?” Trystan asked his aunt. He’d never given his aunt’s solitary life much thought until now.

“Because I was like Bridget and there was only one man for me in all the world. He died while fighting the American colonists. When he never came home, I simply decided there was no one else who would ever take his place, and while I kept my heart open, I was right. He was a once in a lifetime kind of love.” Her voice was soft, and full of an ancient heartache that Trystan was now feeling himself as he thought of Bridget somewhere far away, living a life without him because he’d failed to tell her he loved her.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Helena, I didn’t know.”

She turned to face him and reached out, her gloved hands giving his a gentle squeeze.

“She wants you, Trystan, trust an old woman when I say that I know what love looks like. She’s only ever looked at you with love in her eyes, even when she’s been upset with you. Isn’t that the measure of love? To love through the anger and the pain when one must?”

Trystan found his throat unbearably tight as he tried to speak. “You aren’t old,” he said.

She laughed and cupped his cheek fondly, her eyes bright. “My bones might be, but the spirit is forever young,” she patted his cheek once and then turned back to her pruning again.

“What should I do?” he asked.

Helena rolled her eyes as if the answer was obvious. “Why don’t you go home and sleep on it? I expect you’ll find a clue sooner than you think.”

“Yes, good idea,” he mused thoughtfully. As he turned to leave, he saw a small wooden carving on the bench where he’d so thoughtlessly slammed his shears down. His aunt had her back turned to him as he picked up the wooden carving. It was the size of his hand and it depicted a man with a noble-looking face. The wood had been smoothed with diligent, loving care and he recognized the style just as much as he recognized his own face staring back at him from the carving. Bridget had been here... sometime recently... but when? He didn’t ask his aunt; she wouldn’t have told him. This was his quest, after all—to earn Bridget’s love and trust again. He pocketed the small carving in his coat, then came back over to his aunt.

He kissed his great aunt’s cheek before he left the conservatory, and she returned to her pruning. Rather than wait for the groom to bring his horse around, he decided to go out to the stable himself. As he entered the door, he halted the

sight of the familiar chestnut horse munching on a pail of oats in one of the stalls.

“Beau?” He walked over to the beast and patted its neck, making sure his eyes were not deceiving him. “If you are here, your mistress must be close by, eh?” So Bridget had come here and perhaps she was still here. He gave the horse another pat before he called for a groom to saddle his horse. He needed to get home at once. He would set a plan in motion to catch his wayward little cat in a parson’s mousetrap.

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LADY HELENA WAITED until she was certain her nephew was gone, then spoke to a distant corner of the conservatory, where several tall trees and plants blocked a private sitting area.

“You may come out now. He’s gone.”

Bridget peered around a bush. “You’re certain?”

Helena chuckled. “Yes. How much were you able to hear?”

“Everything,” Bridget admitted.

“And?” Helena picked up the vase of roses. Bridget rushed forward, taking the heavy object from her.

“And what?” Bridget followed Helena as they left the conservatory and walked toward the drawing room.

“You heard him, child. The man loves you. More importantly, he’s *in* love with you.”

Bridget set the vase down on a table by the window and looked out at the garden beyond the glass.

“Do you think he would marry me? If he wasn’t so worried that I’d break?”

“I believe he would,” Helena said. “Now he understands how strong you are. He was too blinded by his fear of the past to see it before, but he’s thinking clearly now.”

Helena sat down in a chair, her bones aching with the day’s work in the conservatory, but she didn’t mind. At her age, the aches reminded her that she had lived a long and good life, one that was far from over if she had any say in it. She wanted to see Trystan and Bridget give her a dozen great-grandnephews and great-grandnieces.

“Would you marry him if he asked you to?”

The young woman adjusted the roses in the vase, then winced as she was pricked by a thorn. Rather than cry out or fuss, she simply sucked at the wound before resuming her sorting. Helena smiled. *Definitely an oak tree, this one*, she thought.

“I would, if he truly meant it. I *won’t* be an obligation to him, nor an ornament. I need him to want me, to want to be with me the way I want to be with him.”

She fretted over the blooms a little longer, then sat down in a chair with a frustrated sigh.

“There’s so much I want to do still, so much to see. What if he won’t let me do those things?”

Helena chuckled. “I’d like to see him or anyone else try to stop you. He will either join you or not, and I think he’ll join you. For a man of leisure, he likes to be busy. He can’t sit still very long, just like you.”

Bridget laughed. “We’re certainly matched in that, aren’t we?”

“Yes. Now come and help me plan my next dinner party.” Helena distracted the girl from her worries and hid her smile.

She was an excellent chess player. She would wait for Trystan to make his move, and then she would send the queen running into his arms.

## CHAPTER TEN

BRIDGET STARED at the old run-down tavern at the edge of Penzance. It hadn't changed at all in the last three months since she had left it.

"Miss Bridget, what should I do while you're gone?" Marvella asked.

"Wait here for me in the coach. Do not go out. This part of the town is not reputable."

Her loyal maid nodded and squeezed Bridget's hand before she returned to the waiting coach and disappeared inside.

"Back again," Bridget sighed to herself.

Had it really only been three months? The life she'd lived here had felt like a century ago. She checked the little bonnet on her head and adjusted the large orange ribbon underneath her chin. Then she lifted the skirts of her fine walking dress and strode toward the tavern. She knew she painted a lovely picture in the sky-blue satin gown with puffed sleeves and orange flowers embroidered on her bodice. Men in the street eyed her with respect and appreciation.

She stepped inside, her vision momentarily dim as she adjusted to the light. A familiar figure stood by the bar, cleaning glasses with a dirty cloth and grumbling. When he

lifted his head, she waited to see a spark of recognition in the man's eyes, but none came. Instead, her stepfather nearly tripped over himself to offer her a seat and food. The old Bridget would have laughed and called the man out for failing to recognize her, but now she cared nothing for the man who'd once been her only family left in the world.

“What can I get you, milady?” he asked.

“An ale, please,” she said calmly, then surveyed the room and smiled. A man at a distant table sat with his back to her, in his hand a small wooden carving. His dark, wavy hair gleamed in the muted sunlight that came through the grimy windows that looked out on the street. Without another glance at her stepfather, she picked up the mug and walked toward the man at the distant table, stopping just behind him.

“Oi, what do you want to drink, fancy pants?” she demanded rudely in her old accent.

“Watch your tongue and bring me a mug of ale,” the man commanded as he set the wooden carving on the table.

She slammed the ale down beside his arm on the table, and it sloshed dangerously close to his hand. He caught her wrist in a flash and pulled her so that she landed with her bottom sitting in his lap. She steadied herself by placing her palms on his chest. The man wrapped his arms around her, holding her securely on his lap.

“Hello, darling,” Trystan said, his gaze heated with a fire she had missed ever since she had left him. Then there was the way he'd called her darling. He'd never done that before, and it made her heart flutter like mad.

“Hello,” she greeted with a hesitant smile. Both ignored the fact that she was in his lap in a very public place. “Why



did you come back *here*?” She nodded at the tavern around them.

“To find *you*, of course.”

“But I wasn’t here—” She halted abruptly, not wanting to give away the fact that she had been hiding for the last week at Lady Helena’s home. He picked up the carving from the table and held it up before her. It was the one she’d done of his face when she’d been staying at Helena’s home for a few days. She’d wondered where she’d left it. He must have found it when he came to visit his aunt.

“When I left Helena’s home, having just confessed my deepest thoughts and feelings about a certain hellcat, I was surprised to come across a very familiar equine face in the stables.”

She smiled, knowing that he had seen her horse. “But if you knew I was at your aunt’s, why come here?”

He gave her hips a gentle squeeze so that she settled more comfortably on his lap. “If I confronted you at my aunt’s house, you might have felt obliged to agree to whatever I asked, being put on the spot like that. But if you chose to come find me, to put yourself in my path again, I would know you wanted me. It’s why I sent a letter to Helena telling her I planned to search for you in Penzance. I knew she would tell you. If you hadn’t come, I would know that you wanted to continue to live your life all on your own. And if you did...”

He left the sentence unfinished, because they both knew what this meant for them. He tucked the carving into one of her hands, and she closed her fingers around it protectively. She’d made that figurine of his face so that she could always carry him with her.

“And if I did come after you, it was because I needed you in my life,” she finished softly as she gazed deep into those whiskey brown eyes that always held her captive. “I already had you in my heart.”

His eyes softened in a way that made her skin break out in goosebumps and he cuddled her closer against him.

“I’m afraid the man you know, the commanding man who has far too many opinions, probably half of them you disagree with is the man I truly am. Can you bear to live with that... with *me*?”

She smiled at him. “I don’t imagine anyone but a hellcat like me could stand to, so I supposed I’d better,” she teased. “It’s a good thing I’m madly in love with you, even when you are being unreasonable and—”

He pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her, “I think you’re saying things so that I’ll bend you over my knee again.”

Bridget giggled. “Perhaps I am...but I do love you.”

“Madly?” he asked, his lips twitching.

“The maddest,” she agreed.

“Good, then we’ll be mad with love together.” Trystan played with the length of ribbon at her chin. “I assume Marvella is waiting for you somewhere?” The restlessness that she’d always been so aware of seemed to be gone. He looked as if he could have sat there with her in his lap for the rest of his life.

“In my coach,” Bridget said.

She stared at his face, taking in the sight of him. She had missed the way his whiskey-brown eyes enveloped her with

their warmth, and the way it felt to have his large, elegant hands hold her. They'd had so little time like this, and this sweet intimacy between them was still so new. She even missed the way that he commanded her about and drove her to frustration with his silly lessons. Looking back all those moments now, she realized she'd started to fall in love with him that first day.

"I heard what you told lady Helena, all of it," she said after a moment.

His eyes warmed even more. "I felt a fool telling her all of that, but afterwards, I felt free. I didn't know you were there in the room listening."

"I'm sorry. I was in the back, in the sitting area. We had been talking when she heard you arrived, and she told me to hide."

Trystan smiled. "Cunning woman. I'd almost guess that she planned something of that sort."

"She is very clever," Bridget agreed.

He met her gaze. "So what are we to do, my little hellcat? Shall I court you like a proper lady? Then, on a fine spring day, I'll get down on one knee and ask you to marry me?"

She brushed her fingers over the back of his neck, lightly grazing her nails over him in the way she knew he liked.

"Perhaps you should just carry me off to the altar *now* before I fly away again."

"And create an even bigger scandal?" he asked. Worry colored his tone a little.

"Who cares about such trivial things?" she replied in all seriousness. "Kent and Graham wouldn't give me the cut

direct and never speak to me again, would they?” Bridget queried, quite confident she knew what he’d say.

“Of course they wouldn’t,” Trystan replied without hesitation.

“Then your other friends won’t either,” she assured him.

He gazed at her, those warm brown eyes still worried. “You would risk it to be a countess?”

She lowered her head to his and kissed him, knowing they were in the middle of a grimy tavern and not caring at all.

“I don’t *care* about being a countess. I only care about being with *you*.” She nibbled his bottom lip, which made him groan softly.

“We had best leave before *I’m* the one who creates a scandal.” He tossed a few coins on the table before he slid her off his lap and led her out of the tavern.

“We’ll let Marvella follow us in your coach. You and I will take mine so we can talk.”

She followed him as they explained matters to the two coach drivers and Marvella, then opened the door to his coach for her. He offered her his hand to climb inside.

“My lady fair...” he teased.

“Am I a fair lady?” she asked with a laugh.

“The fairest. Because I taught you to be.”

“Oh hush, fancy pants,” she shot back saucily. “I rather think I taught *you* a thing or two.”

“You’ll pay for that, hellion,” he warned with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“I certainly hope so.” She raised her chin and purposely swayed her bottom in invitation before she sat on the coach seat.

Trystan climbed in after her and closed the door. He settled her back onto his lap, holding her close, then tugged on her bonnet ribbon again.

“You look quite delectable,” he said. “I could nibble on you for days.”

Bridget beamed at him. “I’ve had a number of new gowns made for me, and a bathing costume.” She unfastened the ribbons of her bonnet and tossed it on the opposite bench.

“Tell me about all of your adventures. I want to hear everything.”

“Everything?”

“Especially about you swimming at the beach.”

She chuckled. “It could take a few days to tell all of it.”

“Lucky for us we have the rest of our lives.” Trystan’s gaze softened, and she wanted to melt into him, to never be apart from him again.

“We do, don’t we?” she said with a smug little grin. “In that case, I have *other* things I’d like to do first.” She toyed with his cravat and wriggled on his lap.

The wolfish look in his eyes returned. He fisted his hand in her hair and kissed her roughly, just the way she liked. Part of what attracted her to Trystan was that he never treated her as if she as if she might break during their moments of mutual passion. She kissed him back just as fiercely and soon they both pulled apart, needing to catch their breath.

He cupped her face in his hands and grinned. "I'm going to make love to you."

"Here?"

"Oh yes. Lift your skirts, my hellion." She quickly shimmed her gown up to her hips and he helped her straddle him, then freed himself from his trousers. He positioned her above him and then gripped her hips and pulled her down hard and fast onto him.

She gasped in surprise as she impaled herself on him. "Oh Trys!" This felt far different than the last time he'd made love to her. She felt full in a completely different way.

"That's it, little cat, ride me..." He groaned, rolling his hips up against her own.

Her earl was the most wicked man she'd ever known, and she wouldn't have him any other way. They were fully clothed and yet she was sliding up and down his shaft, their bodies moving as if they were one being. She clung to him, wrapping her arms around his neck as she met his lips in a fiery kiss that claimed her heart, body, and soul.

She came apart with a cry minutes later and collapsed on top of him. He held her close, stroking her hair and kissing the top of her head.

"That was simply glorious," she murmured drowsily against him. "*And* scandalous."

"That's only the *beginning*, hellcat." His dark promise of more passion made her smile.

"I knew the day I first saw you that you were dangerous," Bridget said.

"Dangerous?" he echoed, intrigued.

“Yes, dangerous.”

“I rather think *you* were the dangerous one all along. Dangerous to my heart, little hellcat.”

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### **THREE WEEKS LATER...**

The remnants of the lavish wedding breakfast had been cleared away from the dining room, and all the wedding guests had retired to their private rooms in Trystan’s massive house to rest before dinner.

Deep in the library, Bridget sat on a chaise, bathed in sunlight, holding a book and reading. Trystan’s head lay in her lap as he stretched out on the couch, his eyes closed as he dozed. Her fingers drifted lazily through the silk strands of his hair. Earlier that morning, she’d said her marriage vows to him in the small local parish, and then stepped out into the sunlight, her hand upon his arm while their friends tossed rice and coins as they headed for their open carriage. The village children had scampered about, collecting the glittering coins on the ground. Everyone had cheered them on. A crowd of men and women from the highest echelons of society had attended the wedding, but all were trusted friends of Trystan.

Bridget knew at some point her past would likely come out, but she didn’t care. By the time they were wed, the entire town of Zennor knew she was nothing more than a common bar wench, their words of course, but after a while the gossip settled down. After all, the villagers said, Trystan was half Romani, and wasn’t it simply expected that he would do something rather risqué?

Bridget took it all in stride because she had Trystan and his friends fully supporting her. She didn't care that certain doors would remain closed to her or that some invitations would never come. No, what she cared about was spending time with Trystan and her growing circle of female friends who didn't care where she came from. Her adventures with Trystan were far from over and none of those adventures took place in ballrooms.

Lady Helena was right. She had herself. She had proven she could change her circumstances and her situation. She wouldn't let a few busybodies and gossips wreck her happiness. All that mattered was what she thought of herself. That was where her strength came from.

"You know..." Trystan spoke suddenly. Bridget closed her book and looked down at him.

"Hmm?"

"I'd completely forgotten this, but last year a band of Romani stayed on my land for a few weeks. Nothing unusual, I've done it before. The old mother of their tribe told me that I would someday find the woman meant for me."

"I'm sure she'd say that to anyone who was kind enough to let them stay."

"Perhaps. But she'd said I'd run from you, and I did... It was a miracle you loved my foolish heart enough to come after me. You are everything I could ever hope to love." He chuckled softly. "I used to think that molding you from clay would be the best way to create the perfect woman. But you proved me wrong. You have your own mind, your own heart, and those are what I cherish about you."



Bridget stared at her husband, then at the book of Greek mythology she had been reading. She stroked a fingertip along Trystan's straight nose, down to his sensual mouth. He kissed her fingertips and she smiled.

"I've been thinking about Graham," she said.

Her husband sat up abruptly. "Nothing bad, I hope."

She giggled and cuddled up against him, resting her chin on his shoulder as she looked at him.

"No, I was thinking of making a wager with you regarding him."

Trystan relaxed and kissed the top of her nose. "You have my attention. What are you thinking?"

"While I was staying in London with Marvella, I got to know the loveliest woman in London. She works in a flower shop. I think he would suit her well as a husband and she would make an excellent wife. They're quite the opposite in nature, but as we've rather discovered, opposites can be quite attractive. I wager I can trick him into marrying her."

Her husband released a booming laugh.

"Now that would be fun. What are the stakes?"

"If I fail to trick him into marriage, you win, and I'll let you..." She leaned in and whispered something terribly wicked in his ear. His eyes widened.

"You would be willing to try that?" he asked, shooting her a playful, leering look.

"Oh yes. But if I win..." She tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"If you win..." He smiled. "I'll do whatever you wish, wife, because anything will be a dream as long as I'm with

you... starting with that visit to Paris you and Marvella were planning.”

She pushed him back on the chaise and crawled onto his lap, straddling him.

“Perhaps we should discuss our terms *further...*” She began to undo his neckcloth at the same time he undid the laces on the back of her gown.

The book she’d been reading fell to the floor and opened to the Greek myth she’d just finished reading. *Pygmalion*.

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MRS. STORY PAUSED by the closed library door and grinned as she heard the giggles and laughter from inside. A footman stood next to the door, his face a little red, completely aware of what his master and mistress were up to.

“Make sure they aren’t disturbed,” she told him.

“Yes, Mrs. Story,” he nodded.

Satisfied the lad would keep watch, she returned to her duties of cleaning up after the wedding breakfast. The home was still full of guests, and they had quite a lot to do to prepare for dinner that evening.

One of those guests came down the stairs as she passed by. He was dressed in riding clothes and tugged on a pair of black riding gloves.

She greeted the handsome gentleman. “Good afternoon, Mr. Lennox.”

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Story. Could you have someone bring my horse round?” he asked.

“Yes, of course, but take care riding if’n ye go too far. There is a wicked highwayman who’s been robbing coaches and riders this past week.”

Mr. Lennox’s eyes widened. “A wicked highwayman? You don’t say...”

“Oh yes, they say he’s a charming one, but that doesn’t mean he isna dangerous.”

“Thank you for the warning, Mrs. Story,” Mr. Lennox said with a most curious smile.

A few minutes later, she passed by the front windows again and saw Mr. Lennox mount his horse. As he rode off, his great cloak unfurled behind him.

**\*Thank you for reading *The Earl of Zennor*, be sure to read *Lost with a Scot*, the book before this one in the League for Rogues series and the next book will be *Her Wicked Highwayman*, Rafe’s story.**

## ABOUT LAUREN

*USA Today* Bestselling Author Lauren Smith is an Oklahoma attorney by day, author by night who pens adventurous and edgy romance stories by the light of her smart phone flashlight app. She knew she was destined to be a romance writer when she attempted to re-write the entire *Titanic* movie just to save Jack from drowning. Connecting with readers by writing emotionally moving, realistic and sexy romances no matter what time period is her passion. She's won multiple awards in several romance subgenres including: New England Reader's Choice Awards, Greater Detroit BookSeller's Best Awards, and a Semi-Finalist award for the Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley Award. She was a 2018 RITA ® Finalist in the Romance Writers of America Contest. To connect with Lauren, visit her at [www.laurensmithbooks.com](http://www.laurensmithbooks.com)

EARL OF STANDISH

ANNABELLE ANDERS

## TWO HEADLINES

REED RUTHERFORD, The Earl of Standish now, stepped into the foyer of the club he'd only heard of before: The Wicked Earls' Club—a discreet gentlemen's club set in the heart of Mayfair.

Inhaling, Reed detected the scent that was uniquely male and uniquely noble—a subtle blend of cigar smoke, scotch, and expensive colognes he'd always associated with his uncle.

Until recently, he'd only heard of the club from his less-than-upstanding male relatives—now, all dead. He ignored the empty sensation threatening to wash over him and took in his surroundings. The understated luxury consisted of gleaming mahogany tables and furnishings upholstered with either leather or forest-green velvet. At least two dozen candles burned overhead, secured in the gold chandelier dangling from the high ceiling.

As Reed walked through the gaming tables, patrons gradually became aware of his presence, and the low murmurs fell silent. Sharp eyes followed him, and an oppressive hush settled upon the room.

But he would not be cowed, and he narrowed his gaze when an annoying voice cut through the tension.

“What have we here, fellows, but the new Earl of Standish?” The Earl of Pittsguard, or “Pitt” as he was known, lifted a snifter in Reed’s direction. The seams on the balding lord’s jacket strained against the padding in his shoulders, and if the shirt points on his collar were any higher, they’d likely put the man’s eyes out.

Reed kept his expression bland. He was not fool enough to see the toast for anything other than the mockery intended.

“How lucky for you, *Standish*,” A second voice leered. “I can only dream that the seven blokes standing between myself and my great uncle’s title would vanish as conveniently as yours have.” Lord Marshall, a youngish earl, raised his glass as well. His hooded eyes and wobbling stance revealed that although it was barely noon, he was already deep into his cups.

Glancing around, Reed realized most of them were in a similar condition.

Likely, they’d been at it all night.

Reed, of course, was stone-cold sober. Despite his new waistcoat, shining Hessians, and perfectly tied cravat, he wasn’t one of them.

“Indeed,” he addressed Marshall, the word dripping in sarcasm, “but not everyone can be so lucky.” Fists clenched at his sides, he was prepared to make the next heckler pay.

Luck—a ridiculous word to describe the tragedy his family had experienced over the past month.

Reed hated being the subject of attention. He far preferred holing up in Rutherford Place, the century-old Standish Mayfair townhouse discreetly set back from the street across from Hanover Square. He’d prefer to be anywhere else,

actually, sorting out estate accounts, or even addressing the abundance of vowels he'd inherited along with the title.

Which was precisely what he'd be doing if not for the urgent message he'd received from his long-time trusted friend, Robert Perry, the Baron of Westcott.

Reed searched the room, eager to find the fellow and learn what could possibly merit such urgency.

Having *benefitted* from the recent demise of his uncle, cousin, older brother, and father, he'd suspected there would be rumors. Any man in his situation would find himself under intense speculation and scrutiny.

*Damn, damn, and double damn.*

Because God help him, despite four healthy male relatives having stood between himself and the title, Reed was Standish now—as in *Lord Standish*.

As in, the *bloody Earl of Standish*. Something he'd never wished for or wanted.

All four men had perished in the fire that had consumed the hunting cabin at Searidge Manor, his uncle's estate.

Hell, now it was *his* estate.

And although the cause of death listed on their certificates was accurate, it was only part of the story.

Only a handful of people comprehended the vices practiced by the recently deceased—and how those depravities had come into play. They'd all been incoherent—out of their heads from the combination of opium and alcohol they favored. Even less had heard his uncle's recent ramblings of ending it all—of escaping this world permanently. Had it been



an accident? If just one of them had been even partly conscious, the fire could have been extinguished.

At the very least, they could have escaped and lived to tempt fate some other time in the future.

Reed refused to mourn them. Hell, he hadn't time to mourn them—what with fielding the massive debts they'd left behind.

Debts beyond comprehension. Disgruntled tenants. Unpaid vendors. Gambling vowels.

Not to mention the care of his mother and three sisters. His uncle's wife had departed the estate the day following the funeral, announcing she'd rather live with her sister than remain at Seabridge Manor another day. For which Reed had been grateful.

One less burden for him to bear.

Because his mother and sisters had been left distraught in the wake of the tragedy. His mother had cared about her husband and loved Randal, her oldest son. Reed's sisters had looked to the two men for security, until recently.

But for the most part, they had been left reeling by the loss of their father and eldest brother.

Reed clenched and then unclenched his fists. He refused to dwell on them now. He had far more pressing issues to sort out.

Blasted issues none of them had considered before acting so recklessly.

The most urgent of which was this unsavory scandal. By revealing as few details of the fire as possible, by declining

any further investigation that might expose his uncle's dark comments, Reed himself had fallen under suspicion.

And ridicule.

And a few legal challenges.

But it was best this way. He'd bury the unsavory circumstances of their deaths right along with them. No one need ever suspect the worst.

Caroline, Melanie, and Josephine's innocent faces came to mind. The rumors about Reed's part in all of it would die down and then he could go about salvaging his sisters' futures. If anything else got out, the poor girls would forever live as pariahs.

"Rutherford." A friendly face appeared, loosening the vice that had begun to tighten around Reed's chest. Westcott and Reed had been in the same level at Eton and, together, had fought off more than one bully. "Right on time." West jerked his head toward a darkened corner near the back of the room. Upon closer inspection, Reed could see a set of heavy velvet drapes hanging there, likely concealing a back entrance.

Reed exhaled.

Not at all reluctant to absent himself from the idiots laughing around the gaming tables, Reed shook the hand West offered and followed him away from the main area.

"Good to see you," he said. Relieved as he was, Reed was still keenly aware that West had refused to share with him the purpose of this meeting. The continued secrecy only further fueled his curiosity.

"Likewise, my friend." West glanced over his shoulder with a warm smile. The baron hadn't changed much in the past few years. He was still slim and broad-shouldered, one of the

rare noblemen never to have worn padding. He had hair that alternately appeared light brown and dark blond, and hazel eyes, making the man something of a chameleon.

Stepping into the more private chamber, Reed barely noticed as a uniformed employee closed a wooden door behind them. He was too startled by the tableau before him.

Because despite having kept mostly absent from society, he immediately recognized all but one of the gentlemen lounging inside—a handful of the most powerful men in all of England.

And not one of them appeared welcoming. What the hell was West up to?

His old friend gestured toward two of them. “Standish, you know Helton and Winterhope.” Maxwell Black, the Earl of Helton, lived year-round in London and had recently acquired the London Gazette. The man’s black hair was unkept and he looked not to have shaved in two or three days. Nonetheless, intelligent green eyes met Reed’s from behind a pair of spectacles.

With the earl having taken permanent residence in London, Reed wondered at the condition of the man’s country estate. Had he simply abandoned it?

“Helton,” Reed leaned forward, noting ink stains on the man’s hand as he shook it.

He then turned to Benjamin St. Lancaster, the Marquess of Winterhope. With neatly trimmed brown hair and sideburns, the man’s flamboyant suit lacked a single wrinkle, and his cravat was tied perfectly. He couldn’t contrast more perfectly with the earl.

“You’re looking nobbish,” Winterhope observed. The comment came as no surprise to Reed, but even having been dressed in the latest finery—by his dead cousin’s valet—he’d yet to feel comfortable in his new position.

And damned if he ever would.

Before Reed could respond, West gestured toward the seedier-looking of the other two gentlemen. Although the hulking fellow appeared relaxed with one booted foot resting on his knee, the man’s eyes burned with a cunning intensity. “Mr. Beckworth,” West introduced the man without further explanation.

And none was needed. Reed had heard of Leopold Beckworth. The man, known to be ruthless and calculating, likely controlled half the commerce that took place on the docks. When they shook hands, Beckworth’s grip was firm, the backs of his hands scarred and rugged.

“And Malum.” Another infamous name.

The Duke of Malum owned the gentleman’s club on the opposite side of town: The *Domus Emporium*. Whereas Beckworth ruled over the darker money that came into England, Malum was rumored to control a good deal of the legitimate wealth that had existed in England for centuries.

An impressive gathering, all in all. And quite unexpected.

Oh, hell. Reed resigned himself to yet more trouble. Had he inherited debts he was unaware of, debts that put him in trouble with the underbelly of society? He wouldn’t exactly be surprised if that was the case. He turned to Westcott with a raised brow, and his friend chuckled.

“Have a seat.” West shook a wayward lock of hair out of his eyes, crossed his feet, and slouched against the wall.

“You’re wondering why I asked you here.”

Not fooled by West’s friendly manner, Reed remained standing. “I’ll admit to some curiosity,” he conceded.

Helton leaned forward. “I’ll skip the small talk, Rutherford —”

“Standish,” Malum grunted, not looking up.

“Standish... Damn. Never thought I’d see the day,” West inserted. “Anyhow, good to see you and all that, but I’ve asked you here because of the recent talk.”

“Rumors?” Reed cocked a brow. How many times had the two of them mocked some rumor or another?

West winced. “Unfortunately, yes. The rumors that you murdered your predecessors are... gaining traction.” Reed’s friend’s tone turned serious. “You need to put them down.”

Reed frowned. “But they are only rumors.”

“Alleging murder.” Before Reed could emphatically declare his innocence, West held up a hand. “I know they aren’t true, but in society, even the most unfounded of suspicions can take on a life of their own.”

“Innocent or not, you’re going to need help, Standish,” Winterhope folded his arms across his chest, looking far too serious. “If they aren’t subdued, the authorities will have no choice but to get involved.”

Reed clutched his hands behind his back, taken aback by this conversation.

“That’s why you sent for me?” A moment ago, he would have laughed at this. But this powerful group of gentlemen most definitely were not laughing. And West had never been one to exaggerate or worry needlessly over anything.

Quite the opposite, actually.

“You need to put them to rest. Something you can’t accomplish while hiding out in your uncle’s country estate.” His old friend’s tone remained somber.

“I thought peers were above accountability,” Reed argued. Having managed both his father’s and uncles’ affairs for nearly a decade, he’d seen crime go unpunished often enough.

“But yours are unique circumstances,” Winterhope said. “Because this crime, in particular, is against another peer—or in your case, peers.”

“You could be thrown in Newgate,” West said. “If these aren’t squashed before the Season begins.”

“The Season always complicates matters. There are more mouths to speculate. More ears to perk up to the gossip.” Winterhope shrugged. “In general, more fuel.”

The Season? But the first event of the season was less than a fortnight away. *Bloody hell.*

“Surely it will die down as soon as some footman runs off with one of the new debutantes?”

“But we’re talking about murder, Reed.” West’s voice was firm. “You simply cannot leave this to chance.”

“And that’s why West here asked for us to step in,” Winterhope said. “Have a seat.” He gestured toward one of two empty chairs in the room.

“You’ll want to take a look at this.” Unsmiling, the Earl of Helton tossed a newspaper onto the small table in front of him.

Reed gingerly lowered himself onto the offered seat and shifted his gaze to the newspaper—which was, oddly enough,

dated three days in the future. But it was the headline that sent his heart plummeting.

*Tragic accident or murder—or worse?*

“It’s on everyone’s minds. The public will demand a thorough investigation. It’s impossible for me to ignore this sort of scandal,” Helton said. “But Westcott here says you were chums in school—mentioned that you’d helped him out a time or two. So, I’m willing to compromise. If you can change the narrative, give me something even more interesting by...” He glanced over to the fireplace, where a large clock sat upon the mantel. “Midnight Tuesday, I’ll print this instead.”

He tossed out a second paper.

“*Standish marries the Duke of Crossing’s daughter?*” Reed asked. “But she was my cousin’s fiancée.” A bark of ironic laughter escaped. Even given an entire year, he doubted he could make the headline true.

Reed had met Lady Gardenia on a few occasions. Although Randal, Reed’s older brother, had been introduced as Rupert’s cousin, Reed had been introduced as the estate manager. The duke’s beautiful daughter had been coldly polite but otherwise dismissive.

“But you are Standish now,” West pointed out.

Reed stared across the room at Helton, earl and publisher. “Couldn’t you simply water down the first version?”

“No.” Helton didn’t even think about it. “Not if I’m going to make this paper profitable. But if you provide me with something to distract them...” He shrugged.

Reed swallowed, imagining a noose being dropped around his neck.

In exchange for one story, Helton wanted another. And it would have to be marriage. An exclusive announcement of a mere engagement to Crossing's daughter, while interesting, couldn't replace the drama of the first headline.

The first story was by far more damning. Words such as suicide, arson, murder, and even treason were all mentioned. The article would erase any hope he had for securing his sisters' futures. And if he did end up in *Newgate*, they'd be left to fend for themselves.

*Newgate.*

The word pinged around his brain.

"You certainly are thorough." He grimaced.

"Not me," Helton said. "My reporters."

Reed shifted his attention to the second headline and exhaled. "You'll kill the first story if I convince Crossing's daughter to marry me before you go to print Tuesday night." Today was Sunday, and the day was already half over. So he'd have less than three days. The only way he saw himself succeeding in this demand was if he kidnapped the chit.

And that scenario had the potential to bring his standing even lower.

"It would hardly be worthy of the front page if you observed proper mourning first," Helton spoke around the cheroot in his mouth.

Reed shifted his gaze to West and then around the room before allowing it to land on the newspaper dabbling earl again. He couldn't technically call this blackmail, but his arm might as well be twisting right out of the socket.

"Why?" Reed asked. "Why even give me a choice?"



Westcott's grimace turned into a deep frown. "Back at school, you came to my aid more than once. I'd do more if I could. But the rumors need to be squashed. I wouldn't have sent for you if it wasn't dire."

If the truth got out, his sisters could say goodbye to the possibility of landing proper husbands. Caroline, the eldest and most independent, would no doubt manage, but Melanie had always wanted a family, and Josephine had grown up with stars in her eyes. She was too young to have them extinguished.

And Reed... well, he wasn't sure how long he could survive being locked up in Newgate.

Contemplating the aftermath of the fire objectively, even Reed comprehended how the circumstances were damning.

But they were just that—circumstances.

Westcott reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded slip of parchment. "We've acquired a special license for you. Send word once you've secured her agreement and we'll make arrangements for a ceremony at St. George's on Tuesday evening—that way, I can get word to Helton before he puts the paper to bed."

The location was simple enough—just across the square from Rutherford Place. But getting a bride there. That was a near impossibility.

Reed shook his head, imagining his cousin's former fiancée—the diamond of the Season, in fact. With her perfect figure, golden hair, and crystal blue eyes, Lady Gardenia could have anyone she wanted. "She'll never agree to it. There has to be another way."

“Nothing as newsworthy,” Helton said. “Crossing’s chit has been said to have the character of an angel. If she marries you, that’s as good of a declaration of your innocence as you can hope for.”

“You are Standish.” The Duke of Malum actually looked up from his papers this time. “Try.”

Ten minutes later, Reed marched passed the towering cathedral on his way back to Rutherford Place, one of the premier addresses in Mayfair.

Where he, Reed Rutherford, was Lord of the manor now—a manor tended to by servants his uncle had employed. This was madness.

He rubbed the back of his neck.

But if he was going to bring honor back to the title and pave the way for his sisters’ futures, he needed legitimacy.

If he wanted to maintain his freedom, he needed to squash all speculation. He wanted to be angry with Helton, but the blasted publisher was, in fact, offering him a bone.

Reed had no choice but to convince the duke’s daughter to marry him.

## SUNDAY AFTERNOON

GOLDIE HALTED before opening the door to the drawing room, smoothed her gown over her rounder-than-fashionable hips, and then tucked a wayward curl behind her ear.

A curl on the opposite side fell forward, and she brushed that one back, but then the other escaped again.

“Blast!” She gave up on the endeavor entirely, and even as she shifted her bodice so as to cover more of her ample bosom, more curls escaped her coiffure.

Unlike her older sister, Goldie was graceless, awkward, and... hopeless.

But she wouldn't dwell on any of that now. She wouldn't because the man she admired most was here.

Today.

This very second.

Mr. Reed Rutherford, the new Earl of Standish. If she'd known he was coming, she'd have tried harder to make her hair behave.

She held her breath, anticipating a glimpse of his eyes, which were the exact color of bluebells in spring. They had been the first thing she'd noticed when she'd been introduced last summer. It hadn't mattered that he'd not noticed her.

She had not been meant to be noticed.

As a plump girl of ten and eight, she'd not come out yet but had been allowed to join the house party guests for dinner. She'd been given strict instructions to keep quiet and not make a nuisance of herself.

And she'd been perfectly fine with that because most evenings, she'd been seated near Mr. Rutherford. She had been thoroughly pleased to simply watch his hands as he ate and listen to the rumble of his voice when he spoke.

His remarks had consistently been quiet and thoughtful, and unlike most of the other gentlemen, he'd never come across as boastful or arrogant.

Intelligence lurked behind his eyes, and he had spoken of his two dogs with great affection. His lack of refinement, rather than diminishing his attractiveness, had enhanced it.

His cousin, Lord Rupert, however, had been quite the opposite. His eyes had been hard and cold, and Goldie had failed to find any redeeming qualities in her sister's betrothed.

Mr. Rutherford, Goldie suspected, would make for a far better earl than Lord Rupert would have.

But with his cousin dead and with no further ties between their two families, why had he come here—to her father's house?

She'd know soon enough.

Goldie turned the handle and, after a deep breath, stepped inside.

The back of his head faced her, allowing her a brief moment to admire his wide shoulders, slim hips, and overall

magnificent physique. And as he turned to greet her, his eyes lit up with anticipation.

But then dimmed the instant he saw that she was not the lady with whom he'd requested to meet.

"My lady—" he began.

Goldie stepped forward. "You were expecting my sister," she interrupted, willing herself to breathe normally. "I'm afraid you're to be disappointed."

"She will return soon?" His brows crinkled, but his expression was all politeness.

"She is in mourning, my lord." Goldie flicked her gaze to the black band on Lord Standish's arm as she uttered the lie. And then she added. "I am sorry for your loss. Won't you sit down?"

He glanced around the room as though contemplating making his excuses, but when Goldie settled herself on the loveseat, he had no choice but to sit as well.

Looking rather stiff, he took the chair facing her.

Goldie arranged her skirts, again wishing her bodice was a little looser. Or did she struggle for breath because of this man's presence?

She twisted her hands in her lap and forced her expression into what she hoped looked sympathetic rather than adoring. Stifling a nervous giggle at the thought, Goldie bit her lip.

She would keep her dignity throughout this meeting. The poor man had recently suffered a horrid tragedy.

It didn't matter that she'd not been overly impressed with the gentlemen who'd perished; they'd been his kin.

His father. His brother. His cousin and his uncle—the former earl. It really was unimaginable.

But Goldie had spent several hours mooning over this particular man last summer when her parents, the Duke and Duchess of Crossings, had thrown a house party celebrating Nia and Lord Rupert’s engagement.

Even back then, knowing he was a mere estate manager, she’d found Mr. Reed Rutherford to be inordinately attractive. Now, dressed in attire fitting of his new station this morning, snug breeches, elegant coat, and perfectly tied cravat, he was simply...

Beautiful.

She couldn’t help but notice how perfectly his waistcoat matched his eyes.

*Even brighter than the bluebells.*

She sighed.

But now he was here, seated before her. And, unfortunately, they’d been seated for nearly a minute in silence. Goldie resisted the urge to squirm.

Why did he need to talk to Nia?

“How are Miss Rutherford and your other sisters? And your mother?” she asked. He had three younger sisters, but she couldn’t remember all their names. No doubt they would have remained in the country to fulfill a proper mourning period.

“She is Lady Caroline now.” Lord Standish frowned as though answering her question required great concentration. “She, Lady Melanie, Lady Josephine, and my mother are as well as can be expected. They traveled with me to London, in fact.”

Goldie blushed at her blunder. “But they cannot go out in public?” Surely they didn’t intend to participate in the Season?

“Because of the rumors?” he asked. Was that a hint of a snarl?

“Because they are in mourning,” Goldie provided.

“Ah, yes,” he answered vaguely before falling silent again.

Goldie glanced at the clock on the mantle. But where were her manners? “Would you care for tea?” she asked.

Her father would not appreciate her inviting this man to extend his stay, but she refused to be rude. And already, she had no doubt that he’d chastise the butler, Mr. Bulwark, for allowing Goldie to even meet with him.

Alone, no less.

If her father had been at home, he’d have tossed Lord Standish out before he could set foot inside.

But Lord Standish didn’t seem interested in tea.

“Do you know where I can find Lady Gardenia?” He looked anxious.

“I do not,” Goldie said. “I mean, I do, but I can’t tell you where. My father insisted on at least six weeks of mourning. She’ll return when the Season begins.” Goldie studied Lord Standish’s chin, firm but with a small dimple in the center. She’d noticed it before. His dark brown hair needed trimming, and a shadow darkened his cheeks and clenched jaw.

She couldn’t quite make out the curse he made under his breath.

“Is there something that I can help you with?” she asked.

Holding his hat in one hand, he ran his other through his hair.

Hair that was thick and springy and clean-looking. She doubted any pomade could keep it in place.

Lord Standish lifted his gaze to meet hers, his eyes pleading. "I need to speak with your sister most urgently. I promise, my lady, I mean no ill will."

Oh, but she knew this about him. And under any other circumstances, she'd sing like a canary.

Nonetheless, Goldie bit her tongue. "I wish I could help you." She'd spend a month locked in her chamber if she went against her father's wishes.

"Is this about Lord Rupert's ring? Do you need it back?" she asked.

It was likely locked in her father's safe, no doubt, to which Goldie had long ago memorized the combination. Was she willing to risk her father's wrath for this man? It wasn't as though her sister cared about it. Nia had resented it from the beginning, and she wasn't about to wear it with her fiancé dead.

This would be one way that Goldie could perhaps ease some of the earl's disappointment. Would he notice her then?

Would her father even realize the ring was missing?

But Lord Standish scowled. "It's been returned already." He seemed even more apathetic about the ring than he'd been about tea.

Goldie nervously watched as the earl rubbed his hands along his muscular thighs.



“Perhaps if you tell me what you need, I can help you,” she said. Why was he so distraught?

With his cousin dead, did he wish to attempt to win her sister’s hand for himself?

Her sister was *Lady Gardenia*, the Duke of Crossings’ eldest daughter, and had also been the diamond of the Season last year. Upon a single glance, most men immediately fell madly in love with Nia. Why wouldn’t this one?

The intensity of his stare made Goldie sit up straight.

“Can you tell me one thing?” His eyes implored her.

With him staring at her like that, Goldie nearly melted.

“Maybe...” she answered.

“Is she in London?”

Goldie rolled her lips together before answering.

“She is not.”

“Curses.” He lowered his chin and seemed to be staring at her breasts. Even though his eyes appeared unfocused, Goldie felt a blush seeping across her skin.

“I’m sorry,” she uttered.

After a few seconds, he exhaled a long hissing breath and met her gaze again. “My apologies.”

And then he burst to his feet.

“I truly am sorry...” Goldie rose more slowly. She hated to see him looking so frustrated.

She hated that *she’d* been the one to disappoint him.

But he turned to her and bowed. “My thanks for receiving me.”

And as quickly as he'd come, the Earl of Standish took his leave.

This was most serendipitous because not two minutes following his departure, the door to the drawing room was thrown open.

“What did that devil want?” Her father's ruddy complexion appeared even more red than usual, and his mere aura filled the room with tension.

Lord Standish was *not* a devil, but Goldie kept her opinion to herself.

“He wanted to see Gardenia.” Her voice trembled more than she'd like.

Her father's long strides ate up the space between them. Most dukes possessed tremendous power and could intimidate a person without speaking. Her father, with his stout physique and permanent glower, intimidated even those who didn't know his status.

“Why didn't you tell Bulwark to send him away?” He pinned her to her seat with nothing more than his stare. “If that murderer steps foot in my house again, he'll be carried out by an undertaker.”

But Lord Standish was *not* a murderer! Goldie didn't believe the stupid rumors for an instant. She wanted to tell her father that there was no evidence supporting those suspicions and that Lord Standish was nothing like the other men in his family.

But, of course, she could not.

Her father's jaw ticked, but he kept silent as he strode across to the window. “Insults to humanity—the Rutherford men. The entire line ought to have ended in that fire. Your

sister was a fool to fall for Lord Rupert's charm, and I was even more of a fool to agree to the betrothal. Your sister has made a lucky escape to be free of him."

Goldie didn't argue with her father—no one ever argued with the Duke of Crossings.

Those who did always regretted it.

"He won't be coming around again," she said. "I told him Gardenia was not in London."

Her father turned around. "I don't know what I did for God to curse me so. I'd trade both my daughters for a single son," he said. "At least I don't have to worry about any of these nobs coming after you. I can only console myself that your mother will have you as her companion once your sister is married."

"Unless my come-out is a success," Goldie reminded him in a timid voice, staring down at her hands. If she failed to land a husband this Season, she doubted she'd get another chance.

She loved her mother. She did! But the Duchess could be picky and criticizing at times. Goldie couldn't picture herself tending to her every whim—not for the rest of her life!

Her father merely grunted.

"Mother promised they would return before The Season begins." Because Goldie required her mother's sponsorship if she was to be presented.

"I suppose, but you know how she is." He walked across the room but turned around when he arrived at the door. "Tell Bulwark that if he allows anyone with so much as an ounce of Rutherford blood to set foot in my house again, he's sacked. And if Standish persists in sniffing around you, hoping to get

to your sister, inform me immediately and I'll demand satisfaction."

Goldie swallowed hard but nodded. Of course, she'd make sure the butler heeded her father's instructions. No matter how enamored she was with Lord Standish, she wouldn't allow Bulwark to lose his job.

She needed to forget about Lord Standish completely. He was nothing more than a childish crush.

A crush who was only interested in her sister.

Goldie straightened her spine. She had her come-out to look forward to.

She prayed she'd land a kind, quiet gentleman for a husband this Season. Love wasn't in her future, but freedom...

That was within her reach.

Even if she had to let go of Reed Rutherford to have it.

## A LOOPHOLE?

IF THE HOUR had been earlier, Reed would have worked off his frustrations by taking his horse for a brisk ride on Rotten Row. Unfortunately, it was nearly the driving hour, and even in the off-season, he'd have to negotiate a few pedestrians.

His mind searching frantically for some other plan to save his family's reputation, he marched unseeing along Hanover Street until he arrived at Rutherford Place. Had West been exaggerating? But no, before allowing himself to contemplate the possibility, Reed dismissed it as wishful thinking.

He needed to discover where Crossings had sent Lady Gardenia. Get there, and convince her to return with him—as his fiancé. All within about fifty or so hours.

The instant he stepped inside the majestic foyer, a flurry of black appeared as the eldest of his younger sisters all but accosted him. “What did she say?” she asked.

Growing up, he'd been closer to Caroline than either Melanie or Josephine. At three and twenty, Caroline was only five years younger, whereas his other two sisters were nearly a full decade behind him.

Which was the only reason he'd shared the dire nature of their circumstances with her after returning from his meeting at the Wicked Earl's Club.

Aside from making the journey from their father's estate, Breaker's Cottage, to London, his mother and younger sisters had chosen to observe strict mourning. And although Reed was fairly certain his mother suspected the rumors, troubling her with the complications would serve no purpose.

Mr. Beasley, his butler now, appeared as though out of nowhere. Reed handed over his hat and coat but didn't answer Caroline's question until the door to the drawing room was closed behind them.

"Well?" Caroline demanded.

"Lady Gardenia is not in London." He dropped onto the settee and ran both hands through his hair.

"Did the duke's butler tell you that, or were you allowed to meet with the duke himself?" Caroline lowered herself as well but lifted her feet onto the settee and hugged her knees.

"He allowed me to meet with Lady Marigold." For an instant, Reed had believed his luck had changed. But then the younger sister had stood at the door.

And he'd been disappointed, to say the least.

And yet some carnal part of his person questioned how he'd not noticed this chit before.

With lush curves and rebellious blond curls, she presented herself as a tempting armful and quite worthy of notice. Even disregarding her more prominent attributes, one couldn't help but find her facial features just as noticeable: curious eyes, full lips, and skin that reminded him of honey and cream.

"She's a sweet girl," Caroline said. "Quiet, though."

"Well, she was too quiet for my purposes today."

“But she told you Lady Gardenia had left London. What else did she say?”

Reed searched his memory for tidbits from the brief meeting. Mostly, he’d been devastated to learn that Lady Gardenia was no longer in town. “I don’t know.”

“Where is she?” Caroline pressed.

“Lady Marigold?”

“No, dear brother.” His sister sent her gaze rolling toward the ceiling. “Lady *Gardenia*.”

“Lady Marigold refused to tell me.”

“But she knows.”

Reed tugged at the back of his neck. “Yes, but knowing Crossings, she’d suffer dire consequences if she were to tell me.” He’d wanted to press Lady Marigold for more information but that wouldn’t have been fair. If he pressed anyone, he’d press the goddamn Duke of Crossings himself.

“She would have told you if she could. Goldie’s nothing like the rest of her family. And besides...” Caroline smiled.

Caroline’s good humor made no sense at all, considering their predicament.

“Besides what?” Reed asked, irritated.

“She’s head over heels for you.” Caroline grinned. “At least she was last summer.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Why am I not surprised you didn’t notice?”

Reed pursed his lips. What the devil was his sister talking about? “Be serious.”

“At the house party? She practically followed you everywhere,” Caroline prompted.

Reed had attended his cousin’s engagement celebration reluctantly and kept himself busy with correspondence most of the time. He vaguely remembered that the younger sister had been allowed to attend formal dinners.

She’d hardly spoken a word, dressed in an abundance of pastels and pink, and an obnoxious amount of lace. She had seemed very, very young.

But she’d changed over the course of the past ten months.

“She rarely let you out of her sight.” Caroline shook her head. “I almost felt sorry for her and would have, if she didn’t exhibit such good taste.

“Ha,” Reed responded, shaking his head at his sister’s compliment. Because, of course, she would say that. “But I don’t see how this has anything to do with me marrying her sister.”

“Did she flirt with you while you were there today?”

“What? Not at all.” But she had been sweet. She’d treated him with almost lavish politeness. “She was rather kind, actually.” She’d asked him to stay for tea, but he’d ignored the invitation.

In fact, she’d been more than willing to listen to his troubles.

And he’d been...

Distracted by the devastating blow she’d served up.

Caroline sat very still but Reed could practically hear her brain as it began devising some scheme.



“That Newspaper man...” she began.

“Lord Helton.” Reed narrowed his eyes.

“He said you must marry Crossing’s daughter, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Did he specifically say that you needed to wed Lady *Gardenia*?”

Reed recalled the meeting he’d had at the Wicked Earl’s Club the day before. “Her name was the one mentioned in the article.”

“But did he mention Lady *Gardenia*, specifically?”

Reed scowled. They had not. But still—

“Do you have the special license with you?”

Reed had, in fact, optimistically brought it with him to the duke’s townhouse. Oh, how misguided he’d been to even entertain the thought that his quest would be fulfilled so easily. He pulled it out of his jacket and handed it to his sister.

Reading it, she bit her lip and then met his gaze.

“The name of the bride is blank.” Caroline sounded far too cunning. The same as whenever she plotted some ill-fated scheme.

“Surely you aren’t suggesting...?”

“Lady Marigold is the duke’s daughter. And marrying her, although not as scandalous as if you were to marry her sister, would be almost as interesting to the Gazette’s readers...”

“He meant Lady *Gardenia*,” Reed said.

“But he only said the Duke of Crossings’ daughter. Do you think he’ll honor his agreement so long as you give him a

good story?”

Helton, an earl, likely would. “It wouldn’t be honorable on my part.” Reed pointed out. “There has to be some other way.”

Caroline leaned back, squeezing her knees nearly to her chin. “Unless Lady Gardenia makes an unlikely appearance, Reed, we’re stumped.”

“There has to be something,” he insisted.

“Well,” Caroline held his gaze. “It’s not as though any of us have bosom buddies here in Mayfair who can tell us where Lady Gardenia is. Even if we did, we’re supposed to be in mourning. And the rumor needs squashed. West and that publisher fellow don’t seem the sort to exaggerate something like this. They’ve spent far more time in Town than any of us, and no doubt understand better how these matters play out.”

Reed huffed. He hated when his sister made sense.

“And,” Caroline continued. “With plan ‘A’ having failed, plan ‘B’ is your only choice. I don’t want to see you in Newgate, brother.” Her sad smile tugged at Reed’s heart.

“Plan ‘B,’ I take it, being Lady Marigold?” He couldn’t believe he was contemplating this. “You really think she’ll be willing to help me?”

“More than that, I think she’ll be thrilled to marry you. Simply ask her. With Lady Gardenia on the marriage mart again this spring, and a father like the Duke of Crossings, the poor girl lacks options.”

Reed frowned as he considered the young woman he’d met with earlier that morning. She’d been sweet and pretty and...

Lush.

“I don’t know why you’d say she lacks options.”

“She’s pretty enough,” Caroline conceded. “But on all other counts, she pales in comparison to her sister.”

“How so?” Women baffled him at times.

“She’s the second daughter. And lacking her sister’s beauty and refinement, I’d wager a year’s allowance that all her future holds is a lifetime catering to her mother.” Caroline cocked a brow. “You do remember the duchess, don’t you?”

Reed did, in fact, recall how demanding the woman was.

“Poor Lady Marigold simply isn’t... marriage material. I like her. She’s intelligent. But she is just not at all a typical debutante.”

Which, Reed thought, was fine by him.

Damn, Caroline could almost convince him that he’d be doing the poor girl a favor.

“If I can’t get information on Lady Gardenia’s whereabouts, I’ll run the idea past West,” he said. “Tomorrow.”

“It’s not as though you have many other options, Reed.” Caroline shrugged. “Or much time. Besides, it’ll be easy. Trust me.”

## MONDAY

AFTER A RESTLESS NIGHT'S SLEEP, with the sun not quite yet risen, Reed knew the best place to find his friend would be on Rotten Row. He was not disappointed.

By the time he arrived at the park, familiar faces, along with a handful of other gents, were already racing up and down the Row. West was on the largest stallion of them all.

After sprinting past Reed on his giant of a horse, West then pulled the powerful animal to a halt and turned to walk back.

Reed waved as his old friend approached. "Where'd you find this extraordinary animal?" Reed studied Westcliff's mount, who stood at least two hands higher than his own. "Impressive," he said.

"This is Bard, one of the latest from Winterhope's stables."

"If the Marquess has others like this one, his stables must be as good as they're rumored to be."

Reed appreciated discussing something—anything—other than his current troubles. But he only allowed himself a few minutes.

He couldn't very well go forward with Caroline's plan without West's support because West would be at the wedding. He would be one of the witnesses.

Reed exhaled a breath, staring unseeing at the cresting sun.

“Lady Gardenia isn’t in London,” West stated, beating him to the punch.

“No.” Damned West. “You don’t know where I can find her, do you?”

Westcott sighed. “Word is that Crossings has sent her to his estate near Southampton. Even if there’s any truth to it, it would be impossible for you to make the journey there and back in time to meet Helton’s deadline.”

“But.” Reed rubbed the bridge of his nose before continuing. “Crossings has another daughter.”

After a pause, Westcott snapped his head to stare over at him, his brow furrowed.

“What are you getting at?”

Reed couldn’t tell if his friend was angry or intrigued.

“Lady Marigold is in town.” Reed winced. “What are the chances Helton would consent to a slight twist of his narrative?”

His normally carefree-looking friend frowned but then turned thoughtful. “He did not, in fact, specify which daughter.”

“Aside from the story,” Reed pointed out.

“Yes, but... Lady Caroline’s idea?”

“How did you know?”

“She’s more cunning than you are,” West laughed.

“Yes, well.” Ceres, Reed’s mount, skittered beneath him, anxious for a well-deserved run. Reed ran a calming hand down her neck. “Any chance it’ll work?”

West remained silent for almost a full thirty seconds. “He won’t like it, but... Honestly, Rutherford, with Lady Gardenia in seclusion, you haven’t much choice.”

Exactly what he and Caroline had deduced.

It was all Reed needed to hear. At least he had a course of action he could follow now—even if it wasn’t the most honorable one.

Because he had others besides himself to consider.

“In that case.” He leaned over Ceres. “I’d best get to it.”

“Send word of the hour and I’ll stand up with you at St. George’s.” West laughed. “Just don’t put it off too late.”

Reed dipped his chin. Despite the unease in his shoulders, by God, he was going to do it. It was either that or...

Full-on catastrophe for himself and his mother and sisters.

With a quick wave, he loosened the rein in his hand and all but flew to the other end of the park.

---

GOLDIE SLID her hands into her gloves and stepped outside. The sun shone brightly, but the air was crisp, so she walked swiftly in the direction of Bond Street. Her father never woke before noon, and so since coming to Mayfair, Goldie had learned that if she wanted any time to explore, she’d have to do it in the early hours.

Alone, she could breathe freely, smile only when she felt like it, and allow her posture to slump naturally. Furthermore, she wasn’t constantly anticipating one of her father’s outbursts.

On this particular morning, she'd decided to first purchase a handful of flowers from one of the morning vendors, and after that, she'd visit her favorite bookstore.

Perhaps after Nia and her mother returned, she could visit the menagerie or even purchase an ice from Gunter's.

As a debutante herself, she could do all the things Nia had told her about. Only her sister had been squired about by an attentive fiancé.

What would that be like? Lord Standish's image appeared unbidden in her mind, but instead of her usual fluttering heart, she felt...

Disappointment.

Like all the others, he'd come looking for Nia. The feelings she'd had for him last summer had been childish. He'd been kind to her, but not because he'd returned her affection. In truth, he'd barely noticed her, and now that he was an earl, he had even less reason to single her out.

This spring, she would find a mild-mannered landowner for a husband. In the first few years, she'd provide him an heir and a spare. Following that, they would pursue their separate interests while settling into a comfortable lifestyle.

She'd have to be careful in choosing such a man, however, as gentlemen were not incapable of hiding their true character.

Take Lord Rupert, for instance. A ghostly chill slid down Goldie's spine, making her shiver, but when she glanced around, she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Nonetheless, she remained wary.

She wasn't, in fact, entirely comfortable going about without a chaperone. If she didn't know for a fact her outings

would get back to her father, she would have brought one of the maids along. Goldie hadn't much choice.

She could either sit embroidering alone all day or summon her courage and go into the world alone.

And by "world," she meant the nearby narrow streets that encircled most of Mayfair.

Her tame idea of adventure made her chuckle. She had nothing to fear. She tilted her head back with her eyes closed and briefly enjoyed the hint of warmth provided by the sun.

"Do share in your joke, my lady."

Goldie's eyes flew open, and she found herself staring at the man she'd just dismissed from her thoughts.

Or tried, anyhow. The same as she'd done numerous times since last summer.

All the reasons she'd found him attractive and more, his sudden appearance stole her breath.

The tiny wrinkles around his eyes when he smiled, and a swagger that came from being fit and agile. Dear heavens, the low grumble in his voice had her imagining all manner of wicked scenarios.

No lady ought to ponder such ideas...

But yesterday, he had come asking about Nia—less than a month following the death of Nia's fiancé, *his cousin*.

"Simply enjoying the sunshine, my lord." Goldie tried to sound cold, despite allowing herself a second glance at his...

Glorious manliness.

She kept right on walking.



His attire was identical to what he'd worn the day before, but this morning he didn't seem nearly as distracted as he matched his strides to hers.

"Unusual for this time of year." He jammed his hands into his pockets. She wasn't all that far from her father's house. Had he come hoping she'd give the information she'd withheld the day before?

"I cannot tell you where she is, my lord." Goldie didn't want to fill in for her sister again. "I will not." She glanced behind her anxiously. If word got back to her father that she'd been walking with the new Earl of Standish, she'd suffer for it. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" She kept her face forward and increased her pace.

"Should you be out walking alone like this?"

"No." Goldie winced. "Nor should I be seen walking with you."

"And yet you are doing both?" There was a hint of laughter in his voice.

"You are not welcome in my father's house, my lord," she tried again.

"But I am not in his house, Lady Marigold." He kept pace right beside her. "So, technically..."

"I already told you, I can't tell you where my sister—"

"But I am not walking with your sister," he said. "I'm walking with you."

Goldie's feet stumbled to a halt, and not quite believing this was happening, she turned to glare up at him.

"Why?" How many times had she wished for this very scenario last summer? She ought to be ecstatic, and yet, it

didn't make sense. Did he have some ulterior motive? Would she be a fool to trust his sudden interest in... *her*?

They'd been walking along the park, and, arriving at a path leading across the vast lawn, he gestured toward it. "It's a beautiful day. Stroll with me?"

And then he smiled.

Dash it all! This, his most potent weapon of all, must be her greatest weakness.

"Very well." She had no power against a smile like that. "But only along the wooded paths. I can't have this getting back to my father."

---

REED OFFERED HIS ARM, and Lady Marigold took it without a second of hesitation. Her hand felt small and warm even through his jacket, and when the breeze caught her hair, a hint of fruit teased his nostrils.

This innocent smelled like strawberries.

"You are out early, by *Tonnish* standards." Her voice sounded breathless.

"But it's the early bird that gets the proverbial worm, is it not?"

"Are you implying that I'm a worm?" But she did not sound offended. In fact, she laughed again, and the alto tones of the sound sent an unusual current vibrating through him.

"Perhaps I am the worm." He sent her a teasing glance.

"Oh, that's far more fitting." They entered a wooded area, and she trailed her gloved fingertips along leaves that sprouted

low on some of the trees. “But what kind of bird am I?”

“A starling?” Reed played along. He’d expected flirting to be more difficult than this. And yet...

Flirting with Lady Marigold came with surprising ease.

“Hmm... I do like wild starlings,” she said.

“What do you like about them?”

“A family of them made their home in the garden at Cross Castle. I think it’s lovely how their feathers develop those little white spots in winter. Oh, and they are smart. I once caught a starling in our garden mimicking cricket sounds. I don’t think they do that by accident.” She drew her hand away from the trees and raised it to her chin thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t mind being a starling... What kind of bird would you be?”

“But I’m the worm.”

“An earthworm,” she giggled.

Reed laughed and then feigned a shudder. “Oh, hell. I’d be a meal then. I suppose I would prefer to be a bird.”

“Not a blue jay,” she declared.

“And why would you say that?”

“Blue jays are bullies. They demand to be first. They don’t like to share...”

“Hmmm...” Reed wondered if she was imagining her father. “I’ve met my fair share of bullies, I must admit. I hope you have not.”

“Only a few...” And then she blushed. Of course, she wasn’t thinking of members of her family, but of his.

“No need to hold back. I am well aware of Rupert’s failures.” And those of his father, his uncle, and his brother.

“But comparing them isn’t fair to the bird.”

She looked horrified but then, after a short pause, laughed and covered her mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” And to keep the conversation light, Reed said. “I actually feel an affinity with crows.”

“Crows?”

Reed glanced down, expecting her to protest. Most people viewed crows to be opportunistic. Instead, she was nodding.

“I can see that,” she said. “Crows are quite clever, really. And practical.”

Which was the characteristic he most appreciated about them.

But she wasn’t finished. “They make use of what resources are available to them. They are problem solvers and very protective of what is theirs. Like you.”

Caroline had said Lady Marigold had watched him closely at the house party. And he’d... well.

He’d dismissed her as a child. But she had seen things about him that few others ever had.

“I’m flattered.” He would not embarrass her for having watched him. She was an innocent—caught up in his less-than-honorable games. She deserved far better.

Reed exhaled. “I’m afraid I have a confession.”

She stiffened and ducked her head, disappointment rolling off her. “Of course...” She erupted with a cynical laugh—a sound too bitter to come from such an innocent. “I should have realized.”

But Reed cleared his throat and charged forward. “I came looking for you today,” he said.

“Why?” She whipped around to stare at him. “Why would *you* come looking for *me*?”

He could compliment her looks, buy her presents and flowers. But that wasn't the way he operated. When he needed something, he first tried the most straightforward means of acquiring it.

“I wanted to ask if you'd marry me.”

He didn't have a chance to check her expression because her foot caught on a root, and if he'd not been there to catch her, she would have slammed unceremoniously onto the packed dirt. Then again, if he'd not been there, she likely wouldn't have tripped at all.

Nonetheless, Reed caught her.

## THE DETAILS

SHE DIDN'T MAKE it to the ground, but the breath whooshed out of her as though she had.

Surely, she'd heard incorrectly. He cannot have actually proposed.

To her, of all people!

"What? I mean, pardon?" She struggled to catch her breath as sturdy hands grasped her waist. The two of them had come to a halt, surrounded by trees and brush with the sky hidden by a giant canopy of branches and leaves.

"I'd like to marry you. Hell, I don't suppose that's the proper way of going about this sort of thing." He released her and then removed his hat to rake his fingers through his hair.

"But... Why?" Goldie glanced around them to see if there might be a collection of witnesses taking part in some sort of joke.

But there was no one. And when her gaze landed on Lord Standish once again, his expression appeared genuine.

"I need... I need a wife," he answered.

"Does this have something to do with the rumors?"

He winced. "You know, then."

“Only from my father. I’ve not yet had the opportunity to make friends here in London. I wouldn’t expect that you’d remember me telling you last summer that I’m going to make my come-out this year.”

He stared at her. “I do, actually. Are you excited about that?”

Two days ago, Goldie would have answered emphatically that yes, she was. But now... She resumed walking, and he matched his much longer strides to hers.

“I’d like to marry,” she mused as she tried to picture some faceless, mild-mannered gentleman offering for her after obtaining her father’s permission.

But the man beside her thoroughly monopolized all her brain space.

“Is that a yes, then?” he glanced sideways, cocking a brow.

A hopeful glance?

It was not a yes. It could not be. This was everything she’d ever wanted and all that she could not have, a fantasy that she’d finally accepted as such, and it made no sense that he would come to her now, presenting it as a potential reality when, as far as she knew, nothing else had changed.

“But why me?” Goldie asked. This had to be a joke.

“Why *not* you?” The ground became even more uneven, and he casually took hold of her elbow. “You’re refined and pretty. I can tell that you’re intelligent. You’d make a lovely countess.”

“As would any other debutante coming to London this spring,” Goldie insisted. “Besides, you don’t even know me.”

“I know you are an excellent listener. I think you are quite brave and perhaps a little foolish to walk about London without a chaperone.” They were nearing the clearing, and he stopped and turned her to face him. “I would be forever grateful if you would accept.”

But...

But.

Goldie resisted the urge to pinch herself. This was not a dream, and yet... this was ridiculous! “My father would never agree to it.”

The earl’s expression turned sheepish. “No, he wouldn’t, my lady.”

Never in a million years would she have imagined having this conversation.

Was it possible that when he’d come to her father’s house the day before, he’d fallen in love with her? Goldie dismissed the notion the instant she conjured it up.

He cannot have. He’d barely noticed her.

But had he realized he was attracted to her?

Goldie blinked, staring into his beautiful blue eyes. “You might as well call me Goldie.” Her voice came out hoarse sounding, and heat blossomed in her heart when she noticed him staring at her mouth.

“Goldie.” Nothing else. And then, without warning, he leaned closer and touched his mouth to hers.

She’d once asked Nia what it felt like to be kissed. Her sister had grimaced, saying it wasn’t horrible so long as the person kissing you hadn’t recently consumed onions or garlic or any other unsavory food.



But Goldie had suspected there was more to kissing than that.

She had been right.

His lips were the perfect amount of soft and hard, and his taste was minty and spicy and something foreign and delicious—simply him.

He teased the seam of her mouth with his tongue, and she only resisted for a second before parting her lips. And as though she'd been kissing men all her life, she slid her hands onto his chest—to keep her balance—but also to assure herself this was real.

He was hard, and she could feel the beating of his heart.

Vibrations of warmth and excitement coursed through her. She lost all sense of time—all sense of anything but of him and of her.

It was as though all her dreams came together to manifest into this moment.

It ought to have been a dream. But it wasn't.

His arms drew her closer, but with a groan, Lord Standish loosened his hold and suspended the kiss.

“I didn't... I'm sorry.” He bent his head forward, resting his forehead on hers. “I didn't mean to do that.” He sounded almost as surprised as she felt.

Not that a kiss wasn't the perfect accompaniment to a marriage proposal, but they had moved from being casual acquaintances to a courting couple over the course of two minutes.

It could not be real.

*This... could* not be real.

“You kissed me.” Goldie stared at her hands, which rested on the wool of his coat. This close, she could practically count the whiskers on his chin and jaw. She could study the pink of his lips, dewy wet from kissing her.

She felt his chuckle as much as she heard it. “Yes, I suppose I did.”

And then he tipped her chin back and stared into her eyes. “Will you? Will you marry me?”

Goldie rolled her lips together. She wanted this to be real. She wanted to believe he’d suddenly been overwhelmed with his attraction for her, but...

Something was off.

She shook her head. “I’ll think about it.”

An expression flashed across his face—disappointment?

But he dropped his hands from her waist, and when he took a step back, Goldie’s hands slid off his chest.

Cold chased away the warmth from a moment earlier.

“I need an answer right away.” He stared over her shoulder as though lost in thought. “I realize the timeline is unprecedented...”

“How soon?” Goldie asked and then swallowed hard. “How soon do you need to know?”

Most of her yearned to accept—particularly her heart, her mouth, her arms—good heavens, even the aching in her breasts and between her legs!

This was an opportunity to marry the object of her affection, for heaven’s sake! But it was her head that kept her

from accepting him outright—a decision-making part of her that was solid and familiar.

“I’ll need your answer by tomorrow afternoon.”

“You cannot be serious.” Why was he in such a hurry? Gone was the man who’d held her so tenderly moments before. This man...

Was quite determined.

He dipped his chin.

“But I hardly know you,” she protested. Yes, she’d put herself in his path whenever possible last summer. But the man she’d mooned over had been fifth in line to an earldom—he’d been a steward of the earl’s properties. And now.

Now he was the earl.

Surely, taking on such a responsibility could change a person. Had they changed him?

Furthermore, as Standish now, he could have his pick of the debutantes this season.

Although the rumors were rather alarming. Goldie narrowed her eyes. Her own father had ordered her to keep away from him. Were the rumors bad enough so as to make him unmarriageable?

Surely not!

“You know next to nothing about me,” she added.

“True.” He studied her, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Would you come out with me later this afternoon? Are you up for an adventure?”

One more outing would not be enough to agree to his proposal, but an adventure...

It was just the sort of escape she craved!

And perhaps after spending a few hours alone in his company, he would become a real person to her. As the earl, he might even reveal a few warts, so to speak. And she could put him out of her mind once and for all.

But to leave the house in the afternoon, she'd have to make up some excuse to give her father.

"I won't change my mind," she said. It was only fair to be upfront with him. "If you need to marry quickly, as you say, you'll be wasting your time with me."

"I'll be the judge of that." He pinned his gorgeous blue eyes on her. "Because I want *you*."

Ecstatic bubbles burst from Goldie's heart and traveled outward to her fingertips and toes.

And her knees nearly buckled.

He wanted her!

She nodded. "Very well then. I'll meet you this afternoon—at the entrance to the park.

"At Three?" he asked.

"At three."

## COURTSHIP

AFTER HANDING his coat and hat off to Mr. Beasley, Reed stepped into the drawing room, knowing his sister would be anxiously waiting to hear of any progress he'd made.

“Were you able to meet with her?” Caroline burst off the settee, pushing loose strands of dark hair behind her ears. It was something Lady Marigold did, but whereas Caroline's hair was brown and straight, Goldie's was blond and curly.

“What did she say?” Caroline prodded.

Two questions, both of which the answers were more complicated than he'd imagined they would be.

“Well,” Reed began. “In answer to your first question, yes. In answer to the second, she did not say ‘no.’”

Caroline's eyes widened, so he added, “Nor did she say ‘yes.’”

Lady Marigold ought to have—for her own sake. What the devil had gotten into him? Kissing her like that? He'd been standing there, contemplating the color of her eyes, a swirling myriad of browns and golds and greens, and then, without consciously deciding to do so, he'd pulled her into his arms and tasted luscious raspberry lips.

“But it might work.” His sister dropped into her seat again, slouching this time, no doubt relieved that Lady Marigold had not sent him packing.

“I’m taking her driving this afternoon,” Reed said, inexplicably remembering how she’d fit in his arms—soft, yielding. Holding her against his body like that had been something of a revelation.

He’d been aroused, he’d not deny that, but he’d also felt interest—attraction.

The cacophony of emotions had been raw, and more than he’d felt in months.

“You can use the curricule Rupert purchased last spring. It’s quite spectacular—bright red. You’d be surprised at how impressive a fancy vehicle can be,” Caroline said. “And you must bring her flowers.”

Flowers, yes. But his chest tightened at the thought of taking out Rupert’s ridiculously flamboyant high-flyer. Once he’d sorted through the current mess that was his life, he’d sell the damn thing and replace it with something more practical.

But Caroline had latched onto the idea. “Rand took me driving in it once—while Rupert was...ill. Perched so high like that, above every other vehicle, made me feel like the queen herself,” his sister said. “Even Randal could be charming when he put his mind to it.”

“When he wasn’t out of his mind,” Reed added, cutting off an inappropriate expletive. Both his brother and his cousin could have been so much more, if only...

“It’s all right to miss them, you know,” Caroline spoke softly.

But Reed wouldn't waste his time or energy there. All four men had made their choices—stupid, horrific choices—and left Reed to clean up after them.

His jaw clenched. He had other worries. Worries that involved family members who depended on him—members who'd not chosen to live so recklessly.

Furthermore, dwelling on the past wasn't going to land him a duke's daughter for a wife. He had an afternoon to plan.

"I don't want to draw attention to the two of us. She's going to have to sneak out of her father's house as it is." He hated the cagey nature of this entire endeavor but was going to have to ignore his sensibilities until the rumors subsided. He could borrow West's curricle, but it, too, would draw attention.

Should he kiss her again? The first time had been... instinctive. But kissing her a second time could be considered strategic. And if he used romance and affection to convince her to marry him, what the hell sort of man did that make him?

Nothing to be proud of, that was for certain.

*And yet, he wouldn't mind kissing her again.*

"What is it?" Caroline, who had been watching him closely, asked.

"What do you mean?"

"That look on your face. What else happened this morning? You look... strange."

Reed scrubbed a hand down his face. *Blasted Caroline.* She'd pester him until he gave in. Although... Caroline, as a woman herself, might have some sort of insight into what Miss Goldie might be thinking about now.

Goldie. It was the perfect name for the blond bundle of sunshine.

“I kissed her,” he admitted.

“Ah...” Her skeptical tone didn’t provide the encouragement he’d hoped for. “Why did you kiss her, Reed? Because as badly as we need you to marry her, it wouldn’t be fair to play with her affections like that.” And then she frowned. “Would it?”

“Hell if I know. You were the one who pointed out that.” Reed cleared his throat. “That she noticed me at the house party last summer.” And damned if he didn’t feel heat ebbing up his neck.

“True.” Caroline seemed to come to some decision. “You can flirt and a kiss or two might be acceptable, but you absolutely cannot seduce her into accepting.”

He turned and faced his sister in astonishment. “What do you know about seduction?”

She shrugged. “Enough to know it wouldn’t be fair play on your part.”

“Of course it wouldn’t be,” Reed grumbled.

“But you kissed her.” Caroline frowned, but only for a moment before her face lit up with understanding. “Oh, Reed. You like her, don’t you? Of course, you’re not the sort of man who would prey upon a woman’s feelings like that. You like her!”

“She’s a pleasant enough young woman,” Reed conceded.

“But you like her! You. Like. Her!” Caroline seemed almost giddy over this. “Your marriage doesn’t have to be a cold business arrangement.” She clasped her hands together.



“It could very well turn into a love-match! And there will be children! Of course, I shall be their favorite aunt.”

*Marriage.*

Reed’s stomach lurched.

As a steward, Reed had never considered the institution for himself. And yet, he’d proposed to a young woman this very morning. And Caroline, by God, was mentioning children now.

A wedding ceremony was one thing—half an hour, give or take a few minutes—but a marriage...

It was for life. All the blood he’d felt in his face a few seconds earlier surely had drained away, and his chest seemed to collapse as he considered all the implications of marrying Lady Marigold.

“Reed,” Caroline moved to sit beside him and touched his arm.

He turned to face his sister.

“You need to do everything possible to convince her. If you happen to feel affection for her, I think that can only be a good thing. But you haven’t much choice. I refuse to allow you to be carted off to Newgate.

Reed was none too fond of the prospect himself.

“We’ll be fine,” he promised. “Trust me. We’ll be fine.”

## THE FATHER

“BULWARK SAYS you went walking this morning,” the duke grumbled without looking up from the Gazette. He sat in his usual spot at the table, cigar smoke curling up from the small dish where it rested while he drank his tea.

“Yes. There’s no one to run into when I go out early. Especially since the Season has yet to begin.” Goldie deliberately kept her eyes focused on her knife as she spread marmalade on a warm piece of toast.

*He kissed me!*

Mr. Reed Rutherford had kissed her! *Lord Standish!* If Nia had been at home, Goldie would have gone straight to her. But Nia was gone.

But even more importantly, he’d said he wanted to marry her.

No one else. Just her. Marigold Hathaway! He’d not mentioned that she was too plump or that her hair had more curl than was fashionable. And he’d not chided her for being clumsy when she’d nearly tripped over the tree root.

No. He’d said he wanted...

Her.

There must be a catch.

Which was why she'd not accepted his proposal. Well, it was one of the reasons she'd not accepted. The little matter of her father's disapproval, to put it lightly, was another one. Oh, but her father would kill the new earl if he knew of their conversation in the park this morning.

And that kiss! Trickle of honey flowed around her heart.

Goldie would remember it forever. The way he'd smelled of soap and leather and... just himself. His chest had felt as firm as the earth beneath her fingertips. His heartbeat had thumped under her palm, racing nearly as quickly as her own.

Warm heat had spread through her entire body, making her want more.

Would he kiss her again this afternoon?

She exhaled a dreamy sigh.

"What are you mooning about over there?" Her father pinned stormy eyes on her.

"Oh," Goldie caught herself. "This marmalade is delightful." And it was. The strawberry flavor danced in her mouth as the butter brought her tastebuds to life.

"You have too great a fondness for sweets." He raised his brows meaningfully. Derisively. "But I don't suppose it matters," he added.

This was nothing new. Her mother had often made similar comments.

Nia never did. Nia had told her that although Goldie's figure wasn't fashionable, it was lovely. *Gorgeously curvy*, she'd said.

Nonetheless, Goldie dropped the toast onto her plate.

“I have an... er... fitting scheduled for this afternoon.”

Her father’s gaze fell on the paper once again as he shook his head. “Damned waste of money, your coming-out.”

“But you promised...” Goldie sat up straight. “And it’ll be worth it—just you wait.”

“Harumph! I could put your dowry to far better use. Not to mention—”

Goldie wouldn’t allow him to finish and abruptly pushed her chair back. “I’m going to write a letter to mother—and to Nia—reminding them that the first ball is in twelve days. And she needs to arrange an evening at Almacks. I can’t exactly make my come-out without a sponsor.”

A scoffing grunt followed her out the door. He’d promised, and she was going to hold him to it.

But for now, she had more pressing concerns. A glance at the clock reminded her that she only had a few hours until she was to go driving with Lord Standish.

Of course, she couldn’t accept his offer. Her father would never forgive her. She’d be banished from their family forever—from her mother, and from Nia.

Even contemplating it felt like a betrayal.

And yet, when she went upstairs, she removed her favorite day gown from the wardrobe and smoothed it out with a damp cloth. While it hung to dry, Goldie then proceeded to put her hair up in a pretty knot.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were lit with anticipation.

He had kissed her.

And he might just kiss her again.

AT PRECISELY THREE o'clock in the afternoon, wearing a pale indigo muslin with blue birds embroidered at the hem, her best gloves, and a pair of practical half-boots, Goldie stood waiting at the entrance of the park as agreed upon.

What if he wasn't coming? What if it had all been a joke?

But at three oh one, a hackney pulled up beside her and the earl jumped out. He looked as relieved to see her as she was to see him.

He held out a hand. "Your chariot awaits, my lady."

It was not a tall gleaming curricle like the one Lord Rupert had squired Nia around in—nor was it even a handsome open barouche. It was a dull black carriage for hire.

Tamping down her disappointment, she nodded and allowed him to assist her inside.

And his touch immediately swept that disappointment away. With sturdy hands, he offered support while she maneuvered the step. Once she was seated, he gracefully hopped in and took the seat beside her.

"I considered one of my cousin or uncle's vehicles," he said, staring straight ahead as the driver rejoined traffic. "But I didn't think you'd want to be recognized."

How careless of her not to have considered that! She'd foolishly been imagining the outing to be a proper one. But there was nothing proper about it in the least.

Not when she'd had to lie to her father about where she would be that day. Any of the Standish vehicles would be

easily recognized driving around town. She ought to have considered that but had been too caught up in her excitement. Apparently, she was more naïve than she'd realized.

And he'd guessed her doubts immediately!

“Thank you,” Goldie answered. She glanced down at her hands, where she'd managed to pull off one of her gloves and twist it into a mangled mess. But if they couldn't risk being seen together, that would eliminate all the usual places gentlemen took ladies while courting them. “What kind of an adventure are you taking me on?”

His glance landed on her gloves, but rather than comment on her nervousness, he said, “Have you ever been to one of the traveling fairs that come through London?”

A traveling fair? Her father would never allow it!

“I have not.”

“Then you're in for a treat. And you look lovely, by the way. I should have told you that right off, shouldn't I? I'm not used to this sort of thing. But as I'm sure you know, London is full of gossips even in the off-season. I was mostly concerned with keeping you out of sight.” He cleared his throat. “I've no wish to cause you any more trouble than necessary.”

He sounded... contrite, so Goldie shifted to see his expression. “It was my choice to come.” He'd not coerced her in any way.

Not unless one wished to consider kissing a form of coercion. And if that was the case, she wouldn't mind being coerced a few more times...

He cleared his throat again. “The fairs are entertaining but also raucous. Easy to remain anonymous once you've joined

the throngs, but if you're not comfortable with the idea, we can—”

“A fair sounds delightful!” But she glanced down at her gown. “Am I dressed properly, though?”

It wasn't the sort of question she'd normally ask a gentleman, and the instant his eyes trailed over her bodice, she realized why.

If his mere gaze could summon such heat, such... awareness, what would it feel like to be touched by him? To be his wife?

A moot question if ever there was one.

She *could* not accept him, so... Goldie bit her lip.

“You look perfect.” His heated stare met hers before he quickly turned to face forward again.

But Goldie knew somehow that he, too, was remembering the kiss.

“It will be fun,” she said, trying to keep their conversation cheerful. “To see parts of London where I'm not usually allowed.” Her father could be quite tyrannical in regard to the freedoms he allowed his daughters. It was Nia, however, who was considered the beauty and most in need of protection.

“Indeed,” Lord Standish said but then fell silent again.

“Have you been before?” Goldie asked before the pause could stretch on too long. “To the fair?” The silence made her uncomfortable. She felt the need to entertain him.

“A few times,” he answered, and a hint of a smile danced on his lips. “When I was younger. It's an unlikely harmony of mismatched oddities, the vain, the garish, interspersed with an occasional display of nature's wonder.”

“Not unlike the *Ton*,” Goldie immediately made the connection and then covered her mouth. Because, as Standish, he was now an official member of society himself. As had been the men who’d died—as were his sisters and mother. “I’m sorry—”

But he interrupted her apology with a burst of laughter—the kind that lit up his eyes—the kind that made her happy that she’d amused him.

“Quite a lot like the *Ton*, I imagine,” he said. “Although, I’ve yet to spend an entire season in Mayfair.”

“Nor have I,” Goldie admitted. “But I’ve heard things...”

“As have I.” His eyes twinkled, and she noticed tiny wrinkles around them from smiling and from spending time outdoors. Their driver took a sharp turn, and her companion glanced out the window. “You are not uncomfortable spending the afternoon at the fair, then?”

“No. I’m quite looking forward to it.”

He went on to describe a few experiences from past carnivals he’d attended, and suddenly all the awkwardness between them fled.

The driver stopped and opened the small door between his box and the interior. “Afraid I can’t get any closer, my lord.”

The street was, in fact, packed, and after making arrangements with Reed to return to the same spot in three hours, he set them down amongst the bustling throng.

All manner of Londoners seemed to be in attendance, and Goldie was grateful to have worn boots instead of slippers as the crowd moved along the muddy clearing in the general direction of a large striped tent.



When a few of the more aggressive participants shoved them from behind, Lord Standish took Goldie's hand in his. "I don't want to lose you," he said.

His fingers threaded between hers and their palms clasped together. It felt far more intimate than when he'd taken her arm. Someone jostled them, and the earl shielded her body with his.

Goldie ought not to be so aware of her reaction to this man. But it was impossible not to be.

His protection made her feel special.

It made her feel as though she mattered. Normally such attention was reserved strictly for her older sister.

"The vendors are up ahead." He spoke close to her ear.

Goldie nodded, inhaling scents of fried foods and sweets mingled with the unmistakable aroma of too many humans and farm animals. The combination ought to have been off-putting, but amongst the occasional cheers that went up from various booths, along with music being played in the distance, it blended together to create an exhilarating mood.

There was a sense that here, amongst so many games and merchants, anything was possible.

And Goldie was here with a man.

A suitor? Yes, a suitor. Because he'd asked for her hand in marriage. And also...

Because he'd kissed her. *Reed Rutherford had kissed her!*

"Are you hungry? We can stop for a pastry." Reed's low, gravelly voice sent a wave of heat through her.

Sometimes, Goldie thought, she was always hungry. It seemed to be her natural reaction to trying not to eat.

“Are *you* hungry?” she asked. It would be mortifying to eat alone in front of him.

“Indeed. Carnival treats are a must. We’ll start with a tart,” he edged them to one of the smaller tents that created a sort of alley. One of the first in the long line featured a painted sash hanging above: Miss Mildred’s Boulangère.

Spotting their approach, Miss Mildred, a robust woman in a worn, flour-dusted apron, called out. “Raspberry or Apple?”

Lord Standish looked to Goldie, brows raised, for an answer.

“Apple,” Goldie blurted out, even though both sounded amazing.

“One Apple and one Raspberry,” he ordered, handing over some coins. “That way, we can both get a taste of each.”

The merchant handed two paper-wrapped pockets over. Goldie took hers, and while she debated removing her gloves, Lord Standish bit uninhibitedly into his.

“Uh oh,” he said. “This one’s yours. But you need to try that one first.”

Aware that he was watching her, Goldie lifted it to her mouth and took a nibble. He frowned, however. “Take a real taste.”

And then, staring into his eyes, she took a larger bite. Hot raspberry sauce exploded on her tongue. It was delicious.

Or was that only because of the company?

Furthermore, how in the world did this feel nearly as intimate as their kiss yesterday?

When she was finished, he raised a hand to his mouth. “You have a little sauce right...” He pointed to his upper lip. “Here.”

Since she was wearing her gloves, her only means of removing it was to use her tongue.

A light in his eyes flared, and when her knees turned to jelly, Goldie dropped her gaze. It was too much.

“Which is your favorite?” he asked after she’d tasted the other tart. Was that a catch in his voice, or was it her imagination?

“I can’t decide. They’re both delicious.” Her own voice came out little more than a whisper.

He cleared his throat. “If we’re going to see everything, we’ll need to keep moving.” And with both her hands occupied now, one with her reticule and the other with the tart, this time, he placed a hand on her back to steer her.

Each small booth offered something unique and colorful—items not sold on Bond Street. The jewelry, although obviously made of paste, gleamed cheerfully amongst silk scarves, bouquets of flowers, and every possible kind of candy. She stopped and admired some hair pins but refrained from purchasing anything that she’d need to explain away later. They didn’t stop again until they turned the corner.

“A fortune teller?” A slightly crooked sign hung above this particular tent, and the aroma of incense drifted from inside. “Madam Zeta,” Goldie said. She’d heard of such people—the *Romani*—but never thought to see one in person. And she

never would have if she'd not come out with Lord Standish—*with Reed*—today.

“None of it is real,” Reed said. His opinion didn't surprise her. Watching him last summer, she'd deemed him inordinately practical.

It was, she realized, part of what had appealed to her.

“I know,” she said with a sigh.

“But you wish to have your fortune read?” he asked.

Goldie pinched her mouth together. *Did she?*

They'd paused just long enough to garner the woman's attention.

“You, sir. Wouldn't you like to know what lies ahead for you and your young woman?” Madam Zeta pointed at them. Painted eyes stared from the fortune teller's ageless face, which was framed by black and silver hair adorned with more than one colorful scarf. Her voice was low and raspy and oddly compelling.

“Only if my young woman wishes to.” Reed deferred to Goldie.

“Yes,” Goldie answered without hesitation. When would she have such an opportunity again? Likely never. She'd make the most of this magical day while she was out from beneath her father's thumb.

Reed laughed softly, sounding indulgently amused.

Madam Zeta stepped backward. “Please, come inside then.” She gestured to her tent, which, unlike most of the others, was enclosed with very worn, very old-looking canvas. It was just tall enough for Goldie to stand, and Reed ducked in behind her.

Inside, more scarves decorated the walls. A round table sat in the center, with three chairs. “What do we do?” Goldie asked.

“Clear your mind, my child, and sit.”

How was a person expected to clear their mind? Goldie glanced over at Reed, who shrugged.

This was going to be...

Fun!

## TOO EASY

SUNDAY MORNING, after learning of the task he was going to have to accomplish, Reed had not once expected he'd enjoy any of it. He'd walked away from the meeting dreading the scheme—for both himself and the lady he'd have to convince.

But showing Goldie around, by God, was... fun. Being with her didn't feel like a task at all.

It had initially, when he'd made his first visit to the Duke of Crossing's Mayfair mansion. But the more time he spent with Lady Gardenia's younger sister, the more he enjoyed himself.

*Goldie.*

His enjoyment came from enjoying *all* aspects of her. Her personality, which surprised and delighted him, was as voluptuous as her figure. She exuded a welcoming sparkle tempered only by an inordinate lack of vanity.

And now he sat beside her in, of all things, a charlatan's tent.

“*Woo her,*” Caroline had told him this morning. “*Court her.*” His sister's advice, ironically, came easier than he'd imagined.

Because he liked indulging Lady Marigold Hathaway.

The fortune teller made an elaborate display of closing the curtains to the entrance and then wafting a dish of incense around them before taking her seat on the opposite side of the table.

“Are you going to use Tarot cards?” Goldie asked. Reed loved that she didn’t feign boredom or sophistication. And in this case, how her curiosity overcame any shyness on her part.

Madam Zeta shook her head. “I am going to seek your fortune in the glass.”

“Scrying,” Reed supplied, and the older woman shot him an approving glance.

“Yes.” The Romani woman confirmed as she revealed the glass ball set in the center of the table, slowly and ceremoniously dragging the scarf over it.

“Oh,” Goldie exhaled, and Reed couldn’t help smiling. She shifted nervously, and Reed took her hand.

He’d held her hand earlier. It felt natural.

“Do you see people in it?” Goldie leaned forward. The ball was glass but not quite transparent. It was an ideal prop for creating an aura of magic.

“Visions,” Madam Zeta answered. “Now, you must be silent, so I can listen to what the spirits have to say today.”

Goldie nodded, looking as though she had another question, but then pressed her mouth together.

Enchanting.

The word drifted through his mind. Madam Zeta made a low humming sound, her eyes intent on the ball. Flames from a few candles reflected off the glass, and it seemed to heighten the woman’s focus. If nothing else, the older woman was an

excellent actress. She would have had decades of practice, of course.

But then, a cool breeze seemed to waft through the room, flickering the candles and stiffening Madam Zeta's spine.

She pinned her gaze on Reed, and even he couldn't escape the ghost that seemed to slide down his spine. "You have suffered great loss," she said. "But also great gain."

Goldie turned to glance over at him, her brows lifted high, but then just as quickly turned her attention back to the fortune teller.

"And you," Madam Zeta directed her attention to Goldie. "Will be faced with a test. A test of courage. A test of faith. Your happiness depends on passing it."

"What kind of test?" Goldie asked. "What will it be?"

Madam Zeta's dark eyes shuttered and closed, and then she made a great show of distress before opening them again. "You were not to speak. But that is all the spirits have for today, I believe."

"But what does it mean?" Goldie persisted.

"That is for you to discern. I am but a mere vessel." Her accent sounded heavier than it had before.

Reed rose and tugged Goldie to her feet. She was looking confused and more than a little troubled, and damned if that wasn't the opposite of what he wanted for her today.

He shouldn't have agreed to this.

His goal for the day had been to put Goldie at ease, not add to her fear.

"That will be two shillings, my lord."



*My lord?*

Even as he dug into a pocket, he frowned.

He was wearing his old and comfortable clothing—nothing that gave away his new status. Why would this woman think he was any different from all the other rabble coming through?

Goldie stood beside him, however, looking every inch the lady. He supposed that the fortune teller's assumption about him came from the obvious status of his companion. Yes, that made sense.

She'd gotten lucky when she'd mentioned his loss—and his gain. It was vague enough that it could have applied to anyone.

“My apologies, Goldie,” Reed said after they'd exited the tent. “She upset you.”

Goldie laughed, but he didn't miss the tremor in it. And then she shook her head. “It's silly. I know. But what do you think she meant? I mean, if any of it was real.”

“She's intentionally vague. You ought not to concern yourself with her ramblings. Let's keep going.” And then he pointed toward one of the gaming vendors. “Shall I win you a trinket?” Reed was determined to get the afternoon back on track. He needed this young woman to agree to marry him. In order to do that, she needed to feel safe.

So for the next hour, with a good deal of laughter, Reed proceeded to drop enough money to buy at least ten prizes before he finally won her a delicate ring. It was nothing more than paint and paste, but after failing to win it herself, and then cheering him on, she squealed in delight when he finally managed to hit the target three times.

Rigged, of course, and all the more satisfying to have gotten the better of the charlatans.

It was ridiculous, but it was also inordinately entertaining.

The thought that mucking stalls with this woman would be entertaining flitted through his thoughts. Her comments were inordinately clever, and when she laughed, she made little hiccupping sounds, which made him want to make her laugh some more.

He touched her more than was strictly necessary, placing his hand on her waist, and twice using his fingertips to brush her hair away from her face. When she spoke, he leaned in closer, drawn by more than her scent.

Simply... drawn to *her*.

By the time he began steering them back to the road where he'd arranged to meet the hackney driver, their mutual attraction now enshrouded them both like a tangible thing. Goldie's eyes sparkled, and her cheeks were flushed. She was deliciously attractive and, not bothering to contemplate his motivation, he swung her around a corner and pinned her against a brick wall.

She'd enjoyed their kiss the day before. As had he.

But he needed her to consent to *marry* him. Normally he might have used more finesse, but time was running out.

Despite all these thoughts clamoring for his attention, when he stared into eyes swirling with browns and greens and golds, he was simply... lost.

She tilted her head back in invitation. Her kiss was his for the taking.

She tasted of the ale they'd shared earlier, but also sweet and fresh. For an instant, he went back in time—to a time when his most pressing concern had been how to best garner the attention of a pretty girl.

Kissing Goldie made him feel young again. It sent surges of inspiration coursing through his veins.

Surges of pleasure, of newness, of hope, and of...

Lust.

"Reed..." She breathed his name and his groin tightened.

The sweet girl in his arms was too pure to be mixed up in any of this, but he was without choices. All he could do was determine to do right by her.

Her entire form yielded, and so he held her tighter. He wanted her so much that he nearly forgot where they were.

And why.

He was courting her—to save his skin and to protect his sisters and mother.

The reminder hit him like a bucket of cold water, and he tore his mouth from hers.

Goldie's lashes fluttered as she opened her eyes to stare up at him trustingly. The smile that stretched her lips was shy.

"That was fun," she said. God, her mouth glistened and her cheeks were flushed a delicate shade of pink.

Reed swallowed hard. Today *had* been fun. She was delightful. Under any other circumstances, he might—but no.

A vision of Newgate stole his breath—much like a hangman's noose would. The possibility of all he stood to lose nearly paralyzed him.

“What’s wrong?” Goldie’s expression fell. He couldn’t allow his own desperation to ruin this. And yet, he needed to regroup. Far too much depended on this woman’s decision.

“I need to get you home.” Already, he’d kept her away too long. And then, experiencing a razor-like panic, he had to ask. “Have you decided?”

“Decided?” She shook her head. “I didn’t—Oh, Reed. It’s... too soon. Please. I...”

Reed nodded. Of course, she couldn’t accept his hasty proposal. It wasn’t as though she’d fallen madly in love with him.

Or that he’d fallen madly in love with her.

He swallowed hard. She wanted him.

He could take her somewhere private, lie with her, and take the choice out of her hands.

But that wasn’t who he was. So instead, he implored her with his gaze. “I need to know by morning.”

He threaded his fingers with hers and drew them both back into the crowd. He’d pushed too hard. But just when he believed she’d drop the subject, she spoke up from beside him.

“What kind of marriage would it be?” The question encouraged him.

“Whatever kind you want.” And he meant it. “I’ll not press you...”

She dipped her chin but didn’t look back at him. Did this mean she was considering it?

“And this is all to repair your reputation?” This time she did look over.

He could tell her it was because he was desperate to have her for his bride—that he'd fallen madly in love. But she deserved the truth.

“The rumors are bad, Goldie.” Reed pressed his lips together. “People think I had something to do with the fire.”

“You didn't, of course,” she stated confidently.

“How can you be sure?” The question wasn't one that would serve his own purpose, but he was somewhat astounded by her faith in him.

“Because you loved them.”

Her response stunned him into silence. He'd loved them once. Yes but... “I'm mad as hell at them,” he practically snarled.

For the past half a decade, Reed had spent a good deal of his time coping with the consequences of their reckless behavior. All the while, they'd made him out to be the villain.

And Reed had managed them without complaint. But now...

Reed had failed to manage them on the night of the fire. He'd failed to protect them from themselves...

No doubt, they were all laughing at him from hell. Any love he'd felt for them was gone.

She squeezed his hand and they were walking more slowly now. “But you loved them,” she insisted.

“You are wrong about that.” He couldn't lie about this, but even so, the words tasted sour in his mouth. “But I did not wish them dead.”

“I know.” Her simple acceptance seemed to lift a weight off his shoulders. How would he have felt if she’d doubted him? He barely knew her.

The thought brought him back to his hasty proposal.

Their hackney was in sight, just as Reed had requested. “You will give serious consideration to your answer then?” Time was running out. He couldn’t afford to lose himself in maudlin sentimentality.

She exhaled a loud sigh with a small wince. Reed assisted her into the vehicle and climbed in behind her.

“If you can find it in yourself to accept, I’ll do everything I can to ensure you’re comfortable. You’ll have my sisters. You’ll be a countess...” God, he was practically begging.

“What about love?” Her smile was a sad one. “I know it’s not common, but... Despite today, which was absolutely marvelous, you don’t really know me.”

*Love?*

He should have known. Love was the last thing he’d contemplated in all of this. And yet... She was sweet. He was attracted to her.

“I don’t know,” he answered her honestly. “I don’t want to mislead you. But I suppose it’s possible... eventually.”

She rolled her lips together and nodded. “And I don’t want to mislead you. My father has promised me a season. I’ve had a wonderful day, almost as though I was truly being courted. I want more of... this. I want... more.”

The hackney was moving along swiftly now, separated from the carnival crowds. Despite the cool temperatures of early spring, Reed felt a drop of sweat trail down his back.

She was on the verge of telling him ‘no.’

Reed didn’t want to give her false hope. He didn’t want to use her so blatantly. Taking her hand in his, he lifted it to his lips.

“Promise me you’ll think it over.” He pressed a kiss against the back of her fist. “Please.”

A pause, and then she nodded. “But you cannot come to my father’s house,” she said.

“I know.” Reed understood. He did. It was too soon. She was too young—too innocent. “Meet me in the park tomorrow morning and give me your answer then?”

She frowned but dipped her chin. “By the trees?” She was not being flippant in her response. Although young and filled with naïve dreams, she could be a somber little thing when the moment demanded it.

He was grateful for that. “Yes.”

And then Reed had no choice but to deliver her back to her father. She asked him to set her down a few houses away, and as he bid her farewell, Reed wondered if she would come tomorrow after all.

He only allowed the driver to move on after watching her enter the large mansion down the way, and after she disappeared, an unexpected emptiness filled him.

## WAITING

“I CAN’T THINK of anything more you can do.” Caroline hugged her knees to her chest at the opposite end of the settee from Reed. “The duke hasn’t any other daughters, as far as I know.” Her smile was forced.

“I could have declared my love for her,” he said. “Three little words and I could resolve this.”

“But you’re not that sort of man. You would regret it for the rest of your life. It’s one thing to marry her to meet that horrible newspaperman’s requirement, but quite another to play with a young woman’s emotions. You’ve been honest, and I’m proud of you for that.”

“I kissed her again,” he said.

Caroline’s brows rose. “Why?”

“I... just did.” Because he’d wanted to. “But I’m not in love.”

“Hmmm...”

“I barely know the chit, Carol,” he said.

“The heart wants what it wants.”

“Good Lord,” Reed grouched. “I’m going to have to keep a close eye on you when you make your come-out. Men are not



about hearts, dear sister, and that's all I'll say on the matter.”

“Pshaw!” She waved a hand dismissively through the air. “Besides, I'm too old to come out. Melanie and Josephine, on the other hand, will require both of us to watch over them. Melanie struggles to stand up for herself, and Josephine will be an outrageous flirt. I, as the older and wiser sister, shall be their matron companion—a most diligent one at that.”

“At three and twenty, you're hardly a matron.” Reed appreciated his sister's levity. And the thought struck him that Goldie and Caroline would get along well. In fact, Goldie would fit in with all his sisters.

He ought to have emphasized the benefit while trying to persuade her. But he wondered if he stood a chance regardless. Goldie was young. She was looking forward to her first Season. Aside from consenting to their adventure today, Goldie, he guessed, wasn't the sort to defy authority.

Reed had spent a good deal of time with the Duke of Crossings at Rupert's engagement house party, and the man, for all intents and purposes, was something of a tyrant.

It was insane to imagine Goldie thwarting her father in any matter, really, let alone something so huge as marrying someone without his approval.

His heart skipped a beat. As the deadline for Helton's article neared, he'd experienced this sensation more and more often.

He pushed himself off the settee. There was no way he could just sit around doing nothing, waiting for the hours to pass while Goldie decided his fate.

Rutherford Place was filled with memories, both good and bad. He'd once respected his uncle. Even Rupert had once

possessed notable qualities. But the opium had permeated their idleness. And if that hadn't been tragic enough, they'd dragged Randal and their father in as well.

But those two hadn't been forced to imbibe. They'd shown no willpower against it.

Reed paced across the room, jamming his hands into his pockets and turning toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Caroline asked.

"I don't know, but I need to get out of this house." He could work, of course. But what good would that be? What good was anything he'd done if Helton's original article ran?

Reed wasn't normally one to drink, or gamble, or carouse. But tonight...

"I'm going to the Wicked Earl's Club."

"Reed," Caroline's voice caught him before he was out the door.

"Yes?"

"Just be back by morning. It's not over yet."

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Reed entered the discreetly placed club for the second time in two days. This time, however, he was not intimidated by these men. He'd enjoy some of the spoils of his title.

Who knew how long he'd be able to claim them?

But as he approached the bar, a hand landed on his shoulder and a familiar voice said, "You're here."

"Do you *live* here?" Reed countered.

West shrugged. “For now.” He signaled to a waiter. “But change is in the air,” he added cryptically. “Whisky neat?”

It had always been Reed’s drink of choice—once he’d graduated from ale and gin, that was. He nodded.

A table opened up and the two of them took a couple of empty chairs at a game of *vingt-et-un*. Reed tossed out a coin but West pushed it back. “It’s all done on accounts. The dealers know who you are.”

Of course.

Reed would have preferred to wager cold hard coins. Mere numbers took the sting out of a loss until it came time to settle up.

No wonder so many lords were up to their necks in debt.

For one night, Reed would play by their rules. In his present frame of mind, however, he’d have to be careful to keep his wits about him.

Reed won the first two hands and then lost the next three. By this time, he and his old friend had downed three drams of what was surely a very expensive Scottish whisky.

“Any luck with Crossings’ younger daughter?” West brought the subject up uninvited.

Reed grunted. “She’ll give me her answer tomorrow.”

“Judging by your sour mood, am I to take it that you’re feeling pessimistic?”

“You know me, West.” Reed gestured for the dealer to give him another card—which put him over. “Pessimistic to a fault.” He didn’t want to discuss his pending nuptials... or not pending, as the case may be.

Reed had no wish to discuss his own troubles.

“Now, about your new friends,” said Reed, perhaps somewhat clumsily changing the subject. “Winterhope, I understand, but what the devil are you doing associating with the likes of...” Reed lowered his voice. “Helton? Beckwith? And... Malum?”

West grimaced. The two of them had been close at school, but they’d rarely met up since Reed took on managing his family’s estates. West had been a lord, and the two positions didn’t facilitate the two meeting up socially.

But now, Reed supposed, they were on equal footing.

“It’s Malum’s doing, really.” West slid his gaze around the room. “I can only say that the four of us have a common objective. Our positions and skills complement the others’.”

Reed knew any endeavor West was involved in would be on the up and up. The other three, however...

“If all goes well,” his friend went on, staring at him over the rim of his tumbler. “You’ll hear more in the future. You’re not without skills yourself, and I think you’ll want a part in it.”

“An investment?” Reed prodded.

But West merely smiled. “Later, my friend. Once you’re a happily settled, happily *married* lord. After hiring a new estate manager to run your properties, you’ll need a diversion.”

“Right.” Reed had a difficult time imagining such a scenario. The waiter appeared and handed them both another drink. As far as the cards, Reed was up.

He dropped the subject and doubled down.

The remainder of the evening progressed in a similar fashion, and by the time Reed arrived back at Rutherford

Place, he'd won a few hundred pounds and the eastern sky was a dull blue rather than black. Deep in his cups, disheveled and nearly incoherent, Reed, for the first time, found the services of his valet to be helpful.

"Just make sure I'm respectable by half past eight," he tried not to slur his words as he informed the man.

"That's less than three hours away, my lord."

"Yes, well. I have an important meeting." Reed winced. "With a lady."

"Very well, my lord."

And practically before Reed's head hit the pillow, it seemed, he was being shaken awake. "Time for your bath, my lord."

Oh hell. Whiling away his time at the club hadn't been his most brilliant idea after all.

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GOLDIE DIDN'T SLEEP much that night either. Not because she was carousing, of course, but because she couldn't quiet her thoughts.

She liked Reed very much. Yes, she'd considered herself in love with him last summer, but that had been naïve of her. She had watched him, but she'd not *known* him.

And she was under no misconception that if she accepted his proposal, her father would not only disown her, but he'd forbid her from seeing her sister or mother. She'd have to meet with Nia in secret. And although her father didn't seem to care that much about her, he was still her father.

Her family was far, far from perfect. But they were the only family she had.

They were... all she had.

Goldie flipped over to her other side and punched her pillow.

She was going to have a season, yes, but what if she didn't like any of the men she met? What if none of them asked her to dance? What if, as her father had predicted hundreds of times, no one wanted her?

Reed had said he wanted her.

*Her.* She was the one he wanted to marry, he'd said.

It was a heady thought.

By morning, she'd changed her mind at least a dozen times, but ultimately, she knew what her answer must be.

One of the maids from downstairs delivered tea shortly after dawn, but by the time Goldie sat up in bed and went to drink it, it had gone cold. She winced and set it back down with a sigh.

If only Reed could court her publicly throughout the Season, get her father's permission, and then propose. It would be so simple.

A dream come true.

Only her father would never allow it.

And Reed needed her answer now. It was as though he was laboring under some deadline—as though...

She shook her head.

It was as though he was afraid.

But he was an earl now! All he needed to do was show the people of the *ton* the sort of man he was, and the rumors would die down on their own.

Because he was not at all like the other men in his family.

Her heart cracked at the thought. Poor, dear Reed. He'd lost so much in the past month. And she could help him.

She swung her feet off the bed, frustrated with her own indecisiveness, and went about preparing for their meeting.

*“You will be faced with a test. A test of courage. A test of faith. Your happiness depends on passing it.”*

Madam Zeta's words had taunted her all night.

Was this the test? It had to be. Was she being a coward if she didn't marry him? Was she being a coward if she did? And faith in what? Her father? Reed?

*Herself?*

Goldie shoved one last pin into her coiffure. Updos invariably never contained her hair for very long but this one was going to have to suffice.

No doubt, when she returned, at least half her curls would be dangling around her head.

But that wouldn't matter. Goldie's hand shook.

Once she'd given him her answer, she'd likely be ready for a good cry.

She donned her gloves, drew a shawl about her shoulders, and tiptoed out of her room.

Mr. Bulwark was away from the door when she crept through the foyer.

Perfect.

And as she marched solemnly toward the park, her heart sank with each step. There was only one answer, really. Because he was asking too much—for her to take such an irreversible step required far more courage than she possessed.



## FINAL ANSWER

REED PACED BACK and forth on the path where they'd agreed to meet, avoiding looking into the sunshine thanks to the throbbing behind his eyes, compliments of his indulgences just a few hours before. Despite bathing and drinking a horrid concoction sent up by the cook, his head ached, his stomach churned, and his thoughts weren't as clear as he'd like.

"Reed?" Her voice sounded sweet and fresh as it drifted across the lawn. "Am I late?"

She wore a garish yellow dress, but on her, somehow, it chased his gloom away.

Unfortunately, she wasn't smiling.

He glanced down at his fob. "Right on time, sunshine." Straightening his shoulders, he braced himself for the worst.

"I won't waste your time with excuses and reasons. Oh, Reed, I'm so sorry. I can't do it." She sounded out of breath, as though she'd been running. "I'm so sorry," she said again.

Reed swallowed hard. It was as he expected. He'd hoped, yes. But had he really imagined this lovely young woman would marry him under such havey-cavey circumstances?

"You've no need to apologize, my lady."

“Goldie. Please, Reed. I am still your friend.” She placed a hand on his arm, and he dropped his gaze to study the intricate lace of her gloves.

Friend?

“You are right in your decision.” Had he known this all along? Was that why he’d drowned his concerns the night before?

But the lump in his throat felt larger than before—the vice squeezing his chest even tighter.

“You look pale. Will you walk with me?” She asked, and when he didn’t move, she dropped her hand. “That is, unless you don’t want—”

He reclaimed her hand. “No, I do. I’d be happy to.” He ought to be hastily making his way home. He ought to be frantically searching for some other option.

But there were none, and oddly enough, he wanted a few more minutes in her company. Despite her refusal, she was a balm to his soul.

“This way.” He vaguely remembered seeing a folly set along a different path, one with a bench. They could sit together. He could simply be in her presence—soak up her peace.

Neither of them spoke until they came to the small clearing.

A friend.

Just as he expected, the folly came into view. It was half covered in vines as though it had been forgotten by the groundskeepers. The bench remained, however, and Reed brushed it off for her to sit.

“I was going to try to persuade you,” he said. “By luring you with the sparkling companionship of my sisters.” Meeting her eyes, he grinned for the first time that morning.

“That would almost do the trick. I remember Miss Ruther—I mean, Lady Caroline. She was very kind to me last summer. You have other sisters?”

“They were too young to come, but I’m sure you would have gotten on well together,” he said, a fond smile lightening his expression. “Melanie, who is nine and ten, isn’t nearly as managing as Caroline, and she’s the quietest out of the three, but she is the most loyal person I’ve ever known. And Josephine can almost always make you laugh.” Reed fell silent as he pondered the youngest of his sisters. “Not presently, of course. She was our father’s favorite.”

“Your mother is lovely as well.” Goldie sat quietly. “How is she?”

“Devastated, as one might expect.” Reed exhaled, recalling his mother over the past few years. The tragic deaths ought to have come as a relief. “I think she’s mourned them for some time now.” The backs of his eyes burned, and he blinked the sensation away.

“As have you?”

“Yes.” Damnit. Much more of this and he’d be bawling like a baby.

In the privacy of the crumbling folly, the two of them simply sat and listened to the birds fluttering around outside. Evidence suggested a few nests had been built in the ceiling. It reminded him of their talk the day before.

Had that only been yesterday morning?

“I gave it a good deal of thought, but I don’t suppose you care much about my reasons,” Goldie’s voice, echoing off the stones around them, sounded like a melody.

Reed lifted his head. Her reasons shouldn’t really matter, and yet...

They did. *She did.*

*She* mattered.

“I’d like to hear them.”

“Well.” She stared down at her hands. “My father is not one to give up a grudge easily. He can be a bear of a man.” Reed hated the trembling sound in her voice. She shook her head. “But he’s my father. We’re supposed to honor our father, right?”

Reed grimaced at that notion. He’d once honored his father. In the end, it was his father who’d quit honoring his family.

“Just because he’s your father, doesn’t mean he deserves to be honored,” Reed spoke of his own sire as much as hers.

Goldie was twisting her gloves in her lap again, something he’d noticed before.

“He would disown me. I’m quite certain. I’m... afraid. My family is all I’ve ever known.” She stiffened and forced a smile. “So, I’ll make my come-out in a few weeks and hope some kindly man—one my father approves of—asks for my hand.”

“You’ll have plenty of suitors,” Reed said. Hell, it was possible she’d take the *ton* by storm. With that glorious hair, her mesmerizing eyes, and gorgeous figure...

But there was more to her than her looks.

For some reason, he felt sick at the idea of her with another man. He didn't like the idea of some pompous lord wooing her, courting her.

Touching her.

"Don't be hasty in deciding," he went on. "Be as picky as you want to be. Trust me. Flowers will be arriving by the dozens."

This sensation was jealousy, and he didn't like it one bit.

She wrinkled her brow. "I think you are wrong about that, but thank you. You're being awfully nice over all this. My father isn't nearly at all calm when he doesn't get his way." She blinked and then bit her lip. "I wish things were different."

They could be.

Reed held her gaze. "Why wouldn't I respect your decision?"

She licked her lips. "Because... I—I'm not giving you what you wanted."

This woman! "It's about what you want, Goldie. Always remember that." And then, because he couldn't help himself, he reached a hand around her neck. "What do you want, sunshine?"

He studied her eyes—today there seemed to be more golds than greens and browns. At that moment, he would have given her the world if she asked.

"Tell me," he said.

"I want..." She swallowed hard. "I want..."

"What?"

She dropped her lashes and then barely whispered. “One last kiss.”

Reed would have chuckled if he didn't imagine that it might hurt her feelings.

“That,” he growled. “I can do.” Reed pulled her forward, pressing his mouth against hers.

She shifted on the bench to face him, and in an instant, this kiss deepened into something more than the ones they'd shared before. Because it could be their last? Or because no one was around to interrupt them?

Fitting her against him, he rested one hand just below her breast.

And his blood spiked by at least ten degrees.

She was so soft.

So inviting.

He slid his hand higher and cradled the plump mound. She wore no stays this morning so nothing prevented him from feeling the warmth of her skin. He stroked his thumb around the tip, and her nipple hardened into a tight little bud.

She fit his hand perfectly, little more than a handful. She arched her back, molding herself against him. “Reed,” his name on her lips, followed by a moan, lit a fire in him.

“Goldie,” he breathed, trailing his mouth over her chin, down her neck, and to her chest. Like a drowning man, he inhaled her essence. Clean, warm, vanilla-scented woman.

Saying goodbye was all wrong. If he'd met her under different circumstances—if he wasn't on the precipice of utter ruin... She could have been his.

He would have courted her properly. He would have given her everything she deserved.

Instead, he would give her this.

This kiss.

“You’re beautiful, Goldie. Never doubt that.” He leaned forward, and laved his tongue over the sensitive flesh before capturing it—sucking her in and smiling when she exhaled a fluttery sigh.

Pleasuring such an innocent was wrong, but it was also right. It was as though the two of them had been discussing this dance since the beginning. Neither could walk away until they’d finished it.

Her fingers threaded through his hair as she melted beneath his touch.

“Reed.”

He pulled her legs across his lap and slid his hand under her gown. Yesterday she’d worn practical half-boots. When she’d climbed into the hackney, he’d gotten a glimpse of woolen stockings.

Today her slippers were delicate and her stockings made of silk. He stroked his fingertips up and down the length of one calf.

“You don’t know how many times I...” She trembled. Was she embarrassed?

“You thought of this?” Reed finished for her.

She nodded into his neck. “Last summer... I grew rather fond of you.”

Reed’s breath caught. Was she going to change her mind?

But she was right. She would lose everything. It wouldn't be fair to make her give it all up. "What do you want, Goldie?" he asked instead.

"This. I just want this."

He walked his fingers higher on her leg.

"This?"

She nodded again.

"Look at me, sweetheart." This had nothing to do with him marrying her. This was pure, unadulterated attraction.

He would not use this to change her mind. Reed clenched his jaw.

"Yes," she said. Her legs parted in a timeless invitation.

"When you find this husband you're going to land." Reed stroked the silk of her stockings, feeling unusually protective of her. "Be sure he makes you feel special."

She stared at him silently, her mouth parted as though she had something to say.

But nothing came out.

Reed inched up to where her stockings ended and delicate skin, softer than any silk ever made, beckoned him to explore some more.

Goldie kept her gaze locked with his. "Yes," she said. And then... "How?"

"Let yourself feel," he said. Reed nudged her thighs wider. Finding delicate curls, he slid his fingers along her folds. He didn't need to ask if she liked this, pleasure flushed her face and her eyes glowed. She licked her lips, her breath hitched, and his fingers were soaked with her arousal.



His cock pushed hard against her bottom but would remain firmly tucked inside his breeches.

Curling his finger, he entered her slowly and watched as her pupils dilated.

Just for her. Just this once. She'd not go into her season like a lamb to the slaughter. She'd know a thing or two of her own needs.

Reed only wished he could use his mouth. And he wished he could know her completely.

But this wasn't love. This was desire—a far more tangible emotion than what she wanted.

The only kind he knew how to match.

“So beautiful,” he whispered. “If you were mine, I'd lay you out on my bed, and I'd memorize every inch of you—with my eyes, my hands... and with my mouth.”

He added a second finger, relishing in her velvety warmth as her muscles clenched around him. “And then I'd cover you with my weight. I'd lick you, and taste you, and fill you with my cock making you mine forever.”

She closed her eyes and tensed. A teardrop formed at the corner of one eye, and Reed captured it on his tongue. And as she pulsed and squeezed his hand between her thighs as her climax rolled through her, Reed wondered if he'd missed his chance. He could beg her to be his. Promise her the love that mattered so much to her.

What was love, anyway?

He could cajole her, offer her promises. The idea taunted him but he refused to allow it to take hold.

Instead, he kissed the top of her head and after allowing her a moment to catch her breath, he helped straighten her dress.

If he implored her now, it wouldn't be fair.

She pushed herself off him, her legs shaking.

"I should walk you back now," he said.

"Yes. Yes." Her answer was distracted.

Vague.

This time he did not hold her hand, but only watched her footsteps to ensure she made it safely back to the path.

At the street, she seemed to have gathered her wits and turned to look up at him. "Good luck, Reed. I'll never forget you."

"Forget me," he said. "But always remember..."

"What?" She cocked her head.

"That you deserve the best."

Her eyes glistened, but before she could respond, Reed pivoted and practically ran to get away from her.

For her sake.

Because she deserved so much more.

## BETRAYED

ENTERING HER FATHER'S HOME, Goldie walked right past Mr. Bulwark and rushed up to her chamber, where she immediately threw herself facedown onto her bed.

What had she done? What were these feelings?

She was terribly confused. Had she made the mistake Madam Zeta warned her about? Saying goodbye to Reed had certainly felt like a mistake. Had her eyes been as sad as his? Were these emotions only fleeting? Would they vanish with greater familiarity as Nia's had done?

But it wasn't the same. Reed was nothing like his cousin had been.

He was kind and understanding. He loved his sisters and mother, and he was everything she'd believed him to be last summer. And more!

But was she prepared to give up the only life she'd ever known? Her sister and best friend?

And then it struck her that even now, she was alone. And Nia would marry soon.

If Goldie did not find a husband, she'd have no choice but to act as companion to her mother and to do her father's bidding.

And despite Reed's insistence that she'd easily land a husband, she'd been led to believe the opposite her entire life.

And if she didn't land a husband, she would never have her own home—or children—or...

She would have no one to kiss her.

But it was done. She'd given him her answer. What would he do now? No doubt, he'd find some other young lady to pursue—someone whose father would approve.

Imagining Reed holding anyone else with the same tenderness he'd shown her... of him touching another woman intimately, of him kissing anyone but her... was devastating! She swallowed a threatening sob, but a few tears escaped nonetheless.

Closing her eyes, she relived the morning's events over and over in her mind.

His scent and his taste were distinctly unique and utterly unforgettable. He'd not checked his passion when he'd claimed her mouth with his. He'd plundered.

He'd devoured. And Goldie had wanted all of it.

And more.

She supposed she ought to feel cheap by allowing such intimacies, but instead, she felt... Cherished. If he'd proposed again, at that moment, she would have said yes.

Goldie punched a pillow and curled onto her side.

Even in the bustling crowd at the carnival, she'd felt protected.

And now she had disappointed him.

With all these thoughts tumbling around her head, her lack of sleep from the night before caught up with her and she drifted into a restless sleep.

“WAKE UP, MY LADY.”

Goldie murmured a protest, but the hand on her shoulder was persistent. “Your father wishes to speak with you.”

“Right now?” Goldie rolled over to stare at Nellie, one of the maids from downstairs. “What time is it?”

“Half past eleven.”

Being summoned by her father was never a good thing. Had he heard about her outing earlier this morning? Had word of her visit to the carnival somehow gotten back to him?

She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and pushed herself up to sit.

“Did he say what it was about?” Goldie asked, hating the familiar sick feeling of dread that came with the prospect of one of his talks.

“No, my lady.”

Crushed by Goldie’s impromptu nap, the gown she’d donned for her earlier meeting had become too wrinkled for an appearance with her father. Furthermore, a glance in the mirror showed all the ravages of her bout of tears.

Nellie immediately understood Goldie’s predicament and rushed across to the wardrobe to remove a new gown. “The water in the bin is fresh. Hold a cool cloth to your eyes,” she said.

“Thank you, Nellie,” Goldie unfastened the front of her gown and wrestled out of it. “Where is he?”

“He’s in the morning room, my lady.” Nellie pulled out a muted mint muslin, not one of Goldie’s favorites, but she didn’t have time to find something else.

Ten minutes later, looking perhaps more tired than usual but otherwise perfectly presentable, Goldie rushed downstairs to join her father at the table where he sat reading the Gazette and drinking tea.

Placed at the right of his plate was a sheet of familiar parchment—a letter—covered with her mother’s handwriting.

“It’s about time.” He barely glanced up as Goldie sat in the chair held out for her by a footman.

“Good morning, father.” She quickly glanced at the clock on the mantle to confirm that it was, in fact, still morning. A quarter till noon.

She exhaled. So much had already happened today. But if she were to dwell on her meeting with Reed now, she’d tear up again.

“I received a letter.” He frowned.

“Word from mother?” Goldie asked. “Is she well? Is Nia?”

“Ah, yes,” he spoke as though he’d forgotten why he’d called her there. “Both are doing splendidly, as a matter of fact. Lord Dewberry is showing an interest in your sister.”

“The duke has a son?” Goldie had met the Duke of Dewberry on a few occasions but didn’t remember ever hearing about any offspring. And although Dewberry was only slightly younger than her father, his skin was wrinkled and dry,

and his eyebrows had grown together into one long line over small, cloudy blue eyes.

“He’s without progeny,” her father informed her. “In fact, he’s in need of an heir. Your mother believes Nia can expect an offer from him in the near future. Your sister will be a duchess, Marigold.”

“But...” Goldie was horrified. “He’s so old!” Poor Nia! Marrying Dewberry seemed a worse prospect than marrying Lord Rupert would have been. Nia was young and bright and positively lovely.

Lord Dewberry... was not.

“He is a duke.” Her father gave the stare he used to keep his wife and daughters from arguing with him. It was dark and cold, and promised swift retribution if the person on the receiving end posed any further argument. Goldie’s stomach clenched.

“Oh.” *Poor, poor, Nia!*

“And,” her father said. “With Dewberry on the line, she and your mother have decided to remain in Bath indefinitely.”

Indefinitely? But they were meant to return to Mayfair any day.

It took Goldie a moment before she comprehended the ramifications of this new information. “You mean until the Season begins?” That would mean delaying Goldie’s come-out.

“I said indefinitely, and that is what I meant. In fact, I’m going to send you there to join them. Without your mother and sister here, you have no business in London.”

“But my come-out—”

“Was never a good idea.” Her father finally looked at her fully. “Come now. You know as well as I that you’re not fit for marriage. You’re far too opinionated. You’ll have a better life as a spinster.” With the subject dismissed, he glanced down at his fob watch. “There is plenty of daylight for you to begin your journey to Bath today. You will pack your belongings at once and be on your way. I’ve already ordered Coachman John to ready the carriage. He’ll be waiting for you in half an hour.”

“But—” Goldie faltered, stunned.

This couldn’t be happening!

“I’ve no companion.”

“You’ll do well enough. It’s not as though you haven’t been galivanting around Mayfair on your own these past few weeks.”

“But I’ll have to stay in an inn by myself—”

“Trust me, a gel like you has nothing to worry about. Simply lock yourself in your chamber when you get there, and don’t come out until morning.” When she didn’t move, he pinned her with that glare again. “You’re dismissed, daughter.”

Her father had just rearranged her entire life with less than a dozen words. No come-out? No husband? No family?

*“You will be faced with a test. A test of courage. A test of faith. Your happiness depends on passing it.”*

Despite her father’s dismissal, Goldie sat frozen.

She’d made the wrong decision! The duke had returned to reading his paper, and as Goldie stared at him, her heart turned cold.

Yes, he was her father. But to him, she wasn’t really a daughter. She was a nuisance, an irritating responsibility.



Recollections from this morning's meeting with Reed slammed into her.

She'd made the wrong decision!

And on the heels of that realization, she began plotting a plan to remedy her situation.

If it wasn't already too late.

She went to rise, and a footman drew her chair backward.

"Very well," she said. She moved toward the door, but before she exited, she turned back. "Goodbye, Father."

A lump nearly choked her words, but he didn't notice.

"Hurry along," her father waved her away.

Which was just as well.

Climbing the stairs back to her room, she blinked away tears. But her father did not deserve them.

And by the time she had located her valise and begun filling it with belongings she couldn't live without, she was fuming. At her mother, at her father, but also at herself.

She had courage. Scads of it!

Tons of it!

She simply needed to use it. And she would use it to take control of her own life.

She secured the case closed and, with one last glimpse around the room, slipped into the corridor and down the servants' stairs. Once she was sure no one was watching her, she snuck out the garden gate and all but ran to where she remembered Lord Standish's Mayfair townhouse was located—on Hanover Square. Luckily, Nia had pointed it out to her last spring.

It was set back from the street, but grand, and visible from St. George's Cathedral. She would know it when she saw it.

If only she was half as confident that Lord Standish would be there.

Because if he wasn't, she...

Hadn't figured that out yet.

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"THERE MUST BE something we can do. Perhaps I can stir up some sort of scandal that would squash these rumors. Because I refuse to allow my favorite brother to live out the remainder of his life in Newgate," Caroline pinned a stern look on him. "Or worse."

"You will not do anything of the sort," Reed spoke in stern tones because he wouldn't put it past his sister to put his safety before hers. It wouldn't be the first time. Despite the five years he had on her, she'd stood up for him more than once.

"Perhaps I can talk to her..." Caroline pondered aloud.

Reed contemplated it for half a second. Caroline could be quite persuasive when she put her mind to it. And yet...

Goldie had made her wishes quite clear. By marrying him, she'd have to give up her family. It wouldn't be fair to manipulate her decision.

"No..."

Earlier, after being refused, Reed had walked around the blasted park more times than he could count, first, in an attempt to tamp down his inconvenient arousal, and once he'd

succeeded with that, he'd racked his mind in search of another answer to his problem.

He was going to have to speak with West—and Helton, of course. The publisher had seemed somewhat sympathetic, or he would have run the first story already—despite his arm-twisting.

But first, he'd returned to deliver the bad news to Caroline.

Reed smoothed his hands down his thighs, pushed himself off the settee, and glanced at the clock. Five past one.

He felt ten years older than he had yesterday at this time.

And he couldn't blame it on the alcohol he'd consumed last night. No, he could blame that on the fact that he'd run out of time.

Caroline rose as well. "I'm going to talk with her."

"You'll do no such thing, Caroline. I mean it."

She didn't get the chance to argue because a knock on the drawing room door cut into the conversation. How long would it be before the rumors solidified suspicions? Before the magistrate acted upon them?

"Enter," Reed snapped.

The door swung open, and Beasley stepped one foot inside. "There is a lady here, my lord."

Reed stilled. What lady in her right mind would associate with their family right now? "My mother isn't taking visitors," he reminded the man.

"It is not your mother she wishes to see." The butler met Reed's gaze. "Lady Marigold, daughter of the Duke of Crossings, is here to see you."

Reed froze.

“Send her in,” he said.

Silence fell when Beasley disappeared until Reed paced across to the window and then turned to meet Caroline’s gaze.

“She’s changed her mind,” Caroline said.

But Reed shook his head, not wishing to get his hopes up.

But they hadn’t time to speculate because a moment later, the door opened, and Mr. Beasley escorted Goldie inside—quite a different-looking Goldie than he’d met with this morning.

Gone was her yellow gown and carefully pinned coiffure.

She locked a panicked gaze with his. “My lord—Reed,” she said. “I was afraid you wouldn’t be here.”

Half her curls had come undone, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes a little puffy—as though she’d either been sleeping or crying.

And she was carrying a valise in one hand.

“My lady,” Caroline said.

Goldie’s eyes widened as though she hadn’t realized anyone else was in the room.

“Oh, Miss Rutherford—my lady,” she faltered. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.” She began walking backward toward the door.

“No!” Caroline was on her feet, taking Goldie’s arm and leading her to the settee. “You aren’t interrupting anything. Please, sit down. I’ll go ask Cook to bring tea.”

Reed wasn’t used to such a swing of emotions. He felt hopeful that she’d changed her mind, but he was also

concerned that something had happened to cause Goldie to appear so harried and... distraught.

Above all, he was relieved to simply see her again.

Paralyzed by the onslaught, he remained by the window until Caroline made her hasty departure.

Goldie shifted so she was facing him. "Have you found someone else?" Lines of worry creased between her lovely eyes and, even holding her valise with one hand, she used the other to pluck nervously at her glove.

"Someone else?" But there was no one else. She'd been the answer to all his problems.

And more.

If anything, Goldie appeared more distraught. "Have you found someone else to marry you today? You're an earl, after all. But in case you have not... If... I'd like... I've changed my mind. Reed. I'd like to marry you—that is—if you still want me."

Reed could hardly believe his ears. With a shake of his head, he finally moved across the room and then gingerly lowered himself onto the seat beside her. "You..." He cleared his throat. "You wish to marry me after all? What about your father? What about your come-out?"

She raised her fist to her mouth, and her hazel eyes swam with unshed tears. "They no longer signify."

Something had happened. Reed reached up and took her fist in his, lowering it so their hands rested between them. "Of course, I still want you." For more reasons than he'd set out with. "I'm..." And then he smiled. "I'm delighted. But only if you are sure."

“I’m sure,” she answered emphatically.

Caroline returned at that moment, not bothering to knock. Seeing Goldie’s hand in his, however, she hesitated. “Is there to be a wedding after all, then?”

## A NEW FAMILY

REED WAS ALLOWED no time alone with his newly betrothed as Caroline had immediately whisked Goldie upstairs. Which, he supposed, was as it should be.

But although he had matters to attend to himself, not being able to talk to her frustrated him. He wanted to learn more about her reasons for changing her mind. It obviously had something to do with her father. Had the duke discovered that she'd met with him? Had the duke hurt her in some way?

Caroline, however, would take good care of Goldie. Already, Reed heard the sounds of heated water being carried upstairs. Servants scurried about and the house seemed to come alive for the first time since the passing of the old duke.

Thinking there must be much to do, but at a momentary loss as to what any of it might be, Reed returned to his study.

He would send word to West. Yes. And to the church, confirming the prior arrangements. Doing things grounded him. Keeping himself occupied was just the ticket.

He retrieved the special license from his top drawer. All he needed to do was fill in Goldie's name.

*Marigold.*

A glance at the clock on the mantle sent a wash of cold fear through his frame. Because, by some miracle, he might just pull this off.

And pulling this off roused an entirely new set of nerves.

Because, it seemed, he was taking a wife.

Tonight.

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LADY CAROLINE DIDN'T WASTE a moment as she all but dragged Goldie upstairs and into a luxurious suite. "I'd take you to the suite that adjoins Reed's, but my aunt's belongings are yet to have been cleared out. We didn't think it would be necessary so soon." She sent Goldie an apologetic wince and shrug. "But we'll have them removed this afternoon. You'll be needing it after you return from the church this evening."

*Church. This evening.* Goldie blinked away the dizziness that threatened.

And before she could protest that this suite would be quite sufficient, two other girls appeared.

"Lady Marigold," Caroline said. "May I present my two younger sisters to you—your future sisters-in-law: Lady Melanie and Lady Josephine." Caroline grimaced. "I'm still not quite used to that. We never expected Reed would have the title."

Both were younger versions of their older sister, and equally pretty.

"It is rather exceptional, isn't it?" Goldie clutched her valise in one hand, not sure what to do.



“Are your trunks going to be delivered later?” Lady Josephine asked. Because under normal circumstances, the daughter of a duke would have more than one valise of belongings to bring with her into a marriage.

She’d also have a dowry.

And a church full of guests.

“I... I don’t know.” Goldie decided to jump right in with the truth. “My father doesn’t know I’m here. He wouldn’t approve if he did.” The thought struck her that if he suspected any of this, he’d likely storm his way inside and challenge her betrothed.

Not because he cared particularly about his second daughter, but because he hated having his plans thwarted. Goldie turned cold at the thought.

“You mustn’t worry about any of that,” Lady Melanie offered. “By marrying Reed, you’ll have his full protection. And you’ll soon learn that he doesn’t take his responsibilities lightly.”

“You will also have free reign with his accounts at all the local shops,” Lady Josephine added with a wink.

“Josie...” Lady Caroline shot her younger sister a stern look.

Goldie couldn’t help but acknowledge that all three girls were every bit as friendly as Reed had said, and his descriptions of their characters, surprisingly accurate.

Lady Caroline managed everything with an abundance of enthusiasm, while Lady Melanie offered quiet support, and the youngest taunted her older sisters that she would be Reed and Josie’s childrens’ favorite aunt.

Whereupon Lady Caroline sent her youngest sister a second stern look before asking the maid to bring tea.

In the quiet that settled after, Lady Melanie spoke, “Your father shouldn’t blame Reed, you know. It’s not his fault the hunting lodge burnt down.”

Goldie hugged her arms in front of her. Everything was happening so fast.

“Let’s not talk about that today.” Lady Caroline took charge again. “Lady Marigold has a wedding to prepare for.” And as though responding to a cue, a footman knocked, and with a nod of permission, he and three other uniformed men began carrying in steaming buckets of water.

Behind them were two maids, one bringing linens and the other a tray with sponges and soaps.

“Reed had piped water installed at our father’s estate—at Breaker’s Cottage,” Lady Melanie sighed. “He’s quite forward-thinking when it comes to practical matters. I’m just happy we won’t have to live in this mausoleum after all. Uncle Lucas considered the convenience of modern amenities a waste. Why put out the expense when there are servants to tend to such matters?”

“Uncle Lucas didn’t care—”

A harsh look from Caroline silenced the youngest yet again. But in the matter of a few minutes, Goldie understood that Reed’s sisters were all staunch supporters of their brother.

And although Goldie had already deemed him trustworthy in her own mind, she found it reassuring.

Lady Melanie however, had mentioned residing elsewhere. “Surely you’ll remain here at Rutherford Place?” Goldie asked.

She'd imagined his entire family living here with her and Reed after the wedding, and learning differently, she experienced a jab of disappointment. The prospect of having such lively girls about was something she'd never realized she'd wanted.

"It's because of me." An older woman with salt and pepper hair and piercing blue eyes stood in the open doorway. Dressed in all black—gown, gloves, and veil—the woman could be none other than Reed's mother.

Having endured years of etiquette training, Goldie immediately rose and then dipped into a low curtsy. "I am honored to meet you, ma'am," she said.

Technically, as the daughter of a duke, Goldie outranked Mrs. Rutherford. But this woman was going to be her mother-in-law. And having turned her back on her own family by agreeing to marry Reed, Goldie would do whatever she could to find favor with his family.

Her new family.

Because Goldie needed... people.

"The pleasure is mine." Mrs. Rutherford's gaze drifted around to her three daughters. "We are grateful, all of us." The servants moved silently as the girls nodded solemnly. "Your decision cannot have been an easy one."

Goldie wished she could think of an appropriate response but only gulped. In the end, she hadn't had much choice.

Her own father had taken that from her.

"As for returning to my husband's residence," Reed's mother continued. "It's best you begin your marriage as mistress of your own home. We promise to be out of your way first thing in the morning."

Goldie would have protested, but Mrs. Rutherford's demeanor was firm. And from what the girls had said earlier, the newly widowed lady no doubt simply wanted to return to her own home.

Reed's mother reiterated her welcome and then disappeared as quickly as she'd arrived. And over the next several hours, Goldie was sure she would have been overwhelmed if she didn't like Reed's sisters so much.

Lady Caroline had sent for a modiste, who brought several gowns for Goldie to try, and then just as quickly swooshed away to alter the one that all three sisters deemed perfect.

Following a delicious tea of sandwiches and pastries, Goldie then languished in a hot bath before sitting by the fire while Caroline styled her hair. And after donning the lovely emerald gown that now fit her perfectly, Goldie even agreed to a very small amount of rouge on her cheeks and lips.

Sometime in the midst of it all, Reed had sent up a missive informing them that the wedding had been scheduled for seven in the evening. They'd all sit down to a special dinner afterward. And although a part of Goldie may have wished otherwise, time flew.

"I'm going to leave you alone now so I can get ready," Caroline was the last sister to remain in Goldie's chamber. "But if you have need of anything else, I'm three doors to the left."

"All of you are coming?" Goldie asked, imagining herself and Reed in the magnificent Cathedral all alone.

"We wouldn't miss it for the world." Caroline smiled as she backed out the door. "Just remember, the third chamber on the left. I'm there if you need anything."

When the door closed behind the older girl, Goldie exhaled a loud sigh. Just this morning, she'd been determined to make the most of her season, and now...

She stared at herself in the looking glass.

Now, she hardly recognized herself. The gown, made up of luxurious silk, fit in a way that emphasized her bosom and hips, nipping in at the waist so that it appeared smaller than usual. And Caroline had done her hair so that the curls seemed deliberate rather than chaotic.

Even her eyes looked brighter. Was that because of Reed?

Or because she was terrified?

An army of nerves exploded in her chest.

Not only had she run away, but she was going to marry a man whom her father disapproved of vehemently.

Her sister would not be there to see it, nor would her mother.

Goldie paced across the room and stared out the window down at the gardener's hut, which was set just on the edge of what would be lush gardens come April.

She would be the mistress of this house. Lady Standish.

A countess!

What would her life look like by then?

Her stomach lurched, sending her rushing over to the chamber pot where she wretched up most of the food she'd consumed earlier. Thank heavens the girls, her future sisters, were not there to witness it.

After wiping her mouth and cleaning her teeth, she lowered herself onto a chair and bent forward. When a knock

sounded, assuming it would be Caroline again, she glanced up. “Come in.”

But it was not Caroline. It was Reed. She drank in the sight of him, hoping to find the thousands of reassurances she needed.

He’d changed into a formal jacket, and his thick dark hair was combed away from his face. The cravat he wore tilted a little to one side, but that only added to his looks. In fact, each time she saw him, he appeared more handsome than before.

“Is it time already?” She sat up.

Reed shook his head. “Not quite, but I wanted a few minutes alone with you.” He kept his glistening blue gaze fixed on her as he drew up a chair.

“I like your mother,” Goldie burst out.

Reed smiled softly. “She likes you too.”

“And your sisters,” she added. Why did she feel so awkward all of a sudden? Why, just that morning, he’d had his hand up her gown, doing unspeakable things!

“They adore you.” He held her gaze, looking open, inviting any questions. “You look beautiful, but how *are* you?” She’d heard about people gazing into one another’s souls but never truly experienced it until that moment.

She had nothing to hide from this man, which was odd, and yet, fitting.

“This is... all happening so fast,” Goldie admitted.

“I’d go about it differently, but—”

“I know. It’s important to squash the rumors.”

“Yes.” He dipped his chin. “But it will also stir up a new scandal.”

“Which is precisely the point,” Goldie supplied. She understood all of this. His mother had thanked her. His sisters had welcomed her with open arms.

By marrying him, she was helping him. But there would be more to their marriage. She was betting her life on it.

“By stirring up a scandal, it’s possible your father will issue a challenge. If he does, how would you like me to handle him? I’m not unwilling to face him, but he is your father. What would *you* have me do?” All his focus was on her, making every inch of her skin come to life.

Goldie flicked her gaze to his mouth, and then down to his hands. Remembering the way he’d touched her earlier. Her breasts tightened with an achy sensation.

But he was asking her how she’d have him to deal with her father.

“I’d rather neither of you killed the other,” she said.

Even if her father had shown he possessed no regard for her feelings.

“If he calls me out, the choice of weapons will be mine. Details can be arranged so that neither of us ends up pushing up daisies.”

Goldie tried to imagine her father in a duel—on her behalf.

And she couldn’t see it. “He won’t call you out, so you shouldn’t worry about it. Now, if you were marrying Nia instead of me, then he would demand satisfaction.” She sent him a rueful smile. “But you did not ask Nia to marry you. You asked me.”

“I asked you.” His gaze warmed her. “Are you nervous?”

She would not mention that she’d lost the contents of her stomach just ten minutes before he arrived. Besides, now that he was here, sitting in front of her...

“Just a little,” she admitted. Suddenly she wanted to be in his arms again. She wanted him to kiss her again.

He glanced at the fob watch hanging from his coat and then rose and offered his hand. “Come here,” he said.

This.

This was why she would marry him. Deep down, she sensed a special understanding between the two of them. She had little reason to trust it, but it was enough.

She took his hand and allowed him to pull her up to stand.

Rather than take her into his arms as she’d wanted, however, he spun her around so her back faced his front.

He placed both his hands on her shoulders and began rubbing the chords of her muscles.

“Oh,” she sighed as the tension she hadn’t even realized was there began easing away.

“My sisters can be quite... exuberant. But they mean well,” he said. “I hope they didn’t wear you out.”

“Quite the opposite,” Goldie relaxed into him. “I like them.”

His fingertips moved up her neck, smoothing over her skin and sliding into her hair.

“I’m glad.” Did his voice catch?

Goldie waited a moment and then asked, “Are you nervous?”



“I’m relieved.”

His answer was an odd one, but then, nothing about their arrangement was normal, was it? He’d kissed her. He’d told her he wanted her.

He’d touched her intimately.

But the marriage was to serve a greater purpose. Naïve though she was, she realized that for him to marry just over a month after the deaths in his family would be great fodder for gossip.

And he would protect her—from the gossip, but also from her father.

She was putting a tremendous amount of trust in him.

“People are going to gossip about me.” She hadn’t thought all of this through. She’d lived most of her life under a cloak of invisibility. How would it feel to be the center of attention—and not the sort of attention one usually vied for?

“Yes.” He did not deny it. “We’ll remain in London just a few weeks into the Season. Unless you would prefer otherwise.”

“What will people say?” Goldie asked.

“They’ll say I couldn’t resist your charms. They’ll say that your new husband is an uncouth commoner who couldn’t keep his desire in check.” His fingers trailed over her shoulders now, slowly, and his voice definitely sounded lower. “They’ll berate me for stealing you away before any of them had a chance to sweep you up for themselves.”

She felt his breath near her ear.

“Surely not—ah…”

Her heart skipped a beat when his mouth landed on her neck. And then she melted like butter when he dropped his hands from her hair and wound them around her waist, pressing her tightly against him.

“They will be right in their speculation,” he added.

The only nerves bothering her now were those of arousal. Nerves he’d awakened that craved more of his touch...

But just as she went to spin around in his arms, a knock sounded at her door. “Goldie! We should be going down now.” It was Caroline.

Goldie jumped away from Reed just before the door opened.

Caroline, a very astute young woman, glanced between the two of them with a knowing look. “Definitely time to be going. Reed, you walk over ahead of us. Your bride should be the last to arrive. It’s already bad enough you’ve seen her on your wedding day.”

Goldie barely stifled a hysterical laugh at this.

Because she hadn’t even realized it was her wedding day until after noon.

*“You will be faced with a test. A test of courage. A test of faith. Your happiness depends on passing it.”*

She only hoped this was the right test.

And she hoped Madam Zeta hadn’t been spouting a bunch of nonsense.

## AT THE ALTAR

REED TUGGED AT HIS CRAVAT, staring down the long aisle dividing the pews at St. George's Cathedral.

From the altar.

Where he stood waiting for his bride!

"Helton will be outraged, initially," West spoke softly from where he stood beside Reed.

"But he did not specify which of Crossing's daughters I was to marry."

"No, he did not," West answered. "But it was implied."

"A little late to second guess, wouldn't you agree?" Reed lifted his chin and stretched his shoulders. Now was not the time to question his choice of bride. He'd known it was a gamble—she'd been his only option, really.

"You have the ring?"

"For the tenth time, yes." West chuckled, and his amused tone echoed off the walls of this revered house of worship, which was mostly empty.

Reed winced. If this church were a ship, it would be listing to the groom's side, where a smattering of guests sat—mostly his sisters and mother, but a few of his mother's sisters as well.

The pews on the bride's side gleamed shining and empty.

A bride who was the daughter of a duke.

It was wrong on so many levels, but there was nothing Reed could do about it now. He'd have to make it up to her sometime in the future.

Movement at the back caught his attention, and the door pushed open. Caroline stepped inside first. She'd happily volunteered to act as a witness.

And after his sister had arrived at the altar and stepped aside, Reed caught sight of Goldie. She stood in the open door looking hesitant—frozen, almost. Was she having second thoughts?

If she had, she quickly overcame them and began the long walk to join him at the altar.

He'd seen her gown already when he'd gone to her chamber earlier, but it radiated more brilliantly in the flickering candles lit around the sanctuary.

No—it was Goldie who radiated. Spending time with her these past few days had lifted his heart like nothing else. The thought took him by surprise.

She'd brought sunshine back into his life.

And as she neared, her features came into focus. Dark lashes fringed her eyes, which danced with that increasingly familiar myriad of golds and greens and browns. He smiled as he noticed her pert little nose, rousing a pink flush to her adorable heart-shaped face.

And then she smiled at him—with lips that were ripe and rosy and far too kissable.

The effect had something tightening in his chest. She was more than pretty. She was sweet and intelligent, and more courageous than any woman he'd ever known.

She was defying her father—the Duke of Crossings—for him.

Her trusting gaze held his, and he determined then and there that he would do all in his power to prevent her from ever regretting it. She liked his family. That was a good beginning.

And from their approving looks from where they sat on the left side of the church, it was obvious they liked her just as much.

Goldie ignored the empty pews on the bride's side. Was that why she kept her gaze fixed on the altar, on him? She looked so small and vulnerable, all alone. No doubt, she felt the absence of her family.

Unwilling to watch her walking alone a second longer, Reed stepped down from the alter and reached out for her hand. And as he escorted her the remainder of the distance, he gave her hand a squeeze. *Everything will be fine—better than fine—actually.*

She glanced up at him, temporarily stealing his breath.

With the flickering candlelight from the sconces on the wall, Goldie's complexion took on an ethereal appearance.

He would eternally be grateful that her sister had left London. Goldie was his perfect bride.

Being with her came naturally. Touching her excited him. She'd wanted him to kiss her again before Caroline had barged in. Would she allow him into her bed tonight?

They arrived before the priest, and the ceremony began.

He'd sat through dozens of wedding services in the past, not absorbing the solemnity or celebration of the vows. But with Goldie, he recited them from his heart.

And when it came time to slide the ring on her finger, his heart leapt. Would their wedding night serve up all the promise her kisses had held?

What he'd assumed to be some sort of punishment had become a blessing. Reed blinked down at their hands. As long as Helton considered Reed marrying Goldie an equally newsworthy story, Reed's worries would be over.

His marriage will have put the suspicions about the fire to rest once and for all.

Goldie slid a gold band onto his finger.

Goldie, however, would be stained with a scandal for life.

Reed was standing in a house of God, his heart racing like any besotted bridegroom, emerging from his family's tragedy utterly unscathed.

He'd slake his lust on his innocent bride.

He'd garner standing and respect as the new Earl of Standish, by using Goldie.

Everything he'd gained came because the most important men in his life had died.

A wave of utter self-revulsion hit him like a brick wall, and suddenly, all the warmth spun out of the room. And with this onslaught of frost came the dawning realization that...

This was all wrong.

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GOLDIE HAD THOUGHT she'd be a bundle of nerves walking down the aisle toward her groom. None of her family was in attendance, not even Nia. Her father would have been told she'd disappeared by now. Did he imagine she was simply pouting somewhere? Hiding in the attic like she'd done as a child?

How long before he even bothered looking for her?

But as she walked toward her groom, as Reed's expression came into view, all those thoughts fell away.

Because Reed, her *future husband*, was watching her with hopeful eyes.

With more than hope, was that affection? He was not marrying her for love. He'd made no pretense of that. But he'd kissed her—twice now. He'd touched her intimately.

And he'd confessed to wanting her.

He'd said he didn't want to marry any other woman. His reasons involved dispersing those nasty rumors, so, of course, this marriage was... complicated.

But no one had ever looked at her like that before—like she mattered more than anyone else.

And as the ceremony got underway, she could almost believe that theirs was a love match.

He even seemed to hold her hand longer than necessary after sliding the simple gold band onto her finger.

But then...

After she'd slid a gleaming band on his ring finger, his entire demeanor changed—not in an obvious way, but she was not mistaken. Whereas he'd initially kept his gaze locked with hers, he'd stood through the last part of the service with it averted. He had only looked at her when necessary, and he rushed the kiss on her cheek.

And instead of taking her hand when it was over, pressing his palm against hers as she'd expected, he offered her his arm, his posture stiff.

*Removed.*

Last-minute cold feet? Did he regret being tied to someone like her?

Goldie forced her smile as she accepted thanks and congratulations from their few guests.

But Reed seemed only to endure the platitudes. Perhaps he'd gotten a headache. Was it possible he'd eaten something bad?

“Are you all right?” she asked him when they were alone. Despite Rutherford Place being only a handful of steps away, he'd ordered a carriage to drive them through Mayfair first. But now that they were alone, he'd become even more removed.

If he was ill, that would explain his strange behavior, would it not?

He'd sat across from her—not beside her.

“Of course.” His answer was short. He turned his gaze out the window.

Something was definitely wrong. But what? Had she done something wrong?



Goldie searched her mind, going over everything that had happened that day. He'd held her in his arms just before leaving her chamber earlier. If his sister had not arrived, surely, he'd have kissed her again. Perhaps he'd have done more.

"Have I offended you?" she asked, wishing he'd return to himself—the man she'd come to know.

Although she didn't know him at all, really, and now she was married to him! Goldie fussed at her gloves, the blood in her veins turning ice cold.

"Of course not," he said. "You've been... wonderful. In fact, I don't deserve you." He shot her a look that was perhaps meant to be reassuring, but his smile was not warm. It was... pained.

"It isn't a matter of deserving one another, is it?" Goldie offered tentatively

"Is it?" The words came out harsh-sounding, and his jaw clenched. Over the past few days, she'd not once felt uncomfortable talking with him. But something happened in the middle of their wedding ceremony.

He'd erected some sort of barrier.

Before she could come up with an answer to his derisive question, the driver came to a halt outside of her new home.

Reed pushed the door open. "My sisters have planned a meal—a celebration of sorts. We might as well get this over with."

He climbed out first and then provided her assistance by taking her hand.

Goldie shivered, though, because the gesture felt perfunctory. What on earth had happened? A vice began squeezing her heart, and the last thing she wanted to do was eat.

The only times she lost her appetite were when she was very, very upset.

Dinner should have been enjoyable. His sisters were perfectly lovely and even his mother, who'd temporarily come out of mourning for her surviving son's nuptials, made pleasant conversation.

But Reed had turned sullen—so much so that his sisters and mother made discreet excuses immediately following dessert. After giving Goldie a series of warm hugs and well wishes, all of the ladies disappeared for the night.

Leaving her alone with her new husband.

Reed remained seated at the end of the long table, his gaze fixed on one of the candles. But he wasn't really present. He was gone, hiding behind that wall he'd built between them.

"I'll go upstairs then." Goldie moved to rise but hesitated. "Unless..." She wanted to ask him to join her but lost the nerve.

"Unless...?" He lifted his eyes to meet hers.

"I mean. Are you... I thought..."

Reed scrubbed a hand down his face, breaking his icy demeanor for the first time in several hours.

Goldie, however, was feeling quite raw and required all her dignity to hold back threatening tears.

She hadn't expected a dramatic declaration of love; however, neither had she expected...

This.

“I’ve rushed you into all of this,” he said.

“I understand—”

“You need time to adjust...” He didn’t meet her eyes, however, and dropped his stare back to his plate where most of the pie sitting there remained untouched. “I won’t expect you to fulfill your... wifely duties tonight or anytime soon.”

“Oh.” Her heart sank.

He *had* rushed her, but...

When she didn’t move, he glanced up again. “Is there something else?”

His tone sent a chill down her spine. What had she done? She was a fool, a ridiculous and naïve fool to have married a man on such short acquaintance.

She rose from her chair and straightened her spine. “No. Good night, my lord.” And without waiting for an answer, Goldie spun around and swept out the door with as much dignity as she could muster.

She even managed to keep her tears from falling all the way to her chamber. But once inside, for the second time that day, she threw herself onto the bed and cried.

This day, her wedding day, was turning into the worst day of her life.

---

REED HEARD the words coming out of his mouth. Rude, thoughtless, horrible words that he had no power over.

Because of a tragedy, because of his uncle, his father, and his brother and cousin's abysmal choices, Reed was left with everything.

It was wrong! It was as though he'd woken up and found himself living in an alternate world. Everything was wrong. He should not be the last man standing. He should not be Standish, and damnit, his actions proved he didn't deserve to find happiness with someone so innocent and sweet as Goldie.

He did not deserve the sunshine. He only deserved darkness.

Newgate. It was the perfect punishment for a man like him—a man who benefited from the tragedy of his own blood relations.

The ceremony ought to have been Rupert's. The ceremony ought to have happened on a Saturday morning—not late at night with none of the bride's family present.

But Rupert had perished.

There must have been more Reed could have done. He'd known knew they were flirting with death—with hell. He'd known they were dancing with the devil. Reed ought to have been able to do something to protect them from themselves.

Newgate should have been Reed's just reward, by God.

Watching Goldie, sweet, innocent Goldie, staring up at him with her heart in her eyes had revealed how undeserving he was. Because... Hell and damnation. He liked her!

He more than liked her.

And he'd been anxiously anticipating their wedding night.

Which he'd decided to deny them both.

When the door to the dining room closed behind her, he exhaled.

Goldie had been prepared to go through it for him. She was... perfect. Everything he ever could have imagined.

None of it made sense.

Reed didn't remain in that blasted dining hall after Goldie left him alone. Even though her suite didn't adjoin his, she would be too near. It would be too easy for him to go to her, to pretend he actually deserved any of this.

And so he exited onto the street and walked.

He walked around Mayfair for what felt like hours. He didn't want to go to one of the gentlemen's clubs that would be open. He'd had his share of drinking and gambling the night before.

But the more he walked, the more he knew what he needed to do.

Once decided, he changed his direction and made his way toward Fleet Street.

Lucky for him, the windows in the building that housed the Gazette's offices glowed from inside.

The doors were locked, but with a few solid knocks, one of the clerks peered outside to see who would come at such a late hour. The man wore a long smock over his shirtsleeves and trousers, and most of his thin white hair stood on end while black ink smudged the side of his face.

"You got a story?" The older man scowled at him.

"Something like that," Reed answered. "I need to speak with the earl. With Lord Helton."

“The earl?”

“Maxwell Black.”

“Ah, and you are?”

“Standish.”

After eyeing Reed for a moment longer, the clerk opened the door and directed Reed to wait in the foyer. “I’ll see if he’s here,” he added.

Which meant the earl was, in fact, there. Reed paced back and forth across the room. And when a figure appeared at the door, he ought not to have been surprised to see his friend’s face. West, apparently, had come directly from the wedding to speak with Black.

“I thought you’d be home with your wife,” West said. “But seeing as you’ve already blundered in that area, come on back.”

“What makes you think I’ve blundered?” Reed growled.

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

Well, he could hardly counter that.

Reed shrugged and followed West as he proceeded to lead him deeper into the building through a sea of cluttered desks and giant machinery. Once through the large work area, they arrived at a heavy door, which West pushed open to reveal Maxwell Black.

The Earl of Helton, reclining with his feet on his desk, wore his spectacles perched on his nose and had a cigar hanging out of his mouth.

And yet the blighter still managed to look every inch the nobleman.

“Standish,” Black spoke around the dangling cheroot. “I understand you’re a married man now. What the devil are you doing here?” He dropped his feet and leaned forward.

“I want to annul it.” Reed rubbed the back of his neck.

Black stared at him from over his glasses. “Why the devil would you want to do that?”

“I don’t want to put her through this. Goldie—Lady Marigold—stands to lose her family.” Goldie had her own sister, a sister she obviously loved. She didn’t need his. How had he done this to such an innocent?

Black, however, frowned. “Even if I agreed with your reasoning, it’s too late. The paper’s already been put to bed. Printers are shut down, and half the delivery boys have already collected their bundles.”

“Catch them,” Reed said. “Surely—”

“It’s too late, Reed.” This came from West. “It’s done.”

“Besides, it’s a good story.” Black reclined again, clasping his hands behind his neck. “And by marrying you, she’s out from under Crossings’ control. The old bastard doesn’t give two figs for his second daughter. The way I see it, you’ve done her a favor.”

But Reed had not done Goldie a favor! He’d used her. And now he’d waited too long to see the error of his ways.

“As for your little change of plans, you ought to have come to me first. Don’t double-cross me again.” Black scowled but then handed across a folded paper. “Still, the story was front page material.”

Reed didn’t want to see his duplicity in black and white, but he stuffed it into his pocket anyway. The die was cast. He

was no better than the other men in his family.

And yet he lived. He'd rule the Standish estate, provide for the women in his family, and somehow find a way to make it up to Goldie.

"We're heading over to the club. Care to join us?" West asked. Black rose as well, donning his jacket.

"Hell no," Reed answered. That would only make everything worse.



## REVELATIONS

GOLDIE'S EYES FLEW OPEN. She'd been in and out of sleep all night, half-expecting Reed to return, to come knocking on her door, and half-wondering what would happen if she tried returning to her father's house, but something else had woken her this time.

She held her breath, and there was the sound again. But it was coming from outside. Sliding off the bed, she tiptoed across her room to the window.

She didn't know what to expect, but the sight below certainly wasn't anything she'd have guessed.

Moonlight reflected off the blade of an axe, which her husband swung in a controlled but violent rhythm.

He'd removed his shirt, and his chest glistened from his exertions.

Freshly cut wood had been stacked neatly against the hut. Wood that had not been there earlier that day.

But that was not what caught her attention.

It was his expression. Earlier, he'd appeared cold and dismissive. Now, he appeared to be a man... tortured.

And a possibility niggled at her.

He'd treated her like a stranger, almost, and she'd assumed it was because he was heartless.

But after a night of contemplating all the facts, she dismissed the notion.

Reed? Heartless? Never.

*"You've been... wonderful. In fact, I don't deserve you."* She played the words over and over in her mind. His voice had caught. And he'd not been able to meet her eyes for more than a few seconds.

Less than one month ago, he'd lost half his family in one night. As the new earl, he'd been expected to carry on as if nothing had happened.

*"I don't deserve you."*

Goldie donned her dressing gown, stepped into her slippers, and hoped she remembered the way to the servants' exit so she could get to him. Left. Yes, and then right. And then through the kitchens.

Four men had died.

Four men who, although undisciplined and immoral human beings, had been constants in Reed's life. And then Reed had become Standish.

She stepped outside triumphantly but then paused. What if she was wrong?

What if his cold demeanor was not because he'd felt undeserving?

But what if she was right?

She forced herself to cross the lawn and then follow the sounds of the axe splitting wood, around the path to the

gardener's hut.

At first, uncertain and doubting herself, she simply stood back, observing. His motions were steady but fierce. Most pieces of wood split all the way through on the first swing.

He didn't notice her for a while, but when she crossed her arms to keep from shivering, he stilled.

"Go back inside, Goldie." He did not turn to face her. Before he began swinging the axe again, she approached him.

"You said you were all right. You lied to me," she said.

Finally, he turned to face her. "I didn't."

It took all of Goldie's focus to concentrate on this conversation rather than his sinewy chest and the muscles that defined his abdomen. She ignored the aching in her breasts. She'd never seen a man like this before. He was...

Spectacular.

"You were happy at the church." She was taking a chance with her guess. "Right up until you realized it."

He shook his head, but at least he wasn't telling her to go away again.

"I saw it in your eyes," she insisted.

Reed shook his head and then swung the axe, splitting a giant log nearly in half. "It's not right." Was there a hint of uncertainty in his voice?

"What isn't right?"

"Any of it." He dropped the axe and bent forward, resting his hands on his knees, staring at the ground. A shudder ran through his form, and his breaths sounded loud in the early morning silence. "I knew they were tempting fate. I could

have joined them that night. If I'd been there, I could have put it out. If I was there, it might not even have happened."

"The fire," she said. Her father had believed the rumors. He'd been convinced Reed had set it—that Reed had taken advantage of the other men's addictions in a manner that he would benefit. Not once had she believed the rumors could be true.

"A senseless fire. And now, they are dead. They haven't traveled to the continent—nor are they languishing in some opium den. They're..." He frowned. "They're dead." The words were little more than a whisper.

Goldie approached him cautiously and, steeling herself, reached a hand out to touch his arm. "You couldn't save them. Not if they didn't want saving. Oh, Reed..."

"I should miss them. I should be devastated. But instead, I'm... I'm Standish now!" He rose, and the pain in his eyes was almost too much for Goldie to bear. "I'm the fucking Earl of Standish."

In that instant, Goldie had no doubt she'd been right. Reed didn't believe he deserved to be the earl. He didn't believe he deserved her.

He didn't believe he deserved to be happy.

"Yes. You are Standish now," she said. "And you'll bring honor to your family's title."

His arm trembled beneath her hand.

In a forceful motion, he tore himself away from her and, lifting the axe in the air, threw it with such force that the blade sunk at least an inch into the exterior of the gardener's hut.

“Reed,” Goldie grabbed hold of his arm again. “I’m so sorry.”

He did not resist her, so she stepped closer and slid her hand up his other arm.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” she chanted as he began to shake.

This time he did not push her away.

He slid his hands down and around her waist and buried his face in her neck. “You don’t deserve to be chained to a man like me. I’m... I was raised to manage estates, not rule them. You’re the daughter of a duke, and I used you—”

“You didn’t use me,” Goldie cut him off, comforting him with all her might, and yet, still, she couldn’t stop his shaking.

“I wasn’t fair to you.’

“I came here on my own. It was my decision. Because... Oh, Reed! I *like* the man who manages estates.”

“You shouldn’t.” He pulled her closer.

“But I do!”

And as though her words broke some wicked spell, he claimed her mouth, losing himself in her kiss like a man who’d just discovered a reason to live.

And the shaking stopped.

## TOGETHER

THIS WOMAN POSSESSED MAGIC. Her embrace had not only chased away his fears but sent his last resistance fleeing. She'd reignited that sliver of hope he'd thought extinguished forever.

"My sunshine." Reed plundered her sweet mouth with his, half out of his mind with wanting her. How had she gotten under his skin like this?

"It doesn't matter if you're an earl or a merchant or a king," she murmured against his mouth. "I wanted to marry you." Her words struck the heart of his desires from all directions.

And he wanted nothing more at that moment than to make her his.

But not outside. Not on the cold ground. He lifted her into his arms and delighted in her surprised squeal.

"We're going inside?" she asked.

"We're going inside."

She wound one arm around his neck, clinging to his shoulder with the other one, and then buried her face against him.

"I don't want to be alone," she said.

Already marching toward the servants' entrance, Reed's breath hitched. "You want our marriage to be a real one." He was fairly certain he knew the answer, but just to be sure...

"Yes." She emphasized her answer with a short nod. "I do."

It was all he needed to hear, and highly motivated, he pushed his chamber door open within moments.

Torn between his need to have her—now!—and his desire to stare into her eyes while making love to her, to memorize each curve and slant of her body, he hesitated for a fraction of a second.

Goldie wiggled, and he lowered her feet to the floor.

She dragged her hand down his chest, and he realized that he was already half-naked. Not ten minutes before, he'd had sweat pouring off him.

This was their wedding night. He ought to have presented himself in a silk dressing robe, fresh from a bath. She deserved...

"Let me clean up. You deserve so much better than me."

Moonlight slanted across her face enough to show the uptilt of her lips. "I don't want better than you. I want you."

Her palm remained flat against his sternum, and she had not stepped away.

"I should wash." But he didn't move. And his voice sounded more animal than human. When had this woman become a seductress?

"Light a flint," she said.

Her wish, at that moment, was his command.

Moving quickly, albeit a little clumsily, Reed adjusted his breeches, which had become considerably tighter, and then struck the flint and lit candles on the dresser and the desk by the window.

Goldie had located the basin and was dampening a linen. Turning to face him, she gestured toward a chair. "Sit for me."

Mesmerized by her voice, Reed did as she asked.

And then, with slow, tantalizing strokes, his virgin bride began to bathe his torso.

"You are a good man, Reed." The cloth grazed slowly from shoulder to shoulder. "You care about your sisters. And your mother." She scrubbed the back of his neck. "And you did everything you could for your uncle."

Reed tilted his head forward, hypnotized by her touch.

"For your cousin." She dragged the linen down one arm.

"For your father and brother," she added, moving around to his front. "You did everything you could."

Her hands crept around to his chest. And then, sliding the cloth lower, she teased the line of his breeches, her mouth inches from his ear. "And that is good enough. You are good enough. You are everything I've ever wanted."

His patience evaporated.

She'd married him because she had wanted to. Reed shot out of the chair, spun around, and captured her mouth with his. He kissed her with frantic desperation, walking her backward toward the bed.

She wanted this as badly as he did. The time for words was over.



She was his *wife*.

His beloved wife!

And with shaking hands, he untied her dressing gown, sliding it off her shoulders, tasting every inch of skin, determined to memorize her—her mouth, her chin, her jaw.

She tasted like sunshine. So beautiful. Perfect. Sexy as hell. He wasn't sure if he spoke the words that flashed through his mind as he lifted her onto the bed. He couldn't savor her and talk at the same time.

And with every touch, she moaned and blossomed, arching toward him, helping him remove her gown, surrendering all.

Reed explored the tender flesh of her belly, licking his way up to her breasts. And once there, he felt like a starving man at a banquet.

More to taste—more to fill his hands.

Her hands had deftly unfastened his falls and he shifted so she could draw them down.

But she was untouched.

“We should go slow.” He barely managed. *It was her first time!*

“Don't you dare.” Even as she spoke, she shoved his breeches off his ankles in a deft maneuver with her feet.

“You need to be ready,” he said, chuckling, but also serious. He would never hurt this woman. She'd come along when he'd needed her most. She deserved...

*Everything.*

“I *am* ready.” Her hands explored his back, and then timidly moved to his buttocks. “I've been ready forever.”

Reed reached between her legs, smiling when his fingers slid easily along her folds. She was soaked.

*For him.*

Reed pushed one finger inside, gently stroking the walls of her channel, and her breath hitched.

“Do you know you are perfect?”

“I’m not,” she answered.

“Perfect.” He added a second finger. “Everything about you.”

Even as her muscles tightened around him, she shook her head.

*“I’m not.”*

He had some work to do with this one—with his sweet ray of sunshine.

There were so many things he wanted to do with her. Reed pushed himself onto his elbows, holding his weight up until she opened her eyes, looking confused.

“You’re perfect for me,” he said. “Admit it.”

“You’re perfect for me.” She smiled. Lush lips, plump and glistening from his kisses.

Reed nudged his hips forward, teasing her seam with the crown of his cock. “Perfect,” his gaze flicked from her mouth to her eyes.

“For me,” she said.

“Perfect,” he said again, pushing himself forward just enough to stretch her opening, and then pulling back again.

“Perfect,” she breathed, lifting her hips, demanding more.

He pushed farther inside. “For me,” he said.

“For me,” she echoed, taking him deeper.

Reed thrust harder, and her inner flesh tightened around him. The tempo increased, and their slow dance took on a primal rhythm.

Never had he lost himself so completely in a woman, but with Goldie, he submerged himself. He ached to feel her everywhere, to claim her completely, and he had no doubt she wanted the same.

---

GOLDIE THOUGHT she'd be shy with her groom when the time finally came to allow him to exercise his husbandly rights.

But that was not the case at all.

His kisses only made her want more. She hadn't been nervous when he'd disrobed her. In fact, she'd helped him. And she'd had no reservations in disrobing him.

Because having seen his upper half unclothed, she'd wanted *more*.

More of *him*.

Him inside of her. *More of him everywhere*.

When he'd pushed through, she'd felt a twinge, but had otherwise been overwhelmed by everything else. Would she have felt like this with any other man?

No.

Because she *loved* him. She'd fallen halfway in love with him last summer. She'd handed him the rest of her heart over these past few days.

He had not turned cold today because he regretted marrying her, but because of the exact opposite—because he had *not* regretted marrying her!

He buried his face in her neck and she ran her fingers through his hair.

He was beautiful... so very beautiful.

And he wanted *her*.

And knowing that made all the difference in the world.

She widened her legs, willing him deeper. She wanted to feel him everywhere, stretching, rubbing.

Tomorrow, she'd be sore, and she'd relish every twinge.

Because he was her husband, and he was making love to her.

And then she lost the ability to think about anything at all—anything other than the aching pleasure that tantalized and then crashed over her.

“There you go, sweetheart. Just like that. Just like that.” Reed murmured, thrusting harder, deeper, growling. He held himself inside, the deepest yet, and his liquid heat warmed her from inside.

His seed.

He was her husband now, in every sense of the word.

## THE ARTICLE

IT WAS the sunlight slanting into the room that woke her, but Goldie didn't open her eyes.

Neither she nor Reed had gotten much sleep the night before. After the first time, Reed had snuggled up behind her, pulling her back against his front, and Goldie had expected to sleep.

But then she'd felt his member come back to life, nestled between her thighs. Reed's hands had come back to life as well.

And his mouth. "Relax," he had whispered against her neck.

He'd made love to her a second time, hooking her thigh over his arm and entering her from behind, penetrating her with deep, loving strokes.

The second time had begun with a lazy rhythm but turned just as frantic as the first.

And the third... He'd wrapped her in his arms and then rolled her over so that she rode him.

No, Goldie smiled to herself; neither of them would be getting out of this bed anytime soon.

Only when she reached her hand out to find him, he wasn't there.

Her husband's bed was a rather large bed, larger than any she'd ever seen, so she rolled toward where she expected him to be...

And opened her eyes.

Because this giant bed, aside from her, was empty.

She frowned and sat up. Would a gentleman go riding on the morning after his wedding night?

And then she remembered the last time he'd brought her to climax—when she'd collapsed on top of him, exhaling and still incoherent from the dizzying heights he'd taken her to.

She may or may not have said something about loving him.

And Reed had... kissed the top of her head. At the time, she'd thought nothing of it. But had she spoken too soon? Last night had been spectacular. It had been a revelation as to all that marriage could be.

For her.

Had it been the same for him?

Goldie glanced around the room. If it had been the same for him, then why had he left?

She trailed her gaze around to where her night rail lay, torn. No wonder it had come off so easily. His jacket and shirt from the garden were casually draped over a matching chair.

Had Reed gone out to collect them?

On the floor, as though it had fallen out of his pocket, lay a folded newspaper.

A copy of the Gazette.

Uncertain as to what to do now, she slipped off the bed, and not at all comfortable moving about his chamber in the harsh light of day, she slipped into her dressing gown and then fetched the paper from the floor.

But before she could tuck it back into his jacket, the headline caught her eye.

*“Mocking any pretense of mourning, Standish marries Crossings’ daughter.”*

*Good heavens!* There must have been a reporter at the wedding. She’d expected this, but not so soon.

She glanced toward the mantle. It was just after noon.

Had Goldie’s father summoned Reed already? Had he, in fact, challenged her husband? Goldie’s heart squeezed.

She lifted the paper closer to read it. The first paragraph mentioned his uncle and the tragedy suffered by the Rutherford family. Next came a brief description of Lord Rupert’s engagement to Nia.

Goldie continued reading.

*“And in a most improper turn of events, in a rushed ceremony, the new Earl of Standish has taken Lady Gardenia for his own wife. This reporter is quite certain that the marriage occurred without the Duke of Crossings’ blessing. Lady Gardenia was one of the most highly sought-after debutantes to enter the marriage mart last Season. The new earl cannot be as bad as the rumors suggest, can he, if he obtained the former Diamond’s consent?”*

Goldie frowned.

Taken *Lady Gardenia* for his wife?

He had told her that he needed to marry, and then he'd asked her to be his wife. And he'd done nothing to mislead her as to the urgency required...

But.

Goldie swallowed hard. He had first come to her father's house looking for Nia. When she'd refused to give him her sister's location, he'd gone away looking quite defeated.

It had not been until the next day that he'd shown any interest in Goldie.

She read through the article again.

Her father was going to be livid!

*"I want you,"* Reed had said. She'd stupidly believed herself to be his first choice.

Her hand began shaking as the truth washed over her. She had been her husband's second choice.

She had been his only choice. Of course, he'd not wanted any other debutante! That would hardly make as good a story as marrying the Duke of Crossing's daughter—or one of them, anyhow.

Was that why he'd been so upset? She shook her head, confused. He hadn't exactly lied to her, but he'd kissed her.

And... more.

She'd told him she loved him!

The door creaked, and Goldie dragged her gaze across the room in time to see Reed peering inside, looking disheveled and windblown, but no less devastatingly handsome than he had the night before.



“You’re awake.” His devilish smile would have swept her doubts away if they weren’t so very, very heavy. Something in her expression made him pause, looking her over more thoroughly. “Are you unwell?” he asked, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

In answer, Goldie held up the paper.

“It says you married Nia.” She felt dead inside. She’d been so certain she’d done the right thing.

Reed’s frown deepened. “But I married you.”

“You wanted Nia first, didn’t you?” Goldie almost kept her voice from breaking. She didn’t want to cry right now. She wanted answers.

“Just, please, tell me the truth.” She could hardly look at him. Because knowing he’d lied to her hurt terribly.

The knowledge that she was nothing more than a consolation, a second choice, brought with it a far too familiar pain.

He exhaled and then ran a hand through his hair. “They wanted the story to be about your sister, yes.”

Silence filled the room, and then Goldie heard him moving two chairs together. “Let me explain, please. Here, sit down.”

Goldie allowed him to steer her to the chair and then cautiously lowered herself onto it. “One of the maids is bringing tea up,” he said. “And I brought you these.” A small, brown paper-wrapped bundle appeared in her line of sight.

“What?”

She didn’t look up, watching instead as his elegant hands unfolded the paper. Before she saw them, the aroma filled her nostrils.

Which confused her further. “Pastries?”

“I went to the carnival this morning. The Boulangère hadn’t opened yet, but I persuaded Miss Mildred to give me a few fresh out of her ovens.”

He had gone all the way to the carnival this morning to purchase a few common pastries?

*For her?*

“But why?” she asked. Why would he bother?

Reed sat the pastries on a nearby table and then took the other chair, the one he’d placed directly in front of her. “I can explain.”

Words that didn’t hold all that much promise in her experience.

He gently worked the newspaper out of her lifeless fingers and skimmed the contents of the article. When he got to the part about her sister, he uttered a curse, low, but not so low that she couldn’t make it out.

Only then did he speak again. “Idiots got the name wrong,” he muttered. And then, “Goldie, look at me, please?”

She couldn’t help herself—he was impossible to resist.

“I wish you would have told me,” she said. “At least then —”

“I didn’t want to get married at all,” he cut her off. “The publisher at the Gazette was going to run an article that would fuel the rumors—serious speculation that I’d killed the men in my family. A few days ago, he sent for me. Said he would cut that article if I gave him another scandal instead.”

“If you married your cousin’s betrothed.”

“If I married *Crossings’ daughter*, but yes, his intentions were for me to marry your sister. And initially, it was what I set out to do.” He reached across the few inches that separated their knees to take her hands. “But oh, Goldie. I never wanted to marry your sister. I didn’t want to marry at all.”

Goldie squeezed her eyes shut, hoping to keep her tears locked inside.

“But there you were. Everything I never knew I wanted.” He moved one of his hands to her chin, tipping it back so she had no choice but to hold his gaze. “I was wrong not to explain everything to you first. But I didn’t quite understand it myself. God, when I saw you walking down the aisle toward me...” His pupils grew large, nearly edging the blue out of his eyes completely. “I realized I was the luckiest man alive.”

When she kept silent, he added, “That’s what sent me into a tailspin—that in addition to everything else, I had somehow found you—the woman of my heart. I love you, Goldie. I know you’ll think I’m crazy. I’ve questioned my own sanity more than once this morning. But I love you. I...”

He cradled her cheek in his palm. “You are my everything. Never second choice, my love. Out of every woman in the entire kingdom, I only want you.”

Goldie exhaled a partial sob. “But I am *Crossings’ daughter*.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re the daughter of a duke or a merchant or the king. I want you, sweetheart. Only you.”

Goldie searched his eyes, so open, so genuine. This time, the sob that escaped was one of relief. Reed didn’t allow a single tear to fall before scooping her onto his lap. This close, Goldie absorbed the tremble that pulsed through him.

“You love me? You really love me?”

“With all my heart.”

She lowered her lashes and plucked at the button on his jacket. “In case you didn’t realize it yet, I love you too.”

He inhaled sharply. “In that case, you’d better get back into that bed.”

Goldie didn’t need to ask why, as she was seated firmly on his lap and was growing rather familiar with the workings of his masculine appendage.

“But what about the pastries?” She couldn’t help teasing him.

“They’ll be put to good use, sweetheart.” He lowered her onto the mattress and then shucked off his jacket. “Now, where did we leave off?”

—The end—

Lady Gardenia has no desire to marry the horrid duke her father has chosen for her, but since her sister’s escape, the Duke of Crossings is more domineering than ever.

So when Nia spies an open window while waiting in a small prayer room before her wedding ceremony, she is presented with one final choice: marry the horrible Duke of Dewberry, or shimmy to her freedom and run away from her own wedding.

And if she runs, where on earth will she go?

Perhaps the Baron of Westcliff can be of assistance...

Earl of Standish is a prelude story to Annabelle Anders' upcoming series:

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EARL OF GRIFFITH

AUBREY WYNNE

# PROLOGUE

*APRIL 1817*

*The Irish Sea*

HELEN LIFTED her head to the biting winds of the Irish Sea. Rory's warmth soaked into her back as the sails popped and snapped, the ship tossing on the angry waves. She smiled as her new husband's arms held her tight, watching the port of Holyhead and Wales fade from sight.

"So, I spent my last coin on the cabin. We'll be alone tonight. No steerage class for Mrs. O'Neill," he whispered into her ear.

*Mrs. O'Neill.* How she thrilled each time she heard the name. Turning around, Helen wrapped her arms around his neck, letting her hood fall to her shoulders. "I love you, Roarik O'Neill."

"But am I worth losing yer family for?" He nuzzled her neck, and she closed her eyes with a sigh.

"You are exactly what I wanted," she reminded him, snuggling closer. "My father's ire will cool eventually. Mama will make sure of it."



Her words sounded more confident than she felt. The Earl of Stanfeld would be livid when he found out his youngest daughter had eloped with an Irish bastard of a duke. Helen had pleaded with her father.

*“HE’S HALF ENGLISH, Papa. His father is a peer of the realm.”*

*“He’s baseborn and not acknowledged, you little nodcock. The man wants whatever money you can provide for his ‘cause’ and will stoop to any level to finance it.” Lord Stanfeld paced the library. “He’s involved with the Radicals in Dublin. A toady of O’Connell who only wants to make a name for himself.”*

*“But—”*

*“He doesn’t have a farthing to his name, Helen! Do you want to raise your children in some Irish hovel?” Her father jabbed a finger at her. “Over my dead body.”*

IT DIDN’T MATTER. She was in love with a man who cared more for her than a title or duty. Rory was nothing like her father, whose world was black and white and saw only the practical side of life. Her husband was passionate with no obligations to an old family name. Helen wanted to be someone’s priority, not a broodmare to produce an heir.

She had saved her pin money for a year and stashed away the small amounts for “something special.” There was enough to get started in a nice townhouse, with dailies perhaps for cooking and cleaning. It would be hard, at first, Rory had warned her. She wouldn’t have the luxuries she was used to. But they loved each other. It was enough, wasn’t it?

The ship dipped and rose, a sprawling gray and white wave splashing against the hull. “I think that private room sounds like a good idea.” Helen shivered as she thought of the wedding night to come. The thought of lying with a man for the first time, *this* man, both terrified and thrilled her.

He took her hand and placed it in the crook of his elbow. “My lady, yer chamber of marital bliss awaits.” His hazel eyes sparkled, the familiar smile still causing her stomach to tumble.

---

“O’NEILL! HERE, O’NEILL!” yelled someone on the crowded dock. A pair of men in dull brown wool jackets and pants waved in their direction.

“There they are, love. Joseph and Colin, my friends I told ye about.” Rory waved back at his cronies, a grin transforming his face from handsome to boyish. “They’re excited to meet ye.”

They made their way through the crowd, down the ship’s plank. Helen carried two bags, and Rory hoisted the trunk on his shoulder. She admired his upper arms straining against the thin coat as he dodged other men with barrels over their backs or lugging more trunks. Helen finally gave up trying to walk by Rory’s side and stepped behind him, gripping the back of his coat as they picked their way across the docks. Introductions were made, and she was immediately relieved of her bags.

“Ye didn’t tell us she was a beauty,” said the dark-haired Joseph.

“Are ye sure she’s English,” asked Colin, nodding at Helen’s dark red hair.

“I’m half English. My mother is a Scot,” she told them with a laugh.

“I like ye even better, then,” said Colin, his own red hair barely tamed beneath a wool cap. Then he turned to Rory. “There’s been some happenin’s while ye were gone. I hope ye had a grand time because it’s time to get back to work.”

Helen followed the three men away from the ships and took her first good look at her new home. With a start, she realized there would be no carriage to pick them up. The streets were crowded like London, though the buildings were not as tall. After walking for close to an hour, they turned down a narrow street. The rows of houses all looked the same, with a layer of grime covering the steps and brick. They climbed three flights of creaking stairs, and she fought the urge to cover her nose from the sour smell that seemed to permeate the halls. Her feet were tired, and she was ready for a hot bath, a meal, and a clean bed. And time with her husband to get to know her new surroundings.

Reaching a door chipped with paint and marked with a black 6, Rory pulled out a key. To her surprise, Colin and Joseph followed them inside. They seemed very comfortable in the apartment, knowing where to put the bags, then making themselves at home at the table in the small kitchen.

“Now, I’m sorry, love. But I’ve got some business to take care of tonight.” He tapped her nose with his knuckle and grinned at her. “Then we’ll continue where we left off this morning.”

Her cheeks burned with the memory of their intimacy. She was truly a woman. “I’ll unpack, then. How shall I arrange for

a bath?”

Her husband’s chortle took her by surprise. “Ye’re a missus, now. We left the grand Lady Helen behind in London, remember?”

“Are you saying a *missus* does not bathe?” she quipped, looking down at her muslin gown stained with street muck. “You won’t love me for a long if I begin to smell like the alleys we passed on the way here.”

“Not to worry. I’ll haul water for ye twice a month. Ye’ll stay sweet enough,” he said with a quick kiss on her mouth. “Make yerself at home, and I’ll be done shortly.”

It was close to dawn when Rory joined her in bed. Helen had lain awake for hours, listening to the deep rumbles of the men, occasional shouts, and bursts of laughter. *They haven’t seen each other in two months*, she told herself.

But the *kitchen conversations*, as she began to call them, happened every night. Helen found herself acting as serving maid and feeding all three men most nights. Occasionally, others would join them. Fortunately, most meals—meat and breads—were bought already prepared and baked, and she eventually learned to appreciate the versatile potato. She didn’t particularly enjoy the work, but it kept her occupied and was better than the alternative. If Rory and his comrades weren’t in her kitchen, then they were gone until dawn. She hated being alone more than she hated cooking.

Helen wondered exactly what her husband’s *business* was. Rory was always evasive when she asked for more details. He had told her he was employed by a Mr. O’Connell as a driver and messenger. That he kept odd hours. He had also taken her purse of coins and “deposited” it for safekeeping.

After six months, Helen realized she was never going to live in a townhome with a daily to help her. She was the only servant who would be cooking and cleaning. The money she'd so carefully saved was gone. She suspected it had gone to "The Cause" that dominated Rory's life.

"Now, love, to be sure, we're doin' so well here," he would croon in his soft, low brogue. "We won't be needin' any strangers in and out every day. And I'm so proud of how well ye're copin' with yer new surroundings." Then he would kiss her, take her to the bedroom, and make her forget all her carefully worded arguments.

Helen laid her hand on her stomach, cradling the growing babe inside her. Her father would have been pleased to know she was so fertile, she thought ironically. Disappointment threatened her composure, but she blinked back the tears. Rory and the others would be home soon, and she needed to get the potatoes on to boil.

She shuffled from the tiny bedroom, no longer hearing the creaking beneath her, through the modest sitting room with a rag rug and two wooden rockers, and into the small side area called the kitchen because it had a stove for heat. Scooping coal from the bucket, she poked the fire to life again. Then she sank into a sturdy but nicked-up chair and sobbed.

Rory's first priority was not her but his beloved Ireland. He cared for her, but now she understood that marriage to an earl's daughter allowed him a certain respectability with the local magistrates. Because of his titled English wife, they would assume he accepted the British monarchy and its stipulations. But if her husband had to choose, the rights of his fellow Irishmen would come first. After all her careful plans

and promises to herself, she'd married a man just like her father.

# CHAPTER ONE

*LATE JUNE 1820*

*Dublin, Ireland*

HELEN SAT UP IN BED. The furious pounding began again. Her hand slid across the cold sheet next to her. Rory hadn't come home. Maeve began to cry, and she scooped up the two-year-old in her arms. The loud tattoo continued as she tried to get one arm into her robe, switched Maeve to her other side, and finished pushing her fist through the scratchy wool sleeve.

"I'm coming," she called in a shaky voice, patting her daughter's back in an attempt to calm her. Her chest tightened with each step. Something was wrong. She felt it in her bones.

Pulling open the door, she found Joseph's wife with her fist in the air, ready to knock once again. Her brown eyes were wide with worry, her hat tilting precariously on her mop of auburn waves. "Helen, ye must get packed. There's been a terrible... accident, and ye must be away or—"

"Where's Rory?" Her heart pounded at her friend's hesitation. "*Where's my husband?*" she screamed, now in a full panic. Maeve began to cry again.

“Shush, now. He’s dead. Ye must listen to me!” Maire grabbed Helen’s shoulders and shook her lightly. “There was an argument in the pub. A pack of Loyalists heckling the Nationalists. Rory tried to break up a fight, then took it outside. When The Force arrived to restore order, yer husband accidentally shot one of the Peelers. Another Peeler shot Rory in the back when he tried to flee the scene.”

The Peace Preservation Force—began by Sir Robert Peel, the previous Chief Secretary for Ireland—consisted of officers who acted as a paramilitary force. The Peelers, as they became known, were dispatched to squash any rioting or unrest. Murdering a Peeler was a serious offense and could be interpreted as treason. Especially by a well-known Nationalist, such as her husband.

*Dead?* She bounced Maeve, soothing the child’s cries and following Maire to the bedroom. Her only friend reached under the bed, pulled out a travelling bag and a small trunk, and set it on the rumpled sheets.

“Give me Maeve and pack what ye’ll be needin’ for a few weeks, including yer tickets for England. I’ll explain in the hack.” Maire reached for the whimpering girl. “I’ll gather some food for my little darlin’.”

Twenty minutes later, Helen sat in a filthy, rented hack, trying not to take a deep breath. The stale smell of vomit permeated the air, and her eyes stung from unshed tears. She had to be strong for her daughter.

“Explain to me why I must leave. I’m now a”—her voice caught as she struggled to maintain her composure in front of Maeve—“widow with a child and no money. I’m not even involved with his doings.”



“Rory was known as one of the leaders of the Nationalists in Dublin. They don’t know if he’s dead yet. Joseph managed to get him away from the fray, but it was too late. He died within an hour of escape.” Maire squeezed Helen’s hand. “My Joey says they’ll come after ye. They’ll want to make an example of Rory, dead or alive.”

“What could they possibly do to me?” Her head was spinning. A dead husband, a crying babe, and midnight conspiracies. What had her life become in so short a time?

“Put ye in goal for interrogation. Ye have no family here to protect ye. Maeve will be taken from ye.” Again, Maire squeezed her hand. “I know ye were plannin’ to go home for yer brother’s wedding. We’ll exchange the tickets ye bought for a ship in Cork. There may be eyes at the Dublin port.”

Everything was happening so quickly. If it weren’t for the jarring hack ride, Helen would think it was all a bad dream. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she’d known it would come to this someday. Her passionate husband would have never settled for growing old peacefully.

What had been her last words to him? Had they been loving or dismissing? Both seemed to come out of her mouth in equal amounts lately. Tears burned the back of her eyes again. She leaned her head against the cracked leather of the cab and swallowed back her fear. Maeve was her main concern. Her precious, blue-eyed girl with the midnight curls of her father. Helen’s own father had died a few months after the elopement. Another man Maeve would never know.

She hugged the plump body now softly snoring against her chest. At least Helen had a father during her childhood. Who would step into that role for Maeve? Her brother, Gideon? The

burning in her eyes began again. *NO!* There was no time for grief now. Later. She'd think about this tomorrow.

“What is our destination now?” she asked Maire.

With a relieved sigh, her friend began, “First, we'll stop at a coach inn just outside of town. I've a bit of coin for anything ye need before boarding. I assume yer brother will care for ye once ye reach the English shore.”

“I must send a letter to Lord Stanfeld,” she said, wondering what Gideon would think when she came without Rory. She smoothed her skirt with a shaky hand. “He thinks our family is arriving at Holyhead and going straight to Scotland for the wedding. I need to relay my new port and that I'll need an escort of some kind.”

Maire nodded. “Aye, now ye're thinkin'. That's my girl. Ye can post yer letter from the inn.” She pulled a sugar cube from her pocket and handed it to Maeve to suck on. The girl made a happy mewling sound and began gnawing on the sweet. “I'll stay with ye until Cork and make sure ye board with no troubles.”

TWO HOURS LATER, Helen's hand trembled as she signed the letter.

*Mrs. Roarik O'Neill*

THE CONTENTS and signature made it seem as if Rory were still alive, and she was still a young, happy wife and mother, not a

grieving widow. She closed her eyes, remembering his smile and the glittering blue eyes that always shone with excitement.

But her husband had also been a radical, a man convinced Ireland should be independent. Adamant that the Irish were equal to any Englishman, thus deserving of the same rights. His passion and self-righteousness had been his undoing. It had taken her a year to realize she had been in love with the charming persona of Rory. That he had used her as a guise for respectability. Why would he be conspiring against the Unionists when he had an English wife? The daughter of an earl, no less.

Of course, he'd been *fond* of her, and the physical attraction had blinded her for a while. She'd been so naïve in the ways of love. But his devotion to Maeve was undeniable. He was a good father when he was there. Rory had loved his daughter with the same passion he had loved Ireland. Almost.

“Would ye like me to post that for ye?” asked Maire. She sat in a chair next to the small hearth in their room. “It may take us several days to reach Cork. I assume ye want the letter to reach the family before ye make shore.”

“Yes, thank you,” Helen agreed with a smile. “You’ve been so very kind and patient, Maire. I will miss you.”

This kind woman across from her had been Helen’s saving grace for the past three years. Maire had swooped in like an angel, showing her where to shop for produce, who had the best prices for meat and bread, and becoming a loyal friend. She’d also helped deliver a bawling Maeve. After having two sisters, Helen was used to company and conversation. Though Maire worked as a seamstress by day, she always stayed with Helen on those nights when the men were “out.”

“What will happen to Rory’s...” *Body*. She couldn’t say it out loud yet. It didn’t seem real.

“My Joey took him to our local parish. The priest will bless him and make sure he’s buried proper.” Maire pulled her chair beside Helen and laid an arm around her shoulder. “And I’ll be sure to tend that grave like I do my da’s.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever return,” she whispered, leaning her head against Maire. “Am I deserting him by not coming back to Dublin?”

Maire shook her head. “Ye’ve done enough for him, my dear. He wouldn’t be expectin’ ye to do any more than ye already have. There’s Maeve to think of now. She’s the most important thing.”

“I’ll make sure she knows who her father was. A man she could be proud of, who was loyal to his homeland until the end.” Helen closed her eyes. No crying yet. If she opened that gate, she might never close it. Too many regrets, too many broken dreams.

“Sure now, let me have the letter and ye try to get some sleep. Ye’ll be back with yer loved ones soon enough.” Maire left, closing the door softly behind her.

It would be bittersweet to see her family again. Helen had thought she would miss the lively social events of London. Instead, she had missed her parents and siblings. The easy life of a prospective debutante, with no other worry except what to wear to the musicale on Thursday. She kissed the top of Maeve’s dark curly head, her small chest rising and falling with steady breaths. Her daughter would love the upcoming adventure.

Helen had let her family believe all was well in Ireland. Her letters had always been positive, never allowing them to think for a moment that her life was anything but blissful. Even now, she omitted the fact her husband was dead. She had excused Rory's absence with his job position; he was needed by his employer. Her brother deserved a happy, carefree wedding. She wouldn't mar the event with her news. There would be plenty of time to tell her tale when they all met back at the estate.

Home. Oh, how she'd missed Stanfeld Manor. It was the first time in three years she let herself fully remember the place, let random images run through her mind. The gardens, the ice pond where she'd skated every winter, the stables with her favorite pony. Comforting memories that would see her through this next stage of her journey. Helen prayed the weather held. Once in Cork, the voyage to Bristol could take a couple days or a week, depending on clear skies and the wind. At least she wasn't prone to seasickness and hoped her daughter would be the same.

When Maire returned, Helen had one more question.

"Did Joseph tell you if Rory said anything before he died?" she asked.

Her friend avoided eye contact and hesitated.

"Tell me, please." Perhaps there would be something to cling to in the dark days ahead.

"He was a patriot to the end, Joey said. His last words were, 'Keep up the fight.' And Joey promised him that they would."

Helen clenched her jaw against the onslaught of pain and guilt. Why would she expect anything else?

## CHAPTER TWO

*LATE JUNE 1820*

*London, England*

“WELCOME, LORD GRIFFITH, WELCOME!” Gideon, Earl of Stanfeld rose from his chair behind the massive oak desk and came forward to shake Conway’s hand. “Good to see you again. Hope you’ve been well?”

Conway nodded. “Aye, in more ways than one.” He’d joined the drovers for this trip, bringing three hundred head of Welsh cattle to the Smithfield market in London. “My brother said you’d be in Town, so I sent a note. Thought I could buy you a drink somewhere along St. James Street if you have time before I go.”

“Of course, but what’s the occasion?”

“Since your estate manager shared some of his breeding secrets, the value of my livestock has improved the last couple years. Wales always had good cattle, but I’m a firm believer in constant improvement. Unfortunately, my fellow Welshmen don’t seem to be interested.” Conway shook his head. “This last herd brought in a substantial amount. More than any of the

neighboring estates got per head. I'm hoping this might change their mind."

"I'll admit I wasn't enthusiastic about animal husbandry, but my man Birks is a genius at it. Our sheep production has doubled since I gave him free rein." Stanfeld's raven hair gleamed in the sunlight pouring in from the window. He poured brandy into two crystal tumblers and handed one to Conway.

"To success and love," Stanfeld said with a huge grin, holding up his glass.

Conway laughed. "I'll toast to success but leave the romantic notions to you. I hear you're leaving soon for your wedding?"

"Yes, Lissie wanted to be with family and have a traditional Highland ceremony. She and Mama have already left for Scotland. I had an unexpected summons to Town and sent them ahead. I'll leave tomorrow, stop by my estate in Norfolk, then on to MacNaughton Castle to meet my bride." Stanfeld's mother was Scottish, and her ancestral home was where the earl had met his betrothed. "Both my sisters and their families here in England have already left. My youngest sister in Ireland will be landing in Holyhead next week with her husband and making their way to the Highlands."

"You'll exchange the heat and havoc of Town for scotch whiskey and worse weather, eh?" Conway enjoyed his trips, but nothing was better than the fresh air and rural views of his beloved Wales.

"Och, I spend more time on my braw estate in Norfolk than this *manky* city. I'll no' mind a wee chill over the numpties strolling through Hyde Park," said Stanfeld in his best terrible Scottish brogue.

“God’s teeth, but that was horrid.” Conway shook his head and chuckled as he threw back the last of his liquor and accepted more.

The men chatted about business and mutual friends, finished off their brandy, and made plans to meet at Boodle’s later that night.

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THE GENTLEMEN’S club was busy, but there were a few empty tables when Conway arrived. Though he’d truly enjoyed the role of drover and the satisfaction of bringing his own cattle across the border, it was time he dressed and acted as a gentleman again. He tugged at the form-fitting deep-blue waistcoat and pulled at the cuffs still stuffed in his sleeves, thinking of the baggy pants and jacket of light wool that had left him so unencumbered. He had been restless as of late and decided an adventure would do him good. Had it?

His grandmother had been horrified he might sleep on the ground and mingle with *worse-than-commoners* for weeks. She had been somewhat mollified when he told her his coach and driver would be sent ahead to meet him in London. Yet, Conway had thoroughly enjoyed himself. He’d learned from his stepfather to appreciate manual labor, the fulfillment a hard day’s work could provide a man. It also ensured that as a landlord, he would better understand his tenants.

Conway took in an appreciative whiff, appreciating the well-prepared meal after weeks on the trail with basic supplies, bad coffee, and bellowing bovine. He tapped his rough fingers on the table, finished with the superb pea soup, and resisting the urge to smack his lips. But his stomach still



growled as he waited for the roasted fowl, glazed carrots, and pudding.

“That looks better than a drover’s fare,” he said when a plate was set before him. With his glass refilled, Conway inhaled his meal. Wiping his mouth with a cloth, he tossed it on his plate and gave a loud, satisfied sigh.

“That sounded like an excellent reference to the chef,” Stanfeld said, approaching from the door. “You look to be a contented man, Griffith.”

“Indeed, I am,” agreed Conway. “And I have a decanter of excellent brandy to share.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

They sat in friendly silence while the waiter brought another glass and poured one for Stanfeld. The sound of men cheering—or jeering, it was hard to tell—broke their quiet.

“How goes it in Wales?” asked Stanfeld. “I hope the countess is well?”

“My grandmother will outlive me,” he said with a chuckle. “She’s too stubborn to die until she’s good and ready.” Conway’s grandmother still lived in the manor house with him. While there was a dowager house on the property, there seemed no reason for her to move until he was married. A fact she now reminded of him with regularity.

“And your brother, Brecken? I haven’t heard any news of an heir yet.” Stanfeld smiled. Conway reckoned he was thinking of producing his own heir soon. “Though it hasn’t been a year, has it?”

“No babe yet. They were married last September, so I wouldn’t be surprised to hear some good news in the near future.” Madoc, the Earl of Brecken was his half-brother and

lived a few days' ride or so from Gryff Estate. Doc's bride, Evie, was lovely and vivacious. She was one of the few women Conway felt comfortable with.

"Any prospects for yourself, old man?" Stanfeld smiled and held up his glass. "There's something to be said for the shackles when it's the right woman. You must be thirty by now."

"So I've been told," he said with a snort. "I've yet to find that woman. Agreed, thirty-two is a bit long in the tooth for a female, but I may still have a few more years of bachelorhood left."

"Don't like the idea of the parson's trap, eh, Griffith?" There was no judgment in Stanfeld's voice, only curiosity. "I used to have the same aversion."

"No, I truly don't have a dislike for the institution. I'm just not... comfortable with the ridiculous pleasantries we have to endure to find a bride. If I have something to say, I say it. If someone asks me a question, I answer it." Conway shrugged. "But to speak of this week's weather for a polite ten minutes, when it doesn't even pertain to the crops, seems like a waste of time to me. I either come off surly or like a green boy."

"I don't believe I've seen you in either light. When the right woman comes along, the words will flow." Stanfeld laughed. "Or you'll stutter like a dunderhead. Hmm, that could be a good wager for the Betting Book at White's."

"I'd prefer to *do* the wagering than *be* the object of the wager."

"I'll second that." Stanfeld tapped his chest, then paused, his smile fading. He pulled a letter out from his waistcoat.

"Bad news?"

“Not exactly. I received a letter from Helen, my youngest sister.”

“The one in Ireland?”

Stanfeld nodded. “It seems she’s coming without her husband. Rather than landing up north, she’ll be arriving in Bristol for some reason. I need to find someone to meet her and accompany her to Stanfeld. My estate manager will escort her to the border from there. One of the MacNaughtons, my mother’s family, will bring her from there.”

“I was heading home at the end of the week. I could go to Bristol.”

Stanfeld’s blue eyes sparked with relief. “Really? She should have a lady’s maid with her and my two-year-old niece. I’d feel much better knowing a man was accompanying them.”

“I’d be happy to. Give me the information and a likeness, and don’t worry about her again.” He had nothing waiting for him at Gryff Estate except his grandmother. The older he got, the more it seemed to bother him.

“It’s settled then. I’ll send ‘round the information and a cameo with a small portrait. She doesn’t take after me, though, except for the eyes. Fiery red hair and petite but don’t let her size fool you. She’s a spitfire.” He shook his head, his blue eyes flashing. “The trouble she used to get into as a child... I was always keeping some escapade from my father.”

“I’ll keep a tight rein on her, to be sure.”

“And you won’t have to worry about chitchat with Helen. She’ll blather on about any subject.”

“Good to know.” Conway smiled. This might be a nice diversion. The women would stay in the coach, so he wasn’t worried about prolonged bouts of polite conversation. And he

loved children. He could spend hours with the village children, following him around, asking a hundred questions, and making him laugh at their honest and unique perspectives on life. Perhaps the child would enjoy a ride in the saddle with him.

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THE NEXT DAY, Lord Stanfeld was true to his word. A letter with the approximate landing time, names, and a locket arrived at his hotel. He was in the dining room, still used to his country hours, enjoying an early meal. Conway clicked the button, and the small heart-shaped bauble opened.

His breath caught. Before him was the loveliest woman he'd ever seen. Ruby-red hair, sapphire eyes, and a smile that could seduce any man. Her complexion was a creamy ivory, her throat slender and graceful, sloping to a full bosom.

Conway blinked and cleared his throat. *It's a painting, you Cretin!* Yet some invisible pull would not allow him to look away from Helen's image. It was as if he'd always known her. Or was meant to know her.

He shook his head. He needed a drink. Or a good night's sleep. Or both. What fanciful imaginings over a friend's sister. Who happened to be married with a child. *I'd wager the little one is as beautiful as her mother.*

THAT NIGHT, he dreamt of a ship on a stormy sea.

*LIGHTNING CRACKED OVERHEAD. Thunder rumbled over the cries of a woman. Conway tried to reach her on the slippery deck, calling to her as she clung to a rail. The rain slashed his vision in heavy sheets, and the next flash of lightning revealed the woman clinging to the edge of the deck. Her pale dress clung to her curves, and tendrils of red hair were plastered against her face and neck. He reached out to pull her to safety, but she shook her head.*

*A wave washed over the side of the ship, and he blew out a breath. She was still there, now crawling as the vessel tipped up, then down.*

*“Helen!” he called, blinking against the pelting rain. “Give me your hand.”*

*When she looked up, the distress in her blue eyes squeezed his heart. Not fear. No, this woman was not afraid of going overboard. Such pain, such disappointment was etched into her face that Conway paused for a moment. She had the look of someone who’d given up.*

*He dropped to his knees and made his way to her side. “Come with me.”*

*She shook her head, backed away from him.*

*“We must get off this deck,” he shouted over the snapping sails. He put an arm around her crouched body and pulled her close.*

*“I don’t have the strength to face it,” she choked out. “Leave me.”*

*“Never.”*

CONWAY BOLTED UP IN BED, his breath coming in rasps, sweat drenching his nightshirt. What the deuce had he dreamt about? A woman he hadn't even met yet. *God's teeth*, he hoped it wasn't some sort of premonition like the villagers talked about. Some terrible omen that the ship he was to meet would sink.

He got up and put on his silk banyan, his bare feet slapping the rug as he walked to the side table. Pouring a glass of brandy, he sat down in front of the hearth and glared at the dying embers of the fire. Well, Conway knew one thing for certain. Mrs. Helen O'Neill had made a considerable impression on him.

## CHAPTER THREE

*EARLY JULY 1820*

*Bristol, England*

“MAMA, I THEWSTY,” said Maeve as she tugged on her mother’s stray curl. They stood on the deck, now that they were close to shore. Helen had stayed in the cabin, preferring to avoid any questions—or problems—about a woman and child traveling alone. The girl had loved the rough sea, giggling and squealing each time the ship had rocked. It had taken all Helen’s patience to get her daughter to sleep last night. And her bright blue eyes had popped open with the dawning sun. Helen had only dozed, unable to close her eyes for long without images of Rory haunting her. His fist raised against another screaming man, or shot in the midst of the crowd, his cries of pain as his friends carried him away.

“Yes, love. We’ll get something soon. See the land?” she asked, pointing to the gray horizon. “That’s England, your new home. It’s where your mama’s family lives.”

“Mama’s family,” she repeated in earnest. “Gwandmama Maeve and Uncle Gidjun.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Helen wondered if it would be Gideon meeting her at the docks. Certainly not her mother, not when she had a long journey to the Highlands this month.

A gust of wind whipped Maeve’s auburn curls across her face, and she laughed with delight as her pudgy hands pushed the hair from her eyes. “Big wind, Mama.”

“A very big wind for a very big girl. Now we must go to our cabin and make ourselves presentable.” She set Maeve on her feet and took her tiny hand. “Do you remember the way?”

They collected the travelling bag and small trunk, Helen’s reticule, and Maeve’s ragdoll. Looking at the dingy, torn toy, she said, “Our first purchase once we’re home is a new doll for you. Would you like that, my sweet?”

The toddler nodded. “But keep Ahwohwah.”

Aurora had been the name given to the doll when Rory had bought it for her birthday and Christmas, last December. Maeve had wanted to name the toy after her papa, but Rory had said it needed a girl’s name. So, Aurora was decided on as a feminine form of Roarik.

Making their way to the gangplank, Helen scanned the busy dock. No one looked familiar. She watched a man with raven hair study a locket, then peer at those waiting on deck. After the third time, she realized he must be meeting someone he doesn’t know.

At that moment, their eyes met. His midnight gaze widened, then he slowly raised an arm and waved. *At her.* Her stomach did a ridiculous twist as he made his way up the gangplank. He was of medium height with a stocky build. Helen thought of the boxers at Jackson’s. And handsome in a rugged way, not preening like the London dandies. His umber



suit was well-made, tailored, and of expensive material that stretched across a broad chest.

*A friend of Gideon's, no doubt.*

“Mrs. O’Neill?” His soft, deep timbre dripped over her like warm honey. He held out his hand. “The Earl of Griffith at your service. I’ve been honored with the task of escorting you to Stanfeld Estate.”

She breathed a sigh of relief and immediately trusted the man. He spoke with a Welsh accent, so Helen assumed he was acquainted with Gideon through business. Shaking his offered hand, Helen introduced herself and her daughter.

Lord Griffith squatted closer to Maeve’s height and held out his hand once again. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Maeve.”

“You have eyes like a cwoh. Shiny,” replied the little girl, leaning closer to study the man’s eyes. “I like shiny.”

“Maeve, it is not polite to compare a man to a crow.” Helen turned to Lord Griffith. “She loves birds, so really it was meant as a compliment.”

He seemed a bit taken aback but recovered quickly. “Well since you approve, I suppose I’ll keep them. I’d considered trading them in for a pair of blue like yours.”

“Do you think mine shiny?” she asked, reaching out a finger as if she’d poke his eye, then tracing one of his thick black brows.

“I think your eyes sparkle like the finest blue gems,” he answered with a smile.

Maeve giggled at that. “Mama, he’s nice. Will we live with him?”

Lord Griffith coughed and choked, holding back a laugh. “I think your uncle would prefer you stayed with him. Though, you would definitely be welcome.”

He stood, retrieved the meager luggage from her side, and held out his elbow. Helen took Maeve’s hand, and they made their way from the ship. “Shall we wait for your lady’s maid and the rest of your luggage? Or is it being sent ahead?”

Helen blinked. How much should she tell this stranger? Nothing about her recent widowhood. If she spoke of it, she’d overflow the Thames. Not only grief over a dead husband, but the sorrow of years lost and starting over. The heartache of her daughter growing up without a father. “No, er, yes, it’s all been sent ahead. It’s just the two of us, and I have what I need for the ride home, thank you.”

Her one evening gown and three day dresses had been sold long ago. The simple sturdy skirts she wore now were typical of any middle class working woman. Clean, at least, she reminded herself, saving their Sunday best for their arrival. But her own wardrobe was in storage. Her mother had told her in one letter that she would keep them in anticipation of Helen’s return. She had brought more clothes for Maeve than herself but knew the child would need some made at the rate she was growing.

“Our coach is just over there.” The earl pointed to a black vehicle with a coat of arms on the door. It had a white shield with two red dragons. Above the shield was a knight’s full helmet; red and white leaves grew out of this, leading to yellow daffodils. A driver sat on the box, four matching bays in hand.

Walking between sailors and hired men hauling shipments, avoiding the mud when she could, Helen felt her head spin.

She'd eaten or slept little in the past two days, and the cacophony of the docks, the smells of sweat and animal dung, seemed to invade her head and stomach. Her body was giving out, even if her mind insisted it didn't need rest.

A small dog barked from atop a wagon, its stubby tail wagging. Maeve wrenched her hand from Helen's. "Puppy!" she cried as she ran toward the animal. A hack passed in front of them just as Maeve dashed away. Helen screamed, the horse reared, and Lord Griffith dove in front of the cab. Covering Maeve's body with his, he rolled them both out of the path of danger.

Her entire body trembled, watching the pair rise from the dirt and mud. Maeve clung to Lord Griffith's neck, her tiny head tucked against his shoulder. Back at Helen's side, the earl's face held only concern.

"She's fine, no harm done," he said, attempting to give the child back to her. But Maeve clung tightly to him, and Helen shook her head.

"I d-don't think I c-can hold her," she whispered. The ground beneath her feet seemed to be moving. People were spinning past her at odd angles. Then blackness.

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CONWAY BENT his knees and slid his free arm around Helen's waist. *Mrs. O'Neill, you lobcock.* He pulled her tightly against his side and looked at Maeve.

"I think Mama is vewy sleepy." She reached out and patted her mother's head. "Can you cahwy Mama too?"

“I’m afraid not, little one. One rider at a time.” He nodded to the driver, who hurried over. “Would you hold Mr. Thomas’s hand so I can help your mother to the carriage? Then she can take a nice nap while we drive.”

“I could sit on you shouldahs,” she bargained. “I be vewy still.”

“I’m sure you would be, but I think we’ll try that another time. Thomas?” Conway tilted his head toward the girl. “Could you take her, please? I believe we’re in need of smelling salts.”

“Got a flask of cheap whiskey if it’ll help.” Thomas took Maeve, who immediately began petting the man’s white hair.

“So soft,” she said before sticking her nose close to his hat and scrunching her face. “But it smells like a hawse.”

“And ye’re quite the prize yerself, miss,” Thomas answered with a chuckle. He began dusting the toddler’s jacket before picking up the travel bag. “Ye’re not smelling so rosy, either.”

“Nor I, I’m afraid. At least it’s only mud and no other muck.” Conway was glad his valet had stayed behind. The condition of his coat would have sent the man into an apoplexy. Turning to the damsel in distress still at his side, he put his other arm under her legs and scooped her up.

She was petite, limp, and utterly divine. Her body tucked against his as if they were two missing pieces of a puzzle. Long dark lashes arced against her pale skin. Light freckles sprinkled her nose, and her lips were pink as the primroses in spring and slightly parted.

*Good God, I want to kiss her.*

He thought of his dream. How he'd tried to save her, and she didn't want to be rescued. Well, she'd had no choice today, had she? The thought made him smile for some reason.

After Thomas deposited the girl in the carriage, Conway ducked under the door and laid Helen on the bench. Maeve sat down on the floor, next to her mother, and held her hand. He checked her pulse and noted her color was returning. *Good! Probably too much excitement.* He knew from his own mother that females could be fragile creatures.

“Why don't you sit up here with me, Miss Maeve? The ride could get bumpy.”

Maeve shook her head, the auburn curls flying against her cheeks. “When I sick, Mama sits with me.” She blinked, her blue eyes moist.

“And you shall be sitting with her. If you come up here, you'll be safe but still next to her. Your mama will want to see that you're well as soon as she opens her eyes.” He held out a hand. “You don't want her to worry, do you?”

Maeve shook her head again and sniffed. “N-no.” She dropped her mother's hand and climbed up on the bench next to Conway. “I want nap too. Sing to me?”

The girl picked up his arm, wiggled underneath, and snuggled against his side with a yawn. To Conway's surprise, it felt right to have this child rubbing her cheek against his waistcoat. He began to hum an old Wales tune that many considered their informal anthem. Her eyelids fluttered and closed.

While the occupants slept, he was able to study both of them at his leisure. He saw similarities in their pert noses, small chins, ivory complexions, and splattering of freckles.

They had the same piercing blue eyes of Stanfeld. But Helen's face was more heart-shaped compared to her daughter. And Maeve would obviously grow taller than her mother. He would have guessed the girl to be three or four with those long, spindly limbs.

His gaze returned to the woman on the opposite bench. A fierce protectiveness rose in him. He pulled the girl closer and watched Helen's chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm.

He must have dozed, for his eyes snapped open at the sound of her groan.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *ON THE ROAD from Bristol to London*

HELEN SWAYED with the rocking of the ship. It felt so good to just lie here, eyes closed, no worries...

*Horse hoofs!* There were no horses on a ship. She opened her eyes to see a handsome man smiling at her, and Maeve sleeping against his chest. *Gah! Where am I?*

The panic must have shown on her face because the gentleman spoke reassuringly. "Your daughter ran in front of a hackney, I saved her, and you fainted. All is fine, and we're on our way to Stanfeld Estate."

His voice was low and calm; it soothed her nerves. She sat up, smoothing back her hair, then trying to remove the wrinkles from her olive skirt and spencer. An impossible task. "Thank you," she mumbled and frowned. "I'm afraid I've quite forgotten your name. I do apologize."

"No need for that." He smiled again. A kind, genuine smile. "After a long journey and such a scare, I'd be surprised if you did remember. I am the Earl of Griffith, friend and business associate of your brother. I must also apologize for

this unusual situation, but I'd been told you would have a female companion with you."

"Fortunately, I'm not a debutante worried for my reputation." She managed to smile back at him before closing her lids against the pounding in her head.

"Are you sure you're fine?"

"Just a megrim." She opened her eyes again. "I want to thank you for saving my little girl. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to her. She's all I have—" Helen bit down on the inside of her lips.

She would keep her troubles to herself until after Gideon's wedding. No matter how sharp the pain in her heart. Her mother had always said sharing one's misfortunes lessened the suffering. Oh, how she wanted to lay her head in Mama's lap, let her mother share the burden of this terrible ache. The awful guilt. The painful knowledge that she only had herself to blame for her present situation.

Such an impetuous, stupid girl she'd been.

Then her gaze fell on Maeve. If she hadn't been impulsive and rebellious, she wouldn't have this precious, loving child. With a deep breath, Helen scolded herself for the moment of self-pity. She was no longer a young girl. She was a mother with responsibilities. And her daughter was worth every tear, for Maeve gave back joy a hundred-fold with her smiles and hugs.

"I stopped on my way to Bristol and arranged for rooms at decent inns. I thought with a child, we wouldn't want to take any chances with unscrupulous patrons. We'll also have a private dining room." Lord Griffith paused and looked down



at the mussed auburn curls of his charge. “She’s lovely. You must be very proud.”

Tears threatened again, and Helen only nodded. What a considerate man. She was surprised that she liked him so quickly. Although, he’d already played knight errant twice. Almost as if he was born to the role.

She cushioned her head against the velvet squab, then turned, and rubbed her cheek against the softness. With her eyes closed, she reveled in the expensive fabric brushing her skin. It had been so long since... Helen jerked her head forward again, feeling his eyes on her.

“Will Mr. O’Neill join you later?”

Again, she shook her head. His voice had the timbre of a baritone. Without reason, she knew he would sing beautifully. Then exhaustion claimed her again, and she soon lost the battle with her lids as they shuttered and closed.

“Mrs. O’Neill.”

The baritone interrupted a lovely dream. She and Maeve were skating on the pond at Stanfeld.

“Mama, wake up. Wake up for the advenchah.”

Helen peeled one eye open to see blue eyes and a tiny nose almost touching her own. Little palms squished Helen’s cheeks. “It’s called ‘The Fox and Wabbit’ and they have vewy good food and feathah mattwesses that will swallow me up.”

“Mattresses that will eat you?” Helen asked, her “s’s” having a pronounced slur with Maeve’s hands still pushing on her cheeks.

“You silly, Mama. Lawd Gwuff said the mattwesses ah so thick that if I jump on one, it could swallow me. I will hide,

and when you come in, I will jump up and yell, *SUPWISE!*” She giggled, then turned, and settled on her mother’s lap. “I miss you, Mama, when you sleep.”

“And I always miss you, my sweet,” Helen whispered in her ear.

“That tickles,” she said and laughed, rubbing her ear.

“And who is Lord Gwuff?” Helen asked, looking up at Lord Griffith as Maeve pointed to him.

“Guilty. It’s an old nickname from my childhood. The Welsh name for Griffith is Gruffyd. As a boy, I tended to be serious, and my mother would sometimes call me Lord Gruff.” He shrugged, his coffee gaze sending warmth through her. “My brother heard her once, and it became his favorite moniker for me.”

“Did you grow into a gruff man or leave the solemnity behind with your boyhood?” She saw kindness and intelligence in his dark eyes, but there was something else too. Sadness? No, not exactly.

“I prefer to think I learned there was an appropriate time for being somber and enjoying oneself.” He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and poked Maeve in the belly. “You, young lady, are nothing but pure delight. I hope you stay that way.”

“I like him, Mama. He’s stwong and makes me laugh.”

“Laughter is good for one’s health,” agreed Lord Griffith. “It frees the soul and lightens our burdens. Don’t you think?”

His gaze locked with hers, and she smiled. “I hadn’t thought about it. It’s been so long—” Helen clamped her lips tight.

“We’ll have to turn it into a science experiment. I’ll find opportunities to make you laugh during our trip, and you can tell me if it makes you feel... lighter.” When he grinned, a crease formed along one cheek. Too big for a dimple, but appealing, nonetheless. “Bargain?”

“Bargain.”

Lord Griffith reached for his hat and plopped it on his head as the carriage rolled to a stop. “Will you do me the honor of dining with me this evening, Miss Maeve?”

“Sewtainly,” she said, cheeks scrunching up with her big smile. “But you have to take Mama too. We ah two peas in a pod, and nothing will sepewate us but the good Lawd above.”

“I shall bow to your wish since I’m not nearly as powerful as Him.” With that, he exited the coach. Popping his head back in the open window and tipping his hat, he said, “I’ll make arrangements and come back to escort you to your room, ladies.”

Helen said a silent prayer for sending *this* man. He seemed to enjoy his role of protector, and her resolve was fading. Leaving the details to him allowed her to save what strength she had left. And it would take every ounce of energy to hold herself together until she reached Stanfeld Manor and the privacy of her own bedchamber. Then she would let the tears fall and cleanse her soul.

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HE SEEMED to destined to watch her sleep. They sat in front of the small fire, mother and daughter dozing. He studied Helen’s profile. Beautiful, proud, and... haunted. That was what he

saw in the depths of those cerulean eyes. What had happened to her since she left the protection of her family?

It wasn't any of his business, of course. Yet, he was drawn to her and had the strongest desire to protect her and her precocious child. Granted, she was married. But it didn't matter. Keeping her safe and seeing her happy once again was his only concern. He knew from her occasional smile and Stanfeld's description of her that Helen had been happy. Her brother had described her as mischievous, intelligent, always questioning or arguing some point she'd read.

The sleeping woman next to him didn't seem to possess any of those qualities right now. Where were they hiding? *What* was she hiding? Conway had always been skilled at knowing when people spoke the truth. While he hadn't thought she'd outright lied, he was certain she hadn't been completely honest with her brother. Well, if she wanted to talk about it, fine. He wouldn't push her.

Maeve rubbed her eyes and stretched, pushing a fist against her mother's nose and waking her up with a start. Helen looked around, eyes wide as if trying to remember where she was.

"Sleepy, Mama," the little girl mumbled.

Conway rose and picked up the toddler. "I'll carry her for you. I'm ready to turn in myself."

She gave him an appreciative smile and rose unsteadily. He caught her elbow and experienced the same rush of heat as when he'd carried her to the coach.

"You must be exhausted," he murmured over Maeve's head.

Helen nodded as he followed her to their room. She pulled back the bedclothes, and he gently laid the sleeping child on the sheets. Conway brushed her damp curls from her cheek and tucked the counterpane around her small shoulders. When he straightened and turned, Helen was blinking rapidly and ducked her head.

He cleared his throat. “We’ll leave first thing in the morning. I’m sure you’re anxious to see your home.” And then he’d leave her. That caused a sharp pain in his chest. *Ridiculous!* He’d only known her a day. Yet, from the moment he’d seen her image in that locket, he’d felt... connected to her somehow. An invisible thread that pulled them gently together.

*You’re the one who needs sleep—or a drink!*

“Yes, I’ve missed my family, the estate grounds. It will be wonderful to see them again through Maeve’s eyes.” She smoothed her hair back and peered up at him, cheeks tinged pink.

“I’ll leave you to your rest, then.”

Just as he reached the door, he heard a soft, “Thank you.” He nodded without turning around, quietly closed the door, and wondered how those two little words could fill him with such satisfaction.

Conway thought about his return to Wales. It had become a lonely place with just he and his grandmother. And Lady Griffith was not a warm person. Though she doted on her grandson, she had a reputation for being cold and unforgiving. His own mother had felt the sting of her disapproval most of her life.

His father had died before he was born. The widowed countess had found love when Conway was a toddler, but the

dowager had refused to let Conway go with his mother. Her new husband, the Earl of Brecken had intervened. An arrangement was made to accommodate both women. Conway spent half of the year—the warmer months—with his mother and stepfather. Brecken taught him how to be a good earl, to care about his tenants, the basics of farming and animal husbandry, and to never rush into a decision. In business or love. The colder months, when there was little to do on his own estate, Conway went home.

There, he spent long hours with Powys, his estate manager. They rode out so the tenants recognized their lord by sight. Powys had taught him that people were people, regardless of their heritage. “Everyone bleeds, my lord. We’re all the same under our skin,” he’d say when one of the villagers would make a comment that surprised their young lord. The elder Welshman also taught him that every decision made impacted others that depended upon the estate. Whether it was the villagers or tenant farmers, Conway’s resolutions of any given situation, directly or indirectly, affected them all.

He had learned much from his mentors. His stepfather was gone now, and Powys was white-haired and moving slowly. The steward was training his nephew, Owen, as his replacement. Conway liked the hard-working young man. They had tried experimenting with the cattle, and Owen’s open-mindedness had been rewarded with larger, sturdier stock. And with that came bigger profits.

Gryff Estate was thriving, so why did he feel so hollow inside? Because he longed for a family, the sound of children laughing and playing in the halls of the manor. He wanted what he’d had only part of every year when he lived with his mother, stepfather, and half-brother. He wanted the kind of marriage his mother had found with Brecken. But then the

thought of a Season emerged, being on display, the ladies themselves parading before eligible men, hoping to find a match in their first Season. It was a horrendous ritual that he desperately wanted to avoid. There was also the inconvenience—for the potential female—of his being Welsh. It wasn't a popular destination for most women used to the excitement of London.

Perhaps he'd find a young woman he felt comfortable with, like Helen. Though, he was certain it was the fact she was married that allowed him to speak with such ease. And the presence of the adorable Maeve. But this chance encounter had made him realize the empty feeling he couldn't identify was loneliness.

## CHAPTER FIVE

HELEN BLEW a stray curl from her eye and furiously flicked her fan. It was hot. Unbearably hot. There was no light breeze as they'd had the day before. Today, either the windows stayed closed to avoid the dust, or the windows were down so they could breathe in the dust. Not much of a choice. She gave her daughter an envious glance. Maeve rode in front of *Lawd Gwuff*, her squeals and giggles piercing the heavy air. For his part, Lord Griffith seemed to enjoy himself as much as his passenger.

The man had a way with children. Maeve had become instantly smitten and stuck to his side. It had been a welcome reprieve, allowing Helen time to organize her thoughts. How could she avoid Scotland and the wedding? One look from her mother, and Helen would burst into tears. Even if she didn't, the older Maeve would know immediately something was amiss with her daughter. She always did.

They would make London today and stay in the townhouse. Gideon had notified the staff to be on the ready. Then another two days before they were home. She wanted to hide there and never leave. How could she avoid the wedding?

Helen was not a person to keep emotions at bay. Holding in her grief, her anger, felt like standing in a storm, her



emotions battering at her, demanding her attention. It made her tense and grumpy. She'd already snapped at Maeve twice. Her daughter had burst into tears, unused to her mother's sharpness.

*I will get through this. The sun will shine again.* Her father's words echoed in her brain. Whenever she'd been disappointed, scraped an elbow, or broke a toy—anything that caused tears—her father would lift her onto his knee, wipe her cheeks with his thumbs and tell her, “The sun will shine again, my sweet girl.”

And she still believed his words.

*LONDON, Mayfair*

HELEN SMELLED London before she saw it. The carriage followed the muddy Thames, and the clamor, odors, and ever-present fog reminded her of shopping trips in Town. Street lamps from the rowhouses beckoned cheerfully as they pulled in front of Number 18 in Grosvenor Square. The familiar front portico with its carved plaster pineapple above the door made her smile. They were putting the past behind them.

The butler opened the door, casting a golden glow on the veranda. Mr. Clarence hadn't changed a bit. Tall and stately, more gray on his balding pate. Maeve had joined her in the carriage and now slept on Helen's lap. A suspicious dark spot appeared on Helen's bodice, near to her daughter's open mouth.

“My lady, would you like me to carry Miss Maeve for you?”

She nodded. “Thank you. I don’t think she’ll sleep long, though.”

Lord Griffith reached in and pulled Maeve out of the coach and against his chest. Helen wondered at how natural he looked holding her child. He was a dear man.

“Lady Helen,” said Clarence as they walked through the entrance. “It is good to see again.” His words were warm as he bowed, though his face remained stoic.

The housekeeper bobbed a curtsy. Her ruddy cheeks plumped as she smiled and pushed up the silver lock that escaped her cap. “There is a cold supper waiting for you after you are refreshed from your journey. Unless you’d like cook to make something hot?”

“No, Mrs. Adams, that won’t be necessary.” Helen tipped her head at the servants, resisting the urge to hug them both and tell them how much she appreciated their hard work. After three years of fending for herself, she saw their roles with different eyes. She’d never take someone for granted again because of their station. “This is Lord Griffith, a friend of Lord Stanfeld. He is our escort back to the estate.”

They both nodded their understanding and mumbled a greeting to the earl still holding Maeve. “The snoring lump he’s holding is my daughter, Maeve.”

Mrs. Adams beamed at her. “After your mother, then?”

“Yes, after my mother.” With that simple question and response, Helen was on the verge of tears again.

She turned toward the stairs on the right, blinking rapidly as she ascended. To Helen’s surprise, Maeve had not stirred. “We’ll lay her down in my room. Do you mind carrying her upstairs?”

“Of course not,” he said, shifting the drooling toddler on his shoulder.

They passed the first floor where Helen had entertained friends and played the pianoforte. The second floor held the bedroom for the “children” and hers was the second on the left. She took a deep breath before opening the door. This was the room she had shared with her sister Lottie when they visited London.

It was like stepping back in time. The primrose counterpane with tiny embroidered apples of green, the thick carpet in a Turkish design of browns, yellow, and greens, and the matching striped wallpaper all brought forth a flood of memories. Her favorite books still sat on the bedside table, the spines of *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Sense and Sensibility* facing out. Mrs. Adams was a saint.

Helen’s cheek burned as she pointed toward the bed and watched Lord Griffith lay Maeve on the mattress. The child snuffled against the pillow and curled her body around the rag doll. The earl gently pulled a lock of hair from her mouth. Then he looked up at Helen, back at the bed, and stammered, “I will leave you to your rest. What time would you like me to return in the morning?”

“You’re staying at a hotel?”

“Actually, your brother set me up in a private club on St. James. The only qualification is being sponsored by a present or past member and not being married.” He moved toward the door. “Anything I need will be provided there. Shall we get another early start?”

“Yes, please.” She hesitated, then called to him as he left the room. “Lord Griffith, are you sure wouldn’t like to dine here? I realize it’s only a cold supper—”

“Yes.” He grinned, looking a bit sheepish at his quick acceptance. “I mean, it sounds perfect. With the heat, I couldn’t eat a hot meal.”

“I’ll see you in the parlor, then. It’s small but one of my favorite rooms.”

As soon as his footsteps faded, she shut the door and opened the wardrobe, praying there was something left behind. With a thank you to the heavens, she pulled out the gray travelling dress. There was a matching spencer, bonnet, and—*thank you, Lord*—a pair of boots. She and Lottie had been the same size when she left.

Helen stripped down to her chemise and pulled on the gown. It was as close to mourning as she could get for now. A pang in her chest reminded her that no one knew, anyway. Her reflection in the Cheval mirror shocked her. The past three years, she’d avoided mirrors except to ensure a clean face if she were going out. But life in Dublin had taken its toll. The dress hung on her, her once curvy form now thin and flat. Her hair was limp, her eyes dull, and her skin pale. Worst of all, she looked older. Much older than her twenty years. *Don’t be vain, you ninny*. Still, she wondered how much weight she’d lost. Her family would see the change before the greetings and hugs had finished.

Mrs. Adams knocked on the door and poked her head in. “May I help you with anything, my lady?”

“Oh, yes. Could you get the buttons and tie the ribbon, please?”

Mrs. Adams clucked as she nimbly finished dressing Helen. “Did you not bring a trunk with you, Lady Helen, er, Mrs. O’Neill?”

“There was a mistake... and my luggage was sent on to our country home.”

“I see. Well, this will do in a pinch. The sash will pull in the material enough, so it won’t be too bad.” She smoothed out Helen’s sleeves. “There you go. Sarah will fetch the dirty clothes and have them cleaned before morning.”

The housekeeper knew something wasn’t right. She’d seen Mrs. Laskey’s expression when unpacking the bag and small trunk. Servants’ clothes. What must she think? *Not now. Don’t think of it now.*

“Thank you so much.” Helen walked to the bed and lightly rubbed her daughter’s back. “She’s had a quite the time this past week. I wish I had her resilience.”

“Children are surely more adaptable than adults. Would you like me to stay with little Maeve, my lady? So, she’s not alone if she wakes?”

“Oh, Mrs. Adams, you are a godsend. It would put my mind at ease. I promise I won’t be long.” She clenched her fists and resisted the urge to hug the older woman. The housekeeper would wonder if Helen had been drinking.

That wasn’t a terrible idea.

## CHAPTER SIX

CONWAY SILENTLY CURSED himself as he descended the stairs. He was like a schoolboy, gushing at an invitation by the most beautiful girl in the nearby village. She was married. Why did he feel so drawn to her?

It was the sadness in her gaze she tried to hide, perhaps. He longed to make her laugh and show him the side Lord Stanfeld had spoken of. He no longer thought it was fatigue from the trip. He'd seen that look darken in his mother's eyes when his stepfather had been paralyzed and had given up on life. When she had lost the love of her life somewhere in the declining body that she washed and dressed each day.

Could there be a problem in Helen's marriage? Impossible. How could a man not appreciate her beauty and breeding? Something else must have happened. The loss of a friend or even a miscarriage. Well, he'd treat her with care, and if she wished to unburden herself, he would be a sympathetic ear. That was a skill many men had not developed. Conway had learned that some women didn't think him tongue-tied or green, but thoughtful and attentive, since he let them babble to their heart's content.

He pulled at his cravat, tugged on his fawn waistcoat snugly over his matching trousers, then pulled his sleeves taut

beneath his umber tailcoat. Now that they were in Town, he had to dress for dinner or appear uncouth. Though, he had wondered at Helen's wardrobe so far. She seemed to have mixed her luggage up with her maid's. Plain, sturdy clothes that a working-class woman would wear. Conway had not mentioned it; he didn't want to embarrass her.

The parlor was small but well-appointed. Polished walnut paneling, cream curtains, and an Axminster rug made the room cozy. He sat in a chair by the hearth, and the butler appeared with a decanter.

"Sherry before dinner, my lord?" he asked. "Yes, er, Clarence, isn't it?"

"Yes, my lord," he said with a half-bow and handed Conway a cut-crystal glass filled with the ruby liquid. "Thank you, my lord." Another bow and he left the room.

Helen appeared at the door, looking better than he'd seen her since their meeting at the dock. She wore a dove-gray dress with delicate lace at the throat and sleeves. A matching lace ribbon was tied high across the bodice. Her hair shone from a good brushing and was pulled up in an informal bun, curls trailing down to her neck.

"I see your luggage must have beat us to London. You look lovely, Mrs. O'Neill." He stood to greet her properly. "That's no easy feat considering your voyage and the long days we've had on the road."

The corners of her mouth turned up, as if she appreciated the compliment. "I must thank you again for all your assistance. You've been more valuable than you can imagine. Especially with Maeve."

"I take it she's in slumberland, then?"

“Yes, it sounded like she was scolding someone in that place.” She led him to the table, and he could smell the mixed scent of vanilla and jasmine. He held out her chair, then sat opposite of her. “She began talking in her sleep as soon as she learned a few words.”

“She converses quite well for her age.” He’d been impressed with the toddler’s speech.

“Unfortunately, there were no children nearby to play with, so it was mostly me and other adults for company.” She took a deep breath as if preparing herself for something. “Shall we eat?”

“Certainly. But will she be frightened waking up alone in a strange place?” The thought of Maeve being frightened or crying squeezed his heart.

“How considerate you are, truly,” Helen replied, giving him a thoughtful look. Strain showed in the lines around her eyes and mouth, but the sincere smile she bestowed upon him brightened her face. “Mrs. Adams offered to stay with her for just that reason.”

A cold salad of thinly sliced veal marinated in oil, vinegar, shallots, and anchovies had been laid out on the table near the window. Warm bread with apricot preserves and butter, thick slices of cheese, and early strawberries finished off the meal.

“I told Mrs. Adams that we would not need anyone to serve us if she set it all out. Do you mind?” she asked, pouring some wine into a glass. She held out the carafe with one auburn eyebrow raised. When he picked up his own glass, she filled it.

“I’m a simple man and happy to have a meal with good company.” He held up his glass. “To new friends and safe



journeys.”

Helen held up her own glass, a slight twinkle in her blue eyes. “Agreed. Though I somehow doubt you are a simple man, Lord Griffith. And I can guarantee company, though perhaps not good.”

Conway served them each some of the beef, then picked up his fork. He watched her put a bite in her mouth and close her eyes as she chewed. Either this was her favorite dish, and she savored it, or she hadn’t had it in a long time. Again, that voice in his head told him something was not quite right.

“Tell me, what is life like in Ireland? Did you live in the city or did you have a country home?”

She blanched, and he thought she might be ill. Or had their place of residence been a sore spot between her and her husband. Slowly, she finished chewing and swallowed. “We preferred the city of Dublin.”

“I see. I assume there were more amusements for the family.”

Helen nodded and began slathering a hunk of bread with butter, then spooned honey onto it.

Conway racked his brain for more conversation. “We’ve been fortunate with the weather, don’t you think?”

“It’s unbearably hot.” Helen paused, the bread almost to her mouth. When she looked at him, those deep blue pools made his heart beat faster. With a sigh and a softening around her mouth, she said, “I apologize. You’re right. We’ve been very lucky there has been no rain to slow us down. And there were no privateers on the Irish Sea or heavy storms.”

He grinned. “That’s the spirit. Always a bright side to everything, my mother used to say.”

“Is your mother here in England?” she asked, studying her bread once again.

“No, she lives with my younger brother and his wife in Wales. It’s a couple days’ ride from my estate.” Conway finished his beef and added more to his plate. It was very tender and expertly seasoned. “I wondered if Doc’s new wife would get along in our wild country, coming from London, but Evie seems happy wherever Brecken is. And she charmed my mother as she does everyone.”

“You like your sister-in-law, then?”

He nodded. “She’s a prize, to be sure.”

“Your brother is a physician?”

Conway laughed. “No, though he doctored enough animals as a youth. His name is Madoc—Doc is our family nickname—and he holds the title Earl of Brecken.”

“Do you get along with your husband’s family?”

Another pause before she took a bite. “He had none. I suppose that could be a blessing for some, but I enjoy family.”

“Something we have in common.” Conway reached for the bread and sopped up the leftover veal from the plate.

“Are you married, Lord Griffith?”

He shook his head, that emptiness creeping into his belly again. “Not yet, though it’s about time I thought about it.”

“You’re not afraid of the leg shackles?”

“I’m not. My mother and my father—stepfather, my own father dying before I was born—had a marriage full of love and laughter. It is proof that it can be a happy institution.”

“He raised you?” she asked, reaching for a strawberry.

Conway frowned at the meat still on her plate. He'd had the impression she enjoyed the dish, but she'd eaten only a few bites, a small chunk of bread, and now moved on to the fruit. No wonder so she was so thin. "He did. Taught me everything I needed to know to be a good landlord, a good person, I hope."

"So if your father died before you were born, and your brother is younger, then he is your half-brother. You get along well?"

"We are the best of friends. I would trust him with my life." He watched her put the berry to her mouth and take a delicate bite with small white teeth. The bright red against the pink of her lips... *Blast* if he didn't have a sudden craving for a strawberry.

"That is high praise, indeed." She smiled and stood. "If you'll excuse me, I should get back upstairs to my daughter. She's in capable hands, but Mrs. Adams is still a stranger should Maeve wake. I'll bid you a good night."

"I thought we would leave at first light, so we can stop earlier and avoid the deuced heat." He also stood and followed her to the hall. "Would that suit you?"

"That sounds perfect. I'm sure Maeve will wake early after so many hours of sleep."

He watched her ascend the stairs and almost jumped when Clarence cleared his throat from behind. "God's teeth, man, you're as stealthy as a thief in the night."

"Thank you, my lord." He gave a small bow and held out Conway's hat. "Will you be taking the carriage or your horse?"

"My horse, I think. It's a clear night."

“I thought so. It has been saddled and is waiting for you.” The butler walked around him and opened the door.

“Are you always this proficient at knowing what is needed and when?” Conway asked, amused.

“I endeavor to ensure all things run smoothly, my lord.”

Conway jogged down the stairs and took the reins from the waiting stable boy. Granted, they weren't far from the mews, but it was still impressive. Not even time moved that fast in Wales. Mounting his horse, he proceeded toward St. James with a whistle on his lips.

“Whoa,” he murmured as he stopped the gelding in front of an inconspicuous building in an inconspicuous neighborhood.

A single **W** hung above the door of the Wicked Earls' Club. He'd laughed at the moniker until seeing the interior. The owner had told him to ask Charles for anything he might need. Charles, a short round man with a blank face, had already secured Conway a room for the night and a bottle of French brandy waited for him. The membership fee was staggering, but the benefits were superb. An exclusive floor of this club, a set of private rooms for each member, and almost any vice for the asking. It might be worth the blunt to pay for a membership if her were to return to London for an extended stay.

The downstairs of the establishment resembled any other gentlemen's club. There were rooms for gaming, a library for those who preferred quieter entertainment or conversation, and a dining room. He followed the sound of masculine shouts to a crowded gaming room. A small group of men were engaged in conversation near a fireplace. Several tables flanked the right side of the room where various games of whist, faro, and

hazard were in progress. Indeed, this could be a comfortable residence the next time he was in Town.

His footsteps were muffled on the luxurious wool carpet that lined the back stairs. Polished mahogany shone from the wall lamps as he turned down the hall of private rooms.

The first door was open, and he poked his head in. It was a billiard room, rectangular and well-appointed with the table at the far end. Its golden-scrolled legs gleamed in the firelight, ending in lion heads under each of the corner pockets. In front of him, chairs were arranged facing a larger table in a semicircle, presumably for cards. Behind it was a side table and two decanters. By the colors of the liquid, he guessed one to be port and the other brandy. Gleaming linenfold paneling of French walnut surrounded all four sides with Axminster carpet underfoot.

Decadent was the word that came to mind. Not his style of course, but for an occasional indulgence... why not? He'd been told he could request anything with a tug on a rope. He stared at that bellpull now as he sat on his bed. A bed with multiple feather ticks and satin bed linens. But what would he possibly ask for?

A vision of Helen eating a strawberry filled his head and lay back with a groan.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*TWO DAYS later*

*Stanfeld Estate, Norfolk County*

THE FIRST SIGHT of Stanfeld brought tears to her eyes.

The carriage stopped at a crossroads, letting a mail coach go through. Helen popped her head out of the window and saw it, proud and majestic upon the distant hill. As they drew closer, she fought to keep the sobs at bay. They would be safe. They were home. *Home.*

The numerous windows of the imposing three-story medieval manor glinted and flashed like jewels in a crown of gray sandstone. The steep gables seemed to stand sentry, and the four corners of the manor were miniature turrets that looked like arrows pointing to the heavens. Surrounded by the original moat, it reminded visitors of long-gone knights, fair maidens, and chivalry.

She'd been so impatient to leave this place. Once gone, she'd dreamt of returning—not just to the estate—but to the atmosphere of happy, shared memories and love. The grounds of Stanfeld had always been full of love.

The carriage rolled to a stop. Maeve waved to her from her favorite place, sitting in front of the earl on his horse. The driver lifted her daughter to the ground, followed by Lord Griffith, then lowered the steps for her to exit. As her own feet hit the cobblestones, a blur of brown and white came around one side of the house, yipping furiously. Its tail wagged faster than a hawkmoth's wings sipping at honeysuckle.

"Little Bit!" she cried, bending low to catch the little dog as it jumped at her. The dog slurped her cheek with his tongue and barked some more. Helen buried her face in the wiry fur and breathed in the smell of the stable. Then Little Bit turned his attention on the human that was more his size.

"A puppy, Mama. You not tell me we had a puppy."

"Isn't it a wonderful surprise?" asked Lord Griffith, squatting and giving the terrier a scratch behind its ears. "I have a few of my own."

Walking with Maeve's hand in hers, they made their way up the portico steps just as the great oak doors opened wide.

There was Sanders, looking just as old as he always had. His gray eyes twinkled as he bowed to their party. "Lady Helen, you have been missed," he said simply.

Without thought, she hugged the man. He was the closest thing to family she'd seen in three years. He patted her awkwardly on the back, turned red as a ripe apple, then faced Maeve. "And is this Lady Stanfeld's namesake?" he asked, covering his embarrassment.

"It is. I cannot wait to show her the grounds." Helen led the way into the hall and sucked in her breath. She pointed to the portraits lining the walls. "These are your family, my sweet."

But Maeve walked straight to the suit of armor standing guard in the entryway, next to the circular staircase. Knocking on the metal, she put her ear to it.

“Who’s in heeah?” she asked, now sticking an eye against one of the slats in the armor.

Lord Griffith chuckled. “I think your mother meant the paintings up there.” He pointed, and she followed the direction of his finger.

“Oh. They look mad.” She put her hands on her hips, furrowed her brows, and pursed her lips. “Do I look like them?”

“A mirror reflection to be sure.” said the earl.

The small form of the housekeeper, Mrs. Laskey, came bustling down the hall, her frizzed orange curls barely contained by her cap. “Oh, my lady, it’s so good to see you.” Unlike the butler, she welcomed the unexpected hug from Helen. “This house hasn’t been the same since you snuck away. And this is your precious daughter?”

“My name is Maeve Chahlotte—that is my aunt—O’Neill,” she said with a wobbly curtsy. “It is vewy good to meet you, my lady.”

“Such fine manners,” cooed the housekeeper. “But I’m afraid I’m only Mrs. Laskey, not my lady.”

Helen made the introductions and explained that Lord Griffith would be staying the night. Her hands were trembling by the time she reached her old bedchambers. Maeve followed her in, jumping onto the sunny counterpane and reaching for the canopy above. The tiny pink and yellow roses lining the cream wallpaper were cheery and still made her smile. Her favorite color had always been yellow. She’d picked the color



for both bedrooms when she'd been old enough to choose. The color had echoed her optimistic disposition. *I surround myself with somber tones these days*, she thought, looking down at her gray traveling dress and pulling off her bonnet.

Then she watched her daughter leap off the bed and run for the window seat, squealing when she saw the garden. "Mama, I wanna see the flowahs. So many of them, see?"

"Yes, my sweet. But first we must wash off the dust from the road—"

"We took a bath in London. I don't want anothah."

"We will wash off the dust, change our clothes, and then get some refreshment. After that"—Helen wagged her finger as Maeve opened her mouth to protest—"we will walk in the garden. I have many things to show you here at Stanfeld."

"Hot water is on the way, my lady," added Mrs. Laskey. "It will only take three shakes of a lamb's tail, and the little miss will have her wish. What time did you want dinner?"

When was the last time someone had asked her that? *Over three years ago.*

"Since it's already late afternoon, and we'll have tea shortly, why don't we say eight o'clock? Would that be too late for Cook?" Helen bit the inside of her lip when the housekeeper gave her a strange look.

"Whatever you time you prefer, my lady, will suit Cook."

"Yes, then eight, please."

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IT WAS dream-like being home again, dressing for dinner in her old clothes she'd left behind. Though, they would all need to be taken in. She hadn't realized how much weight she had lost.

*Thank you, Mama.* Guilt nipped at Helen as she surveyed the indigo dress with van dyke lace edging on the modest bodice, sleeves, and hem. It was really a winter shade, but she had little choice. It was the closest color she had for mourning, without telling anyone she was in mourning. Since she'd arrived on the Stanfeld grounds, her need to fall apart and fill the nearby pond with tears had diminished. Something about being in this familiar place gave her comfort and strength. Everything would be fine now.

*The sun will shine again.* "I miss you, Papa," she whispered to the ceiling. "I wish you could have known your granddaughter."

Mrs. Laskey appeared at the door with Maeve, dressed in a lovely pale-pink gown that stopped just below her knees. "She insisted on this one, my lady. It's a bit small, but we managed. And she ate enough for two."

"Tawts, Mama. With bewies inside and icing on top. And fat, green peas." Maeve patted her belly. "I'm this full." And she held out her arms.

"Thank you, Mrs. Laskey. I've decided we'll be staying in England indefinitely. Is there still a seamstress in the village?"

"Yes, my lady. And her daughter is working for her now too."

"Could you arrange to have them come to Stanfeld? I'll need a new wardrobe for Maeve and a few things for myself."

She bent to tweak her daughter's nose. "Would you like to choose the colors for your new clothes?"

"And Ahwohwah too?"

"I suppose Aurora may have a new dress," Helen agreed as she took the tiny plump hand. "Let us get some tea."

They met Lord Griffith on the first-floor landing, also on his way to the drawing room. "Perfect timing," he declared. "Aren't you the loveliest ladies on the estate? I am a very lucky man."

"And then we go to the gawden." She held up her arms, and Lord Griffith swung her into the air.

"I see my daughter has charmed you as well," Helen said with a chuckle.

"I believe I was easy prey. Now, your butler will be a more severe test." His voice was light with amusement. "However, I did hear *someone* asking him about good hiding places."

"Sandews knows the vewy best places. Mama will never win when we play hide-and-seek." Her smug smile had both adults chuckling.

After tea and the most delicious biscuits Helen had eaten in years, they strolled in the garden. Lord Griffith smelled of spiced bergamot, and Helen found she liked the scent. While she and the earl walked, Maeve ran, skipped, somersaulted, hopped on one leg, and named every color of flower she passed.

"I wish I had half her energy."

Helen studied the earl's profile as he observed her daughter. He was taller than her but not of great height; his body was muscled and solid as a tree trunk. His shoulders

filled out the forest-green waistcoat, and the matching trousers hugged his muscular thighs. Thick dark hair, combed back and partially tamed, shone black with threads of blue in the fading sun. A lock would break loose from the pomade's hold on occasion, and he'd push it back impatiently. A square jaw, tanned skin that told her he enjoyed the outdoors, and dark eyes that glittered like a shard of cold obsidian.

Then he turned his gaze on her, and she marveled at the warmth she saw there. "It's a lovely garden. Did you spend much time here as a girl?"

She nodded. "Here, the stable, and Lake Perfect were my favorite haunts."

He grinned. "Lake Perfect? I imagine high expectations."

They'd reach the outskirts of the garden with hawthorn trees guarding the delicate plants from hungry animals and heavy winds. Maeve waved at them from under one of the trees, jumping to catch a low-hanging branch.

"Careful of the thorns," he called. The girl quit hopping and glared at the branches, looking for the offensive spikes. "She doesn't stop until she sleeps, eh?"

"Indeed." Helen smiled, feeling lighter than she had in weeks. No, years. Her heart ached, but it also told her she was where she needed to be.

"Now, about Lake Perfect," prompted the earl.

"Ah, it's actually a small pond."

"Already the name implies embellishment." He winked at her, and a rush of heat flooded her belly.

"I was a little girl and thought it an enormous body of water. It provided fish for my brother's favorite pastime,

swimming during the summer heat, and ice skating in the winter. I used to sit under a tree at one end and talk to the squirrels. I imagined being friends with all the creatures in the forest, insisting to my family that I shared a common language with the animals.”

“Did you?”

The question surprised her. She looked up to see a mischievous twinkle in his dark eyes. He was teasing her! “I will admit to several long conversations with some bullfrogs. The squirrels liked my imitation of their chatter enough to talk back once in a while.”

“It sounds enchanting.”

Helen laughed. It was a strange sound coming from her throat, but it slid up and out. When had she last done that? She couldn’t remember. “I was always told I had a vivid imagination.”

As the sun dipped behind the hawthorns, Maeve toddled back to them. She tried to hide a yawn behind her fist, but the fatigue showed in her eyes. “It’s time for my sweet girl to say goodnight. Tomorrow will be another day filled with new sights and sounds.”

Maeve nodded her head and again raised her arms to Lord Griffith. Helen swallowed the sadness as she watched her daughter carried by another man. How would she tell Maeve about her own papa? How would she feel about growing up without a proper father? With a deep breath, she put the questions from her mind. There was time to figure it out. Her family would help her find the words.

Or would they urge her to take another husband in the future? Helen shuddered at the thought. Love had caused her

nothing but pain. She'd prefer to avoid pain if she could. Widowhood was much more appealing to her at this point. Yet shame filled her as she listened to Maeve's giggle when the earl tossed her in the air and caught her. Didn't she deserve someone like Lord Griffith to adore and spoil her?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

CONWAY WAS glad to see Helen eat with more gusto. *Relish might be a better word*, he thought as she closed her eyes on the next bite of poached sole. Being home seemed to improve her color too. Perhaps she was prone to seasickness, and the voyage had been hard on her. Regardless, he welcomed the change.

He took a sip of wine and brought up the subject he'd been dreading. "I believe I shall begin my journey home tomorrow."

Her fork froze midway to her mouth. When her gaze clashed with his, he saw disappointment. Why did that make his pulse dance? Did she enjoy his company? *It doesn't matter, you blunderhead.*

"Of course. You have been more than generous with your time." She smiled. "I do hope we meet again."

"If you lived here, I would be certain of it. But I rarely visit Ireland, so the odds are against it." It sounded so final.

"We shall leave it to fate, then." Helen's eyes grew wide as a servant entered with a steaming dish of custard, a pitcher of cream, and fresh berries. "My favorite."

"Fate?" he asked with a grin.

She laughed, a sweet sound that seemed to match the pudding.

“You are a goose. Mrs. Laskey remembered how I love custard.” She sighed and picked up a spoon. “I can smell the nutmeg. How I’ve missed some of these spices.”

“There is a shortage of spices in Dublin, Mrs. O’Neill?” He wished he hadn’t asked when her smile crumbled. Was it coincidence or did her mood change any time she was asked about Ireland? By this time, he wondered if she disliked the place.

“Um, a few of my particular favorites.” She dished the custard into a small bowl, poured a dollop of warm cream on top, and added a spoonful of berries. Her expression lightened. “Do you care for it, my lord?”

“I do, though I have a feeling your cook must make it exceptionally well.” And once he had a bite, he had to agree with Helen. It melted in his mouth.

“I believe I’m in heaven,” she mumbled around another bite. “How I missed this.”

After they finished, he asked, “Would you like to take another stroll in the garden? Or play Whist?”

She pursed her lips in thought. Conway imagined kissing them, soft and still sweet from the custard. “I would prefer to visit the stable. Hopefully my pony is still there.”

“To the stable, it is,” he agreed, pushing away from the table.

Helen was at home with the horses. Little Bit followed them, yapping at her skirts. She stopped twice to scratch behind his ears. As they passed each stall, Helen named every horse. “Here is my Frog,” she said, stopping in front of a little



bay mare. It had four white stockings and a blaze on its forehead. The horse snorted and let out a soft nicker. "I didn't forget."

She held out a piece of carrot, then turned to the next stall with a frown.

"Don't tell me there is an animal you don't like?"

"No, of course not! I don't recognize him. Gideon must have bought him after I left."

"*That* is Verity. He bought the beast at Tattersalls when he was told it was untrainable." Conway reached up and rubbed the horses' soft black neck. "Your brother believed he'd only been trained badly and obviously beaten. He had welts all over him at the time. It took months, but Stanfeld made him into a deuced good horse."

"Verity. Truth. Sounds like Gideon."

Helen turned back to her own mare and fed her another bite of carrot. "I will see you tomorrow, Frog." She kissed the horse on the nose and turned to leave.

"I have to ask," he said, stopping her with a hand on her arm. "Why Frog?"

She laughed, her cheeks pink. "When she was a foal, she would hop around the pasture, and I thought she looked like a dark furry frog. In my defense, I was only five."

Conway snorted. "You poor thing," he told the pretty mare, admiring her shiny deep brown fur. "I would have given you a more prestigious name, like Hoppy or Bunny."

"Ha! In some cultures, the frog represents wealth and abundance. So, I find my name to be quite as respectable as

your silly monikers.” She gave him a mock glare and ambled toward the door.

“I concede, my lady,” he said with a formal bow, enjoying her newfound spirit.

Just outside the stable, she sat on a bench next to the door. He joined her and realized she was watching the last remnants of the sunset. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yes. There is something about a sunrise or sunset in the country. It’s not the same in a city with buildings blocking the view.” She sighed and leaned her head against the building. “And the birdsong can’t be heard over all the noise. The trill of the wren at dawn or the song thrush in the evening.”

“I’m beginning to think you are more of a country girl. Ladies who appreciate the sedate joys of rural life are rare.” He thought of the women who had tried to interest him in marriage in the past. None would have been happy with an occasional trip to England. Life at Gryff Estate would have been intolerably dull for them.

“Honestly, I didn’t realize what I preferred until I left. As a seventeen-year-old scholar of life, I forged ahead without thought. I knew so much more than my parents.”

“It didn’t seem to turn out too badly, though,” Conway said, giving her a slight elbow. “Maeve is quite the treasure.”

“She is.”

“So, will you be leaving shortly for Scotland? The wedding is early August if memory serves me well. I’d estimate a good week or more for travel.”

“Yes, I—no, I mean...” She stood, her hands clenched in front of her, her bottom lip trembling. “I’m not sure if I will go.”

“Why? Are you concerned for your daughter? Is it too long of a journey after coming from Dublin?” Even in the evening light, he could see how she had paled. But she only shook her head.

“Mrs. O’Neill, I can’t help but see you are distraught whenever I bring up certain subjects. Is there anything I can do?” He wrapped his fingers around slim arm and turned her to face him. Conway couldn’t stand the sadness and fear in her sparkling eyes. What could she possibly be afraid of? “Please, let me help you.”

“He’s dead!” she cried out. “I came alone because he’s dead.” Her hands covered her face, and she began to sob. Great heaving sobs that shook her narrow shoulders.

Without thought, he pulled her close, rubbing her back and rocking them back and forth. “Shhh, now. It will be fine. Everything will be fine.” The sobs continued, and he maintained his hold, absorbing her tremors into his own body and giving comfort.

“How?”

A hiccup and a snuffle. He pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to her. She dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose, then looked up at him with red splotches covering her cheeks. “Shot and killed during a skirmish. His first love was Ireland and its politics, fighting for the rights of the people. He worked for Daniel O’Connell.”

“Ah.” It was making sense now. O’Connell was a loud voice in Ireland’s struggle for rights within the United Kingdom. But he’d killed a man and had since avoided conflict. “But I heard that after two duels, he swore to remain peaceful. He’s been adamant about ignoring insults and proud about his refusals to fight.”

“He may turn a deaf ear to the jeers, but his men do not. I learned of Rory’s death in the middle of the night, torn from my bed, and forced to flee. His friends feared the constable would seek to make an example of my husband by punishing his family.” Her eyes darkened with more tears. “I packed what I could, sent a letter off to Gideon, and fled with Maeve like a coward.”

The sobs began again, and Conway cradled her in arms again. He closed his eyes as the warmth of her body seeped into his, feeling her slight curves fit against his perfectly. The momentary joy of hearing she was a widow had been drowned out by her sobs and confession. How had she kept this to herself for so long?

“Your family doesn’t know?”

Her head moved against his chest, and she looked into his eyes. “They believe I am living a respectable life, married to a wealthy squire.”

“But in truth?”

“A two-room apartment on the third floor in a shabby part of Dublin. It was easy to lie to Mama in letters. But now...” With a sigh, she pushed against his chest and stepped away.

He resisted the urge to take her hand and bring her closer. “Now your family will take one look at you and know something is wrong.”

She nodded and blew her nose again. With a deep steadying breath, Helen told him the sad story. She’d been duped, led away from friends and family, and isolated in a new place. He wanted to strangle the man, except he was already dead. Yet, she must have loved him to stay.

“Well, we’ll have to find a way to provide the time you need to face them,” he said once she’d finished.

“How?”

Conway did take her hand this time, slid it onto his arm, and guided them back toward the house. “I’m quite sure Maeve had a sniffle this evening before bed. By morning, I fear she may not be able to travel.”

Helen peeked up at him beneath her wet lashes. “Nothing serious, of course. Just not well enough to make the journey. We will look forward to congratulating the happy couple in person when they return to Stanfeld.” She blew out a loud relieved sigh.

“I believe you have your letter half written.”

“And I believe you are my hero.”

## CHAPTER NINE

HORRIFIED AND HEARTENED AND OH, so relieved. Opposite words that described the conflicting emotions swirling within her. Horrified she had spilled her secrets to a man she barely knew. Heartened that his reaction had not been to turn away from her or be disgusted by her lies. And relieved to be able to share her secret finally. She wanted to throw her arms around this man and tell him how very, very much she appreciated him.

“I cannot imagine bearing such a burden alone. This does put the missing pieces to the puzzle.” Lord Griffith had escorted inside, and they were stopped at the foot of the stairs. “You have hardly resembled Gideon’s description of you.”

“I can imagine some of the things he’s told you.”

“None of them included a quiet, staid woman. But you are hardly yourself under the circumstances.” He lifted his hand, his fingers curled as if he might brush her cheek, then dropped it to his side. “It seems we’ve quite traded roles.”

“How so?” He was such a kind man. She would have to thank Gideon once her tale had been told to the entire family.

“I am usually the quiet one, especially in female company that is. I’m terrible with polite conversation, never had much practice or use for it. So, the ladies considered me dull or

uninterested. Those that pursued me were after my wealth.” He shrugged, and his face turned a trace of red. “Now we’ve both shared a secret.”

“You’ve not had any difficulty conversing with me.”

“No, I have not. I assumed it was because you were married. I’ve always been more comfortable with females that are already spoken for or related to me.”

She laughed. “I’m certainly not related to you. Will you lose your tongue now that you know I’m not married?”

The smile slid from his face. “No. I will always be happy—comfortable around you. I felt a kinship with you the first time I looked at your image in the cameo.”

Why did her heart suddenly beat so? The longing on the man’s face was undeniable. *He wants you.* Panic throbbed in her belly. Would he try to kiss her, take advantage of her as another had done? Loving a man had been like living inside a tempest, wrenching her into its center, taking her breath away for moments at a time, then drowning her heart in doubt and regret.

“Thank you for sharing a piece of your life with me, Mrs. O’Neill.” He bowed and gave her a wide smile. “It has been a memorable adventure. I only wish we could have met under better circumstances.”

“Perhaps one day, we shall.” No, her instinct had been right. He was a good man.

“I must say I’m worried for you, though. Would it help if I stayed longer? I have no pressing commitments and could easily delay my return a week.”

Helen shook her head. “No, though I thank you for your concern and all you’ve done for me and Maeve. Lending an

ear to my troubles has been a tremendous boon to my spirits.”

He gave her another bow and kissed the back of her hand. “I consider you and your daughter my friends. May I write and see how you both fare?”

A small smile turned up her lips. “I should like that, Lord Griffith. I should like that very much.”

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THE NEXT MORNING WAS BITTERSWEET. The sun shone, and the sky was a cloudless blue. Maeve was in high spirits, but pouting that her friend had to leave. Just as the tears were starting, Little Bit saved the day. The terrier came wagging up to his new charge, tugging on the hem of her dress with his teeth. The peal of giggles was instant, and off she went, chasing the dog.

“I’m so easily replaced,” cried Lord Griffith, his hand at his chest. “Beware the fickle female.”

“Not all of us are so easily distracted, my lord.”

“No.” He turned to her, reins in his hand. His driver had left with the coach already, knowing his lord would catch up easily on horseback. “I need you to promise me something.” His tone was serious, and he caught her in a direct gaze.

“Yes?”

“If you need anything—*anything*—do not hesitate to write. I’ve given you my address.” He mounted his horse, swinging his powerful leg over the saddle, and tipped his hat. “Do I have your word?”

“On my honor!” She placed her hand over heart. “I swear.”



“Then I shall leave you in good conscience, my lady. Until we meet again.”

He gave the horse a light kick with his heels, and it took off in a trot. She watched all the way down the drive and through the gates, feeling a loss as he disappeared from sight.

*Nothing like the present*, she thought as she headed to the parlor. She would write a letter and let her family know she would not attend the wedding. It would be mid-August before they returned. That gave her plenty of time to prepare for their reunion. Her words would be calm and practiced by then.

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*GRYFF ESTATE, Wales*

THE TRIP HOME had afforded Conway too much time to think. Lady Helen—which he now called her since she was a widow—was free. In mourning, granted, but free. It had been unsettling news. Of course, he would be smitten with a woman who was complicated. She was mourning a husband she’d loved enough to risk losing her family for. And he knew how close Stanfeld was to his sisters.

Time would be an ally. Time would give her balance and perspective, allow them to become closer through letters. He was in no hurry. Let her grieve the fool who had chosen politics over her. A yell bubbled up inside him and burst from his throat. “YEESSSSS!” His horse perked its ears, moving them back and forth, as Conway let out another triumphant shout.

This was a new emotion. The excited anticipation of seeing a woman, *Lady Helen*, again. For he would, he knew without a doubt. If he had to invent some new business deal with Stanfeld, he'd return to England after the New Year. He would begin with friendship and correspondence. Words were much easier to put on paper than to formulate and say in a moment. He could take his time and deliberate each word.

He had gone over all the oddities he'd encountered since they met. The companion sent ahead, practically no luggage, the way she savored the well-cooked meals, the sadness and pain in her deep blue eyes, the silence and distraction. His instincts had been right. Something had been wrong, but he'd had no idea how wrong. Yet she had demonstrated such strength, such courage to keep her daughter safe and reach her destination. Home.

It was something they shared, the love of home and family. He could picture Maeve running in gardens of Gryff, riding one of the ponies to the stream, laughing with her mother while they picnicked on the bank.

*Getting ahead of yourself, old man.*

It didn't matter. He was a stubborn Welshman. Once he set his mind to something, nothing shy of a herd of raging cattle could stop him. And his mind was set on Lady Helen and her daughter Maeve, for one did not come without the other.

Nor would he want it any other way.

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HE TOSSED the reins to the stable boy. "Rub him down good, lad. He's come a long way."

“Yes, milord,” said the dark-haired boy, jogging away with the horse.

Conway wanted to wash the road off him and let his grandmother know he had returned. He found her in the library, reading by the window. Her favorite lace shawl, spun with silver thread that matched her hair, lay across her shoulders.

“My boy, you’ve made it back to me,” she declared.

He noticed she grimaced as she rose from the chair. Her bones were aching more this year, and he worried that winter would be hard on her. “You’d send the devil himself after me if I did not.”

She chuckled, her dark eyes still sharp. “Come give this old woman a hug and tell me of your journey.”

Conway raised his hands, palms out. “I need a bath, Grandmama. You won’t be so happy to see me if you come much closer.”

With a chortle, she waved him off. “Go, then. I’ll see you in the drawing room before supper. We’ll talk and have a glass of wine.”

“GRANDMAMA, DINNER WAS EXCELLENT,” he said, smacking his lips on the last of the mutton stew. “I think I shall retire early tonight. It’s been a long day.”

“I can imagine. It’s good to hear the cattle brought a nice price. You have a head for business that your father never had.” She rose from her chair. “Come sit with me by the fire for a bit. I won’t be awake much longer, either. My bedtime seems to get earlier every year.”

“You should slow down.”

“You should marry,” she said, wagging a finger at him. “And you won’t find any prospects riding with drovers and fetching a friend’s married sister.”

“About that...” He offered her his arm to help her up the stairs, and they settled themselves in her private sitting room. If there had been guests, she would never have allowed anyone to assist her. Her pride was great, her opinions narrow, and her words often curt, but Conway never doubted her love for him.

Once Lady Griffith had a glass of wine in her hand, she turned to Conway. “You said, ‘About that’ when we were coming upstairs. Continue, please.”

He paused, wondering where to start. There was no need to report every detail. “The lady I escorted is not married. She is recently widowed.”

“Stanfeld’s sister?” She pursed her lips and stared at the fire. “How long has she been widowed?”

“Not long.”

“And you like her?”

“I do. She also has a daughter, about two years of age. We got along splendidly.”

“She already has a child?” She frowned. “At least it’s a girl. No competition once you have an heir.”

“I said I liked her, and you have us married with a babe already.” He clucked his tongue. “Slow down, Grandmama. I only arrived home a few hours ago. Besides, she loved this man enough to give up her family for him. She may not even be open to a second marriage.”

“You’ve never said you *liked* any woman before. I shall take good news as it comes. The widow aspect, however—when will her year be finished?” Her gaze was steady and practical as if she spoke about purchasing a pregnant brood mare. “And what woman with a drop of intelligence and any kind of sense would not want to marry you?”

He snorted. “Plenty, I’m sure. First, I don’t know if the lady will be open to my courtship. Second, I believe I will begin with correspondence. She has yet to inform her family of the situation.”

“So, you *have* decided. I can read you like my favorite book, Gruff. Tell me your plan, then, for I can see you have one.”

## CHAPTER TEN

*STANFELD ESTATE, Norfolk*

*Mid-August*

HELEN SIGHED as she leaned back against the tub. Her hair was washed, the water was still warm, and the fire crackling. Her family had taken the news well. Gideon had been outraged. “How dare the man use you for his own gain. To trick you into leaving England. If you’d written me, I’d have taken care of him.”

Her sisters—having extended their trip to see Helen and meet Maeve—were empathetic, of course. They were both married and in love with their husbands but assured Helen that time would heal her heart. “As Papa always said,” they chimed in unison, “the sun will shine again.” She hadn’t mentioned the fact her heart had been broken long before her husband had died.

Her new sister-in-law, Lissie, had only hugged her. A widow when she had met Gideon, Lissie understood the loss and how lacking words could be. Helen had a feeling her new sister would be a sympathetic ear.

Mama had been a bit of both, her red cheeks matching her hair. “That rascal! Oh, if I could... But my dear girl, how are you coping? How has little Maeve taken this?”

“I haven’t told her.” That was the only time her breathing had stopped, and she blinked back the tears. “I don’t know how. Will she even understand what ‘dead’ means?”

“We will think on it,” Mama had decided.

After a soft rap on the door, her new lady’s maid entered. “Are you finished, my lady?” She was a girl from the nearby village, perhaps eighteen. Her mother was the seamstress and had mentioned her daughter when she came for Helen and Maeve’s fitting. Tess was a slender girl with light brown hair, green eyes, and an infectious smile.

“Yes, the water is getting tepid.” As Tess wrapped the towel around her, squeezing the wet strands of hair sticking to her back, she began to hum. “That sounds like a lullaby I sing to my daughter.”

“It is, my lady. Since I’ve also been helping with Miss Maeve, she taught me the song so I could sing with her at bedtime.” Tess held up the night rail and pulled it over her mistress’s thin body. “You need to eat more, ma’am. There’s nothin’ to you.”

“I’m trying. And thank you for your help with Maeve. The nurse should arrive by the end of the week, and the nursery will be ready by then too.” She looked over at the small form in her bed. “She doesn’t even realize what she’s been through.”

“I don’t mind a’toll, my lady. She’s a sweet, beautiful little girl. And there’s not a contrary bone in her body. Always willing to do whatever she’s told and smiling to boot.” Tess

pushed her mistress toward the hearth, set her in a chair, and finished drying her hair. “Besides, I’m living in this fine house now, so I’m here whenever you need me.”

Helen chuckled. “Thank you, Tess.” It was odd to have someone helping with her bath. *Pff!* It was odd to have a bath whenever she wished. Mama said she would get used to it all again, but she wasn’t sure. She was certain that she’d never take a servant for granted again. A kind word, a show of appreciation were simple things to give another person. Something so small could mean so much. Another life lesson, she supposed.

When Tess had gone, Helen went to her side table and pulled out the letter from Lord Griffith. He had been solicitous, asking not only about her but Maeve and hoping all had gone well with her family. He’d also made her laugh with some of his tales about the villagers and the Welsh superstitions that were still prevalent. Some were ridiculous, like spying the first daffodil gives the finder more gold than silver throughout the year. Others could truly be profitable.

*A MAN in the village named Rhun works for the local farmers. He helps bring in crops and delivers the goods once sold. There is an old Welsh saying that the appearance of a load of hay in front of you means that good luck will attend you.*

*The farmers had gathered at the tavern and were complaining that every time they send Rhun out to deliver a wagonload of hay, it takes him all day. So, they asked the man, “Why can ye manage a load of vegetables by midmorning, but it takes ye till supper for the hay?”*



*Rhun answered, "I'm a man of good will, ye know. So, I wait along the main road, and when I see someone comin', I pull the wagon in front of them. I like to spread luck amongst my friends and kin whenever I can." He took a puff off his pipe and grinned.*

*The farmers nodded and chewed on this for a moment. One said, "But you don't get paid as much if you only deliver the one load in a day. You'll lose money to give people a bit of luck?"*

*The barkeep leaned in on the conversation. "Oh, he doesn't lose a ha'penny. He finds those friends and kin in here eventually. Somehow, the conversation always turns to the hay, the luck coming their way, and the empty bumper in front of himself."*

*"Ye ask a man to buy ye a drink after doing him a good deed?" asked one farmer, frowning at Rhun.*

*"No, now that would be bad manners. I just remind them of my thoughtfulness, and they are always happy to partake in another ale with me. No one wants to cross fate."*

*"What he loses by not driving an extra load, he makes up for in ale over the next week."*

HELEN LAUGHED AGAIN as she reread it. She missed him. They had been together a week. Yet, she'd felt she'd known him so much longer. Her response had not been as lighthearted, relaying her news, but it had ended on a happy note. Gideon had also written a letter of thanks. Her brother had sung Griffith's praises, declaring him a clever businessman and a kind and generous earl.

*LATE OCTOBER*

“ALL HALLOWS’ Day is coming, Mama.”

Helen looked at her daughter. They were outside, picking the last blades of green grass for Frog. It was one of her Maeve’s favorite pastimes, and Frog seemed to enjoy it as well. “And what does that mean?”

“Bonfahyuhs and witches. Wemembah? I fohgot what Lord Gwuff called it in his letter.”

She and Griffith, as she thought of him now, had continued their correspondence. Maeve now demanded to hear what the letters said and was spellbound by the tidbits of Welsh folklore he included for her. After one correspondence, the child had hung seaweed—forcing Gideon to take a trip and find the green nastiness—in the back of the kitchen to ward off evil spirits. Another had her collecting rain in a bucket. Then she washed all the coins the family and staff had in their pockets with the stored water to ensure it could never be stolen. The last letter had been full of fascinating details about the upcoming and highly celebrated holiday in Wales.

“Samhain. We never celebrated that. It’s more of a pagan ritual.” She tussled the girl’s hair. “But I imagine we can carve some turnips and put them in the windows.”

“I have a pile of wood we can buhn. I collect some ewewy day when I walk with Tess.” The maid had continued their walks, even with the arrival of Nurse. Mrs. Hampton was a wonderful, nurturing woman, but Tess was much more suited to chasing the child than the older Nurse.

“We will talk to your uncle about the kindling. I’m sure he’ll manage something that resembles a bonfire.”

She thought of Griffith and saw him before a bonfire, looking wickedly handsome and inviting her to dance. *Stop it!* she scolded herself. The man was creeping into her thoughts too much as of late. He had been invading her dreams too.

“Mama, why ah all you clothes black?” She fingered the lace overlay on her mother’s bombazine skirt.

Helen brushed the hair from Maeve’s cheeks. Familiar blue eyes blinked up at her, curiosity shining in them. “Remember when we talked about your papa going away to Heaven?”

She nodded, her expression serious now.

“Wearing this somber color shows I am sad that he is gone.”

Maeve thought about this for a bit, digging her toe in the grass at her feet. “We didn’t put on black when Lord Gwuff went away. We love him too.”

She crouched down and hugged the little girl to her, suddenly feeling quite weepy. Helen shook her head. “That’s because Lord Griffith can come back to us. Your papa cannot. But we will go to see him someday.”

“When is that?”

“When our time here on earth is done. A long, long time from now.”

“Will Papa be lonely?” she asked, her breath tickling Helen’s ear.

“No, my sweet. He’s with other people who have gone to Heaven too.”

“Good. I don’t want him to be by himself.” And with that she untangled herself from her mother’s embrace and ran toward the stable and Frog.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*DECEMBER 1820*

*Gryff Estate, Wales*

“I’VE RECEIVED A LETTER FROM BRECKEN,” Conway informed his grandmother at breakfast. He had learned upon his return that he would be an uncle. “He’ll be taking Evie to London at the end of January. He wants an *accoucheur* to tend her rather than a midwife.”

“Both would be a wise idea. The male doctor may have more book knowledge, but there is nothing to compare with a midwife’s experience.” Lady Griffith held out her hand for the letter so she could read it herself. She refused to admit it was hard to decipher the script these days. Instead, she had Conway read it aloud, and then she perused the contents as if making sure her grandson had told her correctly.

“He’s invited me to join them after the birth. Perhaps stay for part of the Season and meet some young ladies.” He took a sip of the bitter coffee and smacked his lips. “What say you?”

“Any particular woman in mind?” she asked nonchalantly.

“No.”

“Aren’t you still writing to the widow?” Her gaze was fastened on him now.

“Yes. And her name is Mrs. O’Neill, or Lady Helen.”

“I thought she’d responded. Several times. And yes, I would think she is again using her brother’s title and resumed her old address.” Her fork began tapping against the side of the china as his silence lengthened. “What has you so tightlipped this morning?”

He sighed. “Grandmama, you say you want me to take a wife. Yet, I know what Mama went through when she lived here. I do not want to bring a young woman into that kind of conflict.”

“Why—”

“I don’t want to hear the excuses. I’ve heard them all from both sides.” He ran his fingers through his hair and stood, walking over to the sideboard to fill his plate with eggs and rasher. He needed to choose his words carefully.

“Whoever I bring home as my wife, she will need to be in charge of this household.” He sat down and reached for a piece of toast from the rack. Finally, he raised his head and matched her glare with his own steady one. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“You don’t think I can get along with another female under my ro—under *this* roof?” Her lips clamped tightly together, deepening the creases around her mouth. Her dark eyes sparkled. “I take umbrage to that.”

“Of course you do. But the fact still remains that I cannot marry until this issue is settled.” He buttered his toast, waiting for her response.

“I’m sure the girl will need some supervision and training at first. Every household is different,” she replied, her chin jutting out. “It was different with your father. He was thrice your mother’s age.”

“You will be looking over her shoulder, making her second guess every move she makes.”

“Well, I—”

“Should move into the dowager house.” There, he’d said it. But the look of pain that crashed across her face made him regret blurting it out. “Not right away.”

“Before the bride crosses the threshold.” She took a drink of her chocolate, set it down very precisely, and dabbed the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “You are right, of course. I will begin renovations this week. The décor is deplorable, just deplorable. But we’ll right that soon enough. Could you pass me the marmalade?”

And the conversation moved on. Just like that. Conway made a conscious effort to keep his jaw from dropping. He had dreaded this conversation, knew it had to happen, and had procrastinated long enough. He shook his head, then chuckled. His grandmother was an enigma to be sure.

“Now, what’s this pishposh about not having a particular lady in mind?” she asked, adding a dollop of orange sweetness to her toast. “You’re not one to change his mind.”

“No, but I’m not assuming Lady Helen feels the same way.” He grinned at her raised eyebrow. “Of course, I plan to see her when I go. I’ve already written Stanfeld, and we’re meeting in London in February. If his sister does not come along, I’ll contrive an invitation to his estate.”

“That’s my boy.” Lady Griffith nodded and lifted her spoon. “Show her the Welsh fortitude. And remember to bring some leeks.”

Conway threw his head back and laughed. An old superstition that keeping leeks on one during a fight will bring victory. “Love is not a boxing match, Grandmama.”

“Oh, how little you know,” she murmured, taking a bite of her bread. “Love is always an uphill battle.”

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*JANUARY 1821*

*Stanfeld Estate, Norfolk*

TWELFTH NIGHT WAS OVER, and Maeve lay in her bed, softly snoring. It had taken a month, but she finally slept in the nursery all night. No more cold little toes sneaking under her counterpane early in the morning. It was bittersweet. And lonely.

She walked into her mother’s parlor and plopped onto a chair by the fire. “Off to slumberland.”

“She certainly enjoyed the holiday.” Her mother looked up, a smile in her deep blue eyes. “And you?”

Helen nodded. “I did, truly. I’ve been looking forward to the New Year.” She tucked one foot beneath her, the other hanging down while her toe tapped the wool carpet. “I think I shall begin wearing some half-mourning colors.”

“Oh? Does this have anything to do with a certain letter Gideon received?”



She blushed. “Of course not. Though I consider him a friend, and it would be nice to see him again.”

“Little Maeve certainly hasn’t forgotten the earl. She adored the stuffed Little Bit he sent as a Christmas and birthday gift. She says Aurora now has her own dog.” Her mother set down her needlework. “And do not worry that she refuses another doll. I remember a torn and filthy blanket I would not relinquish until I was ten. Your grandmother hated the thing.”

“I assumed Maeve’s obsession with the thing was because her father had given it to her.”

“That might be part of it. But when we have something that makes us feel happy or safe—or both—we tend not to care what it looks like. It’s the feeling it gives us, that security of something that’s always been there for us and always will.”

Helen nodded. “I hadn’t thought of it that way. I suppose you are right. She can choose her own toys.”

“Back to Lord Griffith. You are still exchanging letters?”

She nodded. “He is quite eloquent in his writing. And he makes me laugh at least once with every correspondence.”

“That’s quite an accomplishment. And what type of answers do you send in reply?” Her mother bent her head over the needlework again, rocking gently as she worked. “Encouraging?”

“I don’t believe so. I recount on-dits from London that Gideon or Etta have relayed to us, Maeve’s reaction to his latest letter, and whatever tidbits I can think of.” She picked at her skirt. “I want to see him again, yet the idea frightens me.”

“Meeting with a friend frightens you?”

“Mama, we both know he seeks more.”

“And why is that such a terrible thing?”

She sighed, trying to make sense of her jumbled thoughts.  
“Love is painful.”

“So is not loving.”

Helen thought about this. “When I met Rory, he was a whirlwind and knocked me off balance. I never knew what to think. I just soaked up his excitement, his passion, and followed him.” She stood and began pacing. “The gale was wonderful and terrifying, and then... I was left alone and cold. My life went from an adventure to silent and lonely. If it weren’t for my daughter, I’m not sure what I might have done. My heart broke in so many pieces that I don’t know if I’ve put them all back together again.”

“Does it feel cracked when you read the earl’s letters?”

Helen shook her head. “It feels right, but I was so wrong before. I don’t think I could weather that storm again.”

Her mother came to her then, put an arm around her shoulder, and pulled her close. “Just listen to your heart, my sweet, and keep your mind open. My heart has never led me wrong.”

“But what about—”

“Sometimes we must experience a misdirected or mistaken tenderness to appreciate true love when it finds us. For it finds *us*, my darling girl, and don’t ever think otherwise. I’m not saying that Lord Griffith *is* the right one, but he may be. And perhaps what you have been through is leading you to the life you are meant for. How will you know if you don’t give your heart a chance to speak?”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*MARCH 1821*

*A London dinner party*

CONWAY TOSSED BACK THE BRANDY. He'd suffered through a ball, a musicale, and Almack's already. He was ogled and looked over like his cattle at auction. And the whispers...

*GOOD STOCK*, one matron had said.

*A little short*, another had said doubtfully.

*Heard he's quite plump in the pocket.*

His favorite so far, *But he's Welsh, you know.*

IF HE WASN'T MEETING up with Stanfeld tonight, he'd be tempted to send them all to the devil and go home. To Wales. *Because he was Welsh, you know.* He sat in the private billiards room at the Wicked Earls' Club, putting off the inevitable. The sound of ivory clacking against ivory took him from his brooding.

A man in livery appeared at the door. "Your carriage is ready, my lord."

He nodded and rose. "Thank you, I'll be right down." Then he poured another finger of brandy and threw it back. *Now I'm ready.*

The streetlamps glowed a pale yellow over the wet cobblestones. His driver pulled up in front of the large townhouse he'd once stayed in with Helen. Tonight, his host would be Lord Stanfeld and his wife. He hadn't met her yet and wondered if Lady Stanfeld knew of him only through her husband or if someone else had mentioned him. He saw a line of several more carriages in front of his and one pulling up as he reached the portico.

*A small dinner party*, Stanfeld had said. He had seen his old friend at White's last week. Conway had thought his inquiry of Lady Helen had sounded solicitous without being overly so. He had learned she was in half-mourning now and might visit London for some minor social events. The words had stiffened his resolve to remain in Town. Tonight, though, he'd hint for an invitation to Stanfeld's country home.

He handed his hat and overcoat to one of the footmen and proceeded into the crowded drawing room. Conway froze. Lady Helen was sitting in a corner with her sister, Etta, a lovely woman with dark chestnut hair and light brown eyes. Her husband, Lord Burnham, stood behind both women, his hand on his wife's shoulder.

Lady Helen looked up suddenly and blinked, peered around the room, and stopped her gaze on him. Her sapphire eyes grew wide, and a smile curved her plump lips. Conway couldn't move, couldn't look away, couldn't even open his

mouth. It had been months since he'd seen her, months since he'd breathed her scent of vanilla and jasmine.

A hand clasped his shoulder. "Good of you to come." Stanfeld stood next to him. "I'd like you to meet my wife."

Conway turned to the lovely woman with burnt umber waves and honey brown eyes. "Lady Stanfeld, it is wonderful to finally meet you. His description hardly does you justice."

"Why thank you, Lord Griffith. It's a pleasure to meet ye. It seems ye have an avid admirer in our house." He had expected her warm smile but the thick brogue surprised him.

His heart sped up. Had Helen spoken of him? "I'm pleased to hear it." Did he sound mundane or mildly interested? He was hoping for mildly interested.

"My niece, Maeve, believes the sun rises and sets on the wisdom of the great Welshman, Lord Gwuff." Stanfeld laughed and clapped Conway on the shoulder again. "You made quite the impression on the girl."

*But what about the other girl?* he wanted to ask.

"Tell me of your new nephew, Griffith. I hear Brecken is ecstatic to have his heir."

Conway told them of the birth of a boy. "He looks like his father but has the hair and eyes of his mother. And a healthy set of lungs on him."

"Was it a difficult birth?" asked Lissie.

"According to the women, it was not."

"I'm happy for her. Lady Brecken is a lovely woman."

"You know her?" Did everyone in England know each other, Conway wondered.

“Her sister Fenella married Gideon’s cousin, Lachlan MacNaughton.”

“Ah, a small world, indeed.”

“Have you spoken with my sister yet?” asked Stanfeld.

Conway shook his head. “I’ve only just arrived. I was hoping to—”

And then she was there, her fiery red curls caught up in a ribbon and cascading down her neck, pearls dangling at her ears and around her throat. She wore a silk dress of mauve with a matching satin overlay. Black lace trim offset the edges of the cuffs and hem. *Perfection*. He drank in the sight of her, intoxicated by her nearness and the scent of jasmine with a hint of vanilla.

“Lord Griffith,” she said, “it’s been much too long.” She held out a gloved hand.

The woman he’d escorted from Bristol was gone. In her place stood a lady at home in this social setting. She had put on some weight, and the gaunt look was gone. Creamy skin and rosy cheeks were only enhanced by her smile.

He took her fingers in his and kissed the back of her glove. “My lady, it is my pleasure. I am happy to see you fully recovered.”

“No doubt, thanks to you,” Stanfeld said. “I heard all about the harrowing escapade of my niece, and your ensuing rescue of both damsels in distress at the docks.”

“The girl has a vivid imagination, so I’m sure the whole incident has been somewhat embellished.” He could feel his cheeks burning. “It wasn’t nearly so dramatic.”

“I beg to disagree,” cut in Helen. “She dashed in front of the carriage, and Lord Griffith dove onto the ground, scooped her up, and rolled away from the rolling wheels.”

“We owe ye a debt of gratitude, my lord,” said Lady Stanfeld.

Helen placed her hand on his arm, and heat shot through his body. “I was so shocked by how close she’d come to harm, I fainted. Then he had to carry me.”

“I’d do it again,” he murmured, scanning her face. This time, she blushed.

Conway accepted a glass of wine, and Stanfeld introduced him to some of the other guests. “Can I ask you a question?” asked his host as they paused in a corner, away from other ears.

“Anything.”

“What is going on between you and my sister? And do not tell me you are only friends who enjoy corresponding with one another.” Stanfeld’s dark eyes pinned him, waiting for an answer.

Conway looked around, then over his shoulder. No one was close enough to hear his response, and Helen stood across the room with her sister-in-law. “Are you sure you want to know?”

His friend nodded, eyes narrowing.

“I’m in love with her.”

He was silent for a moment, then a wide grin covered his face. “Excellent, Griff. I’m happy to hear it.”

“And Lady Helen? Do you know if she holds any affection for me?” Did his voice go up as he asked. *Good God.*

Stanfeld bent closer. “The feeling is mutual, according to my mother. It’s just convincing her marriage is worth another try. But I have a feeling if anyone can do it, it’s Lord Griffith.”

Conway laughed. She cared for him. His heart soared, and he wanted to shout it to the room. “I only needed to know this wasn’t one-sided. I’m in no hurry. I’m already thirty-two blasted years old, what’s a bit longer?”

“That’s the spirit,” agreed Stanfeld. “And know that you have her family behind you. Now, what can we do to help?”

“First, tell me whose idea it was for her to come to Town.”

“Hers. Lissie mentioned being nervous about hosting her first London dinner party, and Helen offered to assist.” He nodded toward the women. “They have become close these past months.”

“Your sister knew I would be here?” He held his breath.

“Yes. She did hesitate for a moment when I informed her, then shrugged, and said she must pack and make arrangements for little Maeve.” He rubbed his palms together. “Now, how can we help?”

Conway let out the breath. “Do you plan to stay here long?”

“No, Lissie prefers the country as does Helen. I’ll travel back and forth as needed to take my seat at the Lords. Would you like an invitation?”

“You have no idea how happy that would make me.” He chanced a glance at the most beautiful woman in the room. “I wouldn’t happen to be sitting next to her at dinner, would I?”

Stanfeld snorted. “What do you think?”



“My appetite just grew tenfold.” He tipped his wine toward Stanfeld and turned to the prize. For at this moment, he had no doubt he would win her heart. Thinking of a curly-haired girl with eyes like her mother, he thought, *I’m already halfway there.*

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HELEN FELT his eyes on her. Looking over her shoulder, she caught Griffith staring at her as he listened to something Gideon said. Were they conspiring? *Don’t be a ninny.* Her brother didn’t know her feelings—she barely knew her own feelings. But tonight, when Griffith walked into the room, she’d felt the air sizzle. Her pulse had raced; her stomach flipped. She hadn’t realized how strongly he affected her until she’d seen him again.

Now he was walking toward her, looking so handsome with his dark hair smoothed back, the snug waistcoat and tails, that smile... Then the happiness knotted with anxiety as she remembered the same excitement with Rory.

*They are different men.*

His breath was warm when he leaned down close and whispered, “May I escort you to the dining room?”

Helen pushed Rory from her mind. “That would be lovely.”

Dinner was announced, and the entire group moved toward the door. They were seated next to each other. Trying to tamp down the fluttering wings, she put her hand on her belly. *How will I manage to eat a bite?*

Yet, she did. Griffith kept filling her plate while maintaining the conversation. For a man who claimed to be stilted in social circles, he was very much at ease tonight. Charming, in fact. He told her of his journey to London over soup. Regaled her with his escapades as a child while serving roast mutton and vegetables. Through the salads and cheeses and another main course, he told an amusing account of his half-brother's experience as a new father. By the time the nuts, fruits, and sweetmeats were served, Helen could only nibble on a hazelnut.

The ladies retired to the drawing room, leaving the men to their port.

"Dinner seemed to go well," Lissie said as the ladies found seats. "Yer Welshman is verra handsome."

"He's not *my* Welshman, but I do agree with you. On both points." Her sister-in-law had become a close confidante, another sibling. "I don't know if I'm ready."

"Then take yer time. I dinna think he'll mind waiting." Lissie hooked arms with Helen, and they walked the room to socialize with the other guests. Some had brought their needlework, others simply enjoyed sharing gossip.

An hour later, the men joined them, and tea was served. Four guests began a game of whist. A viscount had brought his violin and accompanied his wife on the pianoforte while their daughter sang. Everyone clapped, and someone suggested charades. Helen was about to join the game when Griffith appeared at her side.

"Would you like to stroll in the garden?" he asked. "It's a bit chilly but a clear night."

“It’s a small one, but a walk after that meal would be nice. I’ll get my cape.” She had decided there were some advantages to her situation. No one would gasp at a widow taking a short stroll outside with a gentleman. She returned with her cloak, informed Lissie of where she was going, and took Griffith’s offered arm.

They walked in companionable silence during the first turn around the garden. Griffith pointed out several constellations. “Do you see the bright star just to our left? Can you see Taurus?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t know the night sky very well,” she said, peering up at the thousands of diamonds sparkling above.

“Here,” he said, bending his knees so he stood in front of her but lower than her line of sight. “Follow my finger and I’ll trace it. It’s supposed to be a bull, though without a telescope it’s hard to distinguish.”

Helen leaned forward, using his finger as a center. He described the legs and horns, but she could not see the form of an animal. “I’m sorry. I do see the outline you are showing me, but for the life of me, I can’t see a bull.”

Rising, Griffith turned to face her, and his head collided with hers. She yelped and covered her nose, the sharp pain bringing tears to her eyes.

“Blast it! I’m sorry.” He stepped closer and covered her hand with his. “Let me see it.”

His fingers gently pressed around her nose. His image before her was blurry, so she blinked rapidly to bring him into focus. As he became clear, his dark chocolate eyes connected with hers. “I don’t think it’s broken.”

Helen could feel his breath against her skin. If she tilted her head forward just a degree, they would touch. He smelled of bergamot and night air, and his lips were right there, so close, so soft... She reached up with her gloved hand and brushed his mouth, then pulled it back, realizing what she had done. *Sweet Mary, why did I do that?* Her gaze traveled back to his, and she could see the hunger now.

“I promised myself I wouldn’t do this, but...” Griffith cupped her cheek with his hand and touched his lips to hers.

A sweet brush, a hint of port. Then he pulled her close and kissed her hungrily. He smelled so good; his body was hard and pressing. A warmth spread from her belly, lower, and that familiar tumbling in her stomach came rushing back.

His tongue traced the seam of her lips, and she opened for him. His thumb stroked her cheek, his other palm remained steady and caressing on her back. Her head swam, her head body thrummed, and she gave in to her desires. Her arms went around his neck, and she almost smiled against his mouth when he groaned.

Eyes closed, she reveled in the velvet of his tongue against hers, remembering her innate passion, simmering below the surface. She remained still when he ended the kiss, breathing heavily, trying to still the squall within her. Finally, Helen opened her eyes. And the emotion in his was her undoing.

She pushed away from him, shaking her head. “I shouldn’t have... We can’t...”

“Lady Helen, stop.” His voice, deep and hoarse, stilled her, but she did not turn around. She felt his breath stirring her hair as came behind her. “You understand why I’m in London, yes?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

“I’m hoping to find a wife.” His fingers curled around her arm and slowly spun her until she faced him. He tipped her chin up. “Look at me.”

Helen slowly raised her eyes and swallowed. “You mentioned it in your last letter.”

“And you must know how much I’ve come to care for you,” he whispered in her ear, stroking her cheek with his knuckles. “I’d like to ask you—”

“Don’t say it, please. Don’t ask me to marry you.” She cursed the tear that rolled down her face. “I cannot think of marriage now.”

“It’s bad manners to interrupt, you know.” He cupped her face with both hands, kissed her eyes closed, her nose, and finally her mouth. An easy, lazy kiss that promised so much. “I would like to return to Stanfeld when you go. Your brother invited me. I thought we could spend time together. Get to know each other through spoken words rather than only letters. You are still in mourning, my lady. I will give you the time you need. Will you at least allow me your company for a week?”

Helen placed her gloved hands over his and looked at him, her lip trembling. But she nodded.

“Good. I’d like to see Lake Perfect.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “I promise not to ask for more than you are willing to give.”

“And if I’m not willing to marry again?” she asked, wondering how she could deny this man anything.

“I would never jeopardize our friendship. It is too dear to me.” His fingers pulled on the strings of her cloak, and he re-

tied them for her. Then he threaded her hand through his arm and kissed her cheek. “I will warn you, however, that I’m a Welshman. We’re known to be slow and steady—and stubborn. Patience is one my virtues.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*A week later*

*Stanfeld Estate*

SPRING CAME EARLY TO NORFOLK. Helen had hoped to go ice skating with Griffith and Maeve when he arrived. Tomorrow. *He would be here tomorrow.*

What had she been thinking to agree to this? A widow. In mourning. Well, half mourning. Still... why wasn't her mother or brother telling her how inappropriate this visit was? Why did Lissie just smile and hum when Helen voiced her concerns? Because Helen was an adult and would have to make her own decisions. Her dreams had not helped. Griffith on a horse, chasing her down while she laughed and lifting her into the saddle with him. Griffith in the stable, brushing his horse, his shirt open, sweat clinging to the muscles of his back. It didn't matter the scenario; they all ended with a kiss. A ravenous, delicious, life-changing kiss.

But she'd had these feelings before and been wrong. How could she be certain? She had Maeve to think of now. But her daughter adored the man. She had cried a few times once she realized she wouldn't see her father for a very long time. Then

Lord Gwuff and his letters had filled a void along with Uncle Gidjun. If it was up to her family, she would be wed on the morrow when the earl arrived.

Little Bit nosed her hand. She put down the brush, fed Frog the last carrot, and squatted down to scratch the terrier's wiry coat. "Tell me all will be well, Little Bit." His tail wagged faster. "That's not an answer," she said, then kissed the top of his head and straightened up. It was late, but she couldn't sleep. The horses, their nickers, the soothing sound of munching hay seemed to settle her nerves. *The sun will shine again.* But would it shine this week, would it shine on Lord Griffith?

Lissie met her at the door of the house. "Restless?" she asked.

"Yes." With a sigh, Helen hugged her sister-in-law. "I'm feeling unsettled."

"I was going to the library to look for a book. Would ye like to join me?"

The women perused the shelves. Lissie pulled out a thick history tome. "This should be dull enough to put ye to sleep."

Helen flipped a few pages of the book. "How did you know the love you had for Gideon was different from what you had with your first husband?"

"Ah." She took Helen's hand, and they moved to the wingback chairs by the hearth. "Ian and I were betrothed as children. It was an agreement between clans."

"I didn't know that. He was a MacNaughton, my cousin, but I didn't realize the Scots still did that." What would it be like to marry a man because of an agreement?



“We loved each other, no doubt. But as we’ve discussed before, it was a different kind of love. Fierce in its own way, but different. He was my best friend.” Lissie paused, then leaned forward, and took Helen’s hand. “The heart kens what we need. I listened to my heart, and it led me to Gideon. If I had fought that urge, I would have been miserable without him.”

“But what if my heart doesn’t know?” She chewed her lip. “It was so tumultuous, loving Rory. And so short. By the time I was pregnant, that excitement, the fierce desire to be together was fading. I realized I didn’t *like* him, though I loved him. Do you like my brother?”

“Aye, of course. That’s the foundation all couples should have. When passions rise and fall, the friendship remains to get us through until the next wave desire. If ye love someone, truly love someone, it’s not heat and hunger all the time.” Lissie laughed. “It doesna go away, but it burns more brightly at times. Does that make sense?”

Helen nodded.

“Ye have grown to like this mon?”

“Yes, our correspondence has indeed forged that foundation of friendship. He’s a good man.”

“And ye’ve ken him longer than you kent yer first husband when ye eloped, did ye no’?”

Helen looked into Lissie’s warm golden eyes, saw the compassion there. “So, I’m halfway there?”

Lissie nodded. “Now ye must let yer heart decide.”

---

GRIFFITH HAD ABANDONED the carriage for the last leg of the trip. He needed air and exercise to ward off the nervousness coming over him. His confidence had begun to wane in the last ten miles, and enjoying the countryside from a saddle always restored his good humor. Stanfeld Manor came into view, its fairytale turrets shining in the afternoon sun. It was a grand estate, but Conway preferred the wilder lands of Wales. So much of England was too orchestrated, plotted out, with nature bent to the will of man instead the other way around.

Trotting through the gate, he heard the familiar bark of Little Bit. He guessed Maeve would be close behind. And he was right. The brown and white little mutt came barreling around the house from the stables, a little auburn-haired girl running behind. She was waving at him and yelling something, but Conway wasn't sure if it was directed at him or the dog.

“Lord Gwuff, I missed you,” she shouted.

He pulled his horse to a stop and dismounted. His feet had barely hit the ground when a little body came flying at him. He bent and scooped her up, her pudgy arms going around his neck. Any misgivings he'd had dissolved with that sweet, tight hug. This was right; this was where he should be.

“I've missed you too, my little princess.” He bent down to pet Little Bit with Maeve still clinging tightly to his neck and giggling.

“I like it when you call me that.” She smushed her cheek against his. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“I'm thwee now,” she announced proudly.

“Oh my, all grown up.” He set her down on her own feet. “And when did this magnanimous event occur?”

“In Decembah.”

“Did you get my present?”

She nodded. “Mama says he’s the only dog who can sleep with me.”

A stable boy stood patiently, waiting to take Conway’s horse. The carriage was just coming over the hill toward the gate. The great double doors of the manor opened, and Sanders appeared. He was followed by Stanfeld and his wife and Lady Helen.

Lady Helen wore a soft gray dress with lavender trim. It clung to her curves as she walked down the steps, and she nervously smoothed her ruby curls into place. He saw the uncertainty in her blue eyes and longed to hold her again. Tell her how bright their future was, to let him love her, love Maeve, and give her the family they both so desperately wanted.

“Griffith, I hope the journey was pleasant?” asked Stanfeld, holding out his hand and clapping Conway on the shoulder.

“Aye, the weather held,” he said, not taking his eyes from Helen. “You look lovely.”

“Thank you,” she said, her cheeks pink. “I see my daughter is already monopolizing your time.”

“One of my favorite females,” he agreed as Maeve slid her tiny hand into his big one.

“Well, come in. Mrs. Laskey is arranging for tea in the drawing room.” Lady Stanfeld led the way back in the house.

The dowager countess joined them for tea. “It’s so good to see you again, Lord Griffith,” she said, offering her hand. “My

granddaughter has quite a schedule of events planned for the week.”

“I’m ready for anything,” he exclaimed, giving a side glance to Lady Helen.

---

BY THE THIRD DAY, Helen almost felt sorry for Griffith. *Almost*. Then she thought of the poor gardener who had to pick leeks and attach them to the roof to ward off sickness for the family and staff.

“He certainly has fortitude,” exclaimed her mother as they watched the pair play shuttlecock. “Have you been enjoying yourself?”

Helen sighed. “Very much.” Most of the activities during the day had included little Maeve. But the adult evenings had included music, games, and walks in the garden. She had seen the shy side of Griffith during a dinner party with the neighboring estate owners. An urge to protect him had come over her, and Helen had intervened during any awkward conversation. His look of gratitude had warmed her and made her feel... needed. Wanted.

“Tomorrow you are going on a picnic?”

“Yes. I’m taking him to Lake Perfect,” said Helen. “Cook is preparing a basket.”

“I was wondering if you might leave little Maeve here with me.” Her mother kept her eyes on the shuttlecock match. “Lady Carrington is coming for tea and bringing her granddaughter. I believe she’s eight or nine. I think Maeve will be a nice distraction for her while us old women chat.”

She studied her mother's profile, suspicious of the nonchalant tone. "Wouldn't that be improper? For just the two of us, alone, on a picnic?"

"*Pfft.* You're a widow, not some virginal debutante. Besides, who's to know except family?" She turned and patted Helen's cheek. "You need time alone with the man, my dear."

It was true. Griffith—Conway he was insisting she call him now—had not even attempted to kiss her in the garden. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. In his defense, there was always someone nearby. But it had sprouted a seed of doubt. Was he just looking for a wife? Yes, he cared for her. But the word "love" had never been mentioned. Did he love her? And would that be better, or worse, if he did?

After his kiss, her mind had been in turmoil and her heart in pandemonium. She wanted him, but she was afraid to want him. Another kiss might help. Or turn her brain to mush. Her fingers went to her lips as she watched Conway reach out to hit the feather game piece and send it back to his exuberant opponent. He wore a cream shirt, matching trousers, and a light-blue waistcoat. Muscles stretched the thin linen of his shirt as he dove for the return. When he missed, hitting the ground, he looked over at the ladies with the sweetest, silliest grin on his face. Her stomach tumbled. *Careful. You're falling in love with him.*

As if reading her thoughts, her mother said, "Yes, some time alone would be good for both of you."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“IT’S AS lovely as its name.” Conway hobbled the horses and let them graze on the fresh spring grass. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

Lady Helen spread the blanket on the ground, and Conway set down the basket. She wore a mauve dress of muslin. The thin material showed off her petite but curvy figure as the sun shone through it. The neckline was low but still somewhat modest with only a hint of cleavage. A matching bonnet with white flowers and green centers covered her head, a white ribbon tied beneath her chin.

He glanced at the pond, heard the bullfrogs join in the late afternoon birdsong.

“Are they some of your friends?” he asked with a grin.

“Ha! Go ahead and make fun. I’m used to it.”

“So that’s a *yes*?”

She tossed a napkin at him; he threw it back and plopped down on the blanket. It was a nice setting, he thought. There were willow trees on each end of Lake Perfect. They were set up next to one, preferring the warm sunshine to the shade. A pair of wrought-iron benches sat side by side on the other end,

beneath the second willow. He lay down, pointing up to the big fluffy clouds.

“That looks like sheep,” he said.

“I can see that,” she agreed, “much easier than the constellation you showed me.” Then her cheeks went pink as they both remembered what happened that night in the garden.

“Your turn. You find one.”

She joined him on the blanket and laid down next to him, her hand over her eyes as she searched the puffs of white. “There, an owl. See its pointed ears and the outline of the wings?”

“Very good. You’ve played this game before.” He rolled to his side, propping himself up with his elbow. “They say when an owl hoots between houses, a maid will lose her chastity.” He tried to wipe the sly grin off his face but couldn’t.

“Well, it’s a good thing there are no owls in the afternoon, and I’m no maid,” she quipped back.

He let out a loud guffaw. He picked up her hand and kissed the palm. “Touché! I enjoy a quick wit.”

They munched on hard cheese, soft bread, and cold fowl. Cook had also packed some ratafia, which Helen drank from the bottle and handed to Conway. “It’s not strong, so enjoy as much as you’d like. I’m sorry we don’t have any glasses.”

“I’d share all I have with you.”

Her eyes locked with his. “I believe you.”

“I wanted to thank you for an enjoyable week so far.” He handed her back the sweet wine mixture.

“I noticed you were quiet during the dinner party. It was the first time I’d seen you so reserved.” She tipped back the bottle and swallowed.

He watched her throat move as the wine flowed. Her neck was long and graceful, and Conway wanted to reach up and stroke it with his fingers, followed by his lips. “The Griffith you know is the same man my family knows, and the villagers I grew up with. With strangers, as I told you, I’m much more reticent.”

“Yet, not with me or my family? Why?”

“That’s the question I’ve been asking myself.” He reached out and took her hand, his thumb rubbing the back of it. Her skin was like satin.

“And have you found the answer?” Her voice was quiet, barely above a whisper. The wind picked up, ruffling the edges of the blankets, but their gazes remained steady on each other.

“No,” he said with a chuckle. “But it is how I realized you are the one. You are the woman I’ve been waiting for, longing for. Loving you filled the hollow place in my heart.”

His control crumbled. He sat up, leaned forward, and touched his mouth to hers. Her chest fell up and down with her rapid breathing as he pulled back. “May I kiss you?”

“Wh-what was that?”

“That was just a taste, a prelude. May I kiss you now?” The pounding of his heart surged to his groin, and he thought he would die if she said no. But she nodded shyly.

He leaned forward again, brushing her lips, a whisper of a groan escaping. “I’ve been thinking of that kiss every waking moment. When I close my eyes, I dream of so much more.”



His arm snaked around her waist, and he pulled her onto his lap. The feel of her soft bottom against his manhood was a glorious torture. Slowly, he pulled on the white ribbon, unraveling it until the hat slid off and fell on the blanket. He tucked a red lock behind her ear and stroked her cheek with his knuckles. “You are stunning,” he murmured as his lips crashed onto hers, devouring her, demanding she return his passion.

And she did. One hand slid around his neck, her fingers threading through his hair. His mouth traced the curve of her collarbone, trailing up to her jaw, and back to her sweet lips. Something wet plopped on his head. Then another, and another.

“Either a bird is being very naughty, or it’s begun to rain,” he murmured against her mouth. “Perhaps we should move under the tree?”

She nodded but didn’t remove her hand from his neck.

“Sit tight, then.” He tucked an arm beneath her legs, rose to his knees, then stood with her in his arms. He deposited her under the low-hanging branches. “Be right back.”

Conway snatched the remains of their picnic and brought it under the tree. Then he dashed over to the horses, removed their hobbles, and led them under the willow.

“Isn’t this cozy?” he asked as the horses continued grazing beneath the branches.

---

HELEN TOOK a deep breath as Conway dashed around collecting the blanket, basket, and horses. Her heart raced, and

her lips tingled. He had said *love*. Fear and happiness raised their fists against one another within her breast. Did she love him? Or was it lust? Was she willing to take the chance?

The rain increased, and Conway returned with the horses. He had removed his riding jacket earlier, and the linen shirt clung to his arms and chest. He peeled off the wet cravat and dropped it on the basket.

“You’re shivering,” he said, picking up the moderately dry jacket and covering her shoulders. “Let me warm you.” His arms wrapped her tightly against his warm body.

“How care you not cold?” she asked between shivers.

“I’m a hotblooded Welshman, of course.” He smelled faintly of spicy orange and rain. She wanted to lick his chest and see if tasted the same. That thought sent panic racing her down her spine.

She was giving in to her desire. NO! It had ended in disaster before. She couldn’t, she just couldn’t. “I have to go.” Helen pushed away from him and went to the small gray pony she’d chosen. It was new to the stable, and it was her first ride on him. “Easy, boy.” She tossed the reins over his head and pulled the stirrup toward her.

“I’m sorry,” she said over her shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

He hurried over, squatted down, and gave her a lift up. “I apologize for frightening you. It won’t happen again.”

She hooked her knee around the pommel and looked down at him, tears burning her eyes. Her heart ached for both of them. “But it will, don’t you see? It will happen over and over and over again.” She nudged the horse with her heel, and he moved into the open, rain pelting them both.

Lightning cracked above them, and the gelding reared. Helen squeezed with her legs and held tight to the reins. The horse landed with a *thump* and took off at a gallop. Between the tears and the downpour, she couldn't see anything. Her sobs were absorbed by the hoofbeats and the gusting wind. The horse ignored her commands. She yanked on the reins with all her strength, and it did nothing to slow the beast.

Conway appeared next to her, his hand outstretched. Terror gripped her, and she shook her head.

"Take my hand," he yelled.

Helen gripped the pommel with one hand. She couldn't do it. It wasn't just an offer of help, she realized. It was the trust she would give him, and her heart would follow. *Not again. I can't go through the pain again.*

She felt his strong arm on her waist as he lifted her from the saddle. She let the reins fall away. He settled her in front of him, pulling back on his own horse until they were at a standstill. The rain had eased and was only a steady shower. The wind lessened, and the sky lightened.

"This was my dream," he muttered.

"What?"

He turned her chin, so she had to face him. His hand moved up to her cheek. "I'm not him, Helen. *I am not him.*"

Shaking her head, she pushed away from him and slid off the horse. She began running. Running from her past, running from the future. Just running until she couldn't breathe anymore. But he was there to catch her before she fell.

Conway held her up by the shoulders, his hair stuck to his face, water streaming down his back, his eyes dark and fierce. "I'm not bloody him," he yelled. "I love you. With all my

heart and soul. You are all I think of, all I dream of, all I need to make my life whole. You are not an instrument to achieve my goal. *You* are my goal. *You* are my happiness.”

She stood there, sucking in deep breaths of air, her dress plastered to her body, rain pelting her head. But she saw it.

Helen saw the love in his eyes. She saw the truth in his words, and she wavered.

Then he kissed her. A kiss of acceptance, of passion, of determination. And love. He did love her, and she loved him. It was unlike any feeling she'd had in the past. The uncertainty faded, replaced with a calm understanding. This was not the same emotion she'd had with Rory. This was her steadfast Welshman. A man who would stand by her throughout her life. A man who would love her daughter as his own.

He kissed her again, gently this time, and her body leaned into him. She soaked in his warmth, his strength. When the kiss ended, he cupped her face with his hands, and his deep brown gaze locked with hers. “Let me be the eye of your storm, Helen. Let me be your calm, secure shelter. We will always face strong winds in this life, but I'm sturdy, a rock. I will hold all three of us safe against the gales.”

She saw her future in those dark, loving orbs; she saw *them*, a family. Helen nodded, her tears mixing with the rain, and threw her arms around his neck.

## EPILOGUE

*September 1821*

*Stanfeld Estate*

CONWAY SAT ON HIS HORSE, waiting for Madoc to join him.

“Are you ready for the church, old man?” asked his half-brother as he rode up.

“I’ve been ready longer than you know.” He had tried to wipe the grin from his face earlier that morning and given up. Why not let everyone know how he felt? He was getting married to the most beautiful woman in all England and Wales.

They had waited until the year of mourning was up, and their families could attend the ceremony. His grandmother, sister-in-law, and nephew waited in the church.

Helen was with her mother and sisters and would soon follow them.

*Psst!* He turned to Madoc, who was tipping his head toward the rear of Conway’s horse. He turned to see Maeve looking under the horse, and up at his belly. She was dressed in a light-rose gown, detailed with pearls and lace. A crown of

greenery and flowers lay upon head, ribbons dangling down her back.

“What exactly are you doing, my little princess?” he asked, amused.

She sighed and propped her fists on her hips. “Seeing if it’s a boy. If it’s not, you’ll have no sons, only daughtahs. I weally want a bwothah.”

Both men guffawed. “Well, little Maeve, since we have the proper horse, we will see you at the altar,” said Madoc.

---

THE WEDDING FULFILLED all her childhood dreams. Helen was surrounded by her family and those who had just become her family. Her new sister- and mother-in-law, the Lady Breckens, were both lovely and warm. They had become friends in an instant. Conway’s grandmother did not have the same tenderness in her introduction but was cordial and welcoming.

As they left the church, the guests calling and cheering, Helen heard the church bells toll. She looked up, for they hadn’t paid for the bellringer. To her surprise, Conway bent and whispered in her ear, “An old Welsh superstition. Church bells rung for a wedding will keep the storms away.” Then he kissed her cheek and gave her a wink.

Oh, how she loved this kind, sweet, obstinate man. There would be more storms, of course. But they would weather each one together. *Yes, Papa*, Helen thought as she looked up at her beaming husband. The love was so evident in his eyes that she thought her heart would burst.

The sun *will* always shine again with this man by her side.

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## ABOUT AUBREY WYNNE

USA Today Bestselling author Aubrey Wynne resides in the Midwest with her husband, dogs, horses, mule, and barn cats. Obsessions include wine, history, travel, trail riding, and all things Christmas. Her Chicago Christmas series has received multiple awards and twice nominated as a Rone finalist by InD'tale Magazine.

Aubrey's first love is medieval romance but after dipping her toe in the Regency period in 2018 with the *Wicked Earls' Club*, she was smitten. This inspired her spin-off series *Once Upon a Widow*. In 2020, she launched the Scottish Regency series *A MacNaughton Castle Romance* with Dragonblade Novels.

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# EARL OF MADNESS

BELLA MOXIE

## CHAPTER ONE

ALBERT WHITTIER, the so-called Mad Earl's heir, couldn't remember a time when he hadn't wished his father dead.

When the day finally came, he was with his half-sister Madeline at her new home and amongst her closest friends. The message was delivered to Albert's brother-in-law, the Marquess of Hayden, shortly after dinner had ended at this intimate gathering.

"The Earl of Ashburn has passed," Hayden read aloud, his tone uncharacteristically grave as he turned to his wife. Madeline's eyes filled with tears as her friends looked on with sympathy.

Albert waited to feel something. Anything. But only the vaguest sense of relief rose up in him. Relief that the old man was finally gone ... and regret that he hadn't been there to see him die.

The Duke of Raffian, the Earl of Foster, and the Earl of Fallenmore—they and their wives were the picture of sympathy as Madeline's husband wrapped an arm around her in comfort.

No one spoke. Perhaps because no one knew what to say. It wasn't like anyone was sorry to see the world rid of an evil man.

And yet Madeline sniffled, wiping at her eyes as one of her friends handed her a handkerchief.

Albert merely looked on.

It was still odd for him to see his sister here, surrounded by such high-ranking noblemen rather than in the tower where their father and his mother had left her to rot. She was the illegitimate child, and his parents had treated Madeline so much worse than Albert, the son and heir.

And yet it was Madeline who sat here quietly weeping over the old man's death.

How?

Why?

Not for the first time, Albert wondered how his sister could have maintained her sweet innocence after living like a prisoner the way she had.

He'd always meant to save her. He'd been trying to find a way to do just that when Hayden had swooped in to her rescue instead. For the best, of course. Not only had she been saved, his sister had even found true happiness with her husband.

But it had thwarted Albert's own plans in the process. All the assets he'd been hoarding to give his sister the life she deserved, all the steps he'd taken to punish his parents...

It had all been for naught once.

Madeline moved to Albert's side as the others fell into quiet conversation. "Are you all right, Albert?"

He forced a smile. "Of course."

And truly, he was better than all right. This was what he'd been waiting for, wasn't it? "I just wish I could have been

there.”

Madeline misunderstood. She reached for his hand and squeezed. “For all his faults, he was still our father.”

Albert stared at her. Was she serious?

She was.

She honestly thought he was saddened by the news. A cynical laugh threatened as he tugged her into his arms for an embrace. “Sweet girl,” he murmured. “How are you still so good when they were so very bad to you?”

He felt her smile against his chest as she wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed. “Because I had you.”

His heart faltered in his chest. The words were kind, but undeserved. He’d tried. Lord knows he’d tried to help her. But he’d been too young to have any real power in their wretched home.

All his life he’d told himself that when he was old enough, he’d save her. And he’d tried...

But he’d failed.

He hated to think what would have become of Madeline if Hayden hadn’t come along when he had.

Madeline pulled back to glance up at him. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

He felt a smile tug at his lips at her hopeful expression.

“You’re an earl now,” she finished. “You’ll inherit the title.”

“You say that like it’s a good thing.”

“It is!” Her features lit with a hope that was foreign to him. “Just think of all you can do with your new station.”

For a moment he thought about telling her the truth of what he meant to do, but he thought better of it. “A title is nothing without wealth and land,” he said simply.

And their father with all his wild mood swings and conspiracy theories had managed to lay waste to all their properties, turning what had once been a thriving earldom into a bleak wasteland.

With Albert’s assistance, of course. But Madeline knew nothing about that.

“Hayden will help you with all that,” she said.

Her husband came to join them. “Of course I will. Your father just managed things poorly, but with an influx of funds to get things back on track, we’ll buy back your estates, and have them up and running in no time.”

Albert inwardly winced at this kindness. He didn’t wish to explain to his well-intentioned new family that he was the one who’d bought up all the earl’s lands.

He was the one who’d led his father to bankruptcy and destruction...though his father had never realized it had been his own son buying his properties and calling in his debts.

*More’s the pity*, he thought. It would have been satisfying to see his father’s face when he’d figured it out.

But Hayden’s tone grew louder with his excitement as he spoke of all the ways he’d help Albert restore the earldom. The others overheard, and soon Albert found himself on the receiving end of so many helpful offers, all he could do was listen and nod.

He’d never been a man of words, and he didn’t have the heart to tell them that he had no need of their help. How to

explain to these good and noble men that he had no desire to save the title or revive the estates?

Some things were better off dead.

The Duke of Raffian seemed to understand that all of these helpful offers were not wanted at the moment. He clapped a hand on Hayden's shoulder. "There's plenty of time to work out the details of how we can all help Albert to get the earldom back on its feet, but now is not the time."

"Poor man just lost his father," the duke's wife agreed quietly. "He needs time to grieve."

Madeline took Albert's hand and squeezed again.

Hayden winced. "Sorry, Albert. We didn't mean to overwhelm you."

Albert shook his head. "Not at all. Your offers to help are much appreciated."

Though he wouldn't be taking them up on those offers. But that was a conversation for another day. After he'd done what needed doing.

The Earl of Fallenmore's wife set an arm around Madeline's shoulders. "Come, let us get you some tea. You've just had quite an upset."

Madeline cast him a sad smile as she let her friend lead her away, the other ladies following close behind.

"And what do you need, Albert?" Hayden asked. "Something tells me it's not tea."

Albert laughed. "No, not tea."

"I've got what he needs right here," the Earl of Foster said as he poured brandy into a glass.

“Have a seat, Albert,” Hayden said. “Or perhaps we should be calling you Ashburn.”

“I don’t know that I’ll ever get used to being called by that title,” he said.

“It’s an adjustment, to be sure,” Fallenmore said. The earl gave him a look of understanding. “Especially when you do not wish to be anything like the man who’d held the title before you.”

Albert looked away. “No one actually called my father by that name. At least, not so long as I remember.”

A silence fell. It seemed no one wanted to acknowledge the fact that his father had been known only as the Mad Earl for the last two decades, at least.

So what did that make him? He’d heard himself whispered about as the Mad Earl’s son. The heir to madness.

He shook off the thought as he took the glass offered to him.

“You know, we’ve all been there,” Hayden said when he sat beside him. “To lose a parent is never easy. But it’s made even more complicated when your relationship was ... strained.”

Albert saw the men exchanging glances, empathy clear in their expressions. And not for the first time, he found himself envying Madeline for her new world. Her new family.

But like always, the easy camaraderie around him only made Albert feel more distant. More alone.

It was him, he knew, not them. These men had been nothing but welcoming since he’d returned to London after hearing of his sister’s marriage.



His attempts to thwart his father and stepmother and take guardianship of Madeline had been for naught, and he'd come home to find her happy and healthy.

And a marchioness, of all things. How his mother must hate that.

The thought warmed him as surely as the brandy.

"I know you must be shocked by the news," the Earl of Fallenmore said. "But I assure you, there are some benefits to being an earl."

"Oh yes," the duke agreed. "Now that you're in power, you can do just about anything you wish. You can make the earldom as profitable and revered if you wish."

Albert nodded.

But he didn't wish it. The only benefit to inheriting was that he could now destroy the earldom once and for all. He could finally end the twisted legacy his father had created.

"Not to mention, you're part of a club now," Fallenmore continued, his voice low as Hayden and Raffian laughed amongst themselves.

"A club?"

"Don't start with this," the Earl of Foster grumbled. The man was scarred and intimidating, but the look he shot Albert was almost amusing in its exasperation. "Don't listen to him."

"Just because you don't enjoy the company of your peers, doesn't mean everyone is so anti-social," Fallenmore shot back.

"You don't go there anymore either," Foster said.

“No, but that’s only because I married.” Fallenmore shot Albert a crooked grin. “My wife has made an honest man of me, you know.”

Albert adjusted his features into the sort of smile they’d expect from such a comment. Something rueful and knowing.

These days that was the only way Albert knew how to exist among others. He had to school his features to feign the right emotions. To act as if he wasn’t his father’s son.

To pretend as though he were normal.

He wasn’t though, and he knew it. And that was precisely why he’d be doing the world a favor by ending this line of madness with him.

“No wife would want her husband part of such a club,” Foster said.

“But he’s not married,” Fallenmore returned. He cast a quick glance at Albert. “Though you are engaged, aren’t you?”

Albert’s response was noncommittal. His father had arranged a wife for him years ago, so in fact, he was engaged...

But not for long.

Albert took a long draw of his drink, his gut twisting at the thought of what he’d have to do. At the mention of the woman he was meant to marry, his mind called up a hazy memory of gangly limbs, sharp features, and a bright smile.

Francine Rivera, daughter of Baron Ware.

Her father was one of the wealthiest men in London and eager to make his daughter a countess.

And his parents had been eager for a large dowry.

The match had been made years ago, when they were little more than children. He'd only seen her a handful of times since. The last time was more than two years ago, before he'd set off on his mission to save Madeline.

His grip tightened on the glass in his hand. The first step toward ending the Mad Earl's legacy would start with calling an end to this engagement.

Of all the things he planned to do, this was the only one that caused him a flicker of emotion. Guilt, he supposed.

It wasn't the girl's fault that her father had made an alliance with the devil. She'd be disappointed at her loss of a title, no doubt.

But there were other men out there in need of a hefty dowry. She'd make another match, and she'd be better off for it.

That darkness he'd been trying to force down all night twisted and curled in his chest.

Oh yes, that sweet innocent would undoubtedly be better off without him.

His thoughts had been so focused on his fiancée and the meeting to come, he realized belatedly that the two earls were having a debate ... over him.

"The poor lad just lost his father and only recently returned to London," Fallenmore was saying. "It would do him good to let loose a little and find some camaraderie."

*Poor lad.* The phrase almost made him laugh. He might be younger than these two by several years, but he hadn't been a child since his father first taught him the meaning of 'discipline.'

“He’s got us, doesn’t he?” Foster grumbled.

Fallenmore’s tone grew dry. “Oh yes, we are quite the entertaining lot these days. Four happily married men who’d rather spend their nights doting over their wives than go out on the town.”

Foster gave a snort of amusement. “All right, I see your point.”

Fallenmore turned to Albert with a pointed finger. “We used to be just as wicked as the men in this club, I promise you that.”

Albert managed a smile at the man’s jesting tone. “And what club is this?”

Fallenmore glanced around as if afraid of being overheard, but Hayden and the duke were lost in conversation and none of the ladies or servants were even in the room. “The Wicked Earls’ Club,” Fallenmore said. With a wink, he added, “Tell them I sent you.”

Foster rolled his eyes. “He’s a good lad, Fallenmore. Don’t go getting him involved in that crowd. Madeline would never forgive you.”

Albert kept his mouth shut. A good lad. That was what everyone in Madeline’s new circle of friends seemed to think. They just assumed that he’d come out of that wretched home as kind and loving as his sister.

Hardly.

He had more wickedness inside him than any of them could fathom, and for Madeline’s sake he meant to keep it a secret.

But after calling off his engagement, he could use the help of some powerful individuals ... preferably ones who were not connected to Madeline or her husband.

“Tell me,” he said to Fallenmore when Foster had gone off to join the others. “How do I find this club?”

Fallenmore grinned and then launched into directions on how to find the door marked with a *W*.

Albert nodded and sipped his drink.

The Mad Earl’s death was just what he’d been waiting for, and he’d meant what he’d said to Madeline about only wishing he’d been there at the time of death.

He wished more than anything that he could have seen the look on the old man’s face when he realized he was at the end of his life.

More than that, Albert wished he’d been the one to end it.

As the night ended, Albert set his focus on the tasks to come.

First, breaking off the engagement with Franny. Guilt threatened to surface again, but he squelched it quickly.

The girl would be better off without him.

Hell, she’d likely welcome the chance to end her engagement to the Mad Earl’s son.

## CHAPTER TWO

FRANNY PACED the length of the drawing room, eager anticipation making her pulse pound with her every step.

“Please, child,” her mother said with a weary sigh. “Your pacing is making my head ache.”

Franny stopped. “Sorry, Mother.”

It seemed everything Franny did gave her mother a headache these days. But she clasped her hands together and forced herself to be still as she waited in silence.

Her silence didn't last long. “He *did* say he'd be here, did he not?”

Her mother looked up over her spectacles with pursed lips. “Yes, dear. And he will come. He's likely already here, but stopped to speak to your father first. As he should.”

“Hmph.” Franny continued her pacing. She couldn't help it. Her heart was racing too fast to stand still. Unfortunately her two new puppies took that as a signal that they ought to chase her and soon the room was filled with yipping and frantic energy as the two little balls of fur leapt over each other in their zealous pursuit.

Franny laughed. Her mother sighed wearily. “Those two are the last, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Mother.”

This promise to not bring home any more strays had been made—and broken—many times before. But this time, Franny felt certain she could keep the promise—at least, until she was mistress of her own home.

Well, mistress of Albert’s home. The new Countess Ashburn. Her nose wrinkled at the memory of the scandal that surrounded the old countess when she and her husband had been all but driven from London.

To think they’d been keeping a daughter a secret all this time.

She shook her head. Such an odd family. Likely for the best that the father had died.

Franny bit her lip. *That* was likely a thought she ought to keep to herself.

Her fingers clasped and unclasped and then clasped again as she worried her lower lip. How was he handling the death of his father? Stoically, no doubt. But that was all the more reason he needed her by his side.

Because Franny knew better.

She might not have met Albert often, and it had been years since their last quiet encounter. Well, quiet on his end. She’d had plenty to say even back then when he’d looked at her like she was a child.

And truly, she had been a child back then. A child on the cusp of adulthood. But she was well and truly grown now, and ... oh drat. Her gaze caught on her reflection in the mirror. Would he be disappointed?

She wasn't *not* attractive. But she was hardly some diamond of the first water either.

With a huff she turned away. Where was she?

Ah yes. She knew him. That was what mattered. Despite his quiet nature—or possibly, because of it—she'd seen something in him that no one else had seen.

She smiled at her reflection now as the memory came back to her. What she'd seen beneath the guarded expression and somber, terse replies.

He might seem hard on the outside, but there was a kindness in him that she recognized. It was the look she'd seen in every one of the injured and abandoned animals she'd been bringing home all her life.

And just like them, he needed her. And now, finally, she would be at his side to help him.

“Lord Ashburn, my lady,” the butler said from the doorway.

Franny spun to face the door with a brilliant smile. Her heart leapt at the sight of him. “Albert.”

He tipped his chin down in acknowledgement. No smile. Not even a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

But that was fine. She forced her smile even brighter as her mother made her greetings and asked the sort of trivial questions one would expect.

The ones Franny had no patience for.

All the while Franny shifted from foot to foot, smiling brighter when his gaze flicked back to her and biding her time for a moment when she might speak to him about something other than the weather and his sister's new home.



Much to her delight, Albert seemed to be impatient for the same because, at the first opportunity, he asked her mother if he might speak to her in private. Her mother's eyes widened in surprise.

"We are engaged already, Mother," Franny said with a laugh. "No need to look so shocked."

"Very well." Her mother headed toward the door and cast them a warning look. "I'll leave the door open. And I'll be just outside."

Franny nodded, resisting the urge to shoo her away. The moment her mother disappeared from view, however, Franny didn't waste another second.

"Franny, I came here today to—oof!"

He froze as her arms wrapped around his neck, his body stiff and straight, and his arms . . . .

His arms were still at his sides.

A flicker of embarrassment shot through her but she clung even tighter. "Oh, Albert, how I've missed you."

"Er . . . yes." He reached up and pried her arms from around his neck. His grip was gentle, at least.

That was what she told herself as she backed away again.

Perhaps he wasn't quite ready for what her best friend Rosaline called her "Frannyness." Sort of like frankness, but more enthusiastic, Rosaline would say with a laugh.

But Rosaline wasn't here to lighten the room with her laughter. She was off with her husband the General at their cozy home in Vestry Lane.

Her best friend had the freedom Franny had been craving for years, along with the love and the family Franny had been so patiently waiting for. Was she really supposed to stand here and pretend that she wasn't over the moon to see her fiancé?

"I'm so glad you've returned to London," she said.

He cleared his throat, his dark hair and features seeming even darker here in this brightly lit room. "Yes, well, about my return—"

"We should be wed right away, don't you think?" She grinned, bouncing on her toes. "We've waited so long already, haven't we?"

His brows drew together. "Francine—"

"Franny, please. No one but my father calls me Francine."

He hesitated and let out a sharp exhale she recognized. Her father gave her that exasperated sigh at least once an hour when she was in his presence.

Her heart faltered a bit.

He wouldn't be like her father, would he? His only concern about pretense and decorum, image and reputation...

His gaze met hers then and she saw it. The darkness he could not hide, and the wary gentleness hidden much deeper beneath that.

Her heart stopped its falter and soared once more.

She hadn't been wrong. She knew this man. And he'd know her too ... soon enough.

She reached her arms forward to embrace him once more, but this time he was ready. He caught her wrists and her hands hung limply between them.

“Franny, please.” His voice was sharp and she was suddenly very aware of how tall he’d grown since the last time they’d met. And how broad.

Her breath caught, and her wrists seemed to burn under his firm grip.

She liked the way he was holding her. For the first time in years she didn’t feel gangly and tall, but rather delicate and dainty. She forgot even to fret about the plainness of her light brown hair or the sharpness of her features, because here in his arms—even in this odd sort of embrace—she felt utterly feminine in a way she never had before.

Goodness, it made her want to swoon.

She smiled. Of course she wouldn’t. She’d never once swooned, and she wouldn’t start now.

“What ...” he said under his breath. “Are you thinking?”

She couldn’t say if he was talking to her or to himself, and before she could answer, he blinked and dropped her wrists like they’d burnt him. “Franny, please, let me say what I came here to say.”

Her heart flipped. Of course. He’d planned a speech and she was ruining everything.

She backed up a step. “I am sorry, Albert. Please. Go on.”

He regarded her oddly. “Right. Well, it has been years since our parents put this arrangement in place—”

“Too long,” she interrupted.

“And now that my father is gone—”

“Oh yes, about that—”

He continued overtop of her. “I must ask that you call off the engagement.”

She stopped, her mouth still open. When he also stopped speaking, she continued to stare. Waiting for ... something. A laugh, perhaps? Something to indicate he was joking?

“I ... I don’t understand,” she said.

He stiffened as if she’d slapped him. “I think we can both agree that it would be better if it came from you. For your reputation and—”

“Why would I do that?” she asked.

He glared at her, and for a moment she forgot the kindness she knew to be there. It was so well buried under that terrifying glare, one could almost believe she’d imagined it.

“Neither of us asked for this match, Franny,” he said.

The disdainful note in his voice made her breath catch. *He* hadn’t asked for it. That was what he meant. *He* didn’t want it.

“If I’ve ... done something wrong,” she started slowly, her voice shaking.

“You haven’t. Of course you haven’t,” he added tersely. “I haven’t even seen you in years.”

Again, it cut like a knife. That was it then. He hadn’t seen her for years, and now that he had ...

She resisted the urge to look in the mirror, to see just what was so abhorrent that he couldn’t bear the thought of marrying her.

“I am not to your liking then,” she said softly, glancing away.

He muttered an oath so crass her gaze shot up to see his eyes burning like coals in the fireplace. “That’s not what I said.”

She blinked, her lungs hitching. But she forced herself to move forward, to get closer. “I can make myself more appealing,” she said. “I never bothered much before. But my mother always threatens to curl my hair and I’m sure some rouge or—”

“Enough.” His nostrils flared. “You’re a beautiful woman, Franny. This has nothing to do with that. In fact, I’m trying to help you.”

“Help me?” Surely she’d heard him wrong.

His expression softened slightly. “You deserve better than the life I’d give you. Surely you want better than the son of the Mad Earl—”

“You’re not your father.”

“No.” He caught her by the arms when she moved to get closer. Dipping his head, his gaze met hers levelly. “I am worse.”

For a moment she thought she’d misheard, and then maybe that she’d misunderstood. Her mouth opened and closed as she shook her head. “You’re talking nonsense.”

He sighed and dropped his hands. “I’m sorry, Franny. Your father never should have made this match in the first place. It wasn’t fair to you.”

“I-I—” She stopped and swallowed. “I want it.”

He stared at her.

“I want you.”

Her words hung between them. And then he was the one closing the distance, his tall frame moving with languid movements that made her think of a hunter stalking prey. “You do not know me well enough to say such a thing.” He lifted a hand and slid his fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck, his grip firm. She couldn’t tug her head away as his breath whispered over her ear. “Believe me when I say you would not like me as a husband. The things I’d demand of you as a husband. The way I’d treat that sweet, innocent body of yours...”

His voice was a rumble, and a tremble racked her from head to toe as her skin came alive with heat.

“What would you do?” she whispered.

He pulled back just far enough that she saw a flicker of shock in his eyes at her question. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

He dropped his hand and for a moment she nearly melted at his feet. Oh goodness, he was wrong. She very much *did* want to know. Everything from his touch to his tone had her quivering with anticipation.

He backed away. “Be a good girl, Franny, and end this farce of an engagement. Then you can have the life you deserve.”

She didn’t argue this time. And she watched his back as he strode away.

She stood there staring at the space where he’d been for a long moment as she replayed his every word, his every touch, his every whisper.

Finally she sank down onto the settee, her skin still overly sensitive and a delicious ache still lingering between her

thighs.

That brush with his dark side had been too delicious for words. Almost as sweet as seeing that the boy she'd fallen in love with all those years ago was still there, safe behind his thick, thick walls.

Just waiting to be saved.

She grinned as her head fell back against the settee and a new plan began to form.

Oh yes, she still knew this man she was to wed. Possibly better than he knew himself.

And he'd know her too ... soon enough.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE WIND WAS brisk as Albert made his way to the seedy neighborhood known as Vestry Lane. It was a relief to be getting away from the prying eyes and endless curiosity back in Mayfair.

It was good to be getting some distance from Franny, too.

He frowned as he turned onto one of the alleys that made up King's land. The crime lord was as good as God in these parts and the only people walking here in the daylight were the servants and workers who lived overhead the gaming hells and brothels that lined the streets.

Gentlemen and even some ladies came here too—their money was what kept this underworld thriving. But no one but a Mad Earl would be seen walking this stretch when the sun was high overhead.

Hopefully word would get back to Franny.

His frown deepened as he stepped aside to avoid a woman tugging along two small children, her gaze cast down as if even during the day it wasn't safe to look the gentlemen on these streets in the eye.

Yes, he truly did hope word got back to Franny. Maybe then she'd understand that he wasn't the gentleman for her.



That he wasn't a gentleman at all.

Would it matter though? He nearly stopped in his tracks as the thought took hold. Two full days had passed since he'd visited his fiancée and yet he couldn't stop thinking about the look in her eyes. At the way she'd shivered when she was supposed to be frightened.

But her shiver hadn't been one of fear. That look in her eyes had been undeniable. Hot and dark, curious and bright.

She'd been ... attracted to him. No, to his words of warning.

*That way I'd treat that sweet body of yours...*

He winced at the memory. He hadn't meant to be crude, but she'd been so contrary. He'd thought a glimpse of his dark side would do what his words had not.

But all it had done was stoked some fire between them.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. He had to find something to do about that girl, because he was serious about ending their arrangement, and yet he'd really rather she did it.

He wanted to spare the girl a life of misery, not ruin her reputation by throwing her over.

He was so caught up in his thoughts, that for a moment he thought he conjured her. He blinked, but no ... the apparition remained.

Franny stood there smiling, arm in arm with another woman as she blocked his path.

He looked around him for a moment in confusion, but her blasted smile was fixed on him and her gaze sparkled with brilliant joy.

So sweet. So innocent.

So not cut out for the likes of him.

He strode toward her, ignoring her friend whose eyes were wide with alarm. Franny's smile merely widened.

"Why, Albert," she said, her voice like a wind chime on a lazy sunny day.

Good Lord, this woman was too sweet for her own good. He stopped in front of her. "What are you doing here?"

Franny cocked her head to the side, her smile never faltering. "Well, it's good to see you too, my lord."

Her friend made a choking sound and he finally tore his gaze away from his irritating fiancée to look at her. She looked familiar ...

"My lord, I'm sure you remember my very best friend Rosaline, don't you?" Franny said. "She's recently married, you see, and she and her husband live here in Vestry Lane and..."

Franny kept talking, but Albert blinked at the pretty young woman beside her in shock. Such a lovely young woman, gently bred and properly raised and ... what in God's name was she doing living here in this neighborhood?

"And what brings *you* here?" Franny finished. There was a new sharpness to her voice, and when he looked back at her, her smile was slightly strained.

So she didn't like that he frequented Vestry Lane? Well, good. He wasn't exactly pleased she was here either. "Franny, does your father know you're here?"

The last of her smile fell. "I don't see how that's any of your concern, my lord. Especially since you're hoping to be

rid of me.”

A sneer tugged at his lips at her flippant tone. She could be in danger here, did she not see that?

But there was truth in her words and he'd be the veriest hypocrite if he were to claim some sort of ownership over her now when he'd made it clear he wished nothing to do with her.

“Besides,” she continued. “My father trusts that the General will look after his wife's guests.”

Rosaline nodded quickly. “Of course. She's quite safe here with me.”

He didn't respond. But Franny was quick to fill the silence. “And what brings you here, my lord? You never did say.”

He opened his mouth to answer, but was cut off by another female voice, this one low and sultry.

“Ah, Albert, *mon amour*,” Madame Loula purred.

He refused to look embarrassed as the brothel owner leaned in to kiss his cheek. But he couldn't quite drag his gaze from Franny's. She looked stricken. But not horrified or shocked. She just seemed ... disappointed.

And he hated how much that look cut him to the quick.

Madame Loula wrapped her arm through his. “It's been too long since your last visit, my dear.”

He gave her a small smile. He owed this woman and her employer more than he could ever repay. They'd given him hope and a direction in life.

But it was a direction the likes of which Franny would never wish to follow. So then perhaps it was good he'd run into Loula like this.

Maybe now Franny would be frightened off.

“Are you here to see King?” Loula asked.

He nodded.

Loula turned to smile at Rosaline and Franny, and her eyes were knowing as she followed Franny’s gaze which was still fixed on him. “Rosie, dear, you and your friend look lovely today. Might I join you for a stroll?”

“Of course,” Rosaline said.

Loula turned to him. “Go. I shall keep your lady friend company.” Her smile was smug as she glanced toward Franny. “But you’d best not keep King waiting.”

He nodded and walked away, sparing only one glance for Franny who’d turned her attention to Loula and was speaking to the other woman with a furrowed brow.

What was Loula about? The woman knew more about him and his dark predilections than anyone.

His gut tugged and churned. She likely knew about his arrangement with Franny. Would she warn the girl?

It would be good if she did. Surely if Franny found out that he liked it rough in the bedroom, she’d run away screaming.

Once more, his mind’s eye was filled with the memory of Franny’s dark eyes and her shiver.

He swallowed hard and let himself into King’s home where guards waited to take him to see the man who’d become a friend and guide.

“Ah, the prodigal son returns,” King said with a grin.

The grin was new. He’d heard during his travels that King had taken a wife, and the change in him was obvious.

“I heard about your father,” King continued. “I won’t say I’m sorry, as I’m sure you’re not.”

Albert let out a rueful huff as he sank into the seat across from King. “It’s overdue. But it changes things.”

“Of course.” King sank back. “You’ve done fine work on your travels, expanding my reach and opening those clubs for men such as yourself.”

Albert’s jaw twitched. They weren’t like him. But he understood that King lumped all gentlemen into one group. The world was filled with the haves and the have nots. And King had built an empire catering to the vices of the former.

And Albert had helped. He’d first come to King’s world as just another customer. A young gentleman looking for escape. He’d taken to the dark freedom he’d found at Loula’s. She’d found him willing partners who took equal pleasure in the give and take of power in bed. He’d discovered a sort of freedom he’d never known before in those darkened rooms.

And when he’d approached King with a business plan, it had worked for them all.

“I take it the clubs you formed gave you enough money to do what you set out to accomplish.”

The certainty in King’s voice made Albert’s spine straighten with pride. His own father and mother hadn’t seen what he was capable of. But this man had. He’d seen it and he’d trusted in it.

“I bought all the properties my father sold.”

“All under an alias, I presume.”

Albert nodded. “I’ll be meeting with my solicitor after this to discuss what to do with it all now that I’ve inherited the

title.”

Perhaps he’d give it to charity. Or sell it and start anew somewhere else.

He’d done it all to save his sister, but in the end, his sister hadn’t needed saving. She’d found love and happiness with a marquess, of all things.

She didn’t need the fortune he’d built for her.

An image of Franny flared and he shook it off. She certainly didn’t need saving. Not by him. If anything, she needed saving *from* him.

“It’s time to start selling,” Albert told his mentor. “The estates and the clubs. They’re up and running now. They should get a good number.”

King nodded. He’d been long since paid back for his initial investment. “Any thoughts on who will buy? It’s not like underground clubs catering to the vices of gentlemen can be taken to market.”

Albert grinned. “I’ve heard of a private club. One exclusively for earls like myself.” His mouth hitched up on one side. “Earls looking for trouble.”

King chuckled. “Then trouble they shall find. Sounds like my kind of place.”

Albert laughed as well. “Since it’s only open to earls, I’ll have to be your eyes and ears.”

“Very well.” King sank back in his seat. “I take it that once you sell off your properties, you’ll be ready to settle down.”

Albert scoffed at the other man’s dry tone. “Hardly.”

Once again Franny’s face rose up before him.

“You could, you know.” King grew more serious. “With your father gone, your mother out of the picture, and your sister taken care of...” The words hung in the air, but King didn’t finish.

Albert nodded, his chest tight with images of a future he’d walked away from years ago. The day he entered King’s land and discovered that his soul was just as dark as his father’s.

“You know that life is not for me, King.”

King nodded slowly. “So then what comes next?”

Albert opened his mouth and shut it. He had no idea. “That remains to be seen.”

All he really knew was what his life would not be.

It wouldn’t be here in London, and it wouldn’t include family of any kind.

The Mad Earl’s reign ended here and now.

It ended with him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

FRANNY TURNED to Rosaline when Loula took her leave of them at the end of the street. “Give me just one moment, won’t you?”

Madame Loula hadn’t gone far, and Franny only had to pick up her pace slightly to catch up to her. “Madame?” she called after the other woman.

Loula turned slowly, surprise in her eyes but a smile on her lips. “Ah, you are Albert’s fiancée, yes?”

“Yes.” Franny hesitated, but encouraged by the woman’s bluntness added, “And are you his mistress?”

Loula’s head fell back with a laugh that could have been cruel, but wasn’t. She genuinely sounded entertained. “No, my dear. I am not.” She leaned forward, eyes sparkling. “I was inclined to like you because you are friends with the General’s sweetheart of a wife. But now I truly adore you.”

Franny felt a smile tug at her lips, a sense of camaraderie with this brothel owner so sudden it caught her unawares. “I know who you are,” she started slowly.

Loula waved a hand. “Most in these parts do. I’d be surprised if Rosaline hadn’t filled you in on the key players in her new neighborhood.”



“Yes, well, I knew before that.” Franny bit her lip, not wanting to admit just how long she’d been keeping tabs on her fiancé. Not because she didn’t trust him, just because she’d wanted to get to know this man she was supposed to marry. “I know that when he is in town, Albert always visits you.”

Understanding lit Loula’s eyes. “Not me, dear. My club.”

“Yes, that’s what I meant.” She shifted uncomfortably. “I wish to know ...”

Her words trailed off. She might be brazen and forward and all manner of unacceptable to her mother’s mind, but she still couldn’t quite bring herself to finish.

“Yes?” Loula’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

Franny drew in a deep breath. “Loula, may I be frank?”

“Oh, yes, please.” Loula’s French accent was faint and fake, if Franny were to guess. It came and went. But Franny liked Loula too, especially now that she knew the other woman wasn’t intimate with her fiancé. And her gut told her that this woman was not only *not* competition, but potentially an ally.

“Albert wants me to call off the wedding.”

Loula’s eyes widened.

“And I do not want that,” Franny continued.

“I see,” Loula said slowly.

“The thing is, he won’t even give me a chance.”

“And are you so certain that you want a chance?” Loula lifted a brow. “You are a lovely woman, Franny. May I call you Franny?”

Franny nodded. “Please do.”

“I’m sure there are many gentlemen who would be honored to have you at their sides.”

“Yes, but ...” *But Albert needs me.*

It would sound ludicrous if she were to say it aloud. Perhaps it was a foolish thought to begin with, but she felt it deeply. Felt even more keenly that if he’d just give her a chance, she could make him happy.

“For right now, we are still engaged,” Franny said. “He’s left it to me to call it off. But before I do ... I want to try. I want to show him that whatever he thinks he needs to protect me from...” She wet her lips. “That he doesn’t have to.” She met the other woman’s knowing gaze. “That I don’t want him to.”

Loula winced slightly. “You don’t know that ...”

“Then let me find out,” she said. “If he is right and I am wrong, then I will do as he asks. I will end the engagement.”

“If you do what I think you’re asking, you’ll be ruined.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. That is a risk I am willing to take.”

Loula considered her, and whatever she saw in Franny’s gaze, she nodded briskly. “I believe you mean that.”

“Then will you help me?” Franny asked.

Loula pursed her lips. “I will. But only because I like you and I like Albert, and ...” She smiled, and suddenly the woman looked no older than Franny. She looked young and sweet like some mask was stripped away. “And I think you might be meant for each other.”

“Thank you, Loula,” Franny said on a harsh exhale. Relief flooded through her. One chance, that was all she wanted. One opportunity to see the real man.

One night to show him who she really was in turn.

And then if he still didn't want her ...

Well, she would walk away knowing that she'd fought for him, at least.

And surely if there was anything worth fighting for ... it was love.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE WICKED EARLS' Club was dark and nearly empty.

The other men had left for obligatory society events, but Albert had no need to make an appearance.

He'd already avoided Franny's parents' attempts to host a small celebratory dinner on his return to London. He'd sent some excuse about being in mourning, though no one in his right mind could imagine that Albert or his sister could actually be feeling true sorrow over the old man's passing.

Madeline wore a black band around her arm, but that was her only nod to his passing.

He truly hadn't deserved even that. Especially not from Madeline, the daughter he'd tried to keep hidden from society. His father had grown ever more paranoid these last few years, and in some twisted way he'd convinced himself that Madeline would be safer hidden away in their home rather than out in the world.

The truly wicked one there had been his mother though. She'd preyed on his father's paranoia and used it to her benefit. She'd always despised Madeline, the living reminder of her husband's infidelity.

And now his mother was alone in the only decrepit old manor that was left to them.

What would she think if she knew that her son now owned all the estates her husband had sold off?

That he owned them, but was in the process of selling them off so she'd never know a day of pleasure and comfort.

It was a fitting punishment for the greedy, soulless woman who'd abused Madeline while turning his love for his sister into a weapon that she wielded over him. Whenever he tried to rebel, to help her, to venture out on his own—she'd take it out on Madeline, reminding him again and again that love was a weakness.

*Well, consider that lesson learned, Mother.* He reached for his brandy, surprised when a figure appeared in the doorway.

“You're still here, Ashburn?” the Earl of Evermore said. “I thought I was the last one.”

“I have nowhere to be.” Albert nodded toward a seat beside him and the other man sat.

“I'd say you deserve some leisure time after all the business you've been handling here at the club this week.” The other man's lips twisted with wry mirth.

Albert shrugged. “I'm not here for friendships or for entertainment. I heard that what happened within this club stayed within these walls ...” He arched a brow. “Was I wrong?”

“No, no. And I meant no judgment. Just curious, that's all. We don't have many members who are looking to sell properties under the guise of a company their solicitor manufactured.”

Albert kept his mouth shut as he met the other man's gaze.

Finally the earl laughed. "All right, have it your way. Keep your secrets. That's one of the best attributes of this club."

Albert's lips hitched up then, humor easing past the tension that had been building within him ever since word reached him of his father's passing. Since before then, really.

Christ, how long had it been now since he'd felt the urge to laugh?

Albert relaxed back into his seat with a sigh.

The earl eyed him carefully. "You can be at ease here, you know. That's the other benefit of a place like this one."

Albert arched another brow, though he thought he knew what the other man meant.

Still, Evermore spelled it out. "Though we all share a venerable title, not all of us are from respectable families. Some at this club have more notorious legacies than others, but ..." The man tipped his head to the side as he considered his next words. "But we do not judge a man by his family or his reputation. Only by his own actions."

Albert nodded, looking away. "That's admirable," Albert said. "But foolish."

The other man laughed. "Perhaps, but it makes this place a pleasant reprieve from the rest of society."

Albert's lips quirked up again. "Where there is no end to the judgments made."

"Precisely."

Albert laughed softly. He knew he couldn't escape his fate. He always had been and would always be the Mad Earl's heir.

He heard the whispers walking down the streets. Was he as mad as his father? As cruel?

He took a sip of his drink. *Yes*, he could tell them. He might even be worse than his father. For his father's twisted nature was obvious. It came out in fits of rage and senseless fears. It came with a bloody tower to lock away an innocent maiden and marriage to a woman just as cruel as he was.

Albert suspected his own darkness was more dangerous in that it was so well disguised. People looked upon him and saw a mild-mannered, quiet man. A studious young lad, his teachers had called him.

He took a sip of his drink and set it down with a clink.

“So I hear you are to marry Franny,” the man continued.

Albert stilled. Blasted Franny. The mere mention of her name cracked that mild-mannered facade. Heat blasted through him at the other man's casual use of her given name.

“Is she a friend of yours?” he asked.

The man held up his hands in an appeasing gesture. “I've known her since she was a babe. She is like family to me.”

Albert's insides remained too tight and too hot. “Then perhaps you can tell her that she would be better off without the likes of me.”

The other man blinked and then ... then he burst out in a laugh. “Good luck trying to tell Franny anything she doesn't want to hear.” He shook his head. “She's a dear girl with a bigger heart than anyone I know. But if you don't know yet just how stubborn she can be, then you are in for a shock.”

He looked away. Franny might be stubborn, but she couldn't force him into marriage. Her pride was hurt now, that

was all. But soon enough she'd see that she was better off without him.

He pushed to his feet, suddenly unable to relax at all, let alone sit still. "If you'll excuse me," he said. "I do have places to be."

The other man bid him farewell, and Albert strode toward Vestry Lane. He wasn't lying. He had made plans to visit Loula's club this very night. She had a woman picked out for him, she'd said. Someone who fit his requirements.

And Loula ought to know. It was she who'd opened his eyes to the sort of delights and escape one could find in a dark bedroom. She'd never failed to find him women who were as depraved as he. Women who were seeking the same sort of escape.

Women who were happy to walk away afterward with no attachments.

He let himself into the darkened townhome Loula used for her upscale members, nodding to one of King's men who guarded the door. He worked for Beast, really, the notorious enforcer who kept King's properties safe. But they all knew Albert by sight after so many years coming to this debaucherous den.

"Ah, there you are," Loula said in that low husky voice of hers. "Your lady is waiting."

"My lady, huh?" He managed a chuckle as heat spread through him, a balm after the ceaseless cold that seemed to forever linger in his chest. "Is one of your high society ladies gracing me with her presence this evening?"

Loula laughed. "You know I don't divulge names or titles."



“Yes, I know.” And that was why he could enjoy himself. There were no names, and the deeds done here were done in the dark.

Loula gestured to a room. “Go easy on this one, hmm? She’s more eager than experienced.”

He paused, one hand on the knob. “Does she know what she’s getting into?”

“Mmm.” Loula’s voice was noncommittal. “She says this is what she wants. But...”

He nodded with a sigh. “I’ll give her every chance to flee.”

Loula’s face split with a grin. “You’re a good man, Albert.”

He ignored that. He’d heard those words too often from Madeline and her friends, from his school chums who never saw beyond what he wanted them to see.

He opened the door and found her instantly. Only one candle burned, but it was enough to outline the shape of her, sitting on the edge of the bed. He took a few steps closer as he unbuttoned his jacket and took her in.

Quiet. Still. A veil covered her face, and her body was formless beneath a cape. “It’s not too late to run, you know.”

She didn’t move. Didn’t speak.

He exhaled loudly. What was Loula thinking sending him an inexperienced woman? He came for the sensual pleasure of rough sex with no consequences. There were some men who got off on taking a woman’s innocence, but not he.

“Second thoughts?” he asked.

She shook her head quickly.

He felt a smile tugging his lips. “If you change your mind just say the word.”

“The word?” she whispered.

He caught her chin and lifted it but found himself staring at black silk. “*No*, pet. The word is no.”

She gave a jerky little nod.

“But if Loula sent you to me, then that means you’re a naughty one, hmm?” He circled the bed, taking her in from every angle, giving her room and space to bolt. But she made no movements. She was waiting ...

She was waiting for orders.

His cock hardened with eager anticipation. Maybe Loula knew what she was about after all. “Strip for me and get on the bed.”

The order came out harsher than intended. In fact, he normally eased into it. Undressing the woman and kissing her until she trembled with anticipation.

But something about this woman made him want to challenge her. One part of him hoped she’d go running. Another wanted to see her shoulders straighten even further.

Her breath caught, but she didn’t hesitate. She’d been prepared, beneath the cloak she wore only her undergarments and she shed them quickly. If she was indeed inexperienced, it didn’t show in the efficient way she shed her clothes, nor in the proud way she stood before him, naked but for her veiled face. Jesus, the sight was overwhelming. The lust that had been growing in anticipation burst into a hot, churning desire that threatened to cloud his senses.

He wanted to reach for her. To tug her into his arms.

But these nights weren't about intimacy and closeness. It was about desire and control. The trust that was given and the pleasure that it gave them both when control was in his hands.

She moved toward the bed, stopping when he clucked his tongue as she went to lie on her back. "On your hands and knees."

He heard her swallow before she did as he said.

A shudder rippled through him at the vulnerability of her position. Her body was slim and lithe. Athletic, almost, with lean muscles in her legs and her belly taut. Her bottom was rounded and pert, though, and her breasts were perfectly round.

"Gorgeous," he whispered. She dipped her head. Did this woman have any idea how beautiful she was like this? So vulnerable before him?

He could have her so many ways like this.

He could take her from behind. He could come in front of her and open that mouth of hers, sliding his manhood between her lips. But for now he just looked his fill.

Some part of him was still waiting for her to realize she was in over her head.

But she stayed like that, her gaze fixed on him through her veil—he could feel the weight of it, if not see it. She was waiting to see what he'd do.

His cock strained against his breeches until he opened the flap and eased out his erection.

She gasped, the sound soft and sweet and so at odds with this tableau.

“If you want to run,” he said as he stalked toward her.  
“Now is the time.”

## CHAPTER SIX

*IF YOU WANT TO RUN.*

If she wanted to *run*?

She couldn't tear her gaze away from his manhood, so large and erect and on such display right before her face.

Franny had never felt such excitement in all her life. Fear, too, but that paled in comparison to this pulse-pounding, heart-rattling excitement.

She didn't know what was happening. In her wildest imaginings as she'd sat here waiting for Albert to arrive, and as she'd chewed over Loula's words of warning, she still hadn't imagined this.

Her skin crackled with nerves and ... something else. This heat was unbearable but it wasn't shame. Oh, maybe for a moment there she'd been embarrassed to strip before this man, but then she reminded herself he was to be her husband. It was his right to see her ... all of her.

And then she didn't need to tell herself anything at all, because the look in his eyes made her warm all over. Never in her life had a man looked at her like this.

Like she was beautiful. Like she was temptation itself.

Like she was edible.

The feeling that had her trembling now wasn't fear. Not entirely. And what little fear she did feel heightened her senses and made her utterly aware of how alive she was.

Good God, she wasn't sure she'd ever felt more alive than she did right here and now.

And she wanted more. She was desperate to know what he'd do next. What he'd demand of her.

So ... would she run?

"Never," she whispered.

His eyes flared wide and she didn't miss the satisfaction she saw there. Some silly part of her felt an answering pride. She shifted, moving her body in a way that felt good and right, elongating her spine and arching slightly like a cat.

The move sent her bottom tipping upward and his eyes narrowed as he watched her. "Well, well," he murmured. "Little kitty wants to play."

He shifted slightly and without warning his hand came down on her bottom. For a moment she froze at the sting of pain, but her mind went blank. And then, to her surprise, a second after that, she ...

She moaned.

The sound slipped out and it was embarrassing how needy it sounded. Her lungs were laboring to draw air in and out while the rest of her body turned so hot and needy, she thought she might sob. Or beg.

Or both, it seemed.

"More, please," she said. And oh God, was she crying?

“Did I hurt you?” he came around to her front, his breeches gone now, and his shirt partially unbuttoned. “I don’t hurt women. Unless they like it, of course. So if this is too much—”

“More,” she hissed. She pressed her thighs together because the pain between them was unbearable. It throbbed and ached, and she didn’t even know what she was asking for when she wiggled her bottom again, hoping to make him do it again. “Please.”

A smile tugged on his lips, his gaze filled with awe. “Begging already, pet? I like that.”

She was rewarded with another hard smack, and this time he kept his hand on her bottom and rubbed the spot that stung as if soothing the flesh. She pushed her bottom into his hand.

Goodness, what was happening to her? His spankings made her mind go fuzzy and all she knew was sensation. The sting of her bottom once again quickly gave way to this new throbbing ache.

“What else will you beg for tonight, hmm?” He stood beside her and she felt his manhood brush against her cheek through the thin silk of her veil.

She cursed that veil now, even though she knew it was necessary. He’d never have let her do this if he knew who she was.

She turned her head slightly, experimentally. He moved the veil out of the way so his erection slid beneath the fabric and now it traced along the side of her mouth as her breath caught.

“Will you beg me to give you a good pounding, pet?” His voice was teasing as his hand traced over her back and sides,

so gently it was at excruciating odds with the hard spankings he'd doled out.

She brushed her lips over his appendage, and then she tentatively stuck her tongue out to taste him.

His hiss had her pulling away. "I'm sorry," she started.

He caught her chin and held it tight so she was stuck like that, her arms starting to quiver now as they grew tired.

"Never apologize in the bedroom." His voice was so harsh, so low and firm.

She felt a thrill roll over her spine and her sex throbbed.

"If you need to be punished, I'll dole out the discipline," he continued, his fingers biting into her. "But you don't apologize for your needs and your wants. Do you hear me?"

She nodded quickly, and there was that urge to cry again. Not in a bad way, but in a sweet torture sort of way that she couldn't quite explain.

It was a sob of relief that threatened. As if, for the first time in her life, here in this darkened room with a veil over her face, she was allowed to be herself.

How bloody odd.

She gave her head a little shake as his words registered. "I do have needs. And wants."

His chuckle was low and so very alluring. It made her want to press her face to his chest.

"Don't worry, love. I know exactly what you need. And I'll make sure you get it multiple times before I'm done with you."

She swallowed hard.



“Get down on your elbows,” he said.

“W-what?”

He spanked her hard. “Don’t question me. Just do as I say.”

She dropped to her elbows, the movement pressing the tips of her breasts into the bed.

He was behind her, the mattress sinking and she braced herself for it. She might have been a gently bred you lady, but she was no fool. She’d read enough books on the topic, she knew what it meant to have a man take a woman. She shut her eyes tight...and then she gasped.

Hot, wet heat covered her sex and the pleasure was blistering in its intensity. Her eyes shot open and it took a full second to understand that he’d pressed his mouth to her sex, his face buried in her backside.

Shock and embarrassment and pleasure hit all at once and she cried out again. “You can’t. This isn’t...” Her voice turned to a squeak as his tongue widened and he lapped at her sex like he was a starving man and that juncture between his thighs was his salvation.

His tongue flicked over a hard nub that made her hips jerk and he pulled back just long enough to give her bottom a hard slap. “Stay still.”

She couldn’t. She squirmed when his tongue returned to her sex, stroking all the way over the tight hole between her cheeks and then back down to that nub.

“I don’t understand,” she breathed.

He chuckled. “Oh come now. It might be shocking, but don’t act like you’re some innocent virgin.”

She clamped her lips shut just in time before she could say, *but I am.*

He couldn't know that. And of course Loula wouldn't have told him who she was. She'd promised.

“You like this, hmm?”

Her answer was another high-pitched gasp. Did she like it?

Like was not the word for the delicious, dangerous sensations that coursed through her.

“If you're a good girl I'll have you straddle my face later,” he said, his breath hot against her wet flesh as her thighs trembled. “But for now I like you like this. So exposed. So vulnerable.”

Her legs threatened to give out. Yes, she liked that too. It was odd, but she liked it.

“You have to trust me to open yourself like this. Spread your legs wider. That's it.”

God help her, she did it. Shameless as a strumpet she spread her legs wide without hesitation, giving him even more access to her most private parts.

A tension coiled inside her with every lap of his tongue. And when he probed her channel with the hard tip of his tongue, she whimpered.

“Mmm, you're so close, aren't you, pet?” He pulled away. “On your back, my naughty little love.”

She shivered with pleasure, which made no sense. Why did it feel so good to be so bad? To be treated like a mistress or ... or a whore?

She cursed the veil when it blinded her, but she jerked away when his fingers touched the bottom of it.

“Shh,” he said. The hard weight of his body pressed against her, all muscles and wiry hair, long, lean limbs and a flat, hard stomach. He lifted it slightly. “I just need to taste these lips. I don’t want to know who you are, pet. Your secrets are safe with me.”

Her heart stirred in her chest. “And yours are safe with me.”

He stilled above her, his gaze searching her through the veil. “Are they?” He gave his head a shake. “Doesn’t matter. Here in the dark, in these rooms. It doesn’t matter who you are out there.”

Her limbs went weak with relief and an odd sense of wonder. It was true. That was what had appealed to her from the moment she’d stepped in here with this silly veil.

She could be anyone. She could be beautiful and tempting. She could leave aside the feisty, funny, kind lady she’d always striven to be. Here she could just ... be.

There were no rules except for the ones they created. No shame and no pride, no future and no past. There were bodies, sensations, needs, and wants.

And, oh God, did she want. She wiggled and writhed beneath him until his mouth lowered and pressed against hers.

Then she went so perfectly still as her brain and her body did their best to remember every precious second of this moment. The heat of his breath, the taste on his tongue, the way his lips guided hers with such gentle power.

She’d dreamed of kissing this man countless times, and not one of her daydreams had done him justice. She’d always

known there were so many layers beneath that quiet, studious, almost boring facade he showed society.

She'd always known it, had always seen it. But feeling it, tasting it, being at the center of it...

She moaned into his open mouth as he slanted his lips over hers, deepening the kiss.

“Spread your legs,” he ordered against her mouth.

She spread her thighs and felt his groan as his hard member settled against the slick folds of her sex, the tip probing her entrance.

“God, you are amazing,” he murmured. “So quick to obey, and so perfect for me.”

He shifted slightly and she didn't protest when he stretched her arms up overhead and used a cord to tie them to the headboard.

Loula had prepared her for this. Not everything, but the tying up, the spankings. She'd given her some idea of what was to come, but knowing and experiencing were so very different.

Maybe she should have been scared when she found herself bound and spread out for this man's pleasure. But all she felt was excitement and desire and a swell of emotion that made her chest tighten.

It was a feeling of possession. Of being possessed and owned and treasured and cherished.

It was the feeling of being seen once and for all. Not overlooked as another prim and proper young lady, or a means to a dowry. Not the less attractive friend to Rosaline or the irrepressible daughter of the earl.

No, here she was anonymous and yet she'd never felt more seen or more known.

His mouth closed over her nipple and she gasped, her hips arching up, but he cupped her mound in his hand in a harsh grip. "Lie still and learn your lessons in pleasure before I fill this the way you need it filled."

She whimpered as his fingers toyed the edges of her channel, a tease of what was to come.

"Will you lie still?" He bit her breast gently and the jerk of her hips was his answer.

He pulled his hand from her sex just long enough to give it a gentle little slap that made the hard nub at the apex of her slit throb with need.

"Naughty girl. I'll have to tie your ankles too now, won't I?"

She nodded eagerly. The restraints made her feel free. A fact she'd never in her life be able to explain to anyone, not even herself. But the more he controlled her, the more she felt like some lifelong knot was loosening inside her.

Her former self, the one who strove so hard to be so perfect...

She was lost and forgotten with every spank and slap and bite.

He made quick work of fastening her ankles to the bedposts and then he sat back on his haunches to look at her. "Perfection." His eyes gleamed with honesty. "You are nothing short of perfection."

His gaze settled on her sex. "And so bloody delicious." His glance up at her was nearly boyish with mischief. "Just

another quick taste, shall I?”

She gasped because this time she knew what was coming.

But what she wasn't prepared for was the wave of heat that came with the sight of it, his head burying itself between her thighs. It was dirty and shocking and...

Oh hell.

She gasped as desire spiked through her from her sex to her breasts and out to her fingers and toes. His hair and the stubble of his chin rubbed against her inner thighs as his mouth sucked and lapped at her, his fingers sliding beneath her bottom to lift her slightly. He moaned against her sex and she sobbed with need.

Her inner muscles were clenching, and there was an emptiness inside her screaming to be filled.

“I need...” she started. “Oh God, help me, I need...”

He smiled against her sex as he gazed up at her, his tongue teasing hard nub and one of his fingers sliding into her channel.

Her inner muscles convulsed around it.

“You want that pounding now, don't you, sweetheart?” he teased. “You want my cock to pound into you so hard you can't remember your own name, is that it?”

The sounds that escaped were choked sobs. What was happening to her? Her lower belly was growing tight, her sex was throbbing beneath his mouth, and the low rumble of his voice against her wet folds made her feel like she might shatter.

What *was* this?

“I need...something,” she said. But what?

Her mind was gone now and her head lashed from side to side as he watched her, his lips and tongue never ceasing their torment between her thighs.

She needed *him*, dammit. She needed something from *him*.

And then she said it. “Please, Albert. I need it. I need you. Albert, please!”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*ALBERT.*

The sound of his name sent a chill through him, feeling all the colder for the heat that had him in its clutches.

He pulled his head back and stared at her.

He saw the moment she realized what she'd done.

“How do you know my name?” Was he that recognizable?

Maybe. But even if he was, she'd have called him by his title, surely.

The silence grew stifling and he could hardly think over the steady throb of his cock and the heady scent of this woman's sex.

She'd robbed him of his senses completely, and now he was more exposed than he'd ever been.

Claws dug into his lungs as the blood drained from his face. “Who are you?”

It came out as a snarl as he stalked up the length of this mystery woman. This woman who'd been too good to be true from the start. That perfect mix of trusting and sweet, obedient and feisty.

He should have known she was up to something.



“I-I—” The woman stammered and stopped as he leaned over her, his face in line with hers.

“Let’s have a look, shall we?” His voice sounded too harsh to his own ears but he didn’t wait for her protest before he snatched that thin veil right off her face and—

He froze.

Oh hell.

Oh bloody fucking hell.

Franny’s eyes were wide, her lips parted. Shock and fear colored her features. Normally sharp-looking and somewhat plain, she looked nothing less than exotic in this candlelight. Mysterious and sensual and...

And stunning.

Laid out before him as she was, she also looked so very trusting and vulnerable it nearly broke his heart in two.

But then he reminded himself that she’d done this on purpose. That she’d tricked him. He climbed off the bed, disgust replacing all the other soft, warm emotions that had crowded into his throat.

He turned his back on her as he tried to catch his breath. It wasn’t until he heard her struggling behind him that he remembered she was tied up.

He cursed under his breath.

The sounds stopped. Had he frightened her?

She hadn’t been afraid when he’d given her a spanking or taken liberties with her body, but an oath made her freeze?

The urge to laugh hit him in the chest. It wasn’t a pleasant laugh. More utter disbelief. He scrubbed a hand over his face

as his chest rose and fell. His cock was hating him for stopping, but there was no way he could touch her again.

No way to undo what he'd already done.

He heard her move behind him and turned without meeting her gaze to untie her hands and feet. Neither of them spoke. Not until he turned to find her cloak and threw it at her. "Cover yourself."

She just held it in front of her, her legs dangling over the side of the bed. "I can explain," she said softly.

*Christ.* He shut his eyes. How had he not recognized her voice? Even her whispers and her moans should have made it obvious. Her voice was delectable. A sweet and savory sound that made him yearn for a life he'd never known.

One where home was a welcoming place; where family was kind and friends were abundant.

That was the world she lived in. A good world. A happy one.

And that was where she belonged.

"What were you thinking coming here tonight?" he bit out.

"I'm sorry, I ..." She bit her lip, her gaze darting about the room, looking everywhere but at him.

"What?" he snapped when she failed to continue.

"Well, I was just thinking how you'd said I shouldn't apologize here in this room, and then I thought that perhaps I'm not sorry. Not really." She stopped for air and he couldn't have looked away if he'd tried.

Who was this woman?

She was naked, but for the cloak before her, and she ought to be scandalized by what she'd done. What he'd done.

What she'd let him do.

And yet, there was that unmistakable glint of humor in her eyes, the straight spine and the brazen speech he was familiar with from their brief interludes in her family's drawing room.

The woman sitting naked on this bed was both the girl he'd always known and a woman he'd only just met.

It was disorienting.

“Get your clothes on,” he said.

She blinked. “But ... That is, isn't there ...” She bit her lip and her throat worked as she swallowed. “Is that it?”

He gaped at her. *No*, he wanted to shout. That bloody hell wasn't all there was to it. They'd only just begun. But there was no way he was going to take his fiancée's virginity in a glorified whorehouse, with her hands and feet bound like ...

Oh hell.

Like he liked it.

But what he enjoyed in the bedroom wasn't for the likes of her. She was too good, too pure, too much a lady. And he'd been right to try to end their engagement.

He eyed her now as she finally began to dress, reaching for her discarded undergarments with those quick, efficient movements of hers.

And understanding finally dawned.

He nearly smacked his forehead when it finally occurred to him what this was really about. Mystery solved.

His jaw clenched shut.

He should have known.

A huff of laughter escaped this time, bitter and jaded, and with no hint of that warmth he'd been feeling earlier.

“What?” she asked, wariness in her voice. “Why are you laughing?”

“I was just thinking that I'd underestimated you the other day.”

Her eyes widened and her sweet lips curved up in a small smile. A smug little kitten.

His heart twisted and his stomach revolted.

He'd been fooled from the start. All this time he'd been telling himself he couldn't marry a woman like her. He couldn't marry anyone if he meant to end the lineage. But he definitely wouldn't marry a woman so sweet and innocent as her.

He couldn't imagine anything worse than watching a kind soul wither and die because of his innate darkness. His cruelty.

He'd long since known that he was truly the Mad Earl's heir, in every way. He might not have lost his senses—yet—but there was something twisted inside of him. Something that made him seek out the shadows and the vices that dwelled there. It wouldn't be long before that darkness made its way to his behavior with his family.

His sister was safe from him, thank God, but a wife would be forced to live with the devil he was sure to become.

Just look what that had done to his mother. He wasn't sure she'd ever been a gentle soul, but there was no doubt in his mind that dealing with his father's cruelty and anger was at

least partially responsible for the coldhearted wench she'd become.

And he'd been so very intent on not dragging a young lady like Franny down with him. So worried that he'd make her as miserable as his father had made his mother.

But it had never occurred to him, not once...

He watched her as she tied the cloak at her neck.

He'd never stopped to consider that perhaps beneath those sweet smiles and the lighthearted air, she already was as manipulative and conniving as his mother.

His chest was ice cold by the time she stood, her hands clasped before her. "I'm not sorry," she said simply. "I'm glad I had this experience. I'm grateful that I know now why you'd pushed me away."

He remained silent as he watched her, his stomach twisting and bile rising as he realized she'd just betrayed him in a way that was so similar to his mother's manipulative evil that it was uncanny.

"But now I suppose you see," she said. "Don't you?"

He blinked. What was she on about?

She wet her lips. "I'm not scared of you. And I can be your partner. In every sense of the word." She reached out to him, but he took a step back and her hand fell. "I could be your wife, Albert."

Silence fell and he stared into her eyes, so guileless and sweet—she could have fooled any man.

But she'd fooled *him*.

“You will be my wife,” he murmured, and his heart ached as if broken. As if it was truly breaking in his chest, grieving for the young woman he’d thought he’d known. The lady he’d thought he was protecting.

But she’d never been real. Only a figment of his imagination.

The woman before him had tricked him. There was no avoiding a marriage now.

Her eyes glinted with triumph. “I’ll be your wife?”

His heart fell at her obvious satisfaction. She’d won and they both knew it.

“Of course,” he said as he turned to walk her out. “You’ve made sure of it.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*YOU'VE MADE sure of it.*

Franny frowned as she traipsed after Albert. *Wait. Stop. Don't go.*

She just barely bit back the words. She couldn't for the life of her figure out what he was thinking or feeling. One moment she thought perhaps he'd been happy to discover it was his fiancée in his bed, the next she was certain he wanted to murder her.

After that his expressions and his mutterings only grew more confusing.

*You will be my wife.*

Those words had filled her with joy. But that last part. *You've made sure of it.* It rankled and made her mouth taste funny. Her belly dipped and weaved and ... what was this feeling?

Guilt? Shame?

She straightened, hurrying to stay close to him in the hallways. Loula had hand delivered her to this room earlier in the evening and there was no way she wanted to be left alone and lost in the narrow halls that echoed with moans and groans and ...

Good heavens, was that a scream?

He half turned and gripped her elbow, dragging her along beside him as he beelined toward the exit. “Put your veil back on,” he said.

She fumbled with the cloth and put it on just as they strode through a cluster of half-dressed ladies who were giggling and touching each other and...

She nearly tripped over her own feet as she turned to keep watching, that ache between her thighs back in full force at the salacious sight.

Albert gave her arm a tug and she stumbled after him.

“Don’t you, er ...” She fumbled for words. “Isn’t that the sort of thing you might like to watch?”

He stopped just outside the front door, the dark quiet of this chilly night making her shiver as just as the brisk breeze. “Why?” he asked. “Did you find it appealing, pet?”

*Pet.* He’d called her that earlier when he hadn’t known who she was, and she found she liked it. It called to mind being stroked and adored, lapped at and bitten.

She shivered and he turned away from her, waving to a man in the shadows she hadn’t seen but who ran off now without a word.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He sighed with exasperation.

Her lips pursed. Well, this was not pleasant. She didn’t enjoy being treated like some tagalong pest. Which ...

She supposed she sort of was. But he’d said she would be his wife now, so he couldn’t be all that angry that she’d



surprised him at the brothel. And besides, Loula herself had told her that plenty of noblewomen came here in disguise seeking out their pleasure.

Another shiver rippled through her, though she was far from cold. And oh, what pleasure there was to be had.

She stared up at Albert's grim expression as he kept his gaze on the direction that man had fled.

"Albert," she said quietly, lifting her veil, unnerved more than ever now that he could see her clearly on this bright moonlit night.

But he didn't look down at her.

She put a hand on his arm, and he stiffened but didn't move away. She nibbled on her lower lip. "Are you angry with me?"

He didn't say anything.

"I was afraid you'd send me away," she started to explain.

Then a carriage pulled up before them and Albert was handing her inside. For a moment she feared he'd send her off alone, but he climbed in after her. The door shut and they were cast in darkness.

She found herself relaxing in the dark. It was so much more pleasant when he couldn't see her. When she could pretend she was beautiful and exotic, mysterious and seductive.

It was the dark that gave her the courage to speak again. "I liked it," she said abruptly.

Shadows flickered over his face as the carriage moved. His gaze was fixed on her but she couldn't read it. She had no idea what he was thinking or feeling. "I knew I would," she added.

He scoffed.

“I did,” she protested. “I didn’t know precisely what I was getting myself into, but I knew that if it was something you liked, then I would as well.”

He was quiet for a moment and then he leaned forward and caught her wrists. “Enough talking.”

He tugged and she was off her seat and in his lap before she could so much as squeak. A jolt of pleasure raced through her at the heat of his body pressed to hers. She let herself close her eyes and enjoy it.

“See, I’ve always known we would be a good fit,” she said.

He made a sort of grunting sound, and she couldn’t tell if it was agreement or amusement ... or maybe disdain. She shook off the thought.

His arms were wrapped around her waist and she couldn’t tell if he was listening as his free hand slid through the part of her cloak and found her belly. Her breath caught, that heat from earlier back at once at the feel of his strong hand on hers.

“You got what you wanted, hmm?” he murmured in her ear.

At least, that was what she thought he’d said.

“Or no,” he mused, his voice distant somehow as his hand moved down her thighs, to her calf, until he gripped the hem of her undergarment. “No, you didn’t get everything you came for, did you?”

Her throat was choked, her body torn between this blistering, blissful heat, and a wary tension at the tone of his voice, the subtle threat in his words.

Was he angry with her? She couldn't tell.

Why did he make it sound like—

Her thoughts cut off with a jolt as he ripped her undergarments away, tearing fabric and pushing aside her cloak so she was bare in his arms, her skin pale and white in the shadows. She watched with rapt attention as his hand smoothed over her thigh and up, wedging her legs apart so he could roughly grip her sex.

She whimpered as liquid heat seeped out of her, into his palm.

“This is mine now,” he said. “Forever mine. You wanted me to own it. To own you. So now you got your wish.”

“Yes,” she whispered. That had been her wish. From the first moment she'd met him. From the first time she'd seen his tortured kindness and his scarred heart.

His eyes flickered with emotion as he worked his fingers over the soft, malleable flesh of her womanhood.

“Spread your legs wide, wife,” he growled.

She did it. God help her, she arched her back with a pant as she rushed to do as he bid her. She looked like the most brazen whore, arching in his lap, her hips jerking up, silently begging for more, harder, deeper...

She didn't know what she wanted but she needed it all.

Her arms wrapped around his neck and she clung to him. “Please,” she whimpered. “Please, my lord.”

He nipped at her ear. “I'll be your husband soon enough. Call me what I am. Your master.”

“Yes, yes, I will be yours to command,” she said, her heart pounding with excitement. Why did she love that so much?

How did she trust him so thoroughly?

But she did. She always had. She wouldn't have agreed to marry just anyone, but she'd never doubted that this man was hers to take care of, just as she'd be his to command.

He dipped his head, pushing aside the fabric of her gown to fasten his mouth on her nipple, tugging and sucking as she writhed in his arms.

“You're going to pay for what you did,” he said roughly against her breast.

The words were a shock, but they paled in comparison to the feel of his fingers sliding inside of her wet heat.

She gasped, her hips jerking.

“I'm going to fuck you with my fingers until you come apart in my arms,” he said. “I won't let my wife go home to her bed without the feel of me inside her. Without knowing that I own this body.”

He was stroking her insides now, thrusting his fingers in and out as she squirmed beneath him, thrusting her bare breasts up for his attention, burying her fingers in his hair and holding him to her breasts as he suckled and tugged the sensitive flesh.

The sound of his fingers in her wetness filled the air, in and out, his palm slapping hard against that hard nub until she thought she might scream.

She would have if she could have drawn in enough air. But as it was, she panted in his arms, letting him devour her breasts and thrust his fingers into her heat.

Her hips bucked wildly as she tried to get more, her inner muscles clamped down on his fingers as she rode his hand like a hellion.

“That’s it. Take what’s yours,” he said. “Take what your husband gives you.”

He was snarling now, anger in his tone. That shocked her, confused her...

But she wasn’t scared.

This was Albert. Her Albert. The man fate and the heavens had chosen for her to save and to love and to cherish.

The thought had the last of her hesitations fading and she dropped her head back with a strangled, “yes!” as she gave her body over to him completely. She let him work her over until her vision was clouded and that tension inside of her grew unbearable and then—

“Albert!” She screamed his name as her inner muscles clamped down on his fingers and pleasure rippled through her fast, and hot, and fierce.

She trembled in his arms as she came back to earth, panting and sweating and shaking against his chest.

He held her lightly and when she pulled back he gazed down at her with dark, unreadable eyes.

Only then did her pleasure fade, and that earlier wariness bloomed into full blown panic.

There was nothing in his eyes. None of the hurt and heartache she’d seen in him when he thought no one was looking. None of the kindness or the serious soul she’d always known him to possess.

His eyes were dark and cold. Lifeless and hollow.

She began to shiver in earnest as he sat her upright with quick, efficient movements, setting her onto the bench beside him as he retied her cloak like he'd done it a million times.

“There,” he said. “Good as new.”

She gaped at him as the carriage rolled to a stop.

“You look just like a proper young lady again,” he said. But the taunting in his tone made her recoil.

Did he think less of her because she'd let him touch her? Shame threatened for the first time all night. “I-I didn't—”

“You don't have to explain any further,” he said. “I understand completely what you were about tonight.”

“You do?” Horror was twisting her insides into knots, and her skin felt chilled everywhere he'd touched her and kissed her.

“You want to be the countess and you were afraid I'd end it if you didn't.” He shrugged. “So you took matters into your own hands.”

Ice surrounded her heart and made her belly sink. He thought she'd done this to ...to trap him?

Of course, she thought. Of course that was how it might appear.

“Well played, wife,” he said. “I'll have to marry you now, won't I?” His gaze was cold as death as it swept over her. “You really are far more manipulative than I would have expected. But I suppose that will suit you well as my wife.”

Her lips parted, but no words came out.

His smile was sickeningly smug. “Either that or we'll destroy each other like my mother and father did. But at least

you'll get to be a countess, right?"

He reached for the door and opened it, taking her by the elbow and helping her toward the door where a servant waited to help her down.

"But—" she started.

"No, no excuses," he said. "You're smart and ambitious. Two qualities I admire."

Her stomach turned so thoroughly she thought she might retch.

"I didn't expect you to whore out your body the way you did, but I suppose I ought to have learned by now that I shouldn't underestimate a power hungry lady any more than I would an ambitious man."

"That's not what I—"

"You got your wish, wife," he said, that imitation of a smile fading to a sneer. "Congratulations."

She had no chance to respond before he closed the door. The carriage was rattling away down the alley before she could so much as formulate a thought.

She hadn't meant to trap him into marriage. She'd just wanted to prove that she wasn't scared of him or his ... appetites, as Loula called it.

Her breathing came quick and shallow as she turned to the kitchen entrance where she could slip in undetected. The thoughts that had gone blessedly blank all night were back in action with a vengeance now. And there were several truths she couldn't avoid.

They hit her with merciless clarity.

Albert still did not wish to marry her.

And if she had any pride at all—she wouldn't make him.



## CHAPTER NINE

THE BALLROOM WAS a sea of people by the time Albert arrived.

Several guests nodded in his direction as he weaved his way through the crowd, but he kept his gaze focused on the ladies who flitted through the sea of dark suits in their pale silk and taffeta gowns.

He was here for *her*.

For Franny.

A week had passed without a word from her or her father, and the silence irritated him. He'd half expected to be summoned to her home the very next day. Not that she would have told her father about what he'd done, but surely she would have been eager to tell her parents that Albert was ready to finalize the marriage contract.

But he'd heard nothing from her or her father as he'd gone about his business in town.

He spotted the Earl of Evermore on the other side of the ballroom and exchanged a nod in greeting.

He was indebted to the earl, and to his sister's friend the Earl of Fallenmore for sending him to the Wicked Earls' Club in the first place. The gentlemen who were current members, and even some former members who'd given up the club when

they married, had been all too eager to help a fellow club member. With his solicitor's help and that of the agreeable earls he'd met, he'd unloaded most of his family's estates without word spreading that the new Earl of Ashburn himself was the one dismantling the earldom piece by piece.

It was his right to do so, but he had no desire to stir up even more gossip around his family's name. It was enough that everyone still whispered about the Mad Earl and his cruel wife. He got the feeling the gossips would salivate if he gave them every reason to bestow an equally vile name upon himself.

The Mad Earl's Heir was bad enough. He owed it to Madeline not to make an even worse name for himself. The Earl of Lunace, perhaps. Or no, The Earl of Madness.

A wicked grin tugged at his lips at the thought. If his manipulative bride ever opened her mouth about his dark desires, he'd no doubt be called something even worse. A muscle in his jaw ticked as his gaze roamed over the crowd, searching out one pretty brunette in particular.

*Pretty.* His lungs hitched as visceral memories crowded into his mind.

Pretty was far too tepid a word for the vision she'd made the other night. First stretched out naked on a bed, and then writhing in his arms as she found her pleasure.

He ran a hand over his hair as a wave of heat made him wish he was anywhere but in this crowded room. He could hardly breathe whenever he thought of that night.

And soon she'd be his.

The thought brought about both pleasure and pain. It was betrayal at having been manipulated mixed with the oddest

sense of ... relief.

That was the only word he could think of to describe it.

Relief that there'd be more chances to touch her, to kiss her, to teach her a lesson.

He'd never be able to trust her, of course, but he was well used to living amongst untrustworthy foes. With the exception of Madeline, his home had been filled with unscrupulous individuals looking out for themselves.

At least with Franny there'd be the benefit of knowing she enjoyed his touch.

He drew in a sharp breath when he found her, smiling up at another man and laughing at something he said.

The already confusing mix of emotions was overwhelmed by something harsher, stronger, and far more bitter tasting.

Jealousy slashed through him like a knife and he found himself cutting through the crowd to get to her.

Who was she talking to? And why was she smiling like that?

He was so singularly focused on her, he didn't notice her father approaching until he was upon him.

"Ah, Albert, my boy," the older man said.

"My lord," Albert said, grudgingly tearing his gaze from Franny to the man before him.

He'd known the man for an age. One of his father's few allies—at least he had been before his father had driven everyone away—he was one of few he was able to call friend when he'd returned to London.

Which made the other man's wary expression that much more unsettling.

"Is everything all right?" Albert asked.

"Oh, yes, yes, just..." Franny's father cast a glance toward Franny. Albert's gaze followed, his eyes narrowing when he saw that she was indeed still laughing with another man.

His brow furrowed, and he looked back to see her father staring at him with bemusement.

"We didn't expect to see you here this evening, Albert," he said slowly.

He arched a brow. "Indeed? I assumed I would be welcome—"

"Oh, of course. Of course you're always welcome in our home," the other man said quickly. "It's just ..."

Albert faded. "What is it?"

Franny's father cleared his throat, and then he straightened his spine, and Albert was suddenly reminded of Franny's bravery. Most women wouldn't have even dared to come to a place like that, but then to keep calm and stand up for herself when she'd been discovered ...

He crossed his arms, annoyed by the admiration he felt for the woman. She was a wiley vixen. Exactly the sort of woman he despised.

And yet ...

He couldn't deny that he was beginning to look forward to their wedding night more than he ought. She might have trapped him into it, but he'd enjoy every second of it. He'd take her hard and fast until she—

“Franny said she’d told you how she felt,” her father was saying.

Albert blinked, horrified at where his mind had gone. And while talking to her father, of all people.

“Er, she told me what, exactly?”

The older man winced and glanced around as if afraid they’d be overheard. “Look, Albert, if you really want to insist on this marriage with my daughter, it is your right. I know we had an agreement. But I will not force the girl to marry you.”

Albert blinked a few times as the man continued. Finally, he interrupted. “Franny wants to call off the engagement?”

Her father’s eyes widened in surprise. “Well ... yes. She said she’d told you as much the other day when you came to visit.”

His mouth opened, and he shut it again quickly. Suspicion churned in his gut. What was she up to?

She’d gotten what she’d wanted. He might be the devil’s son, but not even he would take advantage of a woman the way he had and not marry her.

He scratched at his temple, vaguely aware of the other man’s incessant babbling. “She’s a good girl. She really is. Normally she’s quite dutiful. Which is why I cannot take her objections lightly, you see. This isn’t just nerves, you understand. She seems quite insistent that the agreement be called off and—”

“I’d like to talk to her,” Albert interrupted. His mind was whirling trying to figure out her agenda.

She was up to something. But what?

Did she want to negotiate her allowance perhaps? Was she hoping to live separately or dictate how many children they have?

His hands fisted at his sides but he forced a calm smile, the sort he'd mastered during his school years when well-intentioned tutors and friends would ask him about his father's health.

"I believe she and I have some things to discuss," he said. "I understand you will not force her," he added quickly when her father frowned in concern. "But I'd like to hear her concerns myself, if you don't mind."

"No, I ... I suppose that would be all right." Her father gave a wry smile. "Heaven knows Franny doesn't need me speaking on her behalf. She's always been too forthright for her own good." He winced slightly. "Too honest, as well. I just hope ..." He cleared his throat. "I hope she will do nothing to offend you, my lord."

Albert smiled again, but his pulse ticked loudly in his ears. Honest? Forthright?

Was he speaking of the same woman who'd trapped him into marriage by showing up in disguise at a sex club?

He cleared his throat, and out of the corner of his eye he caught Franny walking away from the man she'd been laughing with as the musicians began to play. "If you'll excuse me," he said to her father. But he was already walking away.

He caught up with her as she was joining a group of young ladies. "May I have this dance?" he asked.

She looked up, her eyes widening in shock. She recovered quickly. "Actually, I've already promised this dance—oof!"

With a hand on her lower back, he nudged her toward the dance floor. “I’m sure whoever he is, he’ll understand that your fiancé takes precedence.”

“My fiancé?” She honestly sounded confused.

And annoyed.

He pulled her into his arms as the waltz began, joining the other dancers. She glanced around them before clamping her lips shut. Then she leaned in closer. “Didn’t my father tell you? The agreement is off.”

His eyes narrowed. She looked so bloody sincere.

“What are you playing at?” he snapped.

Her eyes widened at his tone, but she didn’t respond.

“You honestly expect me to believe that you went to all that trouble to trap me into marriage, and now you’ll...what? Just walk away?”

Her jaw clamped shut and her chin lifted. For a second he caught the flare of her nostrils and her eyes seemed to blaze with self-righteous fury.

God, she truly was stunning. How had he never seen that before?

“Did you realize too late that you don’t want to share my bed?” he taunted. He leaned down close so he could speak directly into her ear. “I might believe that if I hadn’t felt how wet I made you. If I hadn’t watched you come apart in my arms.”

“That’s enough,” she hissed. He drew back to find that her cheeks were pink. “I don’t deny that I enjoyed ... that,” she finished primly. “And I have no qualms about doing it again.”

With a quick peek up at him through her lashes, she added, “Any of it.”

The air rushed out of his lungs as heat coiled in his loins. Good God, this woman was a marvel. All sweet innocence one moment and a coy siren the next.

She’d wrap any man around her little finger in a heartbeat.

He flinched at the thought. She was already pulling his strings, and he didn’t like it. He was supposed to be the one in charge here, not her.

“Tell me what you want,” he muttered, keeping his expression even as the couple next to them smiled and nodded.

Franny returned the lady’s greeting, her tone and expression at odds with the steel in her voice when she replied. “I don’t want anything from you, that’s what I’m trying to say.”

“You expect me to believe that?” he said again. Frustration had him tensing and he wished with all his might that he could dance her right out of this ballroom, to somewhere dark and quiet where he could kiss her and stroke her and tease that pretty mouth of hers until she spilled her every secret.

“I don’t expect you to believe anything,” she said.

It was the resignation in her tone that had his gaze sharpening, focusing on her anew. He looked for any sign of deviousness in her eyes, any flicker of manipulation. But her gaze met his head on and she sighed, weariness in her eyes and voice. “I don’t expect you to believe me, but I did not go there that night to trap you.”

Of course she had. His jaw worked because her expression was so sincere, and some part of him actually wanted to believe her.



Christ, he was still a gullible fool after all the lies and abuse he'd suffered.

He was the veriest fool, and he knew it. But he still found himself asking the question that was nagging at him. "Then why?" he demanded. "Why did you do it?"

## CHAPTER TEN

FRANNY WAS sure her heart was breaking.

Which was ridiculous. She didn't know the man nearly so well for him to have this sort of power over her.

Still, she'd been smitten with her fiancé since the first time she'd met him when they were children, and those feelings had only grown with their every interaction.

Never more so than the other night. Seeing the real Albert. Being the real Franny—if a masked one.

Being in his arms, and being worshiped by him...

She drew in a shaky breath, forcing herself to hold his gaze. She'd made such a mess of things. And she could see it clear as day in his eyes that no matter what she said, he wouldn't believe her. "You may not believe that I don't want anything from you," she said, though it hurt to get the words out. "But I promise you, I have no intention of marrying you."

That wasn't good enough. His grip on her hand tightened, and the look in his eyes would have been frightening if she didn't know better. But he wasn't angry, just suspicious. He didn't trust her.

And could she really blame him?

Her insides sank because... He deserved the truth.

She swallowed hard, waiting until he'd spun her away from the closest dance partners. "I wanted to get to know you, that was all."

His stare burned into her.

"I thought you thought ..." She let out an exasperated exhale at her own silly babbling. "You'd tried to scare me away with talk of ...of what you'd do to me." Heat filled her neck and cheeks but she refused to drop her gaze from his. "And I suppose I was curious, and also ... I wanted to prove that you could never scare me, and ..."

Something flickered in his gaze as his brows drew down. Her chest fell as she realized her own idiocy.

"And it was a mistake," she said softly. "I see that now."

He was quiet for so long, she thought he might not respond. Then he said, "Is that the truth? You were ... curious?"

Her cheeks were surely on fire by now. It was one thing to have him stare at her so intently in the dark of candlelight and shadows. But the candelabras burned bright overhead and there was no avoiding his scrutiny.

And she knew what he saw. What everyone saw. The too sharp features, the unfashionably slim build, the hawkish nose and plain brown hair.

Her lungs ached with her next inhale and she was grateful when the last chords sounded. But while he dropped his arm from around her waist, his grip on her hand never loosened. "Come with me," he said.

It was an order, and despite everything she felt her body heating in response to that tone. Her traitorous sex was already aching from that one command.

He led her through the crowds and to the French doors, gesturing for her to go ahead of him.

She frowned. “Albert, you are no longer my intended. If you want to keep it that way, we ought to stay here where—”

“We’ll stay where others can see us,” he said.

She clamped her lips shut. Of course.

He was true to his word, keeping her in full view of the windows and door. There were others out here as well, despite the cold air. It was hardly scandalous, and yet her heart raced with the knowledge that they were alone.

In full view, but alone nonetheless.

She waited for him to question her further, to berate her once more. But he just stood there staring at her like she was some riddle he couldn’t decipher.

A huff of amusement escaped. She ought to be used to this look by now.

She was wrapping her arms around her waist to stay warm when he said gruffly, “What’s so amusing?”

She blinked up at him. “Pardon?”

“Just now, you laughed.” His eyes narrowed on her like this was an accusation and not a mere comment.

She let out a soft sigh. “I was just thinking that the way you’re looking at me ...” She gestured to his sharp gaze. “I should be used to it. I’ve always been the odd little creature in the corner, you know. The confounding young lady who never knows when to keep her mouth shut or how to say the right things at the right time.”

His gaze softened ever so slightly and that hint of warmth seemed to loosen her tongue.

Or maybe it was just the fact that she was rapidly realizing that this future she'd dreamt of for them was well and truly over.

What did it matter what he thought of her now? It was already dead in the water.

"I collect strays, you know," she said matter-of-factly. "My friend Rosaline thinks it's because I have such a big heart. My mother thinks I do it just to irritate her." She flashed him a wan smile at that and got a short grunt of wry amusement in return.

"And your father?" The words seemed to be drawn out of him grudgingly.

She shrugged. "My father never noticed because he learned a long time ago that it's easier to love me if he didn't really know me."

She clapped a hand over her mouth in horror, her eyes widening as his brows hitched up in surprise.

"There, you see," she said as she dropped her hand. "It's a problem."

"What is?"

"My inability to think before I speak." She added meaningfully, "Or act."

"I see."

"No, you don't," she said matter-of-factly.

He rocked back on his heels, his gaze considering. He seemed curious despite his suspicions and anger. "So why did

you do it then?”

Her brows drew together in confusion. “Go to Loula’s you mean or—”

“Why do you take in strays?”

“Oh.” She let out a sharp exhale. “Because I like to feel needed. I like being around other creatures who are alone and unwanted. The fellow misfits of the world.”

His brows drew down. “You think you don’t belong?”

“I know I don’t. Why do you think my family was so quick to marry me off to the Mad Earl’s son?” She reached a hand out and let it drop before she could touch him. “No offense.”

His lips twitched. “None taken.”

“I think they thought you’d be sure to have me since ... well, since there likely wouldn’t be a plethora of young ladies lining up to join your family.” She bit her lip with a wince. “Again...I mean no offense.”

He chuckled this time and then cleared his throat as if he was embarrassed he’d been amused by her.

“But I was an idiot, you see. Back when we first met, and every time after, I had this ... notion.”

“A notion?”

“Mmm. I got it into my head that we were the same, you and I. That you were another misfit, like me, like Rosaline ... like my strays.” She shrugged, trying to cover her humiliation with a shrug and a smile. “I was wrong.”

He went quiet again, and she couldn’t read anything in that hard gaze of his.

“So, you see,” she continued, smoothing her hands over her skirts before clasping them together in front of her. “I hereby relinquish you from your obligation to me just like you asked of me when you came to visit.”

He stared at her.

She wet her lips, her belly turning and twisting. She’d apologized already. She didn’t relish the thought of doing it again.

Mostly because she would do it again. In a heartbeat. She hated his suspicions and the fact that she’d angered him. But she wouldn’t take back her memories of that night for anything in the world.

“You truly mean to end the engagement,” he said.

Her heart ached but she refused to let it show. “Yes. Of course. By this time next week my father will no doubt be attempting to arrange another match for me and you will be well and truly off the hook.”

She tried for a brilliant smile to cover up the fact that her eyes stung with unshed tears.

“Franny...” He moved closer, his voice so low it sent shivers down her spine and it was impossible not to remember what his lips had felt like when he’d growled orders against her skin. The way his tongue had felt pressed against her sex ...

She was trembling by the time he continued.

“The things we did ...” His eyes darkened. “You must know you cannot be with another.”

“Why not?” Her voice sounded loud and crass next to his low murmur. She glanced around and then dropped it. “There’s

no way I could have gotten with child ...” She frowned. “Is there?”

He let out a huff that was either amusement or exasperation, she couldn't be sure which. “No.”

“I'm still a virgin, am I not?”

“Yes,” he said, though there was a ‘however’ in his tone.

“So there was no irreparable harm done then, correct? We can move on and pretend it never happened.”

His lips parted but he said nothing. His gaze was trained on her in disbelief. Maybe even a tinge of horror.

Her insides tumbled low. Oh yes, he was likely horrified by her behavior. As any sane man would be. She drew in a deep breath, suddenly exhausted and weary to the bone. She reached for his hand and clasped it between hers tightly. “I did not mean to trap you into marriage, and I won't. I trust you not to tell anyone what I did, and you can be assured that I'll never tell a soul.” She dropped his hand and flashed him one last smile that made her heart break in two. “It's as good as forgotten.”

She walked away from him then, and he let her go.

*As good as forgotten.*

Liar.

She'd never forget their night together.

But she'd rather die than use that night to force his hand.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALBERT SAT across the desk from Mr. Martin, his solicitor whose office was at the edge of Vestry Lane.

Like Dr. Sinclair, the solicitor was from a good family, and catered to clients of the *ton* as well as the residents of Vestry Lane and the slums and docks beyond to the east.

Mr. Martin eyed him with smug satisfaction now as he tapped the edges of the document before him. “You’ve done it, old friend.”

Albert smiled, and for once it felt genuine. Not the forced expression he wore for most of society.

He and Martin had been friends since their school days. As outcasts together amidst the well respected noblemen’s sons, they’d forged a bond that had benefited them both.

As the front man for this business entity that bought and sold Albert’s properties, Martin had made a small fortune for himself. And now that the last property had been handled, Albert was free of the bonds that tied him to his father.

Well, except for his sister.

And his title.

But Madeline was happily married and the title would end with him. He’d make sure of it.

The thought made him think of Franny, and the wedding that would not be. He frowned down at the desk before him, suddenly exhausted when he should be celebrating.

“I don’t know how you managed it,” Martin was saying. “How you gained the trust of all those earls? They were all too happy to make these purchases under the table, no questions asked.”

Martin shook his head, just as baffled as Albert felt by the show of trust by those men. He scratched his temple with a huff. Evermore had said it worked like that. A sort of brotherhood amongst earls. But it had sounded far too good to be true. “They surprised me,” he admitted to his old friend.

Martin chuckled. “Who would have thought there was one trustworthy person to be found amongst the *ton*.” He gestured to the signed deals before him. “Let alone handfuls.”

“Shocking,” Albert agreed.

They shared a grin. It was an old joke that they had no love to spare for nobility, and Martin was even more jaded than he after some incident he didn’t like to speak of with a nobleman’s daughter.

“Now if you could just find a woman of integrity in that lot, you might just find yourself a wife,” Martin said with a laugh. He chuckled again at Albert’s scowl,

“I know, I know. You trust the women of the *ton* even less than the men,” Martin said. “And with good reason with the mother you had.”

Albert made a grunting noise of assent, but his chest felt far too heavy and his mind was a war of dissenting beliefs and old opinions.

Yes, his mother had been a manipulative and cruel wench, trying to pit him against his sister, exploiting her powerlessness for her own gain, twisting their father's already twisted mental state to get her way.

But not every man in society was as rageful and erratic as his father, so why was he so certain every woman was as untrustworthy as his mother?

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, Franny's hurt expression clear as day in his mind's eye. She'd tried to cover it with a rueful smile but he'd seen the pain in her eyes and hated it.

Hated it even more that he'd put it there.

And then there were her words. She felt like she didn't belong. She'd seen him as a fellow lost soul...

He rubbed a hand over his aching chest and swallowed hard.

"You all right, Albert?" Martin asked.

"Yes. Of course," he said far too stiffly. "But I must be off. I want to tell Madeline that she has a small fortune coming her way. She doesn't need it any longer, but I dare say she'll still appreciate it."

Martin nodded, his expression grim. "Your sister deserves that and more for the hell your parents put her through."

"Agreed." He came to stand. "And I intend to give her all she deserves."

Once more he found himself thinking of Franny as he headed out the door and down the stairs that emptied out onto Vestry Lane.

What did *she* deserve? She'd spent years being told she was to marry Albert, planning for it and embracing him, and he'd shown up and...

Well, he'd behaved like a bloody boor.

Albert waved farewell to his old friend and headed past the stretch of gaming hells, taverns, and brothels that looked so tame and quiet during the bright sunlight.

"Lord Ashburn!"

The sound of his name being called had him stopping and turning. He blinked twice at the sight before him. The sweet and proper Rosaline was standing chatting with the notorious Madame Loula.

*Only on Vestry Lane.*

They both smiled and waved him over.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you here." Rosaline's gushing made him freeze. Was she in earnest? Perhaps she hadn't heard about his fallout with her friend or—

"Franny told me what she did," the girl said with wide eyes. "I do hope you're not too angry with her."

"I—" He trailed off with a floundering look at a grinning Loula.

Was it possible this sweet earl's daughter knew what went on at Loula's club?

Loula merely winked at him.

Rosaline, however, was chatting away. "You have to understand, she means well. Always." The girl's eyes were wide and earnest. "I don't know what I would have done without her all these years." She winced. "I never had many

friends except for Franny and my Jacob. But Franny always protected me from those who would mock me for saying the wrong thing or for not understanding..." She breathed out a sharp exasperated huff at whatever memory she was thinking of. "I've really never done well with veiled comments or innuendos."

"Oh, er..." Albert wasn't certain what he was supposed to say to that off admission. But the way she was speaking, he was beginning to understand how she'd stand out amongst the other well-bred ladies of her set.

"Anyway, I just want you to know that I've known Franny forever, and while she is always rash and impulsive in her actions, she always has good intentions." Rosaline beamed like it was all settled now. She'd said what she'd needed to. "I do hope you're deserving of her love," she added.

She patted his arm, seemingly unaware that she'd just swept the rug out from under his feet. "If so, you're a lucky man."

Rosaline leaned over and kissed Loula's cheek. "I'll be by later with biscuits for you and your ladies," she called out. And then she was off, leaving him and a chuckling Loula to watch her prance off as if she were walking in Mayfair.

"She's darling, isn't she?" Loula said.

"Darling," he echoed, still reeling.

Loula turned to him with an arched brow. "All right, let's have it."

He stared at her until she sighed.

"You're angry that I helped your fiancée," she said.

And yes. He had been.

He should be.

“Why did you do it?”

She shrugged, her demeanor unapologetic. “She was curious about your appetites, and as your wife-to-be, I felt she deserved to know. Besides, she was quite determined to win your heart, and I found the romantic in me was rather delighted by that.”

He gaped at her. Had everyone gone mad?

He scrubbed a hand over his face. No, *he* was the Earl of Madness. Perhaps *he* was the one not seeing things clearly.

“So you think...” He started and stopped. “You think she was honestly just...curious? That she was trying to...”

“To win your affection? Yes.” Loula arched a brow. “You heard Rosaline. The poor girl is head over heels for you and it seems she always has been.”

Albert flinched, guilt kicking him in the chest, but alongside that there was the oddest sensation. Something warm and light and...fizzy. Like champagne in his veins.

He cleared his throat and ran a hand over his chest. She actually cared for him?

And then just as quickly guilt gave him a sharp kick in the gut.

What had he ever done to deserve her loyalty, let alone her affection?

“Never underestimate a determined lady,” Loula was saying. “Especially one in love.”

“But she...” Albert winced as he recalled the way he’d spoken to her, and handled her in that room.

He'd spanked her, for the love of god.

That wasn't how any innocent should be treated. "If I'd have known, I never would have..."

"Precisely." Loula's tone was pert. "She didn't want to be treated like a lady, but like your wife."

Sweat broke out along his brow as his perspective of that night was flipped on its head. All he could remember was how seductive and wonderful she'd been. So adventurous and feisty, innocent and eager. His perfect woman...until he'd lifted her veil.

But even then, she'd surprised him. She hadn't cowered in fear or pleaded with excuses. She'd stood up to him. She'd talked to him.

She'd wanted to get to know him, and he...

Oh hell. He wished he knew her better. The little he knew of her left him stunned and wanting more.

"I should go," he said to Loula. "I have some ... things to figure out."

That was putting it mildly. And apparently Loula understood that because her laughter followed him all the way down the street.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

FRANNY DID her best to keep a smile in place as she spoke with her friends at the Turners' masquerade.

She wished Rosaline were here, but she and her General seemed far more content to stay home in the evenings than join in on the revelries of society.

Franny shifted from one foot to the other as a particularly loud friend laughed raucously and the sound gave her a jolt.

She couldn't blame Rosaline. If it weren't for her parents and their desire to make another match for her before any scandal could arise from her broken engagement, she'd have claimed a megrim and stayed home as well.

But her pride and her guilt toward her parents had her getting ready this evening despite her heavy heart.

She might be brazen and admittedly eccentric, but she'd never set out to be a bad daughter. She'd tried her best to make them happy and proud. And look where that had gotten her.

Fidgeting with her mask, she forced an even brighter smile.

Her father was still bemused and disappointed in her decision, though he nicely did not try to force her into an



unwanted marriage. But far worse was her mother's understanding.

She wasn't sure how much her mother had noticed the other day during and after Albert's visit, but by the sympathy in her mother's eyes...she thought her mother at least suspected that this hadn't truly been Franny's decision.

Her throat ached.

Her mother's kind acceptance of her story that she'd suddenly had a change of heart made it all the harder to smile and stand firm in her decision.

Her mother likely knew that it had been his decision. That he'd taken one good look at her and decided she wasn't worth the trouble.

Her lungs hitched but her smile never faltered as the loud girl beside her and a few of her friends moved away to join another circle of gossiping young ladies, leaving Franny alone with the Turner sisters.

Miss Mary Turner, the older of the two, was all dimples and sunny smiles as she took in the crowd around them, seemingly content to stay quiet in the wake of the others' loud chatter. Her younger sister, Mrs. Eloise Sinclair, was exchanging a blushing smile with her husband, whose small smile as he spoke to her father and another gentleman was enough to make Franny's belly twist with yearning and just a hint of envy.

What would it be like to have a man look at you like that?

Like you'd hung the moon and set the stars in the sky.

Everyone had been surprised when the younger sister announced her engagement first, and to a doctor, no less. As

the daughter of a wealthy viscount, everyone had expected her to marry a man with a title.

But it had been clear to anyone with eyes that it was a love match, and so rather than turn their noses up and judge, the *ton* had embraced the unlikely couple.

It didn't hurt that Dr. Sinclair was a well respected physician who'd often dined with the families in attendance here tonight. But it was the sight of how smitten they both were that led to nearly every lady in good society letting out a treacly sigh whenever they walked into a room.

Eloise tore her gaze away from her husband now, and seemed to recall that she was amongst friends. "Oh Franny, I meant to tell you that I saw your Earl of Ashburn the other day."

Franny stiffened. "Oh yes?" she said mildly, hoping the topic would end quickly if she showed little interest.

It wasn't the first time she'd heard Albert mentioned since the night she refused to think about any longer. She should be grateful that she wasn't hearing his name in hushed whispers, or with those dreadful monikers attached.

Why, just the other day she'd heard a group of well-respected men referring to him as the Mad Earl's son. One had called him the new Earl of Madness just because he wasn't socializing in the way they thought he ought to.

It had taken everything in her not to storm over to them and tell them to show some respect. Anyone could claim to be a gentleman when they had the right parentage, but only a true gentleman would look after his sister and face all of society with his chin held high after all the scandal his parents had wrought.

“He’s more handsome than ever,” Miss Turner added with a sweet smile for Franny.

Franny’s own smile withered in response.

Her father had wanted to keep the end of their engagement a secret a little while longer, but it was proving harder than she’d expected.

“I saw him on Vestry Lane the other day,” Eloise continued.

Franny’s insides twisted as if the other woman had taken a dagger to her belly. Her cheeks ached as she reminded herself that the sweet young lady couldn’t know just how much her words were hurting her.

Was he there to see Loula? Or one of the ladies who frequented Loula’s club?

Had he banished all thoughts of her with a night of rowdy love making in a dark room where one’s secrets could be hidden in the shadows?

She somehow managed to keep a smile on her face as her heart felt like it was being cleaved in two. All the same, she was grateful for the mask that at least covered part of her face.

Mary seemed to sense Franny’s discomfort, because she turned to her sister with a pointed look. “So many gentlemen carouse on Vestry Lane, you know that. It’s hardly cause for gossip.”

Eloise’s eyes widened slightly. “Oh no, of course not.” With a sheepish smile for Franny, she added, “My apologies. I did not mean to gossip. I just found it interesting that he was there in the afternoon, you see.” She cast her sister a quick look. “Most gentlemen aren’t to be found in Vestry Lane in the middle of the afternoon.”

Franny opened her mouth to retort but cut herself off promptly. The memory of her own run-in with Albert on that same stretch of cobblestone street came back to her and gave her pause.

What had he been doing there in the middle of the day? She hadn't thought to ask.

“And truly, I found it lovely to discover that he was doing business with Mr. Martin.” At the other girls' blank stares, the girl hurried on. “Er, he's the solicitor who conducts his business in Vestry Lane and he's a friend of my husband. Apparently he's your fiancé's friend as well, from what I've heard.”

Eloise's smile faded as she took in Franny's response.

Or rather, her lack of a response. Shame and regret were inching up her insides as she realized just how little she knew of the man she'd let touch her and kiss her and ...

Oh heavens, she'd let him do far more than that.

And all based on what? A feeling? A hunch?

She was even more of a fool than she'd ever realized. He was right to be rid of her. He must have thought her mad when she'd tried to explain it.

The Earl of Madness and his mad bride.

The errant thought brought about the urge to laugh. A hysterical giggle was squelched with a hard swallow.

She took a stumbling step backward.

Air. She needed air, and she needed it rather badly before she did something even worse than surprising her beau on Vestry Lane. She had to leave before she swooned like a ninny.

She was still trying to come up with a good excuse to flee when Mary surprised her by turning to her sister with a curious expression. “You say you’re friends with this solicitor?”

Eloise blinked in surprise. “Why, yes. Or... no.” She winced, still smiling. “He’s not exactly an easy man to befriend. But Teddy is friendly with him and we’ve had him to dinner several times.” Her smile brightened. “I feel certain I shall call him friend soon enough.”

“Of course you will, dear,” Mary said, but her tone sounded distant. Thoughtful.

Their silence was the opening Franny needed. “If you’ll excuse me, I must find my mother.”

She didn’t wait for a response before turning and fleeing her friends. Nodding and smiling as she walked, hoping to be unforgettable enough that no one would notice when she disappeared out through the French doors and onto a terrace that led to the gardens.

Even that wasn’t far enough. She could hear the music still and the glow of candlelight spilled out through the glass doors and windows.

Without thinking she lifted her skirts and hurried forward, into the garden where the lights gave way to shadows and the sound of music was replaced by the hum of insects and the drum of her own heart.

“Goodness, what a mess,” she whispered to the darkness.

And that was putting it mildly. She’d been set to marry the man of her dreams, and somehow she’d managed to drive him away.

She rubbed at her throbbing temples, and let out a sigh just as a twig snapped behind her. She stiffened. And when she

heard another rustle in the brush behind her, she opened her mouth to call out.

But she was cut short by the feel of an arm around her waist and a man's low voice in her ears.

“What are you doing out here on your own, pet?”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FRANNY WENT stiff in Albert's arms, but his cock still stirred as her scent filled his nostrils and the warm, slim length of her pressed against his chest.

He wasn't here to take advantage. He was here for the opposite reason. To do right by her. To talk to her the way he ought to when they'd first seen one another after so much time.

"You have every right to scream," he murmured in her ear, trying not to be distracted by the smooth skin of her neck or the way she pressed back into him as if by instinct at the sound of his voice. "But I hope you won't. I'm just here to talk. I have no intention of hurting you."

She nodded and he dropped his hand from her mouth. She broke away and whirled around, her breathing ragged. "You scared me."

He flinched. "I'm sorry. I saw you run outside and I followed. I didn't want to draw attention to where you'd gone ... or the fact that I was chasing after you."

She nibbled on her lower lip, and his heart gave an odd little thump at the display of vulnerability.

Had he ever thought she was some devious, manipulative wench? What a fool.

He cleared his throat. “Franny, I—”

“We haven’t told anyone that the engagement is off.” She spoke abruptly and over top of him.

He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to say to that so he merely said, “Ah.”

“My father just asks that you give him some more time,” she hurried on, her hands moving in small useless gestures as she glanced around them.

She looked bloody perfect in her pale gown and with that mask that only managed to accentuate her rosy lips and her strong, regal chin and nose.

Her eyes, however ...

He frowned when he realized that she wasn’t meeting his gaze. Her eyes were darting about like she was looking for help.

The thought made his insides tighten. She had no reason to trust him or to feel comfortable in his presence. But he still hated the sight of her suspicion all the same.

She wet her lips and he found himself temporarily transfixed.

“We *will* tell everyone. Obviously,” she continued.

It took him a moment to recall what she was talking about.

“My father is hoping to form an understanding before people start to talk about ... about us.” Her throat worked as she swallowed.



Her expression was so earnest, her voice so sweet. He wanted to reassure her. To comfort. But not only did he not know how—Madeline was the only woman who'd ever looked to him for comfort and the way he felt around Franny was anything but brotherly.

And then all at once, his mind registered her words. Her father wanted to form another understanding.

Even now he was likely holding conversations with gentlemen of the *ton* who might want the hefty dowry that everyone knew would come with a marriage to Franny.

His lungs seized and his blood turned to fire. His muscles grew tense with the urge to reach for her again, to drag her close and kiss her hard, and hold onto her until she stopped this talk of marrying another.

He stumbled back a step at the overwhelming surge of possessiveness. When her gaze flashed with surprise, he felt another wave of emotion, this one protectiveness.

She shouldn't marry a man who didn't know her, and definitely not a man who didn't see her for who she was.

She was ... spectacular. Braver and kinder than anyone he'd ever met.

"So..." She shifted, and he was reminded of a spooked colt about to take off. "If that's what you wanted to discuss, I assure you there's nothing to fear. You'll be free of me soon enough."

"Franny." He moved closer, suddenly annoyed with this mask that kept him from seeing every inch of her.

Hell, he was annoyed by the clothes too, but he couldn't exactly ask her to strip naked. He reached for the edge of the mask. "May I?"

Her lips parted in surprise, but after a heartbeat she nodded.

Gently, carefully, he detached the mask from the pins that held it in place and lowered it as he murmured, “Let there be no more masks between us. No veils and no secrets.”

She blinked, her lips quivering at his undoubtedly odd speech.

Hell, he’d never been good at speaking about emotions. In his house it was a weakness to reveal any sort of emotion, but especially tenderness. If he was too kind to Madeline, or showed her too much generosity, it wasn’t he who paid for the crime, but Madeline.

Her punishment and exile grew more pronounced every time his mother caught wind of his affection for her.

But he wasn’t a child any longer, and neither of his parents had any power over him now.

“Franny, I didn’t come here to talk about ending the engagement,” he started.

Christ, his voice sounded far too gruff.

She frowned. “You didn’t?”

“No, I ...” He took a deep breath. “I wanted to apologize.”

“Oh.”

Even in the dark he saw red creep up her neck and into her cheeks. “I thought we already covered this. You have nothing to apologize for. I knew what I was getting into and—”

“No, Franny, that’s not what I meant.”

He moved closer and to his dismay, she backed up a step with faltering steps.

“Are you afraid of me?” he asked. He held his breath as he waited for her response.

She shook her head quickly with another frown. “No, of course not. Don’t be daft.”

He didn’t know whether to laugh or sigh at her response. Of course not. He was only the Mad Earl’s son, and a man who’d used her body and given her virgin arse a bloody spanking when she should have been cherished and worshiped.

“I heard you were in Vestry Lane the other day,” she said.

He blinked, taken aback by the turn of conversation, even more so by the odd edge to her voice as if she were desperate to change tact. “Yes,” he said slowly. “I was there on business.”

She nodded, looking away from him again.

Good God, she looked like a cornered rabbit, and he’d never felt more like a beast in his life. He cleared his throat, remembering his purpose. He wanted to get to know Franny, and not just that...

He wanted her to know him.

Vestry Lane was as decent a place to start as any. “That’s my biggest secret, you know.”

She blinked rapidly. “Pardon?”

He drew in a deep breath. Not even Madeline knew about his plotting to take down his father. But here he was, confessing to this brazen little slip of a woman.

“I hated my father,” he said. “You can likely understand why.”

She bit her lip and then said slowly. "I've heard stories, of course."

"They don't do him justice. The man wasn't just mad, he was cruel too. To me, to my sister, and to my mother as well. His moods would swing wildly from one moment to the next, and what was a safe topic one moment would cause him to beat you to a bloody pulp the next."

"Oh!" She reached a hand out but dropped it before she touched him. "I'm so sorry."

"I got the worst of the beatings, but his torture of my mother and sister was more..." He winced. "Diabolical. He was paranoid that my mother had other suitors and cut her off from her family and friends, forcing her to watch as he paraded whores through the house and treated them better than her."

Her eyes were soft with sympathy and wide with surprise, but he was grateful he saw no pity.

"And my sister, well ... I'm sure you heard about how he locked her up." He swallowed, tasting bile. He didn't want to dwell on the past any longer. He needed her to know, but it wasn't relevant any longer. "My mother grew cruel in her own right and I'll never know how much of it was her nature and how much of it was a reaction to the life she'd lived with my father."

Franny nodded slowly. "I'm sorry, Albert. For all of you."

He nodded. "I didn't know how to fight back against it all. Until I met King. I assume you've heard of the ruler of Vestry Lane?"

She nodded.

“I started going to Loula’s clubs. Drowning my sorrows in the pleasure of the flesh...”

Her gaze dropped and his stomach fell with it.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to—”

“It’s all right,” she said quickly. “Continue. Please.”

He wet his lips. “King took a liking to me. He’d heard about my father, and eventually I came to him with a proposal.”

Her sharp gaze grew bright with curiosity. “A proposal?”

“Mmm. He wanted to expand his empire, and I had the connections to help with that. So with his money I started up clubs similar to Loula’s all around the country and some on the continent.”

She gasped, and to his surprise her eyes sparkled with... delight. “How clever of you.”

A choked laugh escaped. “I suppose. I got a cut of the money, of course, and I used that money to, uh...” He hesitated, not because he felt guilt, but because he knew how this made him look.

Like the Earl of Madness, he supposed.

“I bought up my father’s properties,” he said. “One by one, I bought his lands and took what he had.” He met her gaze evenly. “I ruined him. And my mother.”

Her brows hitched high and her lips formed an *O*.

“I’d planned to come back for my sister. To use the money to give her the life of comfort she deserved.” His lips hitched up in a wry, bitter smile. “But I was too late.”

She reached out and this time she touched him, her fingers a gentle touch on his chest.

“Luckily her husband found her in time, before...” He took a deep breath. Those weren’t his secrets to share. “Well, in time. That’s all.”

He saw her mind working as she gazed up at him. “So your visits to Vestry Lane...”

“The solicitor there has been helping me to sell the properties under a business he started. So it’s not public knowledge that I bankrupted my own family.”

“I see.”

He waited, but that was all she said. *I see.*

“So,” he said.

“So,” she added, her lips twitching up ever so slightly at the corners.

“As you likely already figured out the other night at Loula’s, I am just as mad as they say. Maybe more so.” He shrugged as if it didn’t matter.

“Mmm.”

Her noncommittal response, so easy and light, it had his own lips twitching with the urge to smile.

“I’d thought to end the earldom,” he continued. “Which was why I’d thought I couldn’t marry.”

She nodded, her expression so sad, it made his heart hurt. “Yes. I do see.”

“But...” He reached for her hand. “I was wrong. I handled it all wrong. And now I wonder...” He shook his head. “My

father is dead. My mother is ruined and in exile. Who am I hurting by continuing with this crusade?"

"Yourself," she said softly, her eyes welling with tears.

"I meant you," he said. "I hurt *you*, and I'm so sorry."

She frowned, swiping at her eyes. "Nonsense. I understand completely."

She did, he realized. And that only made him feel worse.

He reached out to her, cupping her cheek in the palm of his hand, his heart thudding in his chest as his mind and his desires went to war.

He wanted this woman. Physically, yes—undeniably and undoubtedly, and well before he'd even seen her so glorious and naked at Loula's.

He swallowed hard, willing away the heat that made his manhood stiffen and his head grow addled.

He wanted her in other ways too. More important ways. Ways that made him doubt everything he thought he knew about himself.

He stroked a thumb over her cheekbone and her eyes grew dazed and filled with such tenderness it made his chest constrict and his heart swell.

She was the one to break the moment, pulling away gently from his touch. "What is it that you want, Albert?"

Her voice was gentle but firm.

"You make it sound like a simple question," he hedged.

"It is, rather." She smiled but he caught the way her lips trembled. "I won't make the same mistake again. I thought I knew you, but I was wrong—"

“No.” His voice was too gruff again, but there was nothing for it. “Don’t say that. Please.” He cleared his throat. “What you said the other night about recognizing something in me... you weren’t wrong. Far from it. I’ve always felt like I was on the outside looking in, and truthfully, I never expected anyone else to understand.”

She pressed her lips together, her expression pained. “Why not?”

“Because...” He threw his arms out wide. “No one ever had.”

She nodded. “Then I’m glad to learn I wasn’t wrong, I suppose. And I ...” She gave him a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “And I hope we can be friends.”

“Friends.” He repeated the word with all the bitter disappointment he felt. And it wasn’t until that moment that he realized just how much he wanted her.

All of her.

Her body, her mind ... her heart.

He wanted it so badly and realized it so suddenly, that for a moment it was all he could do to stand there and breathe as his body was racked with the knowledge.

*What is it that you want?* she’d asked.

He knew now.

He wanted her. All of her.

And he’d do anything to have her.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ONE MOMENT he was standing there glaring at her with those fierce dark eyes and an inscrutable expression, and the next he was pulling her into his arms. “Give me another chance, Franny.”

It wasn't so much a question as a command, and Franny felt a familiar thrill rush through her at the gruff, low tone. “Or what?”

He let out a short laugh as his arm tightened around her waist and the bulge of his manhood pressed to her lower belly, making her knees go weak.

Leaning down his lips grazed her ear as he said, “Or I'll give my naughty girl another spanking.”

Her inhale was as sharp as the spear of heat that cut her to the quick. Heat coiled low in her belly as her breasts seemed to strain against the fabric of her gown.

The hot flush of desire was so fast and so overwhelming, she found herself clutching at his jacket, letting him take her weight as her body melted into his.

“I see you're not opposed to the idea.” One of his hands roamed up her side to cup her breast. He flicked a thumb over the already hard nub of her nipple and she whimpered.

“This isn’t fair,” she said. “You know what I like.”

He smiled against her neck as he breathed in her scent that was somehow already so familiar it felt like coming home. “But don’t you see, pet? The fact that you like it dirty and hot, the fact that you love the push and the pull, the give and the take...” He cut himself off with a groan when she pressed her tits against him, her body wriggling against his restlessly even as she shook her head.

“That’s just lust,” she argued.

He straightened, pulling back far enough to look down into her eyes. “Do you think it’s like that with everyone?”

She pouted, her chin set in a stubborn tilt. “I don’t know. You’re the one with all the experience with Loula’s la—”

He cut her off with a kiss that addled his senses.

Him, the king of salacious, naughty clubs all over the continent, and he lost his bloody mind with a simple kiss.

But the taste of her, the way her tongue was so eager to take and to give ...

Just like her.

But mostly the rightness of it had him groaning into her open mouth as he gripped her bottom and dragged her closer still so he could feel every inch of her.

He nipped at her lower lip and then soothed it with a flick of his tongue. “You never have cause to think about any other lady who’s shared my bed.”

Uncertainty flickered in her gaze.

“I’m serious, Franny. Those women were always nameless, faceless for the most part. They were hidden in

shadows and existed outside of my real life. But most importantly...” He slid a hand into her hair, holding her tight. “They didn’t know me. And I didn’t know them. And to be honest...” He swallowed hard. “To be honest I thought it was better that way. For them and for me. I thought it was ... safer.”

Her hands clung to his lapels as her gaze darted left and right to take him in. “Safer?”

He pulled back slightly, easing his grip so she could walk away from him after he said what needed to be said. “Franny, I’m ...” He fumbled for the right words. “I am my parents’ son.”

“And your sister’s brother,” she shot back pertly, not without a flicker of wicked mischief.

He let out another huff of laughter. When was the last time he’d laughed with a woman? Or at all, really?

“I don’t know your sister well, but she seems lovely,” she added.

He dipped his chin. “I see your point.”

“I don’t know that you do,” she said. She surprised him by pressing in even closer, and this time she was the one to lift a gloved hand and cup his cheek. “Your father might have had his struggles, but deep down he was cruel. And your mother, no one ever claimed her to be ill, did they?”

“No, she was just straight up wicked.”

“So there you have it,” she said. “You’re not cruel or wicked. You feel shame and regret and fear. You feel love. I’m sure of it.”

He leaned down until his forehead rested against hers. “How do you do that? How do you take something so complicated and so fraught with emotion and ...”

She winced. “Make light of it? I didn’t mean to—”

“No,” he interjected. “You make it okay. You make the insane seem sane, the outcasts feel wanted...” He turned his face to kiss her palm. “You make the wicked feel like maybe there might be hope for them yet.”

“I do?” She sounded breathless and he couldn’t help but lean in for another taste of her sweet lips.

“You do.”

“Oh.” She looked a little dazed when he began to trail kisses over her cheeks and her nose, and down the length of her neck.

“Oh,” she said again, but this time it was a moan.

He smiled against her soft skin and then he bit her neck gently. Her hips bucked automatically, her arms slipping around his neck.

He nipped at her earlobe next as his hand molded her backside so he could press his erection against her, let her feel just what she did to him.

“Albert,” she said, and there was a question in her voice, a helpless quality that stirred everything primal inside him and had him scooping her up into his arms and carrying her deeper into the cold, dark garden.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” he murmured as she clung to him.

He didn’t stop until he reached a bench hidden in an alcove and then he sat down with her firmly tucked in his lap. He

lifted the edge of her gown as he dipped his head down to trail kisses over the rounded swell over her breasts.

She writhed in his arms as his fingers trailed up her calf and over her thigh. When she whimpered, he quieted her again. “I won’t let your ache go untended, love. I made sure you were satisfied the last time, and I mean to do the same again. Maybe this time with my tongue, hmm?”

She shivered in his arms. “Albert, wait...”

“Why?” he said. “You don’t like the thought of me going down on my knees before you. Of me burying my head between your thighs and—”

“Albert!” Her voice was high and breathy and her chest rose and fell sharply with her every breath.

“Is that an ‘Albert, yes’ or an ‘Albert, no?’” he teased.

She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him away, her gaze tortured. “It’s an ‘Albert, I can’t. I shouldn’t.’”

He tried not to let her see how much the words stung. “Of course. I’ve behaved abominably and you have every right to hate—”

“Don’t be a fool,” she said with an exasperated exhale. “It’s just...I’ve already caused so much trouble. For you, for my parents. I cannot continue to be a burden, and causing a scandal—”

“First of all, I don’t plan on getting caught.” He snagged her hands in his and pulled her close to his chest. He rested both her hands over his heart and held them there. “Second, I am wretched with these sorts of things so I beg your forgiveness for being such a bloody fool.”

She blinked in incomprehension.

He leaned in to kiss her gently. “Love, I came here tonight to ask for a second chance—”

“Yes, but—”

“Not as your friend.” He waited until that registered. “I want to be with you. I want to get to know every part of that fascinating mind of yours. I want to be the man who sees and honors your beauty and your kindness and your bravery.”

Her lips parted as her eyes filled with tears.

His heart slammed against his ribcage at the sight of her tears. “I want to be the man who fulfills your every desire. Wicked or otherwise.”

She let out a watery laugh and he couldn’t stay away for a second longer. He crushed his mouth to hers and rejoiced when her fingers wove through his hair and held him to her with as much ferocity as he felt holding her in his arms.

Like he’d never let go.

“I want you as my wife,” he said against her lips.

Her breath caught, and then... “Yes.”

He pulled back to see her eyes, which were shiny were tears, but also so much joy it made his own heart feel like it might explode. “Yes?”

She nodded. “That was definitely an ‘Albert, yes.’”

He grinned and then started to chuckle at her adorable way of talking and thinking.

She was adorable, and naughty, and sweet, and brazen...

And she was his.

Franny leaned forward and dropped sweet, light kisses at the corners of his mouth until his hands ached with the force

he used to keep them at her waist.

“So, if we are to be married,” she whispered. “That means we’re practically husband and wife. Which means...”

She pulled back to smile at him, and he cut her off with a growl as he lifted her and then settled her on her back.

She giggled. The little minx giggled.

He smiled down at her. “You deserve so much better than to be taken like this.” He hitched her skirts up further. “For tonight, let me pleasure you—”

“No.” He recognized that stubborn tone and he adored it. Struggling up to her elbows, she added, “I do deserve better, and we’ll have a lifetime in which you can treat me with kid gloves and fuck your naughty wife in all sorts of proper ways...”

His jaw dropped at her language, and as he stalked over her, resting his weight on his elbows, he knew he’d never in his life wanted anyone more. “You want me to take you here and now, is that what you’re asking?”

She sighed, her back arching as he tugged down her bodice so her perfect tits could spill out. He closed his mouth over one perfect tip, the nub hard and sweet against his tongue.

“Oh yes, Albert. Yes, yes, yes,” she hissed.

“More?”

“More, yes.”

“You know I don’t feel right about this,” he said, hoping she’d hear the teasing in his tone.

She did, and she went along with it perfectly, pouting up at him like a petulant brat. “I want you to fuck me, my lord. And

I want it now.”

He slid his tongue between her lips and claimed a hungry kiss. “Then you’ll have to beg for it, pet.”

Her breathing quickened.

God help him, his wife to be actually liked to be talked to like this. As for him, his cock was straining painfully against his breeches when she reached a hand down to cup him.

Her eyes went wide. “Please fuck me, my husband. Please give me what I need.”

With a groan, he kissed her hard. “You’re going to take it like a good girl, aren’t you? My dirty, naughty, sweet little wife.”

She gasped, her head arching back as he cupped her hot, wet mound in his palm.

“Christ, you’re so wet for me.”

“Always for you,” she whispered. “Always.”

She tugged at his breeches, helping him to discard them as she tore her garments for better access to that tight little cunny.

He shifted back so he could lean down and plant a kiss on her hot sex.

She cried out, her hips lifting.

He clamped a hand over her mouth, moving up again to replace his hand with his mouth. When she moaned again, he felt it all the way to his core.

He pulled back to gaze down at her for a moment, his beautiful bride-to-be, her legs spread wide for him, and her eyes dazed with wonder and lust.

“I’m afraid it will hurt the first time, love,” he said.



She nodded. "I know." She held onto his shoulders. "But like I said, we'll have the rest of our lives to do this perfectly. For now, I need you."

She pulled him down so she could beg quietly in his ear. "Please, take me. Make me yours."

He shuddered as longing and love filled him at once. And as he pressed the tip of his cock into her tight channel, he felt the enormity of what they were doing and the rightness of it.

He was awed by that.

He held her in his arms, kissing her gently as he eased himself inside of her.

"More," she whispered, when he came to a stop at her barrier. "Give it to me," she whispered, her breath hot against his ear. "Take me hard, Husband."

She trailed off with a cry as he thrust hard and then stilled. For what felt like eternity he held himself still over top of her, giving her time to adjust, her inner muscles loosening slowly but surely.

Eventually she started to rock her hips tentatively, and then with more bravery. "It feels..." She gasped, and then let out a moan that spoke for her.

He teased her nipples as he let her take the lead, rocking her hips and then rolling them as she found what felt good.

He dipped his head to suck on her tits, her already too-tight inner muscles clamping down on his cock until *not* pounding into her became unbearable torture.

But the sweetest kind.

"Does it still hurt, love?" he asked.

Her next words seemed to echo his thoughts. “It does, but it’s...I don’t know how to put it.” Her expression turned coy when she smiled up at him. “I guess you already know from our night at Loula’s that I like...”

She trailed off and to his amazement his naughty, sweet little wife blushed. He kissed her softly. “You like a little pain with your pleasure, don’t you my sweet wife?”

She nodded. “Yes.” Her gaze met his. “Give me more, husband. Make me feel all of it. Everything.”

He didn’t need any more encouragement, and he slid a hand between them to rub circles over her hard nub before he shifted slowly inside her.

She gasped. But when he stilled, she shook her head.

“Give me everything,” she ordered.

He smiled at the command in her tone. “Yes, Wife.”

And the next time he thrust into her, it was with all he had, and his wife took it with a gasp of pleasure.

Pleasure and pain, no doubt. Just how she liked it.

He drove into her again, thoroughly and deeply, holding her gaze all the while. The connection was unreal, unlike anything he’d ever known.

It was pleasure and it was lust, it was affection and joy and a sweet sense of coming home.

He felt her muscles tighten around him as she lifted her hips to meet his and when he gave her clitoris a little pinch, she cried out, his mouth muffling the sound as her muscles milked him. Seconds later, he followed her over the edge, groaning into her mouth as joy shattered around him, unlike any orgasm he’d ever known.

Because this was pleasure and desire, yes—but it was also the start of a new life.

A life that included a wife and a family ... and a new beginning.

They lay there for far too long considering anyone could come along.

And when he finally shifted to clean them up and get them to rights, he found her grinning up at him, her eyes dancing with laughter.

“What is it?” He kissed the tip of her nose just to make her smile grow broader.

“It just occurred to me. If you’re mad, then maybe so am I.”

He smiled against the crook of her neck as he kissed her lightly. “Then let’s be mad together. Forever.”

She sighed in his ear. “For the rest of our lives.”

*THANK YOU FOR READING! If this is your first foray into Bella Moxie’s Rogues Gone Dirty series, you can start the series for FREE with the Earl of Fallenmore’s story when you sign up for Bella’s newsletter at: [http://eepurl.com/gW\\_QWL](http://eepurl.com/gW_QWL)*

EARL OF STONE

AMANDA MARIEL

# CHAPTER ONE

*LONDON, England*

*Lady Hadley's Ball*

SHE REALLY SHOULD NOT HAVE FOLLOWED them. She should turn around this instant and return to the ball. Despite knowing what she should do, Lady Louisa Breckenridge could not end her pursuit. Not when it was her betrothed that led another woman from the ballroom. She had to know what he was doing—and why.

Louisa watched the pair turn into another corridor and fought the urge to increase her pace. When she reached the corner, she pressed against the wall and peeked around the corner. The pair were nowhere in sight. Confident they had disappeared through one of the doors lining the hallway, she stepped around the corner then crept down the hall careful not to make a sound.

By the time she reached the fifth door, she was ready to give up. After all, she really should not be spying on her betrothed. If she wished for a loving union, she had to trust him. And she did trust him—at least she had trusted him before she caught sight of him strolling off with the

captivating woman in the scandalous gown with her painted lips and bouncing curls.

Louisa slumped against the wall and sighed. This was madness. Shame squeezed her heart as she closed her eyes, inhaling a calming breath. She did not want to be a jealous fool. Nor did she wish to damage her relationship with Lord Stone. Determined to forget about her lapse in good judgment and return to the ballroom, Louisa straighten then turned back down the corridor.

Before she reached the next set of doors, she heard voices coming from behind her.

“You cannot be serious, Stephen. An innocent miss will never hold your attention.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Lord Stone’s smooth drawl floated into the hallway.

“Of course I am,” the female voice purred. “Do not cast me aside, love.”

Louisa’s feet carried her closer to the conversation despite her mind telling her to flee the scene. The heavy oak door was left slightly ajar, preventing her from escaping the sight of them. She drew in a sharp breath before pressing her gloved hand over her mouth. He had the woman in his arms. Her body pressed against his arms were around her.

“She will not satisfy you as I do,” the woman said.

Lord Stone stared down at her. “I doubt anyone could.”

“Then why end our affair?”

Louisa’s stomach turned. How could he do this to her? She knew it was common for aristocratic men to keep mistresses, but she’d thought he was different.

He released the woman and stepped back. “I do have some honor, kitten. I will be faithful to my wife.”

Louisa’s skin burned at the endearment. He did not sound like a man who wasn’t interested in what the woman was offering. In fact, that he’d sequestered himself away with her proved his interest.

“You once said you would never marry.” The woman stroked her finger over his cravat, down his chest.

He grabbed her wrist, but did not force her hand away. “It is my duty to marry and get an heir off my wife,” He said, his voice smooth. “The time has come for me to secure the future of my title.”

Louisa thought she would be sick. He spoke of her as if she were a brood mare purchased for breeding. Tears gathered in her eyes.

“You do not love her,” the woman said, pressing against him.

Lord Stone shook his head. “It matters not.”

“Of course it matters,” the woman raised her voice. “If you do not love her, then you have no reason to deprive us of our shared pleasure.”

“I would find no pleasure in being unfaithful to my vows.”

The woman wrapped her arms around him and brought her mouth to his. Louisa’s throat tightened and the first tear slipped from her eyes. When lord Stone failed to push his mistress away—failed to declare his love for Louisa—she could stand no more.

Louisa twirled away from the door. Her skirts whipped around her ankles and she stumbled into a table, sending a

ceramic vase crashing to the floor. Her heart thundered as she grabbed her skirts in one hand and ran down the hall. She had to escape.

She had to break their engagement, and she had to get away.

“Wait,” Lord Stone called down the corridor.

Louisa jolted at the sound of his voice, but did not slow. Instead, she ran faster. She turned down another corridor and raced neck or nothing for an exterior door, then launched herself into the cool night. Nothing mattered to her except for escape.

“Lady Louisa, let me explain,” Lord Stone called across the lawn, his footfalls growing nearer.

She had no wish to hear his explanation. She had witnessed everything first hand. There was nothing he could say that would change what she’d seen. What she’d heard.

He did not love her.

Louisa burst on to the street. “Go away,” she yelled, without looking back.

“And leave you alone in the streets? I can not.”

“Do not pretend to care for me now,” Louisa yelled, then turned a corner, pushing herself to keep running.

“I do care.” He grabbed her elbow.

Louisa came to a stop and pivoted toward him. Breathless and angry, she glared at him. “About as much as one can care for their breeding stock, I’d wager.”

He winced. “If I did not care, I would not have followed you.”



“If you cared, you would not have sequestered yourself away with your mistress. You would have told her you cared for me, and you certainly would not have kissed her.” Louisa shot the words at him like daggers.

“I deserve your anger. You have every right to be upset, but allow me a chance to explain.” He reached for her other arm and stared into her eyes.

She jerked away, preventing him from capturing her other arm. “I owe you nothing.”

“You are to be my wife. The least you can do is let me explain,” he said, his voice imploring.

The statement only angered her more. “I am releasing you from our engagement. You are no longer bound to me.” The words shocked her as they left her mouth, but what choice did she have? She could not tie herself to a man who did not love her.

His gaze narrowed. “You are jilting me?”

“Correction,” she said, notching her chin up, “I have jilted you. Now release me.”

He blew out a frustrated breath. “You will be ruined.”

“I will survive.” Louisa looked away, turning her gaze to the streetlight at the corner.

He reached up and placed his fingers on her cheek to guide her attention back to him. “What of your sisters? Your actions will taint them, too.”

“My sisters would not wish for me to marry a man who only wants to get an heir off me,” she threw his words back at him. “They will understand why I had to beg off, and they will

support my decision. They would never want me to serve as a man's broodmare."

"Perhaps," Lord Stone drew the word out as he studied Louisa. "But is it truly your wish to subject your family to scandal?"

"You have left me little choice, my lord."

"You could choose to let me explain."

"Do you love me?" Louisa stiffened as she waited for his denial.

He held her gaze. "Aristocratic marriages are rarely based on love. I care for you, Lady Louisa. I am committed to being a good and faithful husband."

She bit her lower lip, his words slicing through her. "But you do not love me."

Lord Stone cupped her cheek, stroking his thumb over her heated flesh. "I will be faithful. I'll provide for you and protect you. Ours will be a happy union."

Louisa shook her head. "I can not be happy without love." She stepped back, and he released her elbow. "I absolve you of your commitment to me and you are free to find another wife, or return to your mistress." Louisa walked past him, her head held high even as her heart was shattered.

"We'll take care of the little missy."

Louisa screamed as a firm hand wrapped around her waist. She struggled against her captor in desperation. "Unhand me," she yelled as she attempted to kick at the filthy man. She looked toward Lord Stone.

He was advancing on them, fury in his green eyes.

A heartbeat later, he fell to the ground.

## CHAPTER TWO

STEPHEN MULLENS, Earl of Stone, lay sprawled on the ground as three men reached for him. He attempted to move, but his head was throbbing from the blow they'd served him. Instead, he focused on remaining conscious.

What the devil had they hit him with? A cudgel?

"Looky here, boys. We got us a toff and a lady." The rotund man's lips stretched in a sinister grin, revealing that he was missing most of his teeth.

"Let her go," Stephen forced the words out, his head spinning as blackness threatened to swallow him. "Name your price," he said, his eyes closing against the pain.

"Ain't no price," toothless said, as he tied a length of rope around Stephen's legs.

Stephen attempted to fight, to move his legs and make the task more difficult, but his head swam, dizziness forcing him to be still.

"My brother is the Duke of Thorne. He'll see you hanged," Lady Louisa seethed.

Stephen cringed at her announcement. Now these footpad's would see her as even more valuable. "She's lying," he contradicted, his words barely audible.

Toothless's partner bent over him, unleashing a huff of foul breath. "We'll be the judge of that." Stinky kicked him in the ribs, sending a fierce jolt of pain through his chest while toothless captured and bound his wrists.

"The duke will see all of you hanged. Twice!" Lady Louisa seethed. "You will not get away with this!"

Stephen managed to turn his head enough to see her struggling against the disgusting man holding her.

"Well, ain't ye high and mighty, missy. It'll be fun to knock ye down a peg or three. I'll teach you some manors," The man holding her said as he pressed his grimy face into her hair. "Ye smell sweet enough to eat."

"She's not for ye," another of the men said, his tone authoritative.

Stephen concluded he must be the group's leader. "What do you want from us?" He asked, his tone strained.

The man shuffled over to him, his tall and lanky form swaggering. "I could tell you but that would ruin the fun." He looked at his partners and ordered, "Load them up, boys."

Two of the men hoisted Stephen from the pavement, but not before stinky added another blow to his already battered body. Stephen groaned, his stomach muscles contracting from the punch.

"We ought to deposit his lordship in the Thames. He's of little use compared to a duke's sister," toothless said.

"What have I told you about thinking?" Tall and lanky slapped toothless in the back of the head. "Load them both," he ordered.

Stephen was tossed into the back of a hay-filled wagon.

“Dare to move and I’ll end you,” Stinky said, pressing a pistol to Stephen’s head.

Louisa was dragged into the wagon, and her gaze met his. He could see the terror in her green eyes despite the way she held her chin at an obstinate angle. They had her wrists bound with coarse rope and a cloth stuffed in her mouth.

When had they done that?

Fury surged through Stephen. The hell with the duke! Stephen would personally see that they swung from nooses. He struggled against his confines, determined to get free.

Stinky cocked the pistol, pressing it harder to Stephen’s temple.

Stephen stilled. Now was not the time to fight. He had to cooperate until he could formulate a plan. Or until a good opportunity presented its self. He did not care overmuch about his own life, but he had to save Lady Louisa.

The wagon creaked and jerked as it drove them further from London. Each time they hit a rut in the road, the wagon bounced and swayed, jostling Stephen. And every time he struggled to stay silent. He would not give these street thugs the satisfaction of hearing him groan like a wounded animal.

Lady Louisa remained quiet and as still as possible, too. She kept her chin tilted defiantly and peered into the night. Stephen could only hope that she was paying attention to their route. In his prone position, he could not see a thing save for her and the stars.

He could not say how far, or how long, they traveled before the wagon came to a jerking halt and their captors pulled them from the conveyance. Lady Louisa squirmed and kicked as the grimy one pulled her from the back.

Stephen met her wild gaze and willed her to calm down—silently begging her not to make more trouble. It was no use as she continued to fight, throwing her head back against grimy's face. The man let out a howl then sneered, "You little bitch! You'll pay for that."

She kept struggling as tall and lanky captured her legs, but not before she got a good kick in. Stephen was proud of her, though he'd not say so. For his part, he lay still as stinky and toothless carried him like a sack of potatoes toward a dilapidated structure.

Once inside the foul smelling place, the men pushed Lady Louisa into a dark room, then tossed Stephen in after before slamming the door. His anger multiple at the sound of her body thumping against the floor. He turned his head, searching for her in the darkness.

"Lady Louisa. Are you hurt?" He asked, only remembering that she was gagged when she replied with a series of odd sounds.

The moment he heard the door lock click into place, he rolled his body toward her sounds. They would have to work together if they were going to survive.

## CHAPTER THREE

LOUISA WORKED her arms in an attempt to free her wrists from the ropes binding them. She wriggled and stretched, attempting to slide her arms under her bottom. If she could get them in front of her, where she could see them, she may be able to break free of the restraints. Her gloves proved useless as the ropes grated against them, her flesh beneath stung with every move. Panic sent her heart into a rapped pounding as she worked with desperation. What would become of them? Did the blackguard's intend to kill them?

“Oomph,” she groaned into her gag as Lord Stone's body rolled into hers.

“My apologies,” he said. “Bring your mouth to mine.”

Louisa shook her head and attempted to speak, but her voice was muffled beyond recognition. Was the earl mad? Whatever did he want her mouth for?

“Louisa, bring your mouth near to mine so I can remove your gag.”

She squinted against the darkness, her eyes adjusting in small measures. She could make out the shadowed edges of his body laying in front of her. He lifted his shoulders to bring his face closer to hers. “Louisa, bring your mouth to mine. Let me help you.”



She pressed her eyes closed. Don't think, she told herself. Just move toward him. Let him help.

Swallowing hard, she leaned closer as she talked herself through the motion. She felt him bite onto the cloth, felt it tug from her mouth. And she felt his warm lips brush against her skin as he pulled the cloth away.

She drug in a sharp breath, then slid her tongue across her dry lips, wishing to wet them, but it was no use. The cloth had left her mouth devoid of moisture. She stared at Lord Stone, his features becoming more visible as her eyes adjusted to the dark room. "You have never called me that before," she said.

"Called you what?" he asked.

"Louisa."

He struggled into a sitting position. "A regrettable oversight on my part."

She turned her head, no longer wishing to look at him. Refusing to acknowledge what he'd said. "Perhaps if we bring our hands near to one another, we can untie these ropes," Louisa said.

"A brilliant idea." Lord Stone agreed. "Stay as you are and I will bring my back closed to yours."

Louisa focused on the sound of his body scooting across the damp dirt floor until she felt his hand brush against hers. Her fingers tingled, though she could no more attribute the sensation to his touch than she could her loss of circulation.

"I will attempt to free you first," Lord Stone said as he worked his finger's up her hand to her wrists.

Louisa fought the urge to pull away even as she prayed he would be able to free her wrists. The ropes tightened as he

fumbled with them and even more as he worked his fingers below the rope. She winced as pain shot up her arm. “Stop.”

“I almost have it.”

She wriggled in discomfort. “The ropes are too tight. They are cutting into me.”

“I’m sorry. I just need a few more minutes. If I could just get under the knot.”

“Ouch,” Louisa exclaimed, pulling away as the ropes ground against her wrists.

Lord Stone released an audible huff of breath. “I nearly had you free.”

“You nearly ripped my hands from my body.”

He took hold of her fingers with his. “I have no wish to cause you pain, but neither can we stay as we are.”

Louisa nodded, though she knew he could not see the gesture. “My fingers are smaller. Allow me to try to get you untied.”

“Very well,” he said.

Louisa found the place where the ropes bound him and twisted to get better access when she found the knot. She grabbed it and worked her fingers against it in hopes it would loosen. When it did not, she pressed her fingertip against the place where the rope crossed over to form the knot and tried to push it through.

“Are you making headway?”

“No,” Louisa sighed. “But if you can get one of the pins from my hair, I think we can use it to gain leverage and lose

the knots.” She stopped fumbling with his ropes and wriggled around until she was facing his back.

“I will have to use my mouth,” he said, scooting until he could bring his face to her hair. “Bend down.”

She did as he bid. And this time she did so with no hesitation. Her head tingled, warmth spreading across her as he nuzzled his face against her hair. Before she could consider the sensations, he pulled back, taking strands of her hair with him. “Ouch!” She exclaimed, her scalp smarting from the attack.

“I have one.”

She heard the muted thud of her hair pin hitting the dirt floor, and her heart sank. “You dropped it.”

“How else am I to transfer it from my mouth to my hand? I can not simply reach for it.”

“No, of course not,” she said, inwardly chastising herself. She should not be giving him a hard time. It would serve no purpose in their current predicament.

He brought his back close to hers and said, “I need you to be tough for a few minutes. My strength is greater, and that will give me more leverage.” He took her fingers in his and gave a gentle squeeze. “Can you do that, Louisa?”

She closed her eyes, willing herself to endure the discomfort she knew would follow. “Yes,” she said, her voice scarcely above a whisper.

“Good girl,” Lord Stone soothed as he worked at her wrists.

She felt the ropes tighten and scratch against her wrists, but she did not pull away. She pressed her lips together,

refusing to complain.

“The pin is under the knot. Are you ready for me to pull?”

“Do it,” she said.

She felt a tug, then heard a noise from the other side of the door. Footsteps and voices, though she could not make out what they were saying. “Hurry.”

The door knob rattled, and Lord Stone cursed. “Later.”

“What?” Louisa asked, dumbstruck. “There coming.”

“And we would not wish to be caught mid escape.”

She felt the pressure on her wrists ease as the door swung open.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A LANTERN ILLUMINATED their small cell as Stinky and toothless ambled through the door. Tall and Lanky followed with a scrap of foolscap and a quill, while grimy stopped just outside of the room.

“Glad you could join us,” Stephen said. He positioned himself with the hairpin beneath his thigh, hoping to keep it hidden from their captors. “We were just starting to question your hospitality.”

Louisa shot him a scathing glance, and he grinned back at her.

Tall and Lanky slid his gaze from Louisa to Stephen. “I see you removed her gag. Perhaps we should use it on you?”

Stephen ignored him, other than turning his cocky grin to the man. The footpad wasn’t really asking a question. Not one that justified an answer at any rate.

Toothless moved toward Louisa. Stephen’s pulse increased, the need to protect her racing through him. He turned to place his body in front of hers. The hair pin dug into his thigh, but he dared not flinch. “Do not touch her,” he growled.

“Relax, he only intends to release her hands,” Tall and Lanky said, closing the door behind him. “So long as you both cooperate, no harm will come to her.”

“Why do you want her unbound?” Stephen asked.

“I require her assistance. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll sit still and shut your mouth. The criminal flashed a knife.”

“Assistance with what?” Louisa asked, her voice commendably strong, shoulders straight, and chin held at a defiant angle.

“Ransom note, of course,” Stinky said, holding up the foolscap and quill. “Wager the two of you are worth a hefty fortune.” He chuckled.

Stephen looked toward Louisa as she brought her hands out from behind her back and stretched her fingers, wiggling them. Her gaze met his, and she lifted a brow as if in question.

Stephen gave a slight nod of encouragement.

She turned her attention toward tall and lanky. “Very well. Give me the quill.”

Stinky sat the piece of foolscap on a tall but narrow wooden table along one wall and laid the quill beside it. “Bring her here,” he said.

Toothless reached for her elbow, but she jerked away. “I can see my own way over.” She stood and smoothed her skirts.

Pride surged through Stephen. Louisa was not what he had assumed her to be. She was brave and witty—not at all a tepid society miss. He’d witnessed fear cross her eyes more than once since they had been abducted, but never did she allow herself to give into the emotion.

He watched her walk to the table and take the quill into her hand. “What would you prefer the letter say?” She asked, tall and lanky, arching one brow in question as she spoke.

He rubbed the sides of his straggly beard with his forefinger and thumb. “If you wish to see,” he paused and placed his hand on the table, leaning toward her. “What is your name, chit?”

“Shall I write it?”

“He can’t read,” Stinky said, a chuckle in his voice. “Why else do you think he needs you to write the letter?”

“Shut your trap!” Tall and lanky seethed as Toothless slapped Stinky on the back of the head.

Stephen watched a barley-there grin tug at Louisa’s lips. He feared what she may be thinking. If she were to write something beyond what these idiots ordered, they might discover the deception. There was no telling what fate would befall her, and him, if they got caught crossing the blackguard’s.

He coughed, hoping to catch her attention. When she did not look, he coughed again.

She turned her attention to him, her gaze narrowed in irritation.

No. He mouthed the command as he shook his head.

“Enough,” Tall and lanky said. “Give me your name, and his lordships as well.”

She rolled her eyes at Stephen before looking back at the foolscap laying before her. “Lady Louisa and Lord Stone.”

“Indeed...” Tall and lanky let the word trail off as he glanced at Stephen. He cleared his throat, flipping the knife

over in his hand. “Then write, if you wish to see Lady Louisa and Lord Stone alive, you will bring twelve thousand pounds —”

“Twelve thousand pounds!” Louisa exclaimed, lifting the quill from the foolscap.

“We figure the two of you have deep enough pockets to see the four of us comfortable,” Toothless said, then clucked his tongue.

“As I was saying,” Tall and lanky said, “bring twelve thousand pounds to Hyde Park within the hour.” He set the knife on the table and watched Louisa scroll the words onto the foolscap. Once she had finished, he added. “Leave the ransom in a pouch inside of the knot of the large oak tree near the end of rotten row.” When her hand stilled again, he leaned over and studied the letter before giving a nod and saying, “sign your name.”

Stephen watched as Louisa emblazoned her name across the ransom note. She dropped the quill and pivoted away from the table.

“Not so fast.” Tall and Lanky grabbed her arm.

Stephen struggled to stand, forgetting his legs were bound.

Louisa jerked her arm as she peered at the criminal. “What,” she seethed.

“I’ll be needing your jewels,” he said, plucking the diamond comb from her hair. “Give me the necklace and earbobs, too.” He let her go, but stared at her décolletage as he ordered, “Take his lordships valuables,” then nodded at stinky.

Stinky held out his chubby palm for Stephen to deposit his coin purse and signet ring in, then folded his filthy fingers around the items.



Anger consumed Stephen. He cared not about his things, but how dare they take Louisa's jewels? How dare tall and lanky touch her or gaze at her décolletage as if she were a doxy? Stephen wanted to dismember them. Tear each of them limb from limb and scatter their bodies across the countryside for wild animals to feast on. They would pay for this—with their lives.

Louisa clasped her free hand around her necklace and tugged it from her throat before removing her earlobes and thrusting them out to Tall and Lanky. "You will be hanged before you spend a single pound," she said as she strode back to Stephen, then sat beside him.

"Don't fret on our behalf, lady. You'd be better served by worrying about your own fine hide." Tall and lanky tossed the words over his shoulder as he stuffed the note and her jewelry into his pocket. He strode toward the door, then turned back. "One more thing. Where should we deliver the letter?"

"The Wicked Earl's Club, 276 Bradford Place," Stephen said. "You will know it by the W on the door."

Louisa shot him a surprised look, but said nothing.

He reached into his jacket and unhooked his Wicked Earl's Pin, then held it out to grimy who stood the closest to them. "Show them this, least they not believe you."

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE MOMENT the door clicked shut, Louisa turned to Lord Stone. “The Wicked earls Club?” She shot him a speculative look, doubtful that he could see in the absence of that lamp’s light. She’d heard of the club before, though she knew little about it other than that all the members were earls and rogues.

“They are my friends. A brotherhood of sorts, and if we cannot escape, they will rescue us,” he said.

She darted her gaze to the table, then scrambled to her feet. “Your behavior at the ball suddenly makes perfect sense.” She tiptoed to the table, hoping that no-one was listening on the other side of the door. She had seen their captors leave the knife. Now she hoped to find it without cutting herself in the process. Too bad they had not left the lantern, too.

“I will not deny what you witnessed, but you misunderstood the situation. I ended my liaison with her the moment I decided to propose to you. She was desperate to change my mind and lure me back into the arrangement.” He blew out a breath of frustration.

Louisa felt around for the knife that had been so carelessly forgotten. Her fingers landed on top of it, and she carefully closed them around the hilt. She did not require a band of scoundrels to save her. She’d save herself. “It makes no

difference who she was or what you were doing. We have more important things to concern ourselves with.”

“It makes all the difference, Louisa. I intend to marry you and I swear to you I will be faithful to our vows.”

She turned to him, the knife in hand and said. “That is a pity, for I have no intention of becoming your wife. I will, however, help you out of those ropes.” She gave a self-satisfied grin, hoping his eyes had adjusted to the dim light.

He smiled back, then said, “be careful,” as she crouched down behind him.

“I will not cut you,” she said as she placed the knife’s blade against the rope securing his wrists. Her voice held more confidence than she felt. Not because she couldn’t control the knife, but because the room was so dark she could barely make out the outline of his arms.

“I am more worried about you harming yourself. Knife’s have a way of slipping, take care. If someone must get injured, make it be me.”

She heard a mixture of worry and sincerity in his voice. To her shame, it warmed her heart. He was making it hard for her to remain angry with him. But nothing he did or said could erase the hurt she felt.

Louisa shook the thoughts from her head and focused on the task at hand. She placed the knife blade on the rope between his wrists and sawed into the rope, wishing she could cut away from his body rather than toward it. As she drew nearer to his wrist, she slowed her movement, being extra careful not to cut him.

The last shards of rope gave way to the knives blade and Lord Stone pulled his arms apart. “You did it, clever girl.”

She beamed at his praise, both thrilled with the compliment and pleased that he could not see her expression. Erasing the smile from her face, she stood, then stepped to his side before offering him the blade. “Here, you do not require my help to free your legs.”

He met her gaze as he took the knife from her. “Thank you, Louisa.”

The warmth and pride reflected in his eyes made her knees weak. She nodded, then tiptoed to the door and pressed her ear to the worn wood. She hoped to hear what their captors were doing. More importantly, she needed to break her connection with Lord Stone.

She heard scuffling and footfalls, followed by the sound of something scraping against the floor. A chair, perhaps? “Take turns. Someone is to be awake at all times,” one of the men said from the other room. She strained to hear more, her ear pressed against the worn door. “We will return at dawn.” The same man said before Louisa heard the slam of a door.

How many remained? Two. It had to be two. Which two? She pulled away from the door. It made no difference. She and Lord Stone had the knife. The odds were in their favor.

She moved away from the door and paced over to Lord Stone, who had stood up and was now flexing his fingers.

Standing closer than she wished to, Louisa whispered, “Two have left. I heard them say that they would return at dawn. It was ordered that the two who remain take turns sleeping.”

Lord Stone glanced around the dark room. “The only way out is through that door.”

“Then we get them to open it.”

Lord Stone shook his head. “We wait for them to open it.”

“Are you mad?” Louisa placed her hands on her hips. “That could take hours. They may not open the door before morning when the other two return.”

“Perhaps.”

She scowled, hoping he could see her expression. “I could call out to them. Ask for water, maybe? Or scream like you are hurting me.” She took a step toward the door.

Lord Stone took hold of her elbow, stopping her. “Doing so would only alert them to use caution. We have to catch them off guard. Besides, the Wicked earls are likely to arrive before morning.”

“And if they do not?”

“Then we will be ready when the door opens. I can render the lot of them unconscious, and we will escape.”

She gave an amused little laugh. “Like you did before?” She asked, her voice full of disbelief and mistrust.

Lord Stone pulled her against him and stared into her gaze. The darkroom could not hide the spark in his green eyes. “They caught me unaware, and we shall do the same to them.”

Louisa sighed. “Very well. What do you suggest we do in the meantime?” She asked, not because she agree with him, but because she was weary of arguing. It would not kill her to allow him to take control of their situation—just for a little while.

At least she did not think it would.

He wrapped his arm around her and rubbed his hand up and down the length of her arm. “You are cold and no doubt tiered. Come, let me hold you while you get some rest.”

A shiver ran through her at his touch. Heat fanned out from the places where their bodies touched. Louisa stepped away. She was not afraid of him, but she was most certainly afraid of the sensations he caused within her. “Trying to rest would be futile. I will remain alert while we wait.”

“As you wish.” Lord Stone walked over to the table and hoisted himself up to sit upon it.

Louisa darted her glance around the room. She had no choice other than to join him or sit on the cold, dirty floor. Frustration welled up in her, demanding release. She swallowed past the tightness in her throat and pushed back the tears that threatened. She would not fall apart now.

She moved to assume her position on the table. The wood was hard beneath her bottom and the stone wall scratched against her back, but both were preferable to the cold and damp, dirt floor. A part of her desperately wanted to burrow against Lord Stone and share his heat. She would not give into the foolish notion. Instead, she pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs.

One hour. She would wait one hour before demanding the door be opened.

Long moments of silence passed, perhaps ten minutes. All the while, Louisa fretted over what would happen to them. Would the men get their ransom? Would they set them free, or would they kill them? Would she see her family again?

Oh God. Her family must know that she is missing by now. They would be beside themselves with worry. Were they out searching for her at this very moment? Was she ruined? Would she live to discover how much any of it even mattered? What if they tried to escape and failed? Would it anger their captors enough that they would kill them?

“Are you afraid?” She asked, desperate to get out of her own head.

“No. I am not afraid,” he said, his tone smooth and confident. Another long moment passed before he said, “Louisa?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“I will protect you.”

She could not explain why, but his declaration brought her comfort. For some inexplicable reason, she did trust him. Regret clawed at her heart, leaving it heavy. She had been quite unfair to him throughout this entire ordeal. “Lord Stone?”

He scooted closer but did not reply.

“Forgive me for being persnickety. I know this is not your fault.” She nibbled at her lower lip, waiting for him to speak. To say something—anything at all.

He did not. Instead, he scooted across the distance that separated them and wrapped his arm around her.

Rather than fight him, Louisa said, “Tell me a tale. Something to help pass the time.”

“What sort of tale do you fancy?” He asked, twirling his finger in a long curl that came loose from her pins and now hung over her shoulder.

Louisa dropped her chin onto her knee’s. “I do not know. Something amusing, perhaps. Or scandalous?” Her cheeks burned at the suggestion and she could not help but wonder what the devil had possessed her in order for her to ask such a thing. Worse, for her to allow him to hold her like this when she knew they would not marry—could not marry.

He chuckled and stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankles. “Ask me again and I will, but this time, use my given name, Stephen.”

“Very well, but only this once.” She closed her eyes, then said, “Tell me a story, Stephen.”



## CHAPTER SIX

STEPHEN DELIGHTED at the sound of his name on her lips. How had he failed to notice how delightful she was before now? He'd been courting her for months, but never looked beyond the fact that she would make a good and proper wife. He'd not noticed the spark in her. Of course he saw her beauty, but he had failed to pay attention to the little things that were now driving him to distraction, like the way she tilted her chin in defiance, and the gentle slope of her nose. He wanted to kiss that nose, and he wanted to press her curves fully against his body.

“Stephen,” Louisa said.

He cleared his throat. “How about mischievous with a hint of scandal? Will that do?”

“Yes,” she said, tilting her head to rest it against his side.

“When I was attending Eton, I snuck out with a group of classmates. We were determined to indulge in mischief, but we did not want to get up to the normal pranks. I was fifteen at the time and caught at the awkward crossroads of adolescence and adulthood. We spent days deciding what we would do and formulating a plan. None of the usual things would do, and after rejecting dozens of ideas, we agreed to sneak off campus in order to infiltrate a brothel.”

Louisa gasped. “You did not.”

“I most certainly did.”

“Did you get caught?”

“If I answer that now, it will ruin the story,” he said, pulling her closer.

She readjusted her legs so that her knees pointed away from him and her back leaned against his side. “Oh, very well. Continue.”

Stephen chuckled. “We waited until everyone was abed, then climbed out a window. Once our feet hit the grass, we snuck across the grounds to the road. As we strode with determination toward the establishment rumored to be nearby, we kept to the shadows. We speculated and joked along the way. At one point, we almost turned back, convinced we’d been lied to by the older boys at school. We had reached town and been walking for what seemed miles, passing any number of establishments, but had not seen the one we’d come for. Then we heard music and laughter coming from around the corner. We followed the sounds until it came into view. A stone building with its windows a glow in candle light. I tipped my head back, peering at the upper windows, and there she was.”

“Who?” Louisa looked up at him, her eyes shining with curiosity.

“I will never know her name,” Stephen continued, “but there was a woman standing in front of a window, her naked body cast in the glow of candlelight. I stood there with my mouth agape and...” He let his words trail off as he remembered he was telling this story to a lady. Stephen cleared his throat. “Never mind that. She leaned out the window and

wiggled as she called down to the street below. I could not hear what she said, for I was too stunned at what I was seeing. I had never seen a naked woman in the flesh before. I was so enraptured that I failed to notice my friends turning tail and racing down the street until a firm hand clapped onto my shoulder.”

He smiled at the memory. To this day, he could not say what the prostitute’s face looked like. Could not recall the color of her hair. But he would never forget the sway of her breasts tipped with fine rose-colored nipples. Of course, he could not relay any of that to Louisa.

“What happened next?” Louisa prompted him to continue.

“I nearly jumped out of my skin, then struggled to get free. Alas, it was not to be. I was well and truly caught. I looked up into the outraged face of my headmaster. In an attempt to save myself, I threaten to tell everyone where he had been. It only angered him further. He dragged me back to Eton, demanding to know who the other boys in my company were. Naturally, I refused to tell him anything. The next morning I was brought down to the wooden birching block in the library and received ten thrashings to my bare backside.”

“How awful,” Louisa said. “I bet you never snuck off again.”

“Only every Saturday night,” Stephen said, a chuckle in his voice over the memory of it all. “Most of the time I got away unnoticed. “When I did get caught, it only made me more of a legend among the other boys.”

Louisa laughed and shook her head. “You have always been a rogue, then?”

“I prefer to think of myself as adventurous.” He gave her a little squeeze, then said, “Your turn. Tell me of a time you caused mischief.” He never would have considered asking her such a question before now. He had not thought her capable of mischief, but now he knew she was more than capable. And he longed to know her better—to uncover her secrets.

“Me?” she asked, her tone thick with feigned innocence.

He tightened his arms around her, issuing a challenge. “Yes, you.”

“Would you believe that I have never caused one bit of trouble?” She asked.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “You are a minx, and do not try to deny it.”

She laughed, the delicate sound filling their dark cell. “I am afraid I do not have any tales as salacious as yours, but you are right that I have been involved in my fair share of trouble. There was the time I hid in my brother’s carriage because I wished to spy on them, and more recently I dressed as a maid and attended the village May-Day festival, though I did not get in trouble for that. My whole family disguised themselves to attend.” She sighed. “The most trouble I have ever found is now. I should not have acted so hasty and petulant.”

She slid from the table and paced a few steps away. With her back turned to Lord Stone, she said, “I was hurt and acted out because of it...” Her voice softened to a near whisper, “I am sorry.”

His heart squeezed at the regret in her tone. He moved to join her, cupping her cheek in his hand. “I never intended to hurt you. She was my mistress, but I broke off with her before

I proposed to you.” Stephen stared into Louisa’s gaze. “I have been faithful. I will remain faithful.”

Louisa turned her face, breaking their connection. “Might we try to escape now? It has been long enough for our captors to lower their guard.”

He did not know how he would protect her if they succeeded. Hell, he did not even know where they were or what time it was. Still, he owed her and he would find a way. “Very well, but once we are free, we will discuss our future.”

“We have no future,” she said, her voice cracking. Then, before he could prepare, she called out, “Water. We need water. Do you hear me?” she yelled.

Stephen hurried to position himself beside the door, knife in hand.

Louisa raised her voice, “We will not be worth a farthing dead.”

The doorknob rattled.

“We need water.”

The door swung open, and toothless stepped into the dark room. Stephen greeted him with a hard right hook, knocking him unconscious.

Louisa ran toward the door, stilling at the sounds coming from the other room. The creak of wood and shuffle of feet. “What the devil is going on?” A gruff voice said.

Stephen turned to her and gave a slight nod, hoping she would take his meaning.

“Water,” she called out, positioning herself behind Stephen.

It was odd how she understood him in the absence of words, Stephen thought as he prepared for the man's entrance.

Grimy came into the room, a string of reprimands emitting from his mouth. "Ain't supposed to open that door for nothin. Boss is gonna have yer hide for this. They don't need no—"

Stephen smashed his fist into the man's jaw, cutting off his words and sending him to the floor in a crumpled heap. He looked at Louisa and said, "Stay close." With her following, he exited the dank room.

They made their way across the main room of the hut and out the front door.

All the air left Stephen's lungs as his body smashed to the cool earth below. He groaned and rolled over before wiping the dirt from his face.

"Where do you think you're going?" Stinky asked, staring down at Stephen, a wide jagged toothed grin stretching across his face.

Stephen searched for Louisa and fought the urge to unfurl his own smile when he saw her standing behind stinky a large rock held above her head.

"Home," Stephen said, his tone full of confidence.

Stinky chuckled, then said, "Not on my watch."

Stephen met Louisa's gaze and nodded.

She brought the rock down on stinky's head, rendering him unconscious. The rock fell from her fingers then she brought her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide. "Did I kill him?"

Stephen laid his palm on the man's chest. His heart still beat. "He will survive."

She lowered her hand from her mouth and inhaled an audible breath.

“We must go, now.” Stephen took her hand and led her away from the cottage. She did not resist as he guided her toward a thicket of trees running parallel to the drive. The light of a full moon cast a glow across the landscape. He continued through the trees, her hand clutching his until they found the road. “Do you remember which direction we came from?”

“I wish I would have killed him,” she blurted out in response, her lower lip quivering.

“Sweetheart,” Stephen pulled her into his embrace. He did not know what else to say. He stroked his hand over her disheveled hair and held her while she trembled against him. Now was not the time to question her further. She’d been strong—so strong—through this entire ordeal. She had earned a few moments to fall apart.

Still, they could not remain here much longer. He looked up and down the road as he held her. There was nothing to see beyond the rutted road cast in moonlight and shadows.

“Sweetheart, we have to keep moving,” he encouraged.

She stepped from his embrace and notched her chin up, putting on a brave face. “There was a coaching inn not more than a mile down the road.” She cast her gaze toward the road, looking both ways before nodding to the right. “That way.”

He watched with appreciation as she strode off, her enticing hips swaying with each step. A single word echoed through him—mine. Louisa was his and he would not let her go.

“Do, hurry,” she called back.

Shaking himself from the spell she'd cast, he rushed to catch up.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

EMOTIONS PLAYED havoc on Louisa as she marched down the dirt road, nothing save for the moon's glow to guide her way. Anger, disillusionment, anxiety, and exhaustion begged her to curl into a ball and sob. Determination and pride simply would not allow her to give in. Then there was the longing—more of a craving, truly—to be back in Lord Stone's embrace. To feel his warmth radiating into her and his powerful arms around her. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him—to really kiss him.

They had been courting long enough that they had shared some kisses. Chaste kisses. Nothing more than the quick brush of his lips against hers, or the light press of his lips to her cheek. Their intimacies thus far had not exceeded polite interactions as expected from an engaged couple of their status.

Louisa wanted passion. She wanted to burn with his touch, to be possessed by him, she wanted to be loved by him.

How she wished she'd not overheard the exchange between him and his mistress. She could have gone on believing that he loved her, and that passion would come with their wedding vows.

She hated him. He had made her fall in love with him. Had allowed her to believe that he loved her back.

That was a lie—all of it. She did not hate him and neither had he forced her to fall in love with him. Louisa sighed. She was hopelessly in love with the rogue. Worse, she was tempted to believe him. Tempted to marry him despite what she knew to be true.

She'd seen a different side of him throughout their ordeal. Come to understand him better than before.

Still, she knew the pain and misery to be had in loveless marriage. She had seen it play out across the *ton* many times. Heartbroken wives with beastly husbands who flaunted their mistresses without a care, or packed their unwanted wives off to the country to live a lonely existence devoid of marital affection.

A howl in the distance pulled her from her thoughts, sending an ominous chill straight to her core. She turned toward Lord Stone as she fought the rising panic.

“It is likely a pet. One would be hard pressed to find a wolf so close to London,” he said.

“I do not think we are overly close to London.” She pressed her lips together and swallowed hard. “We were in that wagon for hours.” A dark cloud slid across the full moon as she spoke. She looked up to investigate as darkness closed in around her. “It looks like rain,” she said a heartbeat before the first drops of cold liquid assaulted her face.

“Perfect,” Lord Stone jested as he slipped out of his jacket. He wrapped the heavy masculine smelling coat around her shoulders. “Better?” He asked.

Louisa inhaled his scent as warmth seeped into her weary bones. She nodded her approval, then said, "Thank you." As she resumed her steps, Louisa prayed they were traveling in the correct direction and would soon reach the inn.

Her prayer would go unanswered.

They walked in silence, rain pelting them for what seemed miles. Louisa hugged Lord Stone's heavy jacket around her and kept her head tilted down in an effort to avoid the rain. It did little good as rivulets of cold water snaked down her back and dripped from her hairline onto her nose.

"I think I may have been wrong," she said, her attention trained on the muddied road. "Perhaps we should turn back?"

"We have come too far. It is best to continue on as we are." A flash of lightning punctuated Lord Stone's words. "I will wager there is a village around the next bend. At the least, we are bound to come upon a residence."

Louisa nodded, her wet hair sticking to her cheeks. "I pray you are right."

"If I am wrong, I will find a place along the road for us to seek shelter. A rocky outcrop or thick patch of trees. I will not allow you to parish out here. You have my word."

"I trust you," she said. Louisa glanced at him as she wondered when she had come to trust him? Mercy she was in trouble. Not only did she trust him, but she could not deny her love for him. How was she to remain firm in her resolve to call off their engagement?

She jumped as thunder rattled the ground. An exceedingly bright flash of lightning followed.

"Did you see it?" Lord Stone said, his voice jubilant.

“See what?” She asked.

He stopped walking. “The village is ahead. Less than a quarter mile by my estimation. That flash of lightning revealed buildings and look...” He pointed up the road and to the left, “There are lights.”

“You were right!” Relief and excitement exploded within Louisa, and she threw herself into his arms. “I could kiss you for this.”

He grinned down at her, his arms tightening around her. “You were the one who said we should walk in this direction. It was you that was right, but I will not deny you a kiss.” He feathered his lips across hers, then sucked at her lower lip.

She gasped at the pleasure and shock of his actions as she melted against him.

He took advantage, slipping his tongue between her parted lips to deepen the kiss.

She pressed closer, wrapping her arms around his neck. The intimacy chased the chill from her bones as heat spread through her. This was a kiss—a proper kiss. The kind of kiss she had dreamed about. She kissed him back, following his lead, determined to experience everything a kiss had to offer.

Her knees weakened as her pulse sped, an odd but entirely pleasant sensation gathered deep within her as she slid her tongue against his. She could go on like this forever—kiss him forever.

He pulled away, breaking their connection. “You are shivering. I need to get you to shelter.”

She was shivering, but not from the cool night air, nor from the chilling rain they’d been subjected to for what seemed hours. She was shivering with passion and longing.

Louisa swallowed, then blew out a slow breath, gathering her wits. “Indeed,” she said, as they set a course toward the village lights in the distance.

She bit her lip in thought. She desperately wished to be out of the cold and her wet clothing. Food would be most welcome, too. Her stomach growled as if in agreement, and she wrapped herself tighter in Lord Stone’s sodden coat.

The inn would provide shelter, food, and hopefully a bath. However, it would also leave her vulnerable to scandal. If anyone recognized her, she would be forced to marry Lord Stone.

Of course, refusing to marry him at this point would also result in her being a scandal, but not in such an irreparable way. If she could return home with none the wiser of where she’d been and with whom, she could recover from jilting him. If she were found to have spent the night with him, to have been at a coaching inn with him—the damage would be irreparable.

Louisa stared at the lights ahead as she struggled with her fate.

It seemed she had no other choice.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THAT KISS HAD SHAKEN Stephen to his core. He'd kissed dozens and dozens of women in his years, but never had a kiss affected him so. The moment his lips touched Louisa's, his heart had tugged. It was as if her kiss woke the long defective organ and it suddenly beat again.

He could scarcely reconcile his reaction. It was not as if he'd never pressed his lips to hers before.

But those kisses had been chaste. They had been kisses given out of duty. The sort of kisses a proper gentleman was expected to bestow upon his betrothed, not the sort shared by lovers. This kiss—he had been desperate for it. Bloody hell, she really had gotten to him.

What a lark. Just as he'd decided no other woman would suit, she'd decided he didn't suit at all. He slid his glance toward her. She was stunning cast in the moon's glow. Wet hair and all, she had an undeniable beauty to her, but there was more. She was brave, witty, determined, and headstrong. All qualities he valued in a woman.

And she was jilting him.

Or had she changed her mind? The way she kissed him told him she felt the spark between them. She had pressed

herself close and wrapped her arms around him. She'd not pulled away. Perhaps there was hope for them, yet.

"I know where we are," he said as the outskirts of the village came into better view. "The Thorne and Daisy is on the second block."

"How do you know that?" She asked.

"I have an estate half a mile to the east."

"Are you acquainted with the innkeeper?" She asked, turning her turning to him.

He looked into her eyes. They would make beautiful green-eyed children.

Where the hell had that thought come from? He did not need children. One would suffice. He'd only wanted one child, not children, just the required heir.

"The blackgaurd's took all of our valuables. We have no coins," she continued.

"Not to worry," he said, then turned to her. "I am well known here. Worse case scenario, I give the inn keeper my boots for safekeeping until I can pay him."

Louisa stopped, her slippered feet sinking into the muddied road. "Perhaps it would be better for us to continue to your estate?"

He turned toward her, his brows drawn in annoyance. "I, for one, would prefer to get out of the rain sooner rather than later."

"And I would prefer not to cause a scandal," she countered, her hands on her hips. "If anyone at that inn recognizes me, we will be forced to marry."

He blew out a frustrated breath. He'd hoped that she had given up on her plan to jilt him. The woman was stubborn, to be sure. "The sooner we get you dry and warm, the better. We will be lucky if you have not already caught your death."

"I am not as fragile as all that," she said, waving off his worry. "Another half mile will not make a difference other than to my reputation."

He wanted to put her over his shoulder and carry her to the inn, but something in her gaze stopped him. A genuine concern, or was it fear? Regardless, he could not force her. She had earned his respect and if she wished to walk another half mile in the pouring rain and black of night, he would not stop her.

Besides, he would have a better chance of convincing her to go through with their union if they were at his estate. He nodded his ascent. "Very well, if you are certain you would rather walk—"

"I am," she said, cutting him off as she sloshed through the mud toward the east road.

He followed, catching up to her in a few long strides. They walked through the pouring rain and mud in silence.

He was not displeased with her or angry, he simply did not know what to say. He understood he had hurt her, but could not manage to pinpoint the reason. She may have seen the kiss he'd shared with his former mistress, but then wouldn't she have heard him say that their arrangement was over, and that he would be a faithful husband, too? Perhaps not. How long had she been at the door, anyway?

"Before we escaped, you agreed to hear me out," Stephen said, breaking the silence.



Louisa nodded, her pace quickening ever so slightly.

“How much did you see and hear?”

She shot him an angry glare. “What difference does it make?”

“It could make all the difference in the world.” He sighed as he grappled with what to say next. In the end he settled for, “I am sorry that I hurt you.”

“Apology accepted,” she said, without looking at him.

He gave a cautious smile. “Just like that?”

“Indeed.” She pushed a damp clump of hair from her forehead. “The wedding is still off.”

His momentary relief disappeared like smoke on the wind. He would need to do far better than an apology. Stephen had to make her understand. He needed her to trust him. “I do not want to call off the wedding.”

“That is a pity,” she said, increasing her pace as if she intended to break into a run.

“Louisa, please,” he said, reaching for her elbow. He feared she would slip on the muddied road and hurt herself if he did not slow her down. “Please do not run from me. From us.”

She slowed her steps to match his, but said nothing.

“I will not deny that the woman you saw me with was my mistress. I broke off our liaison before I proposed to you, and she was attempting to lure me back into her bed.”

“How long before?” Louisa asked, turning her head to stare into his eyes. “A week? A day?” she prodded.

He swallowed hard before saying, “an hour.”

Louisa flinched at his admission as though she'd been struck. The sight caused his heart to ache. He truly did not want to cause her a moment's pain, but he had to be honest if he wished to gain her trust.

This time he did not apologize, instead he said, "I was and still am determined to honor you and our marriage. It is true that I did not propose out of love, or even a deep desire to have you as a wife. Ours was to be a union of the *ton*, one of convenience where we both won. You would make the perfect countess, well mannered and biddable. I would be an exemplary husband providing for you and the heir you would give me. I intended for us to be happy in our union."

*Intended?* "I am glad you see things my way now," she said, her tone full of sarcasm and victory.

He slanted her a look. "I never said I wanted our betrothal broken."

"You said that you intended for us to be happy, intended is past tense."

"Now I am determined that we shall be. Everything has changed for me, Louisa." He stopped walking and pulled her under the shelter of a sprawling oak tree. "I did not know your true nature when I proposed. Hell, I scarcely knew you at all. Stupid man that I am; I did not bother to get to know you, not the real you, not until now. I thought you were like every other society miss out husband hunting for a good title and deep pockets."

She winced again. "Not all ladies are after money and titles."

"I know that now, and I regret that I ever believed it of you. I have come to admire you. You are brave and witty.

Strong, determined, and beautiful.” He brought his hand up to caress her cheek. “Did I say beautiful?”

“You did.”

“I meant stunning. And your kiss shook me to the core. You made me realize that I do not want just any well-behaved debutante.” He stared into her eyes, hoping to see some reaction. “I want a sassy, determined hoyden. A lady who will fight beside me when things get rough and challenge me to be better. To do better.”

He saw warmth flood into her gaze, causing the green of her eyes to soften for a heartbeat before she looked away. Stephen guided her gaze back to his, then said, “Louisa, you are the only woman I want.”

## CHAPTER NINE

DESPERATION THREATENED TO OVERWHELM LOUISA. She was desperate to erase his words from her mind. To get away from him, fast and as far as she could go. But she was also desperate to fling herself into his arms. To believe he loved her and give herself to him without reserve.

She wanted a life with him. Wanted to fall asleep beside him each night and smile up at him every morning. She wanted to bear his children, laugh with him, fight beside him, and challenge him.

He does not love you. She reminded herself before she did something foolish. The reminder kept her from pressing her lips to his, but did nothing to dampen her desire for the life he'd laid out before her. Why did the dratted man have to complicate things?

“How much farther is your estate?”

He pointed up the dirt drive she had not realized they were standing beside. “Welcome to Greenly Park.”

From here, all she could make out were glowing windows and a dark facade in the distance. If he had not pointed it out, she never would have known there was a house nearby. She hiked her skirts and started up the drive.

As they drew closer, the house took form. The houses three stories tall, red brick facade stood out against the inky sky. Louisa squinted in the darkness trying to make out the home's details. It was large to be sure, colossal from what she could see, but beyond that she could scarcely make out a thing.

Lord Stone held out his arm as they approached the stairs leading to the front door. She accepted, wrapping her fingers around his elbow and allowing him to lead her. The heavy oak door opened as they approached. An exceedingly tall grey-haired servant, the Butler she presumed, gave a deep bow as Lord Stone lead her inside.

"Welcome home, sir," the servant said. He turned to Louisa, then added, "May I take your coat, my lady?"

"Yes," Louisa said as she slid her arms from the rain drenched fabric, "thank you." She knew it wasn't the thing to thank a servant, but she did not care. She kicked off her muddy slippers as the butler took Lord Stone's ruined coat from her.

Lord Stone thrust his wet, muddy gloves into the Butler's hands, adding to his burden. "The lady needs a room and a bath. Have a bath prepared for me as well, and inform cook we will require supper to be sent up."

"As you wish," the Butler said.

"This way, my lady."

Louisa turned toward the female voice to find a maid standing at the base of the stairs. She took a moment to acknowledge Lord Stone with a curtsey before following the maid. The banister was carved wood and polished to a high sheen. Beneath her feet, the stairs were covered with a plush red carpet.

The entry hall below featured a marble floor and an elegant chandelier cast a candlelight glow through the room. Paintings in gilded frames and candle lit wall scones decorated the walls. When they reached the top of the stairs, the maid led her down a wide carpeted hallway where more paintings and wall scones were on display, along with sturdy yet fashionable pieces of furniture.

This was a grand house, but of course one should expect nothing less of an earl's home. It was not unlike other homes of the peerage, well cared for, large, elegant, and full of family history she suspected. It would not be a burden to take on the role of Countess of Stone and mistress of Greenly.

And now she was being a ninny again. Allowing herself to fantasize about a future that would not come to fruition. She would never be the lady of Lord Stone's house. She could not.

The maid opened a door and indicated for Louisa to go ahead of her.

"I hope it suits, my lady. It is the best room in the house save for the Earl and Countesses rooms," the maid said. "Hard to tell by night, but come morning, there is a beautiful view of the gardens from the windows."

Louisa stepped into the room. Plush cream carpeting muffled the sound of her footsteps. An overstuffed cream sofa with muted mossy green pillows was positioned on one wall, with an enormous marble fireplace on the opposite wall. Heavy cream and muted green drapes covered the windows and a sparkling chandelier lit the room. "It suites perfectly," Louisa said.

The maid smiled. "Your bath is being prepared in the bedchamber." She moved toward a door at the far end of the room, then held it open.

Louisa stepped through into the bedchamber where she found a grand four-post bed draped in the same shades of cream and muted shade of moss green. A crackling fire burned in the carved marble hearth, casting light and heat through the room. The copper tub had been positioned in front of the fire. A line of maids and footmen were pouring buckets of steaming water into the tub, and her bones warmed at the sight.

When the last pail of water had been added, and the last servant had departed, another maid entered and curtsied to Louisa. A young woman, Louisa, suspected the maid to be no more than twenty years of age with sandy brown hair and bright blue eyes.

“I will be your ladies’ maid while you are here,” the woman said. “Let us get you out of these wet clothes and into the warm bath, shall we?”

Louisa took an instant liking to the maid. She offered a smile, then said, “thank you,” turning her back to the maid so that she could unfasten her frock.

The maid was quick to remove Louisa’s gown and underpinnings, then help her step into the warm bath. Louisa sank into the tub, releasing a delighted sigh as she rested her back against the warm copper side.

“There is soap and a cloth beside you, as well as towels. I’ll take your clothing to be laundered after I help you wash your hair and dress for bed. There is a clean chemise and wrapper on the bed as well.” The maid chatted, as she lifted a pitcher into her hand.

Louisa tipped her head back and relaxed further as the maid washed her hair. When the task was done, she reached

for the soap and cloth. "Please leave me. I can finish without further help."

The maid nodded. "You need only ring if you require anything further. I will be pleased to assist you, my lady." She backed toward the door.

"There is one more thing," Louisa said.

The maid stilled, her gaze friendly and eager.

"I require your name," Louisa said.

"Sarah. Sarah Dodger," the maid said.

"Thank you for your assistance, Sarah. Please have my supper brought to my room, then relax and enjoy your evening."

The maid smiled. "You are most kind, my lady. I will see to your meal at once," she said, then continued from the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Louisa washed, then sank back against the tub and closed her eyes. She should leave the bath before her skin puckered like an old prune, but it was entirely to relaxing and she sorely needed the reprieve after all she'd been through.

Was Lord Stone soaking in his own warm bath before a roaring fire? She could not help but wonder. He was no doubt every bit as dirty and weary as she, though he did an impeccable job of hiding the latter. He'd not let on a single time about being uncomfortable despite being as rain soaked as her.

Images of him stretched out in a copper tub filled her mind. His muscular arms resting on the edges as warm water lapped at his bare chest. She imagined his chest to be wide and



well defined. Did he have a fine smattering of blond hair across his chest, or was it smooth?

She shook her head, then splashed water on her face to chase the thoughts away. His chest was of no concern to her.

But oh, what she would give to run her hands over his bare skin. To have his hands on her. If that kiss they had shared was any indication, he would be a skilled lover. Her cheeks warmed at the impure thought, but she did not care. Ladies had the right to their own thoughts, and Louisa was not so green as to have no idea what passed between a husband and wife.

She was an innocent, but that did not make her ignorant. She had married friends and had often heard them talking about bedroom matters. In fact, Louisa had been eagerly anticipating her wedding night with Lord Stone before he'd betrayed her.

Before she'd discovered he did not love her.

She sat up, causing water to slosh over the edge of the tub, and lowered her face into her hands. How had she been so bird-witted? Why had she so easily been fooled? A short courtship and a few chaste kisses and she had fancied them in love. She was daft to believe that a man such as Lord Stone could so easily fall in love with her.

Maybe she had been too hard on them both. She had been so angry and in her anger had determined to jilt him, but was that what she truly wished for? In retrospect, she did not believe she had loved him, either. She had loved the idea of marrying him. The idea of being his countess and being romanced by him. But had she truly loved him? No. She could not have, for she had not really known him.

But now... After the way he had cared for her, defended her, respected her... After the danger they had faced together and the triumph they had shared. After learning more about his past and his wishes for the future. She released a groan, then a sigh. Now she loved him. She knew him. Understood him. And Heaven help her, she loved him.

But was it enough?

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EVERY MUSCLE in Stephen's body tensed as he listened to the sounds of sloshing water followed by Louisa's soft sighs, and devil take it. Was that a groan? His body tensed more with every sound, his cock hardening.

What he would give to be that bathwater lapping at her soft, naked skin. Touching and stroking her most intimate places. Caressing her thighs, the valley between her breasts... He wanted to taste her—every delectable inch of her while she writhed beneath him panting his name and begging for release.

Splash... "Ouch." Thump, thump... "Curse it!" Louisa's voice rang out.

Stephen reached for the door and threw it open.

A bent over, naked Louisa filled his vision, causing a guttural sound to come from deep within him.

She snatched her towel from the floor and held it close, shielding her nakedness. But not before he got an eye full of rounded hips and creamy breasts. She was even more stunning than he had imagined.

And she was staring at him wide eyed, her cheeks flushed and lips slightly parted.

“I heard sounds.. You cursed...” He forced his gaze to hers, before moving it over her Shapley legs, across the towel, and up the column of her neck. “Are you hurt?”

“I tripped and stumped my toe,” she said, holding the towel tighter, her cheeks flaming red.

“Let me see.” He hurried to her side, guiding her to sit on the bed, then taking her foot in to his hands.

She let out a little squeak as she tumbled backward to lie on the bed, but did not pull away or order him from the room. The temptress moaned as he ran his hand along the curve of her foot, her eyelids fluttering shut.

He fought to maintain control. To focus on her toes when all he wanted to do was climb into bed with her and bury himself deep within her. Swallowing hard, he feathered his fingertips over her toes. “Can you move them?”

“What...?” She asked, her tone dazed.

“Your toes? Can you move them?”

“Of course,” she said, wiggling them. “I am unharmed, save for my pride.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” Stephen said, running his palm over her ankle before venturing to her calve. “Does this hurt?” He asked, stroking toward the back of her knee.

“No,” she replied.

He ventured further up toward her thigh while bracing her foot against his chest to apply a bit of pressure. “And this?”

“It feels delightful,” she sighed, her eyes darkened a shade as they met his. “Perhaps you should check my other foot as well?” She suggested, an impish grin tilting her full, pink lips.

Stephen lowered her leg to the bed and took her other foot in hand. He had never been the sort to deny a lady's wishes, and he had no intention of starting now. He began his exploration anew, starting with her delicate foot before roaming up her calf.

She shifted on the bed as he placed her foot on his chest and the towel slid, revealing one plump rosy tipped breast.

His cock jumped, straining to be inside her. He smoothed his hand over her silken skin, up her thigh to brush the curls at her apex.

She moaned, pressing her head into the mattress and tilting her hips toward his fingers.

He stroked through her curls to the soft, wet petals of her entrance. The realization that he could take her, bury himself inside her, propelled him to her side. He stretched out on the bed, his fingers stroking and swirling around the tight bundle of nerves at her core as he brought his mouth to her breast. He suckled at her nipple as he pressed one finger into her tight, damp channel. "Your so beautiful. So tight and wet for me," he murmured.

She moaned, her fingers coming to tangle in his hair as she held his head to her breast and bucked against his finger.

"That's right, sweet. Take what you want," he encouraged her as he thrust another finger in to her, stretching and filling her passage.

"I want you, Louisa," he said, his voice thick with need.

She tossed the towel aside in answer, then grabbed a handful of his shirt and pulled.

Stephen rose, pulling his shirt over his head, then brought his lips to hers in a bruising kiss as he cupped her breast in his

hand, kneading the pliant flesh in his palm. “Say you are mine, Louisa.”

She pressed her eyes closed and rocked her hips against his hand, pressing her sex to his palm and taking his finger’s deeper.

“Say you will marry me.” He kissed a trail down her abdomen, over her hip. “Tell me to claim you,” he urged, before licking across her damp quim.

She bucked against his mouth, her hands coming down to hold his head as her thighs opened wider. It occurred to her she should be more bashful. Show at least a modicum of matronly shyness. But she did not feel shy or ashamed. This was exhilarating. Intoxicating. And she wanted... she wanted him.

He licked her core, suckling the tiny bud, and thrusting his fingers into her. When her moans grew louder, and her passage pulsed around him, he knew she was close. He thrust harder as he flicked his tongue over her bud. Then, just before she found her release, he pulled away.

“Tell me you want me inside of you,” he demanded.

Her gaze burned into his. “I want you.”

He rose to his knees, then reached for his falls. His cock sprang forward.

She reached out a tentative hand, wrapping her fingers around his cock.

Stephen thrust into her palm. “Tell me you want my cock inside of you.”

“I want...” She glanced at his cock thrusting into her hand. “I want you,” she said with a breathy sigh, “inside of me.”

“Then you shall have me.” He moved between her thighs, positioning himself at her opening. “I want you for my wife, Louisa,” he said, pressing the tip to her core.

She went rigid. “I...” she turned her head. “Do you love me?”

Her words propelled him from the bed. He if told he loved her now she would not believe him.

“Stephen,” she said, sitting up, her eyes finding his. “I want you to make love to me.”

“But you do not wish to marry me?”

She climbed from the bed and her heated gaze met his. “Not without love.”

He nodded, pivoted, and left the room.

## CHAPTER TEN

THE FOLLOWING morning Louisa had awoken with puffy eyes and a heavy heart. She was loath to admit it, but Stephen had broken her heart all over again. Her appetite had fled, and she'd cried herself to sleep. This morning she'd burst into tears again. She had to get away from him. Had to end their betrothal once and for all.

Her fool self had been harboring a small fraction of hope that he loved her. His refusal to say the words last night devastated her. If he had loved her, he would have said as much for what man would deny love while being so intimate with a woman?

There was nothing for it now. Louisa had to return home and put an end to this farce. She could not allow herself to wind up trapped in a cold marriage devoid of love. She would not become a laughing stock, nor would she allow herself to be stashed away in the country and forgotten. Her heart could never withstand such treatment from the man she called husband.

Sarah pinned the last piece of Louisa's hair up, then stepped back and smiled. "There is tea and toast in the sitting room, my lady. You are to join his lordship in the receiving room when you are ready to depart."

“Thank you, Sarah,” Louisa stood and walked toward the sitting room. She wished to return home, but was in no hurry to face Lord Stone. Besides, a bit of toast and tea would do her some good after skipping her dinner last night.

Once in the sitting room, she sat on the overstuffed couch across from the fire and pulled her feet up under her skirt. Sarah followed her in and brought her a cup of tea and a plate of toast. Louisa accepted it, then sipped the warm tea as Sarah took her leave.

Louisa stared into the fire as she ate and wondered at what her future might hold. Would her family suffer for her choices? Would her jilting Lord Stone result in sisters, Elizabeth and Catherine’s, failure to secure suitable matches? Would Louisa ever fall in love and marry, or would her refusal of Lord Stone sentence her to spinsterhood?

Whatever the consequences, they would be easier to handle than a lifetime of the misery she knew accompanied loveless unions. She finished her tea, then stood. Gathering her resolve, she went to join Lord Stone in the receiving room.

Her heart skipped a beat when she entered. Their eyes met and Lord Stone dropped to one knee on the polished marble floor. Hurt and anger pricked at her as she rushed to his side and tugged at his hands. “Why are doing this to me? Is your pride so great that you would sentence yourself to a loveless marriage?” She pulled harder, trying to force him from his knee. “Get up.”

He held her gaze, but remained on his knee, squeezing her hands gently. “Quite the opposite, Louisa. My love for you is so great that I cannot imagine a lifetime without you at my side.”



Her breath hitched, and throat tightened. She wanted to argue. To demand he stop playing with her emotions, but she could not find her voice.

The corners of his mouth tilted in an unsure grin. “I did not leave you last night because I do not love you. I left because my love for you is so great that I did not want to risk you doubting it. I was hurt that you questioned my devotion. That you could not feel how much I cherish you in my touches and kisses.” He rubbed small circles on her hands as he spoke. “I feared that if I spoke the words, you would think I had ulterior motives. I did not want to leave you with any doubts.”

Sincerity shone in his gaze, and she felt a slight tremble in his hands. A rogue tear streaked down her cheek. God, she loved him. She loved him so, so much that she wanted to toss herself into his arms—wanted to believe everything he said. But... She swallowed past the tightness in her throat. “Why did you not confess your love for me when your mistress inquired?”

“I was a fool.” Lord Stone hung his head, averting his gaze to the polished floor. He brought his gaze back to her. “I did not know that my affection ran so deep, and I did not think my care for you was any of her business. She is no longer my mistress.” He tightened his hold on Louisa’s hands. “I will never keep a woman again. I only want you, Louisa. My heart beats only for you.”

He stood and pulled her into his embrace.

She melted against his muscled body, her stomach fluttering and warmth spreading through her. She believed him, and she wished to spend her life with him. He was everything she wanted and everything she had dreamed of.

“Do not break my heart, Louisa. Say you love me, too. Say you will be my countess.”

“I will,” she agreed, her voice muffled against his chest. “I love you, and I will marry you.”

He guided her chin up with his knuckles, then brushed his lips across hers. “I will cherish you always.” His mouth took hers in a claiming kiss, their tongues twining together as they tasted and branded each other.

“A-hum,” a deep baritone sounded from the doorway.

Louisa pulled away and turned to face the intruder. Her cheeks burned at the sight of two well-dressed gentlemen staring at them. One tall and dark and the other of average height and light coloring.

“It is about time you find us,” Lord Stone said, pulling Louisa against his side, his arm firmly about her waist. “Allow me to introduce my betrothed.” He led Louisa across the room toward the gentlemen. “Lord Radcliffe and Lord Hawthorne, I am honored to present Lady Louisa Breckenridge.”

Louisa curtsied as the men offered bows.

Lord Stone held her closer as he said, “They are members of the Wicked Earl’s Club and no doubt here because of our ransom letter.”

“Just so,” Lord Radcliffe said. “We tracked the footpad’s back to their hut and saw them carted off in chains before continuing our search for the two of you.”

“It was all rather anticlimactic, if I dare say. With your having escaped before we arrived and all,” Lord Hawthorne added. “I was quite looking forward to a good rescue mission.”

Lord Radcliffe chuckled. “All three men were unconscious when we arrived, and the one we followed was quickly rendered the same.”

“I will not apologize for that,” Lord Stone said. “In fact, you can thank Lady Louisa for knocking out the footpad in the front.” He smiled at her, pride shining in his gaze as the earls stared wide eyed.

“Well, I’ll be.” Lord Radcliffe said. “I dare say you better not cross her, Stone.”

“Indeed,” Lord Hawthorne agreed.

A great deal of noise invaded the entrance hall, followed by someone calling, “Louisa, where are you, Louisa?”

She knew that voice and the familiar sound sent joy spiraling through her. She left Lord Stone’s embrace and raced toward the entry hall. “I am here.” She ran into her brother’s embrace.

“Louisa, we were so worried.” He hugged her tight, then held her at arm’s length and looked her over. “Are you harmed?”

She smiled up at him. “No, William, I am better than I ever have been.”

William’s wife, Olivia, beamed at her. “What a relief! We were beside ourselves with worry.” She hugged Louisa as the rest of her sibling crowded around.

“We came as fast as we could. Blasted carriages and parson slowed us down,” her brother Tristan said.

“Parson?” Louisa asked, her attention moving to William.

He rocked back on his heels, his gaze darting between Louisa and Lord Stone. “Considering that you spent the night

together and everyone who was at the ball knows you did not leave with us, I thought a quick wedding may be in order. I used my ducal status to secure a special license and brought a parson to speed things along.”

Olivia took her hand and gave a warm smile. “Of course if you do not wish—”

“I very much wish to marry Lord Stone,” Louisa cut her sister-in-law off.

“Today seems a splendid day for a wedding.” Lord Stone pulled Louisa into his arms, then nodded to William. “Thank you for your thoughtfulness in arranging our union, Your Grace.”

“Shall we proceed, then?” An old man dressed in clergy gab and clutching a bible asked.

Louisa’s sister, Elizabeth, rushed into the Frey. “Heavens, no! We need a bit of time to prepare Louisa first.” She tugged on Louisa’s arm, pulling her from Lord Stone’s side. “We brought your best gown and your trousseau.”

Louisa hugged her sister and said, “I do not need anything fancy. Having all of you here and marrying the man I love is all I require.” She found Lord Stone’s gaze, and he beamed at her. “I wish to proceed at once.”

“Everyone into the receiving room,” Lord Stone’s Butler called across the entry hall.

William led Louisa into the room after the others piled through the door. He plucked a bouquet from a vase as they passed and winked. “Every bride should at least have flowers,” he said.

Louisa took the lilies, ignoring the water that seeped into her gloves from the wet steams. “Thank you, William.”

“Your groom awaits,” he said, nodding toward the front of the receiving room where Lord Stone stood before the parson with Lord Radcliffe and Lord Hawthorne at his side.

Louisa grinned as William brought her to stand beside Lord Stone. Olivia, Elizabeth, and Catherine stood off to her side as the rest of the company crowded around.

The parson cleared his throat and opened the Bible. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered her this day to join—”

“Wait,” Lord Stone interrupted, then turned to face the others. “I want it witnessed here and now, before any vows are taken, that I love Louisa. I am not marring her to avoid scandal or save her from ruin, though I would lie down my life for her happiness and security. Let it be known by all of you and anyone who should ever dare to speculate that I love Louisa with every fiber of my being.” He turned to her and took her hands, placing kisses to the backs of each, before meeting her gaze. “Ours is a love match.”

All the ladies in the room gave a collective sigh, but none were as swept away in the romance as Louisa. She nearly swooned at his declaration. Any lingering doubts she may have had evaporated like morning dew under the scorching sun. “I love you,” she said, then pressed her lips to his.

“The kiss comes after,” Lord Radcliffe said.

But Louisa did not give a wit about tradition or propriety. In fact, she would rather enjoy giving them all something to talk about. She pressed closer to Lord Stone, deepening their kiss.

Her heart overflowed with love.

# ABOUT AMANDA

## About Amanda Mariel

*USA Today* Bestselling author Amanda Mariel dreams of days gone by when life moved at a slower pace. She enjoys taking pen to paper and exploring historical time periods through her imagination and the written word. When she is not writing she is helping home buyers and sellers achieve their goals as Amanda Koehler Realtor. In her free time she can be found reading, crocheting, traveling, practicing her photography skills, or spending time with her family.

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EARL OF HALSBURG

ANNA ST. CLAIRE



# CHAPTER ONE

*LONDON, England*

*December 1826*

DISGUSTED, Alan Hardin, the third Earl of Halsburg, stared at the note he had just received in the morning post. It was the second time in as many weeks he had received one—but this one elevated his concern. “Travers,” he called out, stopping the bespeckled, lanky butler as he passed the door to his study.

“Do you recall who left the correspondence with no return name or address?” Alan asked.

“No, my lord. I found it on the top step this morning—only an hour ago.”

“I see. That will be all,” he said, dismissing the butler, before a thought hit him. “Wait,” he said before Travers could take a step.

The butler turned back to face him. “Yes, my lord?”

“Did my uncle ever inquire about a note such as this, one that arrived so ... mysteriously?” Hardin asked. This was the second such note Alan had received in the past month—and in the year he had been an earl, he realized. The first note he had

kept but didn't take seriously. But a second meant someone was determined to make a point. *But what point?* This note bothered him, and he planned to find out who had sent it.

The butler stood for a long moment, perceptibly giving serious thought to the question. "Now that you inquire, my lord, I recall there was a time such a note arrived. It was a month before the carriage accident. I know that because we had a footman to start that day, and I had been training him when he stopped me. He asked me if I knew who had left it, much as you have. It, too, was delivered before sunrise. I believe he mentioned his plans to contact the magistrate, but I cannot be sure. However, he asked me at the time to have his solicitor come to see him."

His uncle's death had been an accident. The magistrate said the horses had been spooked and, as a result, the carriage flipped, trapping his uncle beneath the wreckage. "Did the magistrate ask you questions after his death?" Alan asked.

"No, my lord. The only time he visited was to alert us of the accident and the earl's demise," the butler returned, his response coming slower and more introspective than it had been.

The management of the estate had been thrust at him, so Alan ran things much as his uncle had run things, including his solicitor, so he used the same firm as his uncle had done, including using the same legal firm. "Send word to my solicitor that I wish to see him," Alan said, staring at the note. "Let me know when he plans to come. Also, have the room my mother enjoys using prepared. She plans to be here this week."

"On that, my lord. Her ladyship sent word yesterday evening from the coaching inn that she expected to arrive later

today. Her note indicated only that she would want a ... hot bath upon arrival.”

*Had sweat appeared on Traver's upper lip at the mention of his mother?* Hardin bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. His mother was certainly a force of nature. While she treated his servants as her own, she maintained civility; therefore, he felt no reason to intercede. She didn't interfere with his life, and he gave her free rein when she visited. “I trust you to oversee her arrival and see to whatever she requires.” His uncle had rarely entertained, and Alan allowed the servants to go about their business, rarely causing a ripple in their day. But when his mother visited, all that changed. The townhouse hummed with activity.

“Yes, my lord.” The man turned to leave, but turned back. “I alerted the housekeeper, and sent the cook to the market this morning to select the special foods your mother prefers.”

“Thank you, Travers,” Alan said, glancing once again at the note before looking up. Mrs. Nimble and Mrs. Canary knew exactly what his mother required. “That is all.” He would find out what they had discussed. His experience as a spy for the Crown told him this was too coincidental and worth investigating. A niggling concern surfaced with the timing of his mother's visit, but he pushed it away.

“Yes, my lord,” Travers said.

“I want the outside of our house watched round the clock. Assign a footman to watch the front of the house. Hire two more if you need the staff. Not only do I want a report on whom you plan to hire before you offer the position, but I wish to meet them as well. Make sure you investigate their background thoroughly. This is the second such note that has been delivered. I want to know how and who is delivering

them—and the need for security became heightened with this second one.”

The butler brightened, perhaps glad to have something to do other than please Alan’s mother. “Yes, my lord. I will see to it.”

“I look forward to seeing your selections. It needs to be done immediately, so make it your priority,” Alan added.

When his butler left, he reached into the desk drawer and withdrew the first note he had received only weeks earlier, placing it side-by-side with the latest one, comparing them. The handwriting appeared identical, but he doubted that helped. Both letters were hand-printed in what appeared to be an attempt to conceal the sender’s identity. The message on this second note was as direct as the first.

***You should not be the earl.***

The first note had been more circumspect, and while he had not discarded it, he had not felt alarmed by it. This second one, however, drew alarm.

***Fraud! Why did you inherit?***

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ALAN WAS NOT a happy man as he mounted the granite steps of 276 Bedford Street to meet his friends. One look in his eyes foretold his black mood. He had accepted the earldom but had not been pleased. A year ago, life had seemed so orderly. He had returned from a Crown assignment, only to be told his uncle had died suddenly and that he had inherited an earldom—something he had never coveted. Additionally, he became the guardian of his uncle’s best friend’s daughters. Not

something he expected or enjoyed. Up to now, he had signed off on anything his solicitor recommended. The one meeting he had held with the girls' stepmother, Baroness Rollins, had not gone well, forcing him to remind her of his position. She had a reputation as a greedy woman and an unpleasant one at that. He planned to keep their dealings short and had asked his solicitor to pay the modiste and other vendors directly on the daughters' behalf, instead of giving it to Lady Rollins.

Christmastide would be upon them soon, and he was glad he had agreed to his mother's London visit. He needed to reconnect with his wards and thought his mother would enjoy helping with the two young ladies. The eldest was twenty and the other fourteen; at twenty-five, his age gave him a decided disadvantage, at least with the eldest. She was as attractive a woman as he had ever seen. An oval face framed by thick, russet-colored hair and green eyes. *Or were they hazel?* He closed his eyes, determined to shut her out of his mind. After the first and only time he had met her, her image had haunted his dreams.

He would be her guardian for less than six months. *Surely, I can maintain my priorities and be the guardian she requires.* In that vein, a recent bill from a local modiste left him with questions about the baroness and his charges. It seemed the young ladies might get *short-shifted*. He needed to think creatively about this guardianship and felt his mother's presence might provide the answer.

His solicitor's visit earlier in the day had been arduous. Mr. Penman confirmed his uncle's death had been listed as an accident, and he confirmed his uncle had contacted him about a similar note a few weeks before his death. Since the circumstances of the carriage accident looked cut and dry, no investigation had ensued. But after today's note, and Alan's

discovery his uncle had also received a similar one, Alan wondered if it had been an accident. Since no one had investigated Uncle Edward's death, evidence that might have proven something to the contrary might prove difficult to uncover. Alan had the power and resources to investigate, and as a trained solicitor himself, he recognized slapdash work by investigators. Beyond annoyed, he wondered if he had inherited not only an earldom but also a target on his back.

As if that wasn't enough, his solicitor had complained about the welfare of his wards, two daughters of the closest friend of his uncle, who had died six months before his uncle—Miss Elizabeth Rollins and Miss Penny Rollins. This only added to his suspicion that things were not going as he had hoped. The report about his wards had been unexpected, but in this, he planned to garner his mother's help. Perhaps it would distract her from her unrelenting reminder that he must marry and secure the future of the earldom. Alan hoped her focus on the girls might give his household a much-needed break from her scrutiny.

The large, nondescript townhouse blended with those around it. Except for its red door marked with a *W*, it looked no different. Alan knocked at the door as he fingered the small gold 'W' insignia on the pin anchoring his neckcloth. It was a modest emblem, but every member was required to wear his when in attendance. He had been presented with the pin a year ago, following his induction into the club.

While the club was not in the most fashionable district, it compared favorably with White's, but only with the richness of its interiors. The walls were papered in either deep burgundy or hunter-green tones throughout, and the lighting was low. Only the most masculine furniture—rich leathers, dark wood grains—appointed the club's public rooms. The

membership used the club as both a meeting place and a den of pleasures—depending on desire or need. Alan resisted the seedier aspects of the club but found it an excellent place to relax and meet with friends.

“Lord Halsburg, welcome,”

“Thank you, Stewart. Two friends plan to join me for a drink. I’m sure you recall Lord Shefford.”

“I do. He was a member a few years past.”

“Yes, Shefford will have his brother, Mr. Jonathan Nelson, with him. Nelson’s the proprietor of the new fencing club, *En Garde*.

“I understand, my lord.” The older man’s lip twitched, but he maintained his haughty demeanor. “Your friends await you in the club room—they are seated near the fireplace.”

Halsburg quirked his brow. “Thank you, Stewart.” He felt his mood lifting, despite the feeling the cards had been stacked against him. “Have someone bring me a brandy.”

“Yes, my lord. Right away.”

“Shefford, Nelson,” he said, shaking their hands before taking the empty leather chair beside them. “I’m glad to see the two of you and could use some advice.”

“My lord, your brandy,” a footman said, approaching from behind and placing Alan’s brandy on the small table beside his chair.

“If you want to ask about marriage, I highly recommend it,” quipped his best friend, Colin Nelson, the Earl of Shefford. “I just need to find someone to tempt my brother here into settling down.”

“I’m tremendously happy for you and your lovely countess. However, marriage-minded mothers are one thing I have not enjoyed since attaining the earldom. While I have no immediate aversion to marriage, I find the cloying debutantes and their mothers tiresome and avoid them at all costs,” Alan said, chuckling.

“Colin’s about to wear us all down with his perpetual cheer these days,” said his brother, Jonathan Nelson with a laugh. “I can, however, attest it hasn’t taken the edge off his fencing. My customers ask to fence with Colin, perhaps because of his newly gained master’s status.

“Please, don’t ... Jonathan,” Colin said, swirling his drink and turning a slight shade of pink. “It was a requirement for opening the club—we needed two masters.”

“That makes good sense. I’ve heard good things about the club. How’s it been doing?” Alan asked. The brothers had opened the fencing club to honor their father’s influence in their lives. Both men were considered fencing masters, a title only given to the most accomplished. “If you’d like to expand, I would be an interested investor. *En Garde* may do for fencing enthusiasts what Jackson’s has for pugilists.”

“That’s a nice offer and we will keep it in mind. The club has been a tremendous undertaking, but Jonathan operates it carefully, which has been tremendously beneficial for everyone,” Shefford replied.

“It’s been in great demand among the *ton*,” Jonathan agreed.

“Our fencing training was helpful during the war. Has that affected admission applications?” Alan asked.

“Yes, we’ve seen a lot of interest,” Shefford said.



“And I hope it stays that way,” Nelson bantered.

“I’m glad our venture has been successful. But that isn’t why you asked to meet,” Shefford said.

“I’m in earnest about becoming a silent partner, so if you decide to pursue expansion, speak with me.” Alan’s face became pensive. “You are right, though. I need your advice. I’ve gotten two notes—strange ones questioning my legitimacy as heir.”

“How could that be? Your father—your uncle’s only brother—predeceased him, and your uncle was without issue,” Shefford put in.

“Exactly. And if that wasn’t strange enough, I discovered this morning my uncle had received a similar note—delivered with no one seeing who left it—shortly before the accident. I can only guess what they wrote but, without finding it, I have no way to know. It seems coincidental,” he said, withdrawing the notes from his pocket and passing them to his friends, “but pertinent.”

Shefford read the notes and quietly passed them to his brother.

Jonathan looked up after the second note. “Same person wrote it. It certainly would be helpful to have the note your uncle received. Have you sorted through the office to see if it’s still there?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Alan admitted. He’d begin looking immediately. Perhaps Travers would remember if his uncle had mentioned anything.

“If your uncle received something similar and died in a coaching accident that wasn’t investigated ...” Shefford began. “You may have a target on your back.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Alan said.

“It somewhat takes the shine off of being elevated to the peerage,” Shefford said.

“Yes. It does. While I don’t see how that can be changed, I don’t plan to have my life snuffed out over primogeniture. I plan to find whoever is sending the threatening notes to me,” Alan said.

“What can we do to assist?” Shefford asked.

“You’ve heard me out and don’t feel I’m off track. That’s a tremendous support. I sent a note to the palace before I left the house, requesting an audience with the king’s agent. My father died, and outside of my younger brother and myself, there were no other males. But I’m wondering about the transition *before* my uncle’s inheritance and need to investigate. If someone has a question, that might be where we find them,” Alan conjectured.

“The king’s agent’s name is Ruben—*Mr. John Ruben*,” Nelson said. “I contact him frequently with applicants at our school when there are questions. The last thing I want is for our school to gain notoriety for a bad actor who uses the skills we teach them dissolutely. “I’ll put Ruben in contact with you.”

## CHAPTER TWO

“MISS ELIZABETH, YOU ARE BEING SUMMONED,” her abigail said, gently tapping her charge on the shoulder. “You have little time to dress.”

Miss Elizabeth Rollins had finally found sleep, trying to make up for the nightmare that had woken her up and stolen most of her sleep. She reached over and pulled the extra pillow over the back of her head—a poor attempt to deny her abigail’s request that she leave her warm bed. She hated anything that required her to spend time with her stepmother. *What new cruelty does the woman have planned for me today?*

Since Papa’s death, the Widow Rollins turned each day into a fresh assault on Elizabeth’s way of life; little by little, something was taken away. In the week following the reading of her father’s will, she was *temporarily* removed from the room she had spent all her life in and placed in a smaller guest room further down the hallway. They had refitted her larger bedroom as a guest room for her stepmother’s sister, Louisa, who had visited. She had been informed her aunt was a sleepwalker and needed to be closer to her older sister. The woman had stayed two months and, as far as Elizabeth knew, never walked in her sleep while she was there. And they still had not put the rooms back to rights.

Two weeks ago, her stepmother's attention had turned to Elizabeth's wardrobe, when she had canceled Elizabeth's seasonal trip to the modiste. "*Your father died and did not leave enough for us to buy you new clothes this Season, and I need new clothes. I cannot afford to be seen in yesterday's fashions. But I have observed Jane is good with the needle and will repair and adjust your dresses. Of course, you will be permitted new half-boots, gloves, incidentals, and of course, a new pelisse,*" Lady Rollins had said, as they approached the coach for the trip to town.

Christmastide was nearly upon them. Needlepoint was not her strong suit and there was little she could make for her sister. Elizabeth had counted on the shopping trip. Her younger sister, Penny, deserved a decent Christmas and Elizabeth would make sure she received one. She had carefully placed her saved pin money in a carved-out area of a book and placed it inconspicuously on her small bookshelf. It was reminiscent of a book her father had shown her from his library. Papa had been a rich man—far wealthier than many of his peers. *What had happened to his money? Surely, things were not as dire as her stepmother made them out to be.*

"Is Penny awake?" Elizabeth asked in muffled tones from beneath the pillow.

"Yes, Miss Penny is with her governess. I heard ..." Jane started but stopped.

Her maid sounded distressed. "*What ... what did you hear, Jane? Please tell me, especially if it involves my sister.*"

"Cook told me the governess has been dismissed, effective in one week."

"But why?" Elizabeth asked, sitting and running her hand through her hair. "Penny loves her governess. Why would

Delores sack Miss Mary?”

“I’m sorry, miss. ’Tis all Cook knew,” Jane said. “But perhaps she will tell you. She is most insistent that you join her in the drawing room. I saw ... uh ... her son arrived earlier.”

Elizabeth pulled the pillow over her head more tightly as a shudder wound its way through her. Daniel Chadwick was a lecher. He would chase her around the house and try to touch her—something she never told a soul, instinctively fearing her stepmother. Her son was rude and mean. Elizabeth watched her pets closely and kept them away from Daniel, always recalling when the barn cat was found drowned near the pond. She had been horrified, intuitively knowing it was him, but having no evidence. Until he left home, she had not taken another as a pet, fearing what Daniel would do to it. Her horse, Sable, was dear to her, and she rode her as often as she could. She would make sure the ostler knew Daniel was back. Joe knew the boy was capable of mean things. He had helped her bury the mother cat and the kittens, both of them crying. Elizabeth had never seen a man cry before that, and it made her appreciate Joe more.

“Papa banned him after he ...” Elizabeth stopped in mid-sentence, reminded of a stern lecture she once received from her father about discussing family affairs with the staff, *even if that was Jane—who practically grew up alongside her as a sister*. It had been Joe’s daughter Daniel had ravished. Joe kept it quiet, except for her father and her. Joe had become her protector, making sure Elizabeth knew to never be alone with Daniel. He always requested Ross or one of the other footmen ride behind Elizabeth. *“Not that the staff won’t know,” Papa had explained. “Rather, it is poor form to engage in such discussion.”*

Her father had lost his heart the day Mama died. It hadn't helped that her younger sister was the image of her mother, blonde with blue eyes. Elizabeth looked like her father. Papa had become desolate, different, and buried himself in his business dealings—and for a short time, couldn't bring himself to hold Penny. Gradually, after much coaxing from his friends, he reemerged, finding joy in his daughters, and resurfacing into Society—supposedly to find a mother for his girls.

Delores was a young widow who had got her hooks in her father quickly. Elizabeth saw her as everything her mother had not been in temperament—moody, vain, and jealous. Once they married and he moved her into the house, things changed ... subtly, at first. It started with Mama's gardens, which were changed. Delores uprooted her beloved roses and replaced them with boxwoods and other shrubs. It seemed to Elizabeth the woman was trying to erase everything to do with her mother's existence. For right now, however, Elizabeth needed to survive. "Help me prepare for the harridan," she whispered to her maid.

Jane nodded. "Then let's decide on what to wear," her maid said thoughtfully. "I've taken stock of your clothes and there are several dresses, including your favorite rose satin, that needed no repair. And unless the styles have changed tremendously, you should be fine for social occasions," Jane said.

"I'll wear my dark blue day dress. It's comfortable," Elizabeth replied.

"Blimey! One of these days, the woman will figure you out," Jane said, smiling.

Blue had been her mother's favorite color, and Delores knew that. Wearing blue had become Elizabeth's way of

poking the bear. Delores' irritation was palpable, but she was not an intelligent woman and Elizabeth's subtle retaliation never dawned on her.

Thirty minutes later, Elizabeth stood in front of the door to the drawing room. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open and entered. Her stepmother, Delores, sat with her back at the door, reading a paper. Her son peered up from his plate, seated in the seat her father had always occupied at the other end, and did not stand when she entered. Typical of his manners ... *lacking*, Elizabeth thought.

"Ah, Elizabeth. So nice to see you again," her son finally said from his seat. Once he had taken another drink from his cup, he put down his paper and stood, walking to the sideboard for a second helping of eggs and rashers before retaking his seat, wasting no regard on Elizabeth.

"Daniel," the baroness said with a tight smile, pulling tightly on her face. "Perhaps you can assist Elizabeth with her breakfast."

*Which made Elizabeth wonder what her stepmother had in mind for today.*

"Yes, Mother," Daniel said, putting down his utensils and standing. "Miss Elizabeth." He pulled out the chair nearest his own for her.

"I'll take my usual seat, but thank you," Elizabeth said, choosing the chair in front of the sidebar, placing her as far as possible from the loathsome man. A shudder of foreboding shook her. From the corner of her eye, Elizabeth caught her stepmother's eyes narrowed in her direction, but when Elizabeth glanced up, the woman quickly schooled her face.

“Darling Elizabeth, Daniel has moved back home,” her stepmother said pointedly. “He requires a larger room, as did my poor sister. It is my hope you will not object to his use of your former room.”

Biting her bottom lip to avoid saying what she wanted to say, which would most certainly lead to more trouble, Elizabeth choked back her retort. “No, Stepmother. I do not mind. I’m quite comfortable in my new room.”

Her stepmother’s brows lifted in surprise. “Then, it is settled,” the baroness said, taking a bite of her toast. “I almost forgot. There is one more thing I should mention,” she said acerbically as she sipped her tea. “I dismissed Miss Mary.”

“But ... but why? Penny loved her. And she was doing so well.” Elizabeth struggled to keep her temper in check.

“I found the woman lacking. And while I feel you would be a more suitable person to see to your sister’s education, Daniel pointed out the unsuitability of that arrangement.” She smiled in her son’s direction, almost reverently.

Elizabeth glanced from the mother to the son and would have sworn each smirked at the other. *My birthday cannot come soon enough*, she thought, thankful she had saved most of her pin money for the two years before her father’s death. Otherwise, she could not leave the house. She would not allow this to happen. “Did Lord Halsburg approve of the dismissal?” she asked in a voice devoid of emotion. Lord Halsburg, as her father’s best friend’s nephew, had been named the guardian of both her and her sister until they came of age, after his uncle died.

The baroness tossed her napkin down and stood. “How dare you question me! I run this household. Not Lord Halsburg. I can dismiss ...”



“A servant Lord Halsburg hired and pays?” Elizabeth cut in, firmly. Pride stiffened her backbone. She would show no fear to her stepmother.

From the corner of her eye, Elizabeth noted a strange, silent communication between mother and son. A subtle shake of her son’s head had her stepmother retaking her seat. Her countenance changed. “Of course, you are right, and I had forgotten that. Excuse my outburst. The stress of your father’s absence has worn my patience quite thin. So many things have changed, and I miss him so.” She took a steadying breath. “Dear Daniel pointed out my misstep, and I rehired the woman, of course.”

“Thank you, Stepmother,” Elizabeth said, cautiously exercising a tried-and-true response she had learned over the years worked on the woman. The woman’s vanity needed constant mollifying, and Elizabeth had learned long ago a small amount of contrition was a powerful tool.

The door opened, and Walters stepped inside. “Lady Rollins, Miss Rollins,” the butler said. “Lord Halsburg has sent his footman with an invitation. He awaits your response,” the butler said, offering the salver with the invitation in its center.

Elizabeth didn’t miss Walters’ omission of her son in his greeting. But Walters had been here for ages and if Delores dismissed him, the rest of the staff would likely follow him.

Her stepmother snatched it and opened it. Recalling how her stepmother had torn up a previous invitation from the Halsburg residence after the reading of the will, Elizabeth watched the side of her stepmother’s mouth twitch in anger. Placing the vellum on the table, the baroness scowled at Elizabeth. “It seems they have invited us to Earl Halsburg’s

residence for dinner. They have included your sister,” she said haughtily. “Certainly, they are unaware Daniel has temporarily moved home. Walters, give us a few minutes.”

“Yes, Lady Rollins,” the older man said, stepping outside the door.

Elizabeth glimpsed her stepbrother from beneath her lashes and didn't miss the pull of his mouth in a grimace at his mother's revelation he had moved back home. But the man restrained from comment. Yet, his drinking and gambling were no secret and had been a constant source of conflict between her stepparent and her father. Papa had not only banned her stepbrother from the house, but shortly before he had died, Elizabeth had overheard a heated discussion between her father and Daniel as she passed her father's study. Her father had told Daniel he would no longer pay his debts, meaning Daniel would have to live on an allowance. The amount he gave Daniel was not much bigger than that of her own monthly pin money. Elizabeth had bitten the back of her hand to keep from making noise as she tip-toed past the door of the study to the stairwell and ducked into her departed mother's parlor—the only place that was still decorated in the colors her mother had chosen.

“I was unaware you had moved home permanently. I thought this was a surprise visit, Daniel,” Elizabeth said carefully. Turning to her stepmother, she said, “When is the dinner?”

“It's in two days,” she bit off, apparently attempting to maintain a calm demeanor. “I have changed my mind and have made an appointment with the modiste today. I will see what she has that is ready-made and can be adjusted to your size. We will find somewhere else to trim expenses. Your pelisse is

also ready, so I will bring that home as well. Perhaps while there we will find something to match it.”

“Thank you, Stepmother,” Elizabeth managed, recalling the last time her stepmother selected a dress for her. “But coincidentally, Jane pointed out the deep rose satin dress this morning. It should need little to no alteration.”

“Excellent. Then, it is settled. I will send word back to Lord Halsburg.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### *THE NEXT DAY*

“TIME TO AWAKEN, MY LORD,” Everly said, opening the heavy green drapes and pulling them to one side of the wall. “Your mother just arrived, and the house is abuzz with activity. She is asking to see you in the drawing room so you may break your fast together.”

“Did she say what delayed her arrival?” Alan asked sleepily, squinting at the bright light streaming into his room.

“No, my lord. But she seems to have a burr under her saddle if you catch my meaning. Something unexpected may have delayed her,” Everly said carefully, as he laid out the earl’s clothing. “Your bath is drawn, and I will return to assist in a little while.”

He opened his mouth to correct the overstep of his valet but bit his tongue. “Thank you, Everly. I shall require a shave, so I’ll make quick work of the bath.” Their relationship had allowed the verbal frankness on the battlefield. Sometimes, his candor had helped. They had bonded together on the battlefield, and in that regard, they were brothers in arms.

“Yes, my lord. I will retrieve your boots while you bathe and can shave you when I return.”

“That gives me time to wake up,” Alan said, dragging himself from the warmth of the bed and wrapping his top sheet around his lower torso. “I stayed at the club a little longer last night. But it was good to see Shefford and Nelson.”

“Two of my favorites, my lord,” Everly said, walking towards the door before stopping at the door. “That reminds me. You were gone when James returned from the Rollins’ house. But the baroness agreed to come to dinner tomorrow.”

“Excellent,” Alan said. “I wish to see both young ladies for myself.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Penman told him the baroness was diverting funds intended for his wards. He shook his head in disbelief. *The young ladies and my mother’s presence should subdue my temper.* “Have Mrs. Canary consult with my mother on the menu.”

“To be sure, the baroness will question her dubious actions towards your wards before the last course of dinner is served,” the valet said, dipping his head before departing the room.

“That is my hope,” Alan muttered, stepping into the copper tub of steaming water.

Once dressed, Alan hurried to the drawing room. His stomach rumbled at the familiar smells. “Hello, Mother,” he said, walking into the room and taking his seat opposite his mother. “It’s wonderful to see you this sunny winter morning.”

“You’ve nailed the weather, son.” His mother placed her fork down. “But I suspect there’s an additional meaning behind those cheery words.”

“Can’t a son be pleased to see his mother?” Alan asked, with his back to his mother while he added rashers and toast to his plate.

Taking his seat, Alan shook out his napkin before placing it on his lap.

“I would hope so, but this time you sound too pleased,” she said, amused. “Out with it.”

Alan struggled to bite back his smile. “I have a favor to ask you, Mother.”

“I knew it!” she said, smugly taking a bite of her eggs. “How can I help?”

Taking a sip of his coffee, Alan gave a moment to think about his approach. Direct was usually the best way with his mother. It would help him in a couple of ways if his mother would help with his wards. She was just the right foil for the baroness, too. “I need you to take the lead in helping me with my two wards. According to my solicitor, Mr. Penman—who, as you recall, was also Uncle Edward’s solicitor—Lady Rollins is diverting my efforts to care for the two Rollins ladies and lining her pockets with whatever money I’m turning loose for their care.”

“How so? You’re certain he didn’t misunderstand her intentions?”

“There’s little chance of that, Mother. Penman spoke with the modiste, and all the outfits charged to me were for Lady Rollins. The girls got no new dresses. She allowed them a few things, like a pair of half-boots and a new coat, but no new dresses. I have purposely invited the baroness, and Miss Elizabeth Rollins, and her sister Penny for dinner tomorrow.”

“And she accepted,” his mother said, astonished. “Surely she doesn’t expect to get away with denying the proper upkeep for the girls!”

“I believe she does. And that is why I need your help. I find my attention must be elsewhere, but I cannot allow this woman to take advantage of these girls. Miss Elizabeth Rollins missed the last two Seasons—possibly because of her father’s death. But I must ensure that Miss Rollins takes part in the next Season, and her sister must have a proper young lady’s education and have everything she needs. I need someone to help these young women.”

“I have never had a daughter and would love to see to the young Rollins girls. And I assure you, they will gain the advantage of having a very thoughtful and caring guardian—you—who is acting in their best interest. When was the last time you spoke with them?”

Alan glanced away before looking his parent in the eye. “It’s been almost a year. That may be why she thinks she can ignore my requests. So, I bear some responsibility.”

“*Well, no more!* I will make sure she takes nary a farthing that belongs to those lovely girls,” the countess said.

“Thank you, Mother. That takes an enormous weight off my shoulders. It will make my job as guardian more effective in this case,” Alan said.

“You mentioned dinner. I take it, she will come under protest,” his mother supposed.

“I sent James to relay my invitation, and she accepted, but he said he heard loud voices from inside the drawing room. And she has taken her son, Daniel, back into the home,” Alan added.

“The son that the solicitor told us Lord Rollins had banned for illicit behavior toward the upstairs maid?” she said in astonishment.

“Yes. According to Penman, he had been banned, and shortly before Uncle Edward’s accident, Uncle Edward had withdrawn his support for Chadwick’s gambling and drinking. Daniel Chadwick had been running up debts and asking his stepfather to pay. But he stopped that. There was more, but you get the idea. And the boy is back at home, so he will accompany the baroness to dinner tomorrow evening.”

The sparkle in his mother’s eyes was all the answer he needed. Perhaps this would provide the countess with the diversion she needed.

A knock preceded Traver’s entrance. “My lord, you have a guest—Mr. Ruben.”

“I have been expecting him. Have him wait in my study.” Wiping his mouth with his napkin, Alan stood to leave, then he walked to his mother and kissed her on her head. “Thank you, Mother. I appreciate you so much.”

“I will quite enjoy this, son,” she said, sipping her tea. “Thank you.” The countess picked up her gossip rag and resumed reading it.

He’d have to thank Nelson when he saw him next. Mr. Ruben had arrived much earlier than he had expected. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Ruben,” he said, extending his hand to his guest.

A blond man with greying temples and a slight paunch entered the room. “Mr. Nelson and Lord Shefford suggested we meet, my lord. I found myself on this side of London today and thought I would take the chance to stop by to see if we



could meet,” Ruben said. The shorter man took the seat in front of the earl’s desk.

“Would you like some brandy?” Alan asked, setting out two glasses next to the decanter.

“Yes, thank you,” Ruben said, accepting a glass.

Alan sipped his brandy and sat back in his chair. “I suppose I should get straight to the point,” Alan said. “I believe my uncle could have been murdered, even though his death was considered an accident.”

“What makes you believe so, Lord Halsburg?” Ruben asked.

“For one, these letters.” Alan reached into his desk drawer and withdrew the two letters and handed them to the man. “Not meaning to confuse you, but I received these.”

The man looked up, puzzled.

“Yes, I know what you are thinking, but when I questioned Travers, my butler, about these, he mentioned my uncle had also received one shortly before his death—something his solicitor confirmed. I found that odd, so I did some checking, and it seems that my uncle’s death might not have been an accident. Uncle Edward contacted the solicitor about the note he received and asked him to find out if anyone else—or the relative of anyone else—had possibly laid claim on his title. Nothing surfaced. And now, a year after I’ve inherited, I am receiving the notes.” He eyed Ruben, hoping to gauge his thoughts, but the man maintained a very emotionless façade. “What do you think, Ruben?”

The man picked up the notes, read them, and laid them face up on the table. “Someone has you in their sights, my lord.”

“That seems to be the consensus.” Hearing someone else say what he had also thought sent chills down Alan’s spine. “And what do I do about it? Do *you* know of anyone that has openly coveted title?”

“I do not, my lord. But it is difficult to pick up on those nuanced comments if you are not listening for them,” he said, taking a sip of his brandy. “Tell me more about your role as guardian. Often the transition to guardianship can make for a bumpy road, but these things clear up ... often with no one losing their life over it,” he said, chuckling.

Alan ignored the dig. “It’s not been smooth sailing, but that is because of Lady Rollins, the widow. She resents my involvement and attempts to thwart me on every move with the girls, this time canceling their modiste appointments. Instead, she bought clothing for herself and had the bill sent to me.”

“My, that is blatant,” Ruben observed. “And stupid.”

“Yes. She is rather shallow. Normally, I would not have checked it, but I have grown suspicious of her, so we contacted the modiste. While the visit was the same day I had arranged for my wards, she canceled the girls’ appointments and used them for herself. Of course, when I call her on it—which I intend to do—she will blame it on the modiste.” Alan swirled the brandy in his glass contemplatively.

“Wasn’t the girls’ father, Baron Rollins, wealthy? He was rumored to have more money than many of the peers of the realm. What odd behavior?” Ruben inquired.

“I agree. And with everything else—especially the receipt of these notes—my concerns must be on more important matters. I have asked my mother to assist me with the young

ladies, and she has graciously accepted the challenge,” Alan said.

Both men chuckled. “I can imagine her ire when she finds she is being managed by another woman—and one who is not intimidated by her position,” Ruben said thoughtfully.

“I had not considered that, especially when she married Lord Rollins to achieve her position. Before that, she had ... traveled outside our circles,” Alan added thoughtfully. “Mother can handle herself. And I explained what had been going on.”

“I should like to meet your mother one day. I have heard many good things about her. I hope that doesn’t make you uncomfortable.”

Ruben’s comment caught him by surprise, and despite himself, Alan felt disordered over the comment. The agent, Mr. Ruben, was a handsome man and worked for the king. *Good God! Was he upset because the man was attracted to his mother?* Yet, maybe he could use making a match for his mother as another tactic to divert her attention from finding him a wife. He shook his head. *No.* He could not get comfortable with that, tempting as it might be. But he would pass the message to his mother. “I appreciate that, Ruben. Perhaps another time, she may be in attendance. But I believe she is running errands.” His attention drifted to the study door for a second. *Don’t make a liar out of me and waltz through my study door, Mother.*

“Yes, well, I apologize if I made you feel awkward,” Ruben began. “I find myself lonely these days, that is all. My wife died five years ago. An attractive woman who is my age and shares my interests appeals to me greatly. I noticed Lady

Hardin at a function earlier this year, but never gained an introduction.”

The man took a healthy drink of brandy, inspiring Alan to take a fortifying drink himself.

“Do you have any other concerns, Halsburg?”

“I do,” Alan replied. “Her son has moved into the house. I have it on good authority that he spends a great deal of time in the opium dens, not to mention the gaming houses. I should like to find out what you know about his debts—only because he now lives with his mother, and, of course, my wards.” Unexpectedly, Elizabeth Rollins’ dimpled face with large green eyes came to mind. He blinked. *Where did that come from? How has she wormed her way back into my mind?*

“You realize you could bring your wards here to live?” Ruben prodded.

*Just what I’d need. I’d never get her off my mind.* “Frankly, I’ve thought that out of the question ... at least before my mother came; it would not have been appropriate. I would rather they stay where they are comfortable unless it is necessary to move them. However, I will mention it to Mother.”

“I reference it only as an option. Give me a few days to poke around about the son. What is his name?” Ruben asked.

“Daniel Chadwick.”

“That sounds strangely familiar,” Ruben replied, thoughtfully.

“My solicitor tells me the baron stopped paying for the boy’s gambling debts. And they banned him from the family homes for attempting to ravage a housemaid. That had been a discussion between my uncle and his friend. But somehow, he

has found his way back ...” Alan let the sentence die as two other thoughts popped into his head. “No one has been named the baron’s successor. Is his barony reverting to the Crown?”

“It *has* reverted to the Crown. No legitimate heir could be found. However, the baron had extremely healthy financial resources and was wealthy outside of the barony,” Ruben said. “That includes the townhouse in Mayfair. However, I doubt being turned out by the baron had any effect on his habits.”

“I had given thought to that, too. However, it is a direction to look ... if only as it affects my wards. Would you mind letting me know what you find?” Alan asked.

“Not at all. I suggest you pay close attention to both him and his mother. Do they know how much wealth you are managing for the girls? There was a great deal of wealth there.”

“I had not considered that point. But I will ask my solicitor.”

“Thank you, Lord Halsburg,” Ruben said, draining his glass and standing. He turned serious. “I will investigate these matters for you and revisit any distant relatives that might have felt a slight at your inheriting, especially since the notes appear to question that.”

“Good. Thank you for that. Let me hear from you when you have something to tell me,” Alan said, walking him to the front door and shaking the man’s hand. “It has truly been a pleasure.”

“You will hear from me soon,” Ruben promised, accepting his hat from Travers, and replacing it on his head.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *THE NEXT DAY*

ELIZABETH ROSE EARLY and took her horse to Hyde Park, needing to free herself from the tension her stepmother and her son had created. They were up to something. She just knew it. *But what?* She wasn't frightened for herself, but Penny was only fourteen years old. Having Penny so much younger and with no place to go kept Elizabeth under her stepmother's thumb, and she knew it.

She wished with all her heart, she had taken her first two Seasons seriously, but she had never thought she would lose her father and her way of life almost at the same time. She had contemplated finding work as a governess—she could speak French and Italian, play the pianoforte, and paint. Her needlepoint was not her strong suit, but she could make herself do better. Only becoming a governess would mean leaving her sister here. And she couldn't do that. No, her father would expect her to take good care of her sister. And she intended to do just that.

Muffled voices from her father's study down the hall caught her attention as she reentered the house; she was eager

to hear but not get caught. Spotting the door to a small room to the left of her father's study, she walked slowly in that direction. The room didn't have a certain name, like a storage closet or pantry. She didn't understand its purpose. The few times she had peeked inside, she had seen stacks of books and things that looked like they belonged in the attic. When she had asked Papa, he had said that his father had had the room built for things he wanted to keep nearby, but not in the study.

It was still early in the morning, and Elizabeth had expected to find everyone still asleep. Holding her breath, careful not to be heard or seen, she edged along the wall. Earlier in the week, Jane had mentioned being approached by her stepmother to keep tabs on Elizabeth, but her maid had refused—at the risk of being turned out. Most of the servants had been with her family since before she was born; however, she would not put it past the baroness to turn one into a snitch.

When Elizabeth tried the doorknob, she was grateful it clicked open, and she quickly slid inside. The muffled tones she had heard earlier were much clearer, and she could hear her stepmother and Daniel.

“I cannot keep giving you money for your habits. You must find someone to marry,” the baroness said. “My funds are limited now that George is gone.”

“What about *her*?” Daniel asked. “You told me to get closer to Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth's body shivered with revulsion.

“Elizabeth and her sister have the bulk of his unentailed properties and wealth, but they are being held in a trust and managed by Halsburg, as their guardian.”

“What is it with that man? Why don’t you marry him, Mother? Use the same seduction trap you used with the baron.”

Elizabeth gasped. *What were they speaking of?*

“Don’t be absurd! I am too old to have children now. But George married me in hopes the baby I carried would be a male heir,” her stepmother said quietly. She sounded sad.

“Well, why didn’t you give him another brat when you lost that one? At least you’d still have the barony ... until the brat became of age,” Daniel said mockingly.

The loud sound of skin smacking skin sounded, almost as if it was next to her.

“Never speak to me like that again, *Daniel*.” Her stepmother said angrily. “And never speak of me or my child that way, or I swear, I will turn you out. You are under my roof and will treat me with respect and obey the rules of the house. The opium den is off limits—as are the gambling houses. Find a way to earn money because I cannot support you indefinitely on my measly income, especially with the habits you have developed.”

“You suggested I marry Elizabeth. That would solve all my money problems ...”

“Only if there was a lot of money there and only until your next debt. I’ve changed my mind. She won’t have an endless income,” Lady Rollins said, cutting in. “No, you must clean yourself up and find a young heiress that has a title—someone with a large dowry and a rich father that can bail you out of problems. I suggest you court Lady Rose Gunter. This was her second Season, and unless I am mistaken, she failed to gain a marriage proposal.”



“What have I to offer her? The baron settled no money on me and didn’t think to bestow one of his properties on me. I got nothing,” Daniel sneered.

“You have looks and an allowance. Your allowance would have been more had you acted responsibly while he was alive. But no, you had to force yourself on that maid and get thrown out of the house. I told you to keep your hands off the servants,” his mother scolded.

“You could have fought to change my allowance, Mother. I have a plan I intend to follow.”

Hairs prickled Elizabeth’s neck. He sounded so loud, it startled her, briefly thinking he was within inches of her face—even though he stood on the other side of the wall from her.

“Don’t sell yourself short. You are intelligent. Do nothing you will regret, son,” the baroness said. Her voice had lost the edge moments ago.

“I won’t embarrass you, *Mother*,” he jeered, exiting the room and slamming the door to the study.

Elizabeth remained still. *What was his plan?* “I have a bad feeling about this,” she muttered to herself. A moment later, the door to the study clicked shut and the familiar sound of her stepmother’s footsteps moved down the hall toward the parlor. Not wanting to get caught, Elizabeth waited five minutes before emerging. As she walked past the door to the study, Walters rounded the corner and stopped.

The older man gave a knowing look, and in that instant, Elizabeth realized he had seen her. He kept his voice barely above a whisper. “The baroness just closed the door to her parlor, Miss Elizabeth. Hurry upstairs before she steps out.” He gave an encouraging nod. “Ross put the horses up. And

your stepbrother left the house through the kitchen. I cannot speculate on where he's gone, or for how long, but he was in a rotten temper."

"Thank you, Walters."

"Of course, Miss Elizabeth. I am keeping a pledge I made when your father died to watch over you and your sister, to the best of my ability. Now, go!" he urged.

Humbled by his obvious feeling for her and Penny, Elizabeth gave him a hug. Then she took off her half-boots and hurried up the stairs, determined to keep the noise to a minimum. Checking the hall and seeing no one, she scurried into her room and shut the door behind her. Elizabeth leaned up against it in relief before a light knock sounded.

She stepped away, just in time for Jane to walk into the room carrying her chocolate and biscuits. "Miss Elizabeth, I thought you might enjoy breaking your fast in your room this morning," Jane said. "I had your bath prepared while you were exercising your horse. You allowed Ross to keep up with you, didn't you?" Jane gave Elizabeth a knowing look. She was known to give the footmen a run to keep up with her, but she had done as she knew her father would have wished this morning and taken it measured and slow. She had needed fresh air away from the smothering persona of her stepmother, and now her son. Her father must be rolling over in his grave, she thought. "Of course. I promised you. Ross rode behind me, but I didn't leave his sight. The last thing I want is to give my wicked stepmother any ammunition to use against my sister or me." An involuntary shudder shook her, as she recalled the conversation she had overheard. "I hope he isn't planning on *me* being part of his ... plan," she murmured.

"Pardon, miss?"

“I’m sorry, I was speaking a thought out loud,” Elizabeth said, horrified she had spoken her thoughts. Thank goodness it was with Jane and not her stepmother. “I’m ready for my bath.”

“If you don’t mind, miss, I’ll tidy up your room while you are bathing. I keep finding things to put away since you changed bedrooms. And I want to assist you in getting ready and making sure we have everything you need for your dinner tonight. I’m afraid that if I leave the room, the baroness finds things for me to do, and it keeps me from assisting you.”

“Thank you, Jane. I hope she will leave me alone and let me relax today. The dinner will be stressful, enough. Especially for her.” A giggle escaped Elizabeth, as she remembered the baroness’s face when she had read the earl’s invitation.

“I hope it doesn’t sound too impertinent, but I wish I had been a fly on the wall when she read the invitation,” Jane said in a loud whisper, before both girls dissolved into subdued giggles.

“It was priceless, I’ll have to admit,” Elizabeth allowed, keeping her voice down, as well. “Jane, you must be careful my stepmother doesn’t pick up on your feelings. If she questions your loyalty, she might sack you. And I’m not sure what I would do without you. Promise me.”

“I promise, Miss Elizabeth. I will do my best not to draw her ire. But you and Miss Penny should meet the earl and spend time with him if you can. Your father selected his uncle because he’s a good man and would care about the welfare of both of you. From what I’ve heard, this man is good, and he is astute. I heard he was trained as a solicitor before becoming an earl.”

“Ha! I won’t ask your source. All right ... I should bathe before the water gets cold. I won’t be long.” Elizabeth said after Jane helped her with her clothes. She disappeared into a small sitting room she had turned into a dressing room. Grabbing the small bar of jasmine soap before slipping into the warm bath, she sank, allowing the soap to glide over her body. The jasmine scent and warm water made her content to close her eyes and stay there until the water turned ice cold. After what seemed like half an hour, she rose, and toweled off, resigned to facing the rest of the day. Somehow, with Daniel’s presence, the day had taken on an ominous pallor. After overhearing the conversation earlier, she wondered what was in store for her sister and her. Jane was right. Her guardian was her only hope—a stranger she had only met a few times, but the nephew of the man her father had trusted like a brother. Perhaps she could trust him—*she needed to trust someone*.

Once she was dressed, Elizabeth sat down on the blue and white loveseat she had brought from her bedroom and placed it in front of the fireplace. The heat from the fireplace provided just the warmth she craved. She had recreated this room, determined to make it as comfortable as the one her stepmother had taken from her.

Daniel certainly didn’t need her frilly settee. Without asking, she had quietly selected a couple of chairs from another guest room. She had also had Ross and another footman exchange her vanity and other personal items from her old room with the chairs from this one. She realized her stepmother had orchestrated the move just to be mean, but it made her laugh to think of how Daniel must enjoy her sunny yellow room.

This room had been in blue tones, and it was easy enough to transition some of her favorite pieces into it. Smiling, she

picked up the book she had been reading. It was a gothic romance—something into which she could immerse herself and escape. Elizabeth settled into the settee and pulled a warm blanket over her stocking feet, as Jane neared the couch. “When Penny is dressed, ask her to join me,” Elizabeth said.

“I’ll do that, Miss Elizabeth,” Jane said as she left the room.

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“MOTHER, I appreciate your willingness to help me,” Alan said, leaning down and kissing his mother on the head. “And you look lovely, as usual.” His mother never seemed to age. His father had died shortly after his brother had been born. But his mother never so much as entertained the idea of remarrying, despite her beauty. Her dark hair had no grey, and except for a few laugh lines, his mother was as young and beautiful as she had always been.

“It’s the least I can do. You are my son, and you need me,” she said, swatting him. “Now, go on with you. I have a few things to do before we receive our guests. Walk with me to my parlor. They are expected in less than an hour. By the way, I received a note from Jeremy. Your brother wanted to surprise us with his return from his tour but thought it might be wiser to warn us ahead in case we were entertaining.”

He could not wait to see Jeremy. “If that letter is for him, please tell him we will look for him and keep a place ready for him at dinner. What a wonderful surprise,” Alan said. “I will return shortly, Mother. I need to speak to Colin and his brother Johnathan before they leave.”

“You men have spent the day closeted up. There must be something cooking,” she teased.

He laughed. “No. We’ve just been catching up. And if you must know, we are discussing my becoming a silent partner in their fencing club. Although, I hold little hope. Colin has all the money he needs, and the club is doing exceedingly well. I’m trying to talk them into expansion.”

“You boys have always talked about doing business together. Maybe this will be the one. I’ll wish you good fortune on it, son,” Lady Hardin said.

“It’s not what is on my mind, though, Mother. Uncle Edward’s death occupies my thoughts,” Alan murmured.

“How so?” His mother took a seat on the blue tapestry settee. “Sit,” she said, patting the seat.

“I have not mentioned this to you, Mother, but perhaps I should. I received two notes over the past few weeks and both of them questioned my inheriting the earldom,” Alan began. “When I questioned Travers, I discovered Uncle Edward also received a mysterious note a short while before he had his accident.”

“My goodness! That would give anyone pause. What is the magistrate doing to investigate this?” She visibly shook. “It frightens me to think someone might threaten my son.”

“Nothing. Truth be told, I have imagined that if Uncle Edward’s accident was no accident, I might also become someone’s objective.” He stood and walked to the window, clasping his hands behind his back. “Things were simpler before I assumed the earldom. Between accepting responsibilities for two young women—one almost too old to be my ward—and now this ...” He let the sentence drop and

gave his head a clearing shake. “Uncle Edward probably dismissed this, as most would have—including me, when I received the first odd note. But to get two and find that he also may have received them changes things. I have spoken to the king’s agent, Mr. Ruben. And of course, with my connections to the Crown, I don’t plan to leave a stone unturned.”

“Well, there is some comfort in that, I suppose,” she said, placing her hands in her lap. “Should I also be concerned? What about the Rollins girls?”

He sighed. “I apologize, Mother. Perhaps I should have followed Society’s dictates and not worried you about these matters. But I have always benefited from your uncanny ability to spot a problem. You have always been my ‘fixer.’ Whether it was a skinned knee, or deciding which friend to holiday with at school, you have always given me the benefit of your intuition without expectation. I hope you will give this matter perspective. Maintain a heightened awareness, but don’t let it define your day, or I shall regret telling you and adding worries to your already full agenda. The girls’ stepmother will be a big enough handful, and you will need your faculties to deal with her antics.”

His mother beamed. “I promise not to let it bother me. But knowledge is power, and the more I’m aware of, the better, especially considering your wards.”

“Pay close attention to her son, Daniel Chadwick. He shall most likely attend this evening. I’m hoping between the two of us, we can keep him under observation. If we are at two opposite ends of the table, we can monitor him without his being aware.”

“You inherited that from your father. You are an excellent judge of character. Go! See your friends and discuss the

venture and this matter. I will see to my correspondence. Our guests will be here before too long," his mother said, withdrawing a sheet of vellum.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *THAT EVENING*

“ARE you ready to get dressed, my lady?” Jane asked.

“Oh yes. I fear if I’m in here alone much longer, Delores will take the seat opposite me and ask me to tell her what I’ve read. She’s been extremely attentive today,” Elizabeth said. “Sickeningly so,” she said under her breath.

“Ha! I heard that, my lady. Careful—the walls around here may have ears. We don’t know what she offered others to spy for her—only what she offered me,” Jane whispered. “I dare not let her know I told you.”

“I understand, believe me,” Elizabeth said, picking through her jewelry. She picked up her mother’s pearls and lovingly threaded them through her fingers. “I miss you, Mama,” she whispered, swiping a rogue tear from her face. “I hate her. Mama told me to never use that word, but I cannot help it. Delores doesn’t like Penny, and I fear she has some sick plan up her sleeve where I am concerned.” A sick feeling formed in the pit of her stomach as she recalled Daniel’s words she had overheard from outside her father’s study. She could not share what she had heard ... with anyone, not even with Jane.

*“Why don’t you marry him, Mother? Use the same seduction trap you used with the baron.”* Had her stepmother tricked her father into a marriage with pregnancy? Elizabeth barely recalled her stepmother being pregnant. If memory served, she had lost the baby—a boy—a few months after she married her father. Elizabeth had mourned the loss of her baby brother and recalled her stepmother took to her bed for months, despondent over the death of her baby.

“Your stepmother is jealous. Always has been,” Jane whispered, as she withdrew the rose-satin evening dress from the wardrobe and hung it on the edge of the door before stepping back to admire it. “Lovely! The rose pink compliments your rich brown hair. Your mama loved you in pink. You are very much like her. She was always happy and beautiful—truly a gentle soul. “

“Why did you say that ... about the baroness?” Elizabeth asked, tracing her finger down the rich satin of the dress.

Jane remained quiet for a moment before speaking. “Your mama, God rest her, would be horrified at the things that woman has done to her home and the slights she pays her daughters. I’m quiet around her ... not hard of hearing.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I am looking forward to dinner at Lord Halsburg’s residence—as long as I don’t have to sit at the table with Daniel.” Her stepmother had made up no less than three occasions where she stuck her head in Elizabeth’s room, asking her how she felt. It was easy to imagine what that was all about. If she had even hinted at a trace of illness, Lady Delores Rollins would cancel the visit under the pretense of family illness. Having witnessed that behavior enough times when her father lived, Elizabeth went out of her way to show

herself as hale and looking forward to the evening—always smiling when her stepmother visited.

The woman might have done it anyway, but Elizabeth suspected she was leery of the earl's power over whatever her father had left her and Penny. And she wished she had overheard more between mother and son that morning—something that would have given her an idea of what the earl held in trust for her sister and her. Her stepmother whined about money constantly—something Elizabeth was unaccustomed to.

A tap on the door was all the warning they had got before Lady Rollins glided into the room. She walked to Elizabeth's vanity, where Jane was finishing the last few touches on Elizabeth's hair.

“Elizabeth, you were right about the dress. It is your color and looks nice,” Lady Rollins said pointedly, before glancing around the room—as if she had been looking for something but settled on nothing. “We should leave. His lordship will expect us.” As she left, she stopped at the door. “Your pearls would look lovely with the dress.” Then she left just as quickly as she had entered.

Jane picked up the pearls. “You had laid these out to wear. Shall I help you put them on?”

“Yes, thank you,” Elizabeth said, turning around and carefully picking up the cascade of curls Jane had created. *How odd for her to recommend my mother's pearls to me.*

Jane fastened the pearls, and Elizabeth slowly lowered the curls. “I suppose I'm ready.”

THE RIDE to the earl's house was short and quiet, except for the clapping sound of the horses' hooves on the cobblestone bricks. Elizabeth sat with Penny, facing her stepmother and stepbrother. Nary a sound passed between them in the stale air of the carriage. When they arrived, a smartly uniformed footman stepped out to open the door, and Daniel stepped out first without waiting for his mother. *Daniel has the manners of a goat*, she thought.

As she waited for Penny to depart the carriage, she heard the earl stop him at the door. "Welcome to Halsburg House, Mr. Chadwick, Lady Rollins. Please allow James to escort you to the parlor where my mother awaits. I will follow with your lovely daughters, Lady Rollins.

When she and Penny emerged from the carriage, Elizabeth looked up into the eyes of her very handsome guardian and her heart did a strange flip.

"Welcome, ladies," the earl said, stepping between them and extending his arms. "My mother and I are happy to see you both." He leaned over and kissed Elizabeth's gloved hand, sending a fissure of feeling up and down her neck.

"Thank you, my lord," Penny and Elizabeth said together.

She caught herself staring at the earl, so Elizabeth focused on the steps to avoid embarrassment. When last they met, she had focused more on what he was saying—he was to be her new guardian after the death of her father's best friend, a man she had called 'uncle' most of her life. Of course, there was no actual relation to the man, but he had always been kind and generous to both her and Penny. Losing him had been like losing the last link to her father—so she hadn't see the man in front of her, at least not as she saw him today. She couldn't fathom having a guardian who couldn't have been over five

years her senior. And one that looked like him ... *so handsome.*

“Ladies,” he said, escorting them into the drawing room. “Allow me to introduce you to my mother, Lady Hardin.”

A beautiful, dark-haired woman stood with her back to them while speaking to Elizabeth’s stepmother. Upon hearing her name, she spun around and, with a warm smile on her face, walked to them. Both girls dipped in a curtsy. “These are two lovely young ladies, son,” she gushed. “I am sure we will get on famously.”

Approvingly, Elizabeth took in the rich burgundy and dark wood tones of the rooms. It was beautifully appointed with navy blue and gold-toned accents. The room’s masculinity fit Lord Halsburg perfectly.

“You must be Mr. Chadwick,” Lord Halsburg said, extending a hand to Daniel, who stood next to a burgundy couch. “Pleased to meet you.”

She gave a side glance and noticed the earl was looking her way. But it was her stepbrother’s expression that caught her breath. Daniel looked angry. Thankfully, he remained over there, unable to walk away from the conversation with the earl. Whatever they were discussing, Daniel looked like he had become animated, with his attention focused on the earl. While she couldn’t make out what they were saying, Elizabeth caught herself eavesdropping, mesmerized by the warm, rich tenor of Lord Halsburg’s voice, and perplexed by the way it soothed her.

“Would you care for a glass of sherry or lemonade?” Lady Hardin asked, drawing her from her musings. With an effervescent smile, the woman gave Penny a quick wink

before giving a slight nod to the attending footman to serve drinks.

Lord Halsburg's mother edged closer to Elizabeth and Penny, who stood near their stepmother. "Lord Halsburg has asked me to commission seasonal clothing for you both. I hope you don't mind, but I made appointments with Madame Trousseau. She looks forward to meeting you."

Elizabeth heard Penny inhale and smiled. This was just what Penny needed. Her sister had outgrown her wardrobe, and Delores had forced her to wear out-of-date dresses, hemmed, like today, so they would fall to the right length. She could not disappoint her sister. Elizabeth nodded. "Thank you, Lady Hardin. We have never been to Madame Trousseau's establishment and look forward to that."

With a warm smile, Lady Hardin clasped her hands and turned to their stepmother. "This will be delightful. You will, of course, attend, won't you, Lady Rollins? Madame Trousseau would be happy for you to commission a new frock for the holidays."

Had Elizabeth not already swallowed her sherry, she feared she might have choked. It seemed clear the earl had indeed discovered someone had canceled their modiste appointments. This trip was his way of letting Lady Rollins know. She was starting to adore her guardian.

"I would expect Lady Delores Rollins will pay for her own dresses," At the covert glance Lady Hardin gave her son at the mention of the visit to Madame Trousseau's establishment, Elizabeth wondered if her stepmother's recent trip to the dressmaker had been billed to the earl. Her stepmother's lips puckered as if she had just swallowed a sour pickle. "Well,

certainly, I shall love to attend. I will need to assist my lovely ... daughters,” she finished dryly.

“Excellent,” his mother said demurely, with a broad smile. “With Christmastide almost upon us, I took a chance and scheduled it for tomorrow afternoon. I hope that time will work for everyone.”

Elizabeth noticed Penny nodding, so she smiled and nodded as well. A side glance at her stepmother showed the woman looking slightly befuddled and stalling on her reply. This would be an interesting outing.

“You will come with us, won’t you, Lady Rollins? It won’t be the same without you,” Lady Hardin prodded sweetly.

“Y ... yes of course! I look forward to it. Your kind gesture caught me unawares, that is all,” her stepmother replied, forcing a smile. “It will be a grand outing!” she cooed.

“I have arranged a light luncheon at the restaurant next to Madame Trousseau’s, and of course, we must stop and get an ice at Gunter’s. It will be such a wonderful girl’s day!”

A footman entered the room. “Dinner is served.”

“Shall we?” Lady Hardin said to Penny. Penny nodded and the two of them walked into the room, followed by her stepmother, escorted by Earl Halsburg. Daniel held out his arm, and Elizabeth reluctantly accepted it.

“It’s my pleasure, Elizabeth,” he said with a wicked grin. “This should prove an interesting dinner.”

Elizabeth feigned a smile but focused her attention on her tall, handsome guardian, refusing to respond. Luckily, Lady Hardin had arranged seating, and Elizabeth found herself seated at the right-hand side of the earl. Strangely, a tremor of excitement worked its way down her arms and across her

shoulders, as she covertly studied the man next to her. The scuffing of a chair against the table pulled her attention to Daniel, who found his place marker across from Elizabeth.

“This is a pretty room, isn’t it, Stepmother?” Penny said, happily taking her seat next to Lady Hardin, while her stepmother seated herself to the right of Lady Hardin.

As they worked their way through the first course of the meal, the conversation focused on the upcoming girls’ day—mostly on Penny’s excitement as she kept discussing the excursion. Her sister’s excitement was so contagious, her stepmother began to contribute ideas about their outing—a shocking development.

Oddly, a vacant dinner plate sat between her and Penny. While she noticed it, Elizabeth felt no urge to comment on it. *However, Daniel did—with a mouthful of food.*

“Who’s the plate for?” he asked, nodding to the plate between his two stepsisters, in between bites of buttered bread.

Elizabeth made it a practice not to look in his direction at the table, or she would leave hungry. She set her soup spoon down and stared into the bowl, biting her lower lip to avoid smiling. From beneath her lashes, she noticed her stepmother had done the same, unwilling to take credit for her son’s lack of etiquette.

“I apologize for not saying something earlier,” the earl said, smoothly. “My younger brother, Jeremy, is on his way home. We’ve instructed the servants to leave a place setting for dinners in case he joins us during our meal. I was reluctant to alter it.”

As if on cue, someone cleared their throat from the doorway. “Ahem.”



“Jeremy!” Lady Hardin said, excitedly turning to see him. “My goodness, we had not known when to expect you, but hoped for your return every day, as you can see.” She pointed to the setting.

“Do not stand, Mother. I expected making it here at dinnertime as a surprise and changed at my last stop. But I apologize for interrupting your dinner party.”

“Nonsense! Allow me to introduce you. These are our friends, Lady Rollins, and her son, Mr. Daniel Chadwick,” Lady Hardin said.

“And there are her stepdaughters, who are also my wards, Miss Elizabeth Rollins and her sister, Miss Penny Rollins,” Alan added.

Jeremy arched a brow, and a knowing look passed between the brothers, before Jeremy took a seat—a look Elizabeth didn’t miss.

“Lady Rollins is the widow of Baron George Rollins, Uncle Edward’s good friend, correct?” Jeremy asked. He gave her a curt bow. “My uncle spoke fondly of your husband. Whenever Alan or I visited, they were always together, it seemed. We grew up knowing your husband, almost like an additional uncle. He is missed.”

“Thank you, my lord. I was unaware of that. I know he considered your uncle his dearest friend—almost a brother,” Lady Rollins said, glancing between the earl and his brother. Giving what appeared to be an honest smile, she added. “You boys look the epitome of night and day! I’ll bet you have heard that often.”

Lady Hardin laughed. “Yes! My eldest gets his coloring from me and Jeremy from his father.”

Indeed, Jeremy looked the opposite of his brother, except in height. Both men stood approximately six feet, Elizabeth thought, judging from their being as tall as the door openings, which were noticeably larger than those in her house. Her guardian was the most handsome man she had ever met, but his brother was a close second. The earl's dark hair and grey eyes contrasted with his younger brother's short blond waves and brown eyes.

The commentary seemed to relax everyone as the second course was served. "I only missed the turtle soup," remarked Jeremy. He held his hand up to the footman, who started to serve it. "If you don't mind, James, I will pass. I've had lots of soup on my tour."

"As you wish, sir," he said and left the room, taking the soup tureen back to the kitchen.

"I had hoped to make it back in time for dinner. I did not know we would have such lovely guests," Jeremy said, giving a meaningful look at his brother.

"I thought it would be an excellent opportunity to reintroduce myself to the baroness and her family." Alan turned to the baroness. "I asked my mother to assist me with the things young ladies need—clothing, dancing lessons, a governess, and instructors for painting and other special activities."

The baroness opened her mouth to say something closed it, and then opened it again. "I see," she said tightly. "I can perfectly manage my household, my lord, and that includes the needs you mentioned."

"I'm sure you can agree it is best for me to oversee their financial needs and ensure their activities are directed in the proper, intended direction through personal observation—in

which, I am asking my mother to serve in my stead when it makes the most sense.” He paused meaningfully. “I believe this will work effectively. Of course, we shall consult with you on certain matters—for example, the time and place of their lessons.” His voice was gentle but firm.

“I would be pleased to provide direction for the girls, as I have been doing, my lord. Elizabeth is nearly too old to be considered a ward—and you are only a few years her senior. This is highly unusual,” the baroness sputtered.

“I agree on both counts, Lady Rollins. Miss Elizabeth is coming of age in a matter of months.”

Elizabeth’s face heated, unsure of how to behave, as they talked about her as if she was not in the room.

“Your husband charged me to make financial decisions for his daughters and see to their needs.” The earl gave a meaningful pause and glanced at Elizabeth before continuing. “Partly for the reasons you just named, I will ensure Miss Elizabeth Rollins has a London Season beginning in April. In the meantime, I would welcome your help, but Miss Elizabeth has been out of mourning for some time and could not take part in the last Season. I intend that both Miss Elizabeth and Miss Penny stay in London for the duration of the Season. Mother has agreed to chaperone Elizabeth and help navigate her way back into Society. And I plan to move Lady Penny’s governess to our townhouse once the bedrooms we want them to use are suitably rehabilitated.”

Elizabeth caught a flash of surprise cross Lady Hardin’s face before it broke into a smile.

The baroness shook her head. “No. The girls cannot leave. You assured me last year when you assumed their guardianship that they would stay in the house.”

Her stepmother's concern was not for them leaving; it was the loss of income the woman would have for the upkeep of her household if Elizabeth and Penny moved to Lord Halsburg's townhouse.

Fortunately, their footman came in with a course change, and while everyone was preoccupied with the delivery of the new course, Elizabeth looked over at the earl and caught his gaze. "Lord Halsburg, could we speak? Perhaps after dinner?" She spoke in guarded tones, hoping not to draw Daniel's attention.

The earl smiled at her. "Of course, Lady Elizabeth."

He rested a hand near hers—barely touching—but enough to send waves of excitement to Elizabeth's midsection.

"Allow me to stop by the parlor following the meal and we can find a few minutes to speak," he said, staring into her eyes.

"Thank you, my lord," Elizabeth returned.

A shiver shook her as Elizabeth looked across the table and noticed Daniel listening to the conversation around him and wearing a slight smirk.

Elizabeth was determined to protect her sister. She refused to allow Daniel Chadwick to have the upper hand. As she ate, she mulled over her question. The earl had been sending an agreed-upon amount of maintenance for Penny and herself. If he planned to move them here, she would speak to the earl about allowing Jane and Miss Mary to come, too. Her stepmother had threatened often enough to discharge her maid over what she cost to keep.

Ten minutes later, his mother stood. "Ladies, why don't we withdraw to the parlor?"

Elizabeth removed to the parlor with Lady Hardin, Penny, and the baroness. She noticed James stop Lady Hardin and hand her a message, but thought nothing of it.

About ten minutes later, the earl stopped by the parlor. “May I speak with Miss Rollins?” he asked his mother, giving a slight nod in Elizabeth’s direction. “I promise to bring her right back, unharmed. If your maid can follow, that would be helpful.”

“Of course, son.”

He waited for Elizabeth and Martha, his mother’s maid. They walked to his study and he offered her a seat. Martha took a seat across the room, in front of the fireplace, and waited. “My lord, I didn’t want to pull you away from your company.”

“Nonsense. I am here for you and your sister. How can I help you?”

“I had a question but could not feel comfortable asking it at dinner,” she said softly.

“Perfectly understandable. Does your stepbrother always stare at you? I noticed he did that quite a bit,” the earl said.

“Yes ... and it’s disconcerting. But in my household, there is not much I can do. He is ... unsettling. And that’s part of what I want to speak with you about. He was banned from our house by my father years ago for molesting one of the staff. I do not know why he is back, but I fear for our safety with him,” she began.

“Has he made any inappropriate gestures?”

“No. He has not, other than his disturbing way of showing up when unexpected and getting too close when he wants to speak with me. It is for my sister, Penny, I am most concerned.

She is impressionable and young. Without my father in the house, I fear for us. I recall you mentioning moving us to your townhouse, and I wanted to ask if you would also take my lady's maid and Penny's governess."

"The governess your stepmother fired?"

So he knew. She wasn't surprised. "Yes."

"Our cooks are friends. Yes. I will bring them both. And we plan to move you here when the rooms are finished being refurbished."

He touched her back. "You are trembling."

"Only because I heard Daniel's voice in the hallway. I fear he was outside the door eavesdropping."

"I will make sure he doesn't bother you, Miss Elizabeth. It was my mother's idea to move you. But it makes sense. It's an immense home and with a proper chaperone, there is no reason you cannot move into my townhome."

"Please, call me Elizabeth. It seems too formal. You are my guardian, after all."

## CHAPTER SIX

### *THE NEXT DAY*

ALAN MET his brother on the stairs, heading to the drawing room. “You must have the same thought as me.” He laughed. “I’m starving.”

“I’m hungry, too.” Jeremy laughed too. “Last night’s dinner held more excitement than most. I’m afraid I left more on my plate than I should have.”

“I knew it could get tense but had not planned to come away from it hungry,” Alan confessed.

“I’m rather happy I didn’t miss out on your guests, even though I felt bad about interrupting your party. You have your hands full with that family, dear brother. Not the young ladies, but the stepmother and her son.”

“I’m beginning to see that,” Alan said, opening the door to the drawing room. “I could use your opinion on some things. The whole situation has me irritated,” Alan confessed, lowering his voice. “I had no wish for any of this. Yet, I’m drowning in conflict.”

“Whoa, where is this coming from, brother?” Jeremy asked, patting his brother on the back. “I watched you last evening. You took a difficult situation and hit it head-on. I take it the baroness has been skimming from the girls and they are not getting what they need.” He held his hand up when the footman moved to serve them. “We’ve got this, James.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hardin.”

Alan filled his plate with eggs, rashers, and toast and sat down, where he noticed James had placed his mother’s broadsheet and his newspaper. “It seems we beat Mother this morning,” he observed, laughing.

“She’s most likely getting dressed for the shopping trip. Do you think the baroness will go?” Jeremy asked.

“I don’t think so,” Alan supposed. “I believe she realized we were on to her antics. I almost found it hard to conduct myself as a gentleman, and at the same time, ensure she knows I was serious where my wards are concerned.”

“Yes ... your wards,” teased Jeremy. “Elizabeth is quite a beauty. And her younger sister holds great promise to be one as well. She’s fourteen and already a lovely young lady.”

Alan couldn’t reconcile with the pang of jealousy that shot through him at his brother’s mention of Elizabeth. True, he had looked in her direction when he thought no one had seen him, but her auburn brown hair and soft curls were the perfect frames for her large green eyes. They were almost a blue-green, something he could not recall ever seeing on a woman before. *How had he not remembered the color of her eyes until last night?*

“Did I lose you, brother?” Jeremy teased.



“I’m sorry. I was thinking of something from last night,” Alan quickly amended.

“Of course,” Jeremy said superciliously, as he poured himself a glass of tea.

“Be serious, Jeremy,” Alan chided, good-humoredly. “I do, however, think you have grasped the situation, exactly. I hated to strong-arm the situation, but I feel the only attachment the baroness has to these girls is to their inheritance.” Alan indicated to his brother to sit next to him, as they walked to the sideboard and took a plate.

“Do you plan to move the ladies here?” Jeremy asked. “Mother has always wanted a daughter. Don’t you think you are playing with matches here?”

“What do you mean?” Alan asked.

“I cannot think you do not see the attraction,” Jeremy said.

“No. I am her guardian. It is my job to maintain her safety,” Alan said, shaking his head and hoping to clear it of images of Miss Elizabeth Rollins. “That’s the reason I’ve asked Mother to chaperone her.”

“I see,” Jeremy said astutely. “With no male heir, Mother said the barony went back to the Crown. Something makes little sense. Rollins had lots of money, didn’t he?”

“I see where you are going with this. And yes, he had a lot of money. According to my solicitor—who was also the baron’s—the baron changed his will shortly before his death, making Uncle Edward the guardian of his daughters. About six months before his death. The baron reduced Daniel’s inheritance to only a small allowance. His wife got a third of his estate, which was substantial. He had investments in the East India Company, as well as excellent returns on others.”

“Which begs the question, why is she so worried about money?” mused Jeremy.

“Exactly. I got a bill from her modiste dated the day she was supposed to take the girls for a new wardrobe. Yet, when my valet questioned her, Everly said the modiste denied taking any orders for the girls, short of a new pelisse and hat—outerwear—for each of them. Mother noticed Penny’s dress last evening was out of style for a child her age.” He shook his head. “Elizabeth has less than six months before her twenty-first birthday when she will leave my guardianship. I owe it to her to make sure she and her sister are treated decently—as her father intended.”

“She is beautiful,” Jeremy observed. “Miss Elizabeth.”

“Yes, she is,” Alan said. A smile formed on his lips. “Very true. I tried to handle the guardianship from a distance, but as you’ve noticed, that didn’t work. Miss Elizabeth has poise and a sense of herself I don’t see in the cloying debutantes. I suspect it could be her learned sensitivity to her stepsibling and stepparent. It’s obvious to me that the baroness does only what’s needed. She has no feelings for her husband’s daughters. And I can’t get a good read on her relationship with her son.” *Miss Elizabeth also has the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen*, he thought.

“He’s vulgar,” Lady Hardin said, walking into the room. Her sons stood as James pulled out her chair. After she sat, the footman filled her cup with tea and brought her a plate of food. “Thank you, James. That will be all.”

“Mother, what time do you plan to leave for your excursion with my wards?” Alan asked, changing the subject.

“At ten o’clock,” she replied, applying some sugar to her tea. “It should be an interesting day.”

“My guess is the baroness will back out,” Jeremy offered. “Her ill intentions towards the girls were fairly exposed during dinner.”

“I hope so, although a part of me wanted to observe the interaction between them. I am confused why she would divert money intended for the girls for her purpose.”

James reentered the room. “My lord, Mr. Ruben is here to see you.”

“Show him in, James,” Alan instructed.

“Good morning, Mr. Ruben. Join us. James, can you get him a plate?”

“Yes, my lord,” the footman said, filling a plate from the sideboard and placing it before their guest, and stepping from the room.

Alan laid down his fork. “It’s good to see you, Ruben. Let me introduce my brother, Mr. Jeremy Hardin.”

Ruben dipped his head. “Nice to have your acquaintance, sir.”

“Have your investigations revealed anything?” Alan asked.

“Not on your uncle’s death,” he said. “However, I uncovered some rather interesting information on Mr. Chadwick.”

“Do tell,” Lady Hardin said, setting her teacup on the table.

“He has been accruing debts all over London, but since his stepfather’s death, his credit has experienced a renewal, of sorts—until a few weeks ago. And he’s a terrible gambler. Drinks excessively and never wins. After the baron’s death, perhaps coincidentally, he seemed to have a more fluent flow

of cash at his disposal. But the tap seems to have waned again.”

“Do you think someone was financing him?” Alan asked.

“I believe his mother was his banker,” Ruben said. “But it’s my belief she didn’t realize it until recently. That could be the reason she moved him home.”

“How could he have his hands in her money without her knowledge?” Jeremy asked.

“I have no certain answer to that, but I suspect he stole from his mother,” Ruben said.

Lady Hardin audibly sucked in her breath.

“Banknotes paid most of the debt. I think he might have taken them, somehow. But word has it, she cut him off, completely, forcing his move back home,” Ruben explained while glancing around the room. “And there’s something else. Miss Elizabeth Rollins’ name was floated when he was deep in his cup one night, according to a source.”

Alan felt a surge of protectiveness he had not expected. “That’s ludicrous. He is her *stepbrother*,” he shouted, seeing Elizabeth Rollins’ face in his mind. She was innocent, and he was responsible for her. Perhaps that was the reason she kept intruding on his thoughts.

“Alan?” his mother prodded softly. Both his mother and Jeremy were watching him.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about what you were telling me,” he apologized.

“My Lord, the man is unscrupulous and holds no loyalty to anyone but himself. While she is his stepsister, he apparently

feels no brotherly love in her direction. We will let nothing happen to the girl,” Ruben said.

“How can you be certain?” Jeremy asked. “He has free rein and lives in the same house with the girls.”

“I can change that,” Alan asserted without thinking, slightly perplexed as to his roiling gut and the anger he felt. He would not retract it. He meant it. If that was the only way he could make sure she and her sister were safe, he would move her into his house.

“I believe we should take our time on this, Alan,” Lady Hardin said, placing her hand on the table next to her son’s. She looked at Ruben. “We have discussed this, and to that end, have rooms being redecorated for the girls.”

“Keep an eye on things,” Ruben cautioned. “Of all I heard, that disturbed me. It appeared he was attempting to damage her reputation. But to what end?”

“Oh, I can think of what end. If he ruins her, he will have to marry her,” Jeremy asserted.

“No! Surely, he would not do that to ...” Lady Hardin began.

“A stepsister?” Alan interrupted. “Jeremy may be right. They banned the man from the house when he was barely fifteen and sent him to school. He spent his holidays with friends, one supposes. When he became of age, I’m sure the baron gave him a suitable income, but he spent it gaming, drinking, and ... on other pleasures,” Alan finished.

“I am perfectly aware of what he did,” his mother appended. “And I’m in total agreement that these girls should move here. But first, you must establish a relationship with them, son,” Lady Hardin interjected. “Today would be a

splendid opportunity to do that. Why don't you and your brother meet us for lunch at the Harrington Restaurant? It would be an opportunity to relax and get to know your wards."

"You make a good point, Mother. As I have nothing else scheduled for today, I will be glad to join you," Alan agreed.

Mr. Ruben withdrew his pocket watch from his waistcoat and checked the time. "I hate to end our time together, but I must meet the man I've assigned to watch the Rollins' townhouse." Standing, he pocketed his watch.

Alan stood and shook his hand. "Thank you for coming and updating us. Alert me to anything you turn up on my uncle's accident. I will walk you to the door."

"Certainly, my lord," Ruben said. He gave a swift bow to Lady Hardin and left the room with her son.

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THE DOOR CLOSED, and Jeremy leaned back in the chair and watched his mother move the remains of her food around her plate. She piddled with stuff when she was planning or thinking through things. "I know what you are doing, Mother. And it won't work," Jeremy said.

"I cannot know what you are inferring," his mother said, giving a coy smile.

"You hope to strike up more than a familiarity between my brother and Miss Rollins," Jeremy said.

"I am sure I don't know what you are speaking of. And even if what you say had a dribble of merit, one cannot control another person's sense of attraction to another," she replied.

“True. You are counting on Alan being blinded by ... his attraction to his ward. That is something he will fight, if indeed he feels it. We both know you have always wanted a daughter, and with these two wards, you might have found yourself at least one to cater to. Miss Rollins will be in the marriage mart soon enough.”

“True,” she said. “And if she found your brother interesting, who are we to quibble with whom a person finds attractive?”

“This scheme could backfire. You realize that?” Jeremy said.

“Fine! I’m dabbling a bit. But I see it as ‘encouragement.’ I can count on your ... discretion, can’t I, son?” She gave him a meaningful look.

“Certainly. You have my word.”

“Good. Then I can count on seeing you at the restaurant at lunch.” She laid her broadsheet back on the table and took a final sip of her tea. Standing, she gave a slight jerk to her skirt, displacing the wrinkles, and left the room.”

“My homecoming has been entertaining, to say the least,” he murmured. “I should think today’s luncheon will only add to my enjoyment.”

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ELIZABETH’S DAY began with her sister bounding into her room.

“Wake up, sleepyhead!” Penny said, springing onto the bed. “Lizbeth, I am so excited! I am so happy to get new clothes. It’s been forever since I’ve had a new dress! Did you

like the earl? I liked the earl. And his brother was really handsome! Don't you think so?"

Elizabeth rose from her bed to see her sister swirl around in a circle, holding her nightgown as if it was a ballgown and she was a princess. "Whoa! One thought at a time. I'm still dusting the cobwebs from my brain," she said, tweaking her sister's nose.

"But didn't you like the earl? I saw him watching you. And that dreadful Daniel was watching. I hope he will leave soon," Penny droned.

"Yes, I do like the earl. I'll admit, he was much more engaging than the first time we met. Which was at Uncle Edward's funeral," she said, realizing that was probably why his character had seemed rather sedate. It had been a funeral. "And yes! I'm excited for you! Jane told me she had added matching fabric to the bottom of your dresses to hem them. Have I answered all your questions?" Elizabeth playfully ticked off imaginary questions on her fingers.

"No! You left off the part about his brother. Jeremy! He was so handsome."

"And you are so young! Yes, he is attractive. And since you have sort of claimed him," she teased, "it wouldn't be right for your sister to also remark on his looks."

"Yes, you can. You just cannot touch!" Penny said playfully.

"Penny! I think you have been sneaking into my romance novels. I must remember to check under your bed!" Elizabeth replied, laughing.

The door opened and Jane entered with a tray of biscuits and chocolate. "Miss Mary told me your sister had abandoned



her for breakfast, so I added some biscuits to your tray,” she said, smiling. “You two should get ready. Lady Hardin will be here in an hour.”

“Can we sit in front of your fire and eat, Lizbeth?” Penny asked, excited.

“Of course, Penny! And we can plot out our day,” Elizabeth replied. She adored her little sister and wanted the best of everything for her. Since Papa died, she had done her best to shield Penny from Delores and her viciousness, but it had been impossible. Her stepmother’s wrath knew no bounds. When she had fired Miss Mary, Elizabeth had felt her temper boil, but before she had said anything, apparently the woman had realized the earl would step in, so she had rehired the governess.

*Penny and I must get away from this house*, she realized. Perhaps she should take this shopping trip seriously. The Earl of Halsburg’s mother mentioned they were having some rooms refurbished. So that was an option. Or, if she found someone to marry, perhaps the earl would allow Penny to live with her. “But first I need to find a husband,” she murmured. And that lent even more importance to the shopping trip ahead of them. There had been a couple of suitors before her father died, but his death had left her numb, and she had stopped taking their calls. Oh, if she had only had a crystal ball and could have seen into the future, she might have done things differently, she thought miserably.

*No, you wouldn’t*, a voice in her head said.

“Let’s get ready, Penny, dear! We shall make this a wonderful day and have lots of fun. I cannot wait to see what fabrics we can find for you. Just think! You will have all new

clothes!” Something her younger sister should have had all along.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“THIS COLOR GOES FABULOUSLY with your unusual eyes, Miss Elizabeth,” Lady Hardin said, fingering the azure satin. “Madame Trousseau has a wonderful selection of fabrics.”

“I have always gravitated towards the blues and deep rose pinks, but don’t recall ever having a dress made from this color,” Elizabeth added approvingly.

“Oh, *oui!* I love ze color on you, Miss Rollins. It is lovely. You and your sister are so lovely,” Madame Trousseau said, walking up behind them. “If you don’t mind, I would like to help ze little sister select some fabrics.”

“Oh yes! Thank you.” Elizabeth watched the modiste take Penny aside and show her fabrics. “Thank you, Lady Hardin,” she said, facing her benefactor. “This is most generous of you and your son.”

“Pish!” She waved her hand dismissively. “Think nothing of it! Your father was my husband’s brother’s dearest friend. Edward would have insisted, Miss Rollins.”

“Please call me Elizabeth or even Liz. My friends called me Liz.”

“I have always loved the name Elizabeth, so I shall call you that,” Lady Hardin said. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“What do you mean *called*?”

Elizabeth sucked in her breath, feeling suddenly squeamish. She had not meant to call attention to her and Penny’s virtual isolation from their friends. “Since Papa’s death, my stepmother prefers that my friends *not* visit.”

“Really, Elizabeth? She *said* that?” Lady Hardin’s shock was clear. “But *why*?”

“Yes. She asked that we not have guests in the house.” Lady Hardin’s features hardened.

“Elizabeth, what about you visiting your friends?” His mother persisted. “Surely, she did not forbid that.”

Elizabeth found she liked Lady Hardin. The woman was a force—a *supportive force*. It was nice to have someone she could talk to again. It had been so long since she’d had someone who cared about her innermost thoughts. Father had loved her, but their relationship had been different than her mother’s relationship with her. Elizabeth had been fourteen when Mama died. Except for Jane, there had been few other females in her life. “I used to visit my friends, but when I returned, I would find my room disturbed. Things were moved. And worse, pieces of jewelry my father had given me went missing ... little by little. They were special pieces that my mother wore every day—including Mama’s sapphire wedding ring and a gold necklace with a locket that had a small painting of her and my father on their wedding day. I suppose they were more sentimental than valuable.”

“That’s terrible. I recall seeing the locket around your mother’s neck when she visited,” Lady Hardin replied.

“Of course, I could not point fingers. When I realized it happened only when I left the house, I resolved to stay home.

When her ... irritation ... extended to Penny, I was glad I was home to buffer Penny. Lady Rollins and I occasionally have appointments together, but when they occur, nothing is disturbed.”

Lady Hardin pursed her lips. “The intrusion into your room happened *before* your stepbrother moved to the household?”

“Yes, but please do not worry. Since I limit my excursions, my room has stayed ... intact,” Elizabeth explained. She found it freeing to finally say something about this harassment—and theft.

“What about today? The baroness chose not to come. Will that be a problem?” the earl’s mother asked.

“No. I took precautions and hid my jewelry in my sister’s room. It is a secret hiding place I found as a child when I lived in the nursery. I don’t think Penny knows about it,” Elizabeth said.

“I should not say this, but my head literally wants to explode! I would never have thought her capable—or anyone capable—of such devilry. My son is your guardian. Bring your jewelry to our townhouse, and we shall keep it there for you. If I have my way, you will move from that house. *Her treatment of you and your sister is awful.*”

“Madame, I see you have selected the aqua mist satin,” Madame Trousseau said, approaching them. “Would you like to have a dress made in that? I could suggest a beautiful overlay for it.”

“Do you like it?” Lady Hardin asked.

“I do. I have always had a propensity for the rose pinks, but this has my attention,” Elizabeth said, loving the fabric. “I

would love a dress from that material.”

“Lizbeth, what do you think of these pink silks?” Penny asked, holding up a bolt of pink.

“I love them for you. Blondes look gorgeous in pink,” Elizabeth said, giving her sister a kiss on the cheek.

Penny selected a bolt of pale blue fabric, holding it close to her body, as she peered into the looking glass. “Lizbeth, I feel like Cinderella!” she exclaimed, giving a slight twirl. “Lady Hardin, you are like a fairy godmother!”

“My dear, you have excellent taste in fabrics. We shall take all of them,” Lady Hardin said, giving Penny a quick hug. “Don’t forget the matching ribbons for your hair!” She turned to the modiste, who stood next to the seamstress holding a stack of fabric bolts. “Madame, please have dresses made from all the fabrics these young women have selected.” She showed the stack of fabric bolts on the counter. “I’d like ten dresses for each one of them, and something in green for Miss Rollins for the Christmas holiday and one in gold for Miss Penny. Add in all the ribbons and undergarments my ladies have selected. James will be here to pick up the boxes. Put them on my son’s tab.”

“Yes, my lady. I shall have these boxed up and ready for your footman,” Madame Trousseau said.

“No, my lady. That’s too much. We don’t require that many new dresses,” Elizabeth protested. “A few should do us fine.”

“Nonsense. You will attend functions with me, and you need several changes of clothes. And Penny deserves just as many.” She gazed at the clock on the corner of the counter. “If we are to make lunch on time, we must move on to Wood and

select shoes to match the dresses we've commissioned. And then, of course, to the milliners."

"I have never been to Wood to select shoes. What a grand treat," gushed Elizabeth. She rarely got excited about shopping, but to have several shoes matched for her dresses was thrilling.

"Not only will you select shoes, but you will also pick out new half-boots," Lady Hardin said. "My sons are planning to meet us for dinner. And I've arranged for a local chop house to serve us lunch in a private dining room."

"What fun!" Penny exclaimed. "I'm going to always remember this day, forever! Lady Hardin, you are like a fairy godmother straight out of *Cinderella*!"

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"GENTLEMEN, we'd better break this up. Little brother and I have a lunch meeting with our mother," Alan said, pushing back from the table at the club. Their visit with Shefford and Nelson at the club had been both enlightening and profitable. Jeremy wanted to hear all about *En Garde*, and when Alan mentioned the situation with his wards, he and Jeremy found out Daniel Chadwick had applied to the fencing club. Shefford promised to share the information after Ruben had done his background check. There was something about the man that alarmed Alan—more than just the way he stalked his stepsister, he told himself. *I'm making Chadwick my business.*

"I know you must get back to Lady Shefford. Please give the countess my wishes for a happy festive season," Alan told Shefford, clapping him on the back as they walked from the building. He and Jeremy both shook Jonathan's hand,

promising to meet him at the fencing club the following week. It excited Alan to test his skills. It had been a long time since he had fenced.

“Alan,” Jeremy said, signaling their coach. “If we don’t get to the restaurant, we will endure Mother’s wrath. No doubt she has something up her sleeve.”

“You are joining your wards for lunch ... with your mother,” Shefford observed. “My money is she has something long-term in mind.” He laughed.

“His ward is an exquisite woman,” added Jeremy, nudging him in the ribs.

“You are not being helpful, little brother. Ha! I know what you gentlemen are hinting ... and I won’t take the bait,” Alan said, laughing.

The coach stopped in front of them. “Can we give you a lift?” Alan asked.

“No, our club is just a few blocks away. A brisk walk will do us good after two glasses of brandy,” Shefford teased.

They shook hands, and he and Jeremy entered the coach. As they drew closer to the restaurant, Jeremy pointed to the corner across the street from the eatery. Daniel Chadwick was meeting with another man—passing him something.

“Stop,” Alan hit the roof with his cane, stopping the vehicle. He and Jeremy exited and walked to the corner, but Chadwick had disappeared.

“Damn it! Do you think he saw the carriage? We should have brought the unmarked one,” Jeremy said.

“Mother took that one. There they are.” A carriage stopped across the street and the ladies exited. Jeremy and Alan made



their way across. “Hello, ladies,” Alan said.

“We were afraid we’d be late,” Jeremy said.

“No, my dears. We found the smartest hats in the milliners, and it took a little longer than we had expected. But all is well since we are here together.”

Jeremy extended his arm to his mother while Alan extended his to Elizabeth, while Penny followed behind them with the footman into the restaurant.

The door opened and the owner—a short, balding man with large black eyes and a warm smile—met them at the door. Before extending his hand, he rubbed his hands, as if drying them, against a brown apron—that gave minimum cover to a rumpled white shirt. “Welcome to the *Fatted Snail*, Lady Hardin, Lord Halsburg, Mr. Hardin, ladies. I’m Mr. Potter and ’tis my and m’wife’s pleasure and privilege to host yer lunch. Your room has been prepared; please follow me.” Mr. Potter led them through a short hall, moving past the main dining room where tables of rowdy patrons and the loud clinking of dishes made hearing difficult, coming to a private dining room with a roaring fireplace and a large wooden table in the center of a well-appointed room. The floor was wooden but clean, and sconces lit up the walls. “The missus will be here in a few minutes to take ye orders.”

When the door closed behind Potter, Alan looked at his mother. “This looks to be a significant find, Mother. Admittedly, I was unsure of where the *Fatted Snail* was located. It’s rare to see ladies eating in town.”

His mother beamed. “Of course! I met Mr. Potter ages ago. Your father and I always found his food to be very good. He’s shown a desire to develop a restaurant that caters to men and

women. Maybe that will happen one day, and private rooms won't be as necessary."

"I don't see that happening," Jeremy said. "Women of means will not appreciate eating among such ruckus."

His mother made a dismissive gesture. "Pish! This is not a ruckus in here. You do not imagine the possibilities. Women don't want to end their shopping trips just to gain sustenance. It's really a very simple thing. I think a restaurant would be successful," Lady Hardin said.

"I do, as well," Elizabeth added. "Maybe one day, there will be family restaurants."

Elizabeth Rollins' comment was unexpected, but gave him an opportunity to change the subject. "How was your shopping venture?" Alan asked.

"I believe we were wildly successful," his mother said, wearing a pleased smile.

The door opened, and Mrs. Potter entered with a teapot and cups. She distributed them among the five guests. "We have pot roast and potatoes with a salad," she offered.

"It is the agreed-upon menu. I hope it shall suit everyone." Lady Hardin said, nodding to Mrs. Potter to serve. The proprietress left to retrieve the meals. "It was the best I could pull together in such a short period and is one of their specialties."

"You mean, besides the fatted snails?" Jeremy asked, grinning.

"Something like that," his mother chided while Mrs. Potter was out of the room.

“I thought this would be a wonderful way to end such a perfect outing,” his mother said. “But there is one issue the housekeeper raised, and I hope you will not mind my discussing it here, son. But the boxes for boxing day must be prepared. I was hoping these ladies wouldn’t mind helping us do that.”

“We haven’t had boxing day since my father died. I would be happy to help,” Elizabeth said.

“I’d enjoy helping as well,” said Penny.

“Then, it’s settled. Once we get them put together, we will need to get them to our manor home, but that’s something I can have Travers help me with,” his mother said, smiling, obviously pleased.

“Elizabeth, I hope you are all right if I call you that here,” Lady Hardin began. “Tell us about your horses. When we move you ladies over to the townhouse, we don’t want to leave your pets.”

“I ride my horse, Sable, almost every day before the rest of the household rises,” Elizabeth said. “Now that my stepbrother has returned, I worry he will see she’s mine and something could happen. I do not know him for his gentle nature,” she said diplomatically.

“I confess, I surprised my mother by having agreed with her suggestion to move you both, but as I devolved a couple of issues, I realized you’d be safer if I could ensure you were being cared for, and since my mother had already shown she was in favor it, I decided to go ahead with it,” Alan said.

“Thank goodness you said that! I thought I had missed a step in my age,” his mother said, sipping her cup of tea.

Jeremy barked with laughter. “I caught Mother’s look, but she pulled it off beautifully. We will be happy to have such lovely ladies as part of our household. We have a very large townhouse that needs to be filled with people.”

“You are so right, son,” his mother agreed.

“I’m thrilled to move in with you, even though I shall miss my bedroom,” Penny chimed in. “I have already packed all the things I don’t want to leave and shoved them under my bed,” she added thoughtfully.

“Who accompanies you on your rides to Hyde Park, Miss Elizabeth?” Alan asked.

“Elizabeth, please. And Joe, our ostler, always gets a footman, usually Ross, to ride behind me and ensure my safety.”

“Good. Well, it would be my pleasure to do so tomorrow morning, if you are interested,” Alan said.

He didn’t miss the arched brows of his brother and mother. But he needed to see what his ward did in the morning—virtually alone, but for one footman. At least that was what he was telling himself.

“I would be happy for you to join us, Lord Halsburg,” Elizabeth said.

Alan nodded. “Then, it’s settled. What time do you go?” He couldn’t account for the pleasure that shot through him when she agreed.

“Seven in the morning. I’m usually back and changed before our stepmother breaks her fast,” Elizabeth replied.

“I will be there,” he replied. “Does your maid ride?”

“Goodness, no! That’s largely why I take the footman. I enjoy riding and Sable needs the exercise. It gives me time alone before I face whatever the day brings,” Elizabeth said, smiling.

Alan smiled, feeling lighter than he had in weeks, certain it was because he was getting a better grasp on his guardianship and its responsibilities. It was the efficacious smile on his mother’s face and the expressive one on his sibling’s face that gave him pause—but he would not let their teasing mar his achievement as a guardian.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*FOUR DAYS later*

ELIZABETH HELD Sable's face in her hands, nuzzling her between the eyes and nuzzling her velvety nose. "I'm looking forward to today's ride, Sable," she whispered, before mounting the horse for her morning ride. The horse had been given to her by her father and, outside of her sister, was the most important thing in her life, and she loved both dearly. Riding was something she looked forward to doing, but having the earl accompany her made it more fun. For the last three mornings, they had ridden through Hyde Park, followed by chocolate or hot tea at Gunter's, at the end of their morning ride.

The two laughed and talked about anything—normally mundane things that, when talked about with him, seemed interesting. Since she and Penny had moved into the Halsburg house, things seemed calmer. She no longer allowed herself to think about Daniel walking up behind her and cornering her in a room, as he had been fond of doing.

The park was empty at this time of year, as most of the gentry had moved back to their country homes. The horses

were in a slow trot as they passed through the main entrance to the park.

“Do you have a preference on which path to take?” Alan asked, jolting her from her musings.

“No,” she said. “It’s your choice today.”

“Wonderful. I thought we could try a different path,” he said, turning to ensure his footman was following them. “James doesn’t seem to mind this early assignment.”

“Ross told me he spoke to James to acquaint him with my riding habits.” A snort escaped, and she bit her lower lip to control her laughter.

“What habits would *those* be?” he asked, raising a brow.

“Mmm. I’ve been known to take off and race Sable across the fields—that sort of thing.”

He grew serious. “I know you were fond of your footman and hated to leave the staff you’d known for years. Perhaps opportunities to increase staff will present themselves along the way, particularly when we return to the manor house. We hired your maid and Penny’s governess and to do more would give the baroness a reason to cry foul.”

“I understood. But they will watch out for each other. Walters runs a tight ship.”

“Yes, I got that impression.” He moved his horse closer. “You and your sister seem to have transitioned smoothly into Halsburg House. I hope you are finding everything to your liking.”

“Oh yes, my lord! My room is almost like the one my mama decorated for me. And the cheerful colors of the nursery meet my sister’s approval.”

He smiled. “I understand from Mother that you had a secret hiding spot. Hidey spots, as I called them, are important. Please tell Penny that she should create her own—and I do not require knowing the location.”

She realized he knew about her conversation with Lady Hardin. It was no matter. She had grown tired of feeling confined to the house to protect her very basic belongings from being vandalized. When her stepmother had allowed her son to move home, Elizabeth’s stress had doubled. “You and your mother have made us so comfortable. I never imagined leaving my home, but you both have been most welcoming. Except for Lady Rollins’ demands for compensation for Sable and Jane, I hope our moving created no other problems.”

“Everything worked out,” he said, holding her gaze. “I settled a nominal amount on Sable, which was fair, and Lady Rollins backed off her demand for Jane. That was utter ridiculousness.”

Elizabeth remained perplexed as to why her rich stepmother had become so money-grabbing. *Papa was an extremely wealthy man*, she thought, looking away. “What happened to his money?”

“I don’t know, but surely something will come to light,” the earl returned.

Her face heated when she realized she had spoken a thought out loud. “I hadn’t meant to say that. However, she made us live as if we were at the door to poverty—something I cannot understand.”

“I have wondered the same. It seems counter to her ostentatious personality. But let us not allow her on our ride this morning.”



Elizabeth's horse followed his horse's lead, and they veered left onto the path that snaked alongside the river. For a few minutes, both settled into a pensive quietness. "I like this scenery. When I ride by myself—I mean with Ross behind me—I stay on the main trails. This is more wooded—it's nice."

"Shall we make our morning stop for chocolate at Gunter's?" he asked, with a smile curling at his mouth.

Her heart gave a twist as she took in his handsome face. *I'm really attracted to this man.* Ignoring common sense and cutting their ride short, she nodded. "Yes, please. I'm chilly."

A few minutes later, they sat in their usual spot by the fireplace. His footman had Sable and Maximillian, the earl's horse, as well as his own, in a small stable near the parlor. The earl also made certain James received a hot cup of chocolate. Secretly, Elizabeth thought the sticky buns and chocolate were the real reason for James' happiness with this morning's assignment.

"I wonder if you would honor me by calling me by my given name—Alan—when we are not around others," he said, abruptly setting his teacup on the table and looking into her eyes. His gloved hand slid slowly across the table and covered her own.

Delicious pulses of energy shot up her arm, a feeling she noticed each time he grew close, and she savored the comfort it gave her. Propriety told her to move her hand, but her heart wouldn't let her. She enjoyed the time spent with this man and woke up looking forward to seeing both him and Sable.

A nerve quickened in her throat. "What about my being your ward?" *This was what I wanted to do, isn't it? I could have opted not to go to Gunter's,* she reminded herself. "Won't people think it odd to hear me call you by your given name?"

“If you mean my family or staff—you will find them to be accepting. You would still address me formally in front of company. I suppose some might. But you will be twenty-one in a few months,” he offered. “January, correct? I’ve been thinking it’s a few months, but it’s only one.”

She grinned. “And do you keep up with everyone in the household’s birthdays?”

“Only those important to me,” he said meaningfully. “Generally, Mother reminds me of the important ones. But with yours, I’ve had lots of reason to become more acquainted.”

His eyes held hers.

“I looked over some paperwork yesterday that had you and your sister’s birthdays. Penny’s is in April. Yours is January the fifth. I kept thinking it was a few months away—I suppose because when I assumed the guardianship, there was so much to take in, I glossed over some things.”

He gently squeezed her hand. “Care to take a walk? The horses will be fine with James. I promise,” Alan said.

She nodded. She loved his company. *How did I not see the person he was when I met him a year ago? I didn’t see the man he is.*

“Good,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” He spoke with one of the staff and they pointed to a young boy waiting outside the door. The boy immediately came into the shop. Elizabeth noticed he was missing several of his front teeth, and his clothes were too small for him, pulling in all directions to cover his small, lithe body.

“M’name’s Robbie, guvnor,” she heard him say.

The conversation between the two of them warmed her.

She saw Alan withdraw a coin and tuck it in Robbie's hand before handing him a small tray of food and drink. "Take this note and this warm food to the man in the stable who is holding our horses. His name is James. Tell him we are delayed but plan to leave shortly. The coin and the second bun are for you."

The boy opened his hand and looked back at Alan, his face splitting into a grin. "A crown! Oh, thank ye, milord. Thank ye! I can surely afford a good doctor for m'mum."

Alan walked back to the table.

Elizabeth wanted to say something like *that was really nice*, but stayed silent.

"Care to take a short walk? There's a place I'd like to show you." Alan held out his arm and Elizabeth took it. "We will stay in the public view, so I won't compromise your reputation." A few minutes later, they were at a small spot on the Serpentine. "I used to come here and fish when I was a boy. My father brought me. It's the most private spot I know in the park, and it's out in the open. I occasionally come and relive memories of my father," he said. "Let's sit."

Her heart fluttered wildly as he took her hand. "Only if you promise I won't fall in." He showed a log that sat a foot from the water's edge and helped her sit, then joined her.

"This is pretty and very quiet. I used to fish with my father," she said. "When he didn't have a son, he taught me to ride a horse, fish, and shoot an arrow."

"You enjoy archery? I would have never guessed," he said, sounding disbelieving.

"I do. The last time I shot was with my father. We were teaching Penny," she said. Her throat caught at the memory.

“I haven’t used arrows since before I left for war, so I’m rather rusty.”

She noticed he edged closer. “I had forgotten you fought in the war,” she whispered.

Elizabeth watched him looking around. “We are alone, Elizabeth. I realize I’m your guardian and you are my ward. When you are near, I can think of little but wanting to kiss you.” He cupped her face. “I’d like to kiss you now.”

A knot formed in her stomach. She wanted the kiss as much as he did, but this didn’t seem like the right time. There was a tree next to her, which provided some coverage.

“My lo ... Alan. I don’t think this is a good idea. Not ... not that I don’t want your kiss. I do,” she hastily added. “Goodness, help me, but I want to kiss you. But if someone sees us, it could cause problems for you, Alan, for both of us.”

“We are alone at this hour ... in this place,” he murmured, moving closer. “I see no one, but your concerns are valid. Yet, my heart tells me to take the risk,” he said, leaning towards her.

“Do you trust me?” he whispered.

She wanted to answer, but could only nod, with her attention firmly on his mouth moving towards hers.

A soft gust of wind rustled through the near-empty limbs of the trees surrounding them, forcing the remaining leaves from the branches to waft through the air onto the serene waters of the Serpentine. The scene seemed like something out of a book, she thought, taking it all in as his face inclined towards hers. He placed his lips on hers and she closed her eyes, relishing the warmth and softness of his lips, wanting more.

She parted her lips as his increased their pressure, and his tongue explored the recesses of her mouth. Elizabeth tasted him, the sweetness of the honeyed bun they had shared, mixed with the lemony tartness of his hot tea—both tastes melding with the chocolate that had lingered on her tongue. She felt as if she were tasting the vestiges of a secret aphrodisiac.

His face moved slightly, and his hands framed hers as he sought more of her, deepening his taste. Tremors of sensation rushed through her body, and she clung to him, twining her hands in the hair at his nape. When he slowed his movements, she tugged him closer, reacting to a surge of need she had never experienced before. *She felt wanton but wanted.*

Time stood still while they kissed, tongues meeting, probing, searching, and caressing, until he pulled back and broke off the kiss. Elizabeth's energy felt depleted, and she momentarily felt limp—but strangely feeling renewed. Summoning her reserve of energy, she drew back and opened her eyes, staring into his.

“I will never regret taking that kiss,” he whispered.

“Me either,” she said, still slightly dazed.

Slowly, he helped her stand. “We should get back,” Alan said, squeezing her hand. “Riding with you in the morning is a habit I could get used to.”

“I could do it every day of my life,” she whispered to herself.

As they walked back to Gunter's, they spotted James holding the reins of the horses and laughing with Robbie.

When he saw them, the boy stepped forward. “Yer back, guvnor! Ye may wonder why I'm still here with your man.”

“I'm glad to meet you, Robbie,” Elizabeth said.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, your ladyship,” Robbie said, smoothly taking Elizabeth’s gloved hand and kissing it.

He turned to Alan. “M’um is sick with a cough and needs a doctor. I’d be pleased if ye had some work fer me.” A short-legged black dog barked from behind him and moseyed up alongside him.

“This ‘ere’s Trina,” he said, patting her head. “Would it be all right if she followed me to yer place? I always split my food and water with her. She was starving when I found her, but we’ve become friends and I keep her with me as much as possible. As you can see, she lies low while I work.” His voice took on a note of self-importance at his accomplishment.

Alan glanced at a smiling Elizabeth. “I think we can find something for you to do. Bring Trina. James will introduce you to my stable manager. He will find work for you and my cook can rustle up some food for your friend there.”

“Thank you, guvnor!”

Elizabeth’s heart did a somersault. The man was the epitome of kindness. He had been nothing but helpful and honest with her. Knowing she would spend Christmastide with his family seemed like a miracle.

Alan glanced at Robbie and then at his footman. “James, see you make the introduction,” he said, giving a knowing nod.

“Yes, my lord,” the footman said, hoisting the boy behind him.

“We should get back,” Elizabeth said, amazed at the transaction she had just witnessed. Alan had the biggest heart. “I imagine his mother has consumption,” she said, shuddering.

“Poor lad. You are probably right. I’ll speak with Mother and see if she has any ideas.”

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ALAN GLANCED AT ELIZABETH, who leaned forward and whispered to Sable. The content expression on her face pleased him. He had never kept a mistress, but there had been other women in his life. Yet, this woman was different. Never had he felt such an intense attraction. And never had he experienced such a kiss as he had experienced with Elizabeth. *I care for her.* His heart had never been engaged to any woman, but he feared Elizabeth Rollins owned a healthy portion of it.

Over the week, they had shared countless hours of laughing and telling stories of their lives. The attraction to her overwhelmed him to where he could no longer deny himself.

“Was it your first ... kiss?” he asked.

She looked at him, her eyes veiled by her thick black lashes. “There have been others that have given me what they called a kiss, but I could not put their efforts in the same category as what I experienced with you, my lord.”

“Alan,” he reminded her.

She maintained her focus ahead. “I’m sorry. Alan,” she whispered loud enough for his ears, alone. “No other kiss could equal that.”

“Shall we ride tomorrow morning?” he asked. “I promise to keep it to the ride and perhaps, our stop at Gunter’s. Nothing further.”

“Yes, I enjoy our mornings,” she replied.

They heard hooves coming up fast from behind. It was James and Robbie.

“My lord,” James said, a bit out of breath as he pulled alongside Alan’s horse. “I could not see his face, but Robbie was the first to notice a man is following us. He said he saw the man at Gunter’s while watching the horses with me, but until he saw him trailing us, he thought nothing of it. The man keeps a steady distance, hanging well behind us. I looked behind, pretending to be speaking with Robbie, and I saw him move to the side of the road, hiding. That happened twice.”

“Let us get Miss Elizabeth home safely. How fast can the dog run, do you think?”

“She has short legs, so I think not fast,” James replied.

“We are almost at the townhouse. We need to get Miss Rollins back safely.” He turned to Elizabeth. “Please go into the house as soon as we pull into the drive. I will take Sable to the stable.” He needed to check on the footmen he had hired.

“Who could it be?” she asked. One name immediately popped into her head. *Surely not*, she reasoned. “Be careful.”

---

A TALL MAN stepped from a dark corner behind a stable, a house away from the mansion the earl called his *townhouse*. He watched the earl and his footman walk the horses into the stable. A large brown overcoat and a slouchy brown hat hid his face, blending him into the scenery.

Watching Halsburg speak to his guards made him laugh to himself. Today hadn’t worked out the way he had planned, but there was always tomorrow. “You think you can outwit me,



Lord Halsburg, but I'm determined. You will learn I mean business," he said, narrowing his eyes. Mounting the tall, black horse standing behind him, he kept to the shaded side of the street, replaying what he had witnessed earlier in the park, fueling his anger.

## CHAPTER NINE

*SEVERAL DAYS later*

“THESE ARE FOR ME?” Robbie asked, putting the pitchfork down. “I’ve been putting fresh straw in the stalls. I ain’t n’er had a real job before—unless you count climbing into a chimney. But that was when I was smaller.”

Elizabeth’s heart twisted. This child had been on his own for too long. Alan had already sent a doctor to see his mother today. *I hope they can help her. Losing a mother is so hard and he’s doing his best to care for her.* Turning her attention to Robbie, she passed him two pairs of breeches Jane had made for him. “Jane made these for you. We hope you like them.” Her maid had taken some older pants belonging to the late earl and made them into smaller pants for Robbie. It had been Alan’s idea.

“I’ve never had new clothes in my life,” he said, threatening tears.

“You do now, Robbie. With winter here, his lordship thought you needed a few things,” Elizabeth said. The late earl’s clothing had given Jane plenty of material to make the child’s pants. Elizabeth reached into a small box and withdrew

a grey and black plaid jacket. “This used to be my father’s favorite jacket when he was outdoors. I thought it might be perfect to resize for you.”

“Ain’t n’er had a new coat, Miss Elizabeth,” he said, wiping a tear. “I figure it was my lucky day when his lordship asked me to watch yer horses. Now I got me a job and a way to help m’ mum.”

Elizabeth pulled him close and hugged him before pointing to Jane. “My sweet maid, Jane, did a good job guessing your size based on her observations. We wanted it to be a surprise, so we couldn’t measure you properly.” Reaching into her bag, Elizabeth pulled out another item made from the plaid coat. “This is a pelisse for Trina.”

“I n’er heard of a coat fer a dog, but that don’t matter. She gets cold and burrows into the straw at night to get warm, but running around during the day makes her cold,” Robbie explained. He whistled, and they heard the dog dig herself out of the straw in the stall next to them.

“That dog is hilarious. Come here, girl,” Elizabeth said, stooping down and scratching behind Trina’s ear. Taking the doggie pelisse, she slipped Trina’s head through the neck opening before adjusting it around the girth of the pet, cinching it with small fabric hooks. Before Elizabeth could stand, Trina licked her on the chin, eliciting a giggle. “You should be warm now, girl.”

“She likes it,” Robbie said.

“Jane and I must head to town.”

Robbie stood up. “James plans to go with you, right?” Robbie asked.

“I think so. I’m not sure who is going. But I’m certain his stable manager has it well in hand. Lady Hardin feels we need one more item in the boxing baskets and I volunteered to go.”

“I ain’t n’er seen a boxing basket,” Robbie said, slowly scratching his chin.

Elizabeth smiled. “I’d explain it to you, but the carriage is being brought around, so I must leave. Lord Halsburg wanted you to have these clothes as soon as possible. However, I promise you will learn what *boxing baskets* are.”

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ROBBIE FOLLOWED Miss Elizabeth and watched James assist her and the maid into the coach. When it lurched forward, he saw the driver. The two times he had seen the earl’s driver take the coach, the man had worn a taller hat. The man driving Miss Elizabeth’s coach wore one that covered half his face. He had never seen him before, and Robbie had met everyone in the stables.

Robbie ran over to James. “Weren’t you supposed to go?”

“I was,” James said, looking puzzled. “It pulled off as soon as I shut the door.”

“Get the earl,” Robbie said. “A bad man just took Miss Elizabeth.”

Running as hard as he could, Robbie chased the coach as it turned down streets haphazardly through Mayfair, but traffic soon blocked his vision, and he lost sight of it. *Something was wrong—he just knew it!* Desperate to help Miss Elizabeth, he turned and ran back to find the earl.

---

“WE SHOULD TALK. I left *En Garde*,” Jeremy said, entering Alan’s study and shutting the door. His brother walked to one of the leather chairs in front of the desk and sat down.

“What’s going on, Jeremy?” Alan asked, looking up from his ledgers.

“Remember the man we had seen with Chadwick the day we met with Nelson and Shefford? I found him.”

“Where?” Alan asked, picking up two clean glasses.

Jeremy held up his hand. “No brandy. This could be serious. Remember when we were leaving the club the other day and we saw Chadwick handing a man something?”

Alan nodded.

“I saw the same man today and followed him. He ducked into a tavern near the fencing club, and Jonathan and I followed him. The man told us Chadwick had tried to hire him for a job, but word on the street was, Chadwick’s credit was no longer good—so, he refused him.

“And?”

“He said Chadwick mumbled something about taking back what should have been his.”

“What the devil does that mean?” Alan said, easing back as the feeling of foreboding crept over him. “I’m expecting Ruben any minute. When he comes, you’re welcome to stay.”

Travers tapped on the door and showed Ruben into the study.

“We were just talking about you,” Alan said.

“Good things, I hope. Good morning, Lord Halsburg, Mr. Hardin,” the older man said in a grim tone. “I have the information you wanted. There’s a lot to unpack.”

“Please, sit down. Can I offer you a hot cup of tea, anything?” Alan said. Hair pricked his neck. Something felt wrong.

“I’d love a cup,” Ruben said.

Alan nodded to Travers, who went to the kitchen for the tea.

“It’s been unusually cold today, especially with the wind.” Ruben took a seat and withdrew a paper from his vest pocket. His eyebrows drew together in a frown as he stared at it. Finally, he said, “I did an investigation on Mr. Daniel Chadwick for Mr. Nelson’s fencing club and what we found was not the best news, my lord. Mr. Nelson asked that I share it with you immediately. Let me start with what we know.”

Ruben’s slow pace of divulging information made Alan fidgety. He fought the impulse to snap and ask him to hurry up and tell them. *Ruben’s doing me the favor*, he reminded himself. Instead, he chewed the inside of his lip, a bad habit of his when stressed, and allowed the man to plod along.

Steepling his fingers, Ruben leaned back in the chair. “It seems Mr. Chadwick came into a bit of money following the death of his stepfather, Lord Rollins ... but that was not Lord Rollins’ wish. Chadwick has a small allowance, not one that supports his current habits around town. One of the bank tellers at the bank where your uncle did, and I believe you, as well, Lord Halsburg, do business—found himself in a bit of financial difficulty with Chadwick. To gain his way free, the teller agreed to alter some of the bank records.

“Of course, the man has been arrested now,” Rubens continued. “And what’s gone is gone, as the saying goes, but oddly, it was the widow’s finances he altered. *His mother!* Can you believe that?”

Alan grimaced as he attempted to hold his control. Instead of saying anything, he shook his head.

“Yes, well,” Ruben went on. “It was Chadwick’s mother whose actions led to this discovery. And to the teller’s arrest. She has been complaining that something is not right with her income from her husband’s estate and finally, she complained to the chairman of the bank, who launched a quiet investigation. As your uncle had already taken over the other two-thirds of the estate designated for his daughters, those monies were safe and untouchable.

“The magistrate and our men have been looking for Chadwick today, but as of the time I arrived here, we have not found out his whereabouts and he is unaware the magistrate wants him. Curiously, the arrested man assured me in my discussions with him that Chadwick only asked him to alter his mother’s account and divert regular payments to him. According to the man, Chadwick said he was employing other methods to access his stepsisters’ inheritance.” He took a relaxing breath. “This is the latest news—and of course, isn’t even known to Mr. Nelson. But since you are the guardian, I felt it was your business to know everything.”

“That accounts for why she diverted the funds I sent for the wards’ use,” Alan said, thinking out loud.

“Yes. It would,” Jeremy agreed. “Still, it doesn’t make it right.”

“Is there anything else I should know?” Alan demanded.

“There is more. Chadwick has had several more complaints made against him in recent years. There were two complaints about drunken abuse against the daughter of a London merchant, but they dropped the charges. To protect his daughter, the merchant refused to talk about it. The merchant told me he had threatened both him and his daughter,” Ruben said.

“There were also unsubstantiated rumors of his involvement in a riding accident—the saddle was tampered with.”

Alan looked at Jeremy. “What did they determine?”

“The only witness died, and the suspicions died with them. Nothing was investigated further. If anyone looked for a conviction or court document against the man, they wouldn’t find one. But we found people willing to talk. And I believe that where there is smoke, there is fire. The man stole from his mother!”

“It explains a lot. He allowed his mother to move him into the house, where he could find out more about the girls’ inheritance.” Alan’s temper rose.

“I plan to pursue all three situations—rumors and all,” Ruben said. “Allegations or suspicions were dropped, and nothing was pursued. I shared the last two incidents with Nelson; Chadwick didn’t meet his club’s character standards and he turned his membership down. He said the man left his club, furious. But Nelson and his brother are experts with swords and guns. Sagely, Chadwick chose not to test his luck.”

The door to the study burst open and Robbie ran inside. “My lord, I think Miss Elizabeth is gone,” he said, struggling to catch his breath. “I tried to catch ’em, but I lost sight of the carriage.”



All three men rose. “What do you mean ... *gone*?” Alan demanded, standing with such fervor, he nearly turned over his desk.

“A man took her with yer carriage. She and her maid, Miss Jane, said they needed stuff for the boxing things. When the carriage pulled away, I saw the driver looked different than I’d seen afore. I couldn’t see his face ’cause of his hat ... like the other day with the man following us from the park. I ain’t been here long, guvnor, but yer driver has a different hat.” The boy leaned over to catch his breath.

James appeared behind him at the door. “He’s right, my lord. They’ve taken her. There was a footman on the back wearing your livery—but you had hired a few new ones this past week, and I didn’t pay enough attention. I found the driver nursing his head in the back of the barn with his clothes missing.”

“I suspect you will find a footman somewhere missing his livery and nursing injuries, as well,” Ruben said. He turned to Alan. “We will find her, Lord Halsburg. Mark my words.”

Alan’s heart lodged in his throat. *He had to find her.* “We have to find them before something happens.”

Lady Hardin rushed into the room. “I heard you in my parlor. What has happened to Elizabeth?”

“She’s been taken. We must find her, Mother. I believe he took her.”

“Who is *he*?” Ruben asked.

“Chadwick,” Alan and his mother said, together.

“I have men. We will comb the town and investigate every place he has lived or been seen,” Ruben said.

“Jeremy, we’ve got to find her,” Alan said.

“What about her maid, Jane? They were both going into town,” his mother said.

“Robbie thinks someone highjacked the carriage once the ladies got into it.”

*My heart is in that carriage*, Alan realized. All kinds of scenarios played out in his head, but only one name resonated. *Daniel Chadwick*. She had always been frightened of the man.

## CHAPTER TEN

*SOMETHING WAS WRONG.* When Elizabeth looked out the window as the carriage lurched forward, she saw it leave James behind, and James usually accompanied her to town. Alan's driver, Mr. Pickett, drove more steadily than this—at least when Lady Hardin or Alan was in the carriage.

The carriage flew through the streets of Mayfair and took curves on two wheels, tossing its white-knuckled occupants from the left side of the carriage to the right. Jane's eyes were as big as saucers as she and Elizabeth fought against motion sickness, holding on for their lives.

"Something's very wrong, miss," Jane said when the carriage turned off the main road. "I don't mind telling you, I'm scared."

"Me too," Elizabeth admitted. The carriage stopped, and the door jerked open. An unshaven, foul-smelling man stood there.

"Ladies, you need to get out." When they didn't move, he pulled a small gun from his pocket. "Git. Out." He motioned with the gun. "Carl here will escort you."

A man in a Halsburg livery stepped up behind them, slapping the toothy man on the back of the head. "Don't you

know not to say our names? Now, you've probably messed up the job!"

"They won't get out," the toothy man complained, dangerously wielding the gun.

"Did you tell them you'd shoot them, stupid?" the liveried man asked.

"I did. And don't call me *stupid*. Where's the bloody boss? *He* can do it himself," the toothy one snarled. "It's his job. He promised me this carriage and I need to move it to the docks before the ship leaves."

"Hey, I get half. Don't forget the horses. They're worth sum'fin," Carl said.

"Why are you men doing this?" Elizabeth demanded, cutting into their argument. "You mentioned *he*. Who is *he*?"

"*He* would be me." She recognized that voice. "Daniel, why are you doing this?"

"Money," he said simply. "I don't know what you're worth, but I suspect a lot—as my wife." He snatched the gun from the toothy man and shoved him. "Give me that! Plans have changed. We are taking this carriage to Gretna Green. It has no markings on it, and people won't know who it belongs to. Now." He pointed to Jane. "You. Out of the carriage. The extra baggage will slow us down."

"You are not leaving her in the middle of nowhere," Elizabeth cried.

"Shut up!" he warned. "Out." His focus was on Jane, who, trembling, picked up her skirts and exited the carriage. "Tie her up."

“But boss, she’s seen our faces,” the one named Carl whined.

“Do it! She also knows our names,” but there’s nothing anyone can do. Tie her up and put her in the dark stable over there.”

Elizabeth looked around and realized she was in the mews somewhere in Mayfair. No wonder the carriage kept turning. They were circling the town. “Don’t hurt Jane,” she cried. When he turned back to face her, Daniel wore a wicked smile. Pulling his arm from behind his back, he grabbed her and held a cloth over her nose and mouth.

“I don’t plan to struggle with you the whole trip. When you are my wife, you will learn your place,” he said ominously, pinching her on the breast.

Elizabeth struggled as hard as she could against him, but the world grew darker. She heard voices, but they sounded further and further away until, after what seemed like an eternity, she slipped into the dark void.

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ALAN AND JEREMY rushed up the steps to the Rollins’ household and banged on the door until Walters opened the door. “We need to see Lady Rollins,” he demanded. “*And her son.*”

“Mr. Chadwick hasn’t been seen here in several days ... except for a visit earlier today,” Walters said.

“Then, take me to Lady Rollins ... immediately,” Alan insisted, ready to push past the butler if need be. Instead,

Walters stepped aside. “Is everything all right with Miss Elizabeth and Miss Penny?”

“That’s why we’ve come. Miss Elizabeth has been taken and we think Chadwick did it.”

The older man gasped. “Oh, Lord! Come in. Follow me to the parlor,” he said, leading Alan and Jeremy.

The retainer opened the door only to see Lady Rollins trussed up and gagged, rolling on the carpeted floor.

“Gawd! What happened here? Are you all right, my lady?” Walters asked as Alan ripped the gag off the baroness.

“Did Chadwick do this?” Jeremy asked.

“He did,” the baroness whimpered. “He demanded my jewelry. When I refused, he tied me up, ripped off my earrings and rings, and tore up the room, looking for my safety. He didn’t find it. I’m shocked no one heard him. I’ve been laying on the floor for hours.” As if their presence suddenly dawned on her, she looked up. “Why are you men here?”

“He kidnapped Elizabeth,” Alan said, helping her up.

Lady Rollins gasped. “What? Oh no!”

“You brought him into this house with two vulnerable young women, and everyone in the *ton* knows his reputation—what he did to that scullery maid, and why he was made to leave.” Alan’s eyes blazed and he leaned into her ear. “Trust me, I know what you have been doing, but will keep it to myself unless you refuse to help.”

Ross walked into the room. “My lord, Lady Rollins. Did I hear someone say Mr. Chadwick has taken Miss Elizabeth? I saw him leave earlier and head into the mews. He was on foot.”

“There! You are wrong about my son,” Lady Rollins charged weakly. “He couldn’t have done it.”

“Even you know that’s a lie. He had her kidnapped from my stable area on the mews. Where did he go, Ross?”

“I was so curious, I followed him,” the footman replied. “He hasn’t returned here in days —until today. I wondered if he was staying somewhere.” He looked penitently in Lady Rollins’ direction.

“Don’t apologize. If he has done this, and I suspect there is more, the man is a criminal,” Alan said.

“How dare ...” Lady Rollins started.

“*You* most of all know what your son can do. Tell me what you know, or I will pull my bills for my wards and speak to every one of the vendors. Stealing is a crime, and I have friends in high places,” Alan threatened.

She looked away. “He has it in his head to marry her. I tried to direct him to other ladies, like Lady Rose Gunter. But he has nothing to offer a lady—no title, no wealth. I just realized he’s been into my accounts and spending my money all over town.” She slumped onto the couch. “I’m so sorry,” she said, holding her face in her hands. “I must ask your forgiveness.”

“I won’t have any forgiveness if one hair on Elizabeth’s head is harmed,” Alan said. “Let’s go, Jeremy, Ross.” The men started out the door.

“I’m coming, too. The girl has been like a granddaughter to me all her life,” Walters said. “I promised her father years ago I would watch out for her.”

The door slammed behind them, and the four men took off down the steps. Jeremy and Alan mounted their horses and

followed behind Walters and Ross to the stable, where both men got horses. The small group followed the mews road that ran behind the Rollins' house.

"It's very close," Ross said as they approached an intersection.

When they turned onto the street running behind his family's mansion, they heard barking and a boy's voice.

"What are Robbie and Trina doing here?" Alan asked. The dog was furiously sniffing the ground near a much smaller townhouse with a stable behind it. Everything was dark inside the house. It was obvious the owners had relocated to the country.

"The boy and his dog found the stable I saw Chadwick enter earlier," Ross said, opening an unlocked door and lighting the lamp inside.

Muffled sounds of a woman drew their attention to a stall to their right and the sight of Jane trussed up and gagged.

"Oh my God!" Walters bellowed, sliding from his horse. "Jane." The older man bent down and ripped the bindings from her hands and face and held her against his shoulder while she cried with relief.

"He's taken her. I saw him put something over her face and drug her. Then, he said he planned to marry her. It couldn't have been more than an hour. They have your unmarked coach, my lord," Jane said raggedly. "I could have been here forever, and no one would have known it. Thank goodness you found me."

"You have these three to thank, Jeremy said, pointing to Robbie, Trina, and Ross. If not for them, we may never have found you."



“Gretna Green, I’m guessing,” Alan said angrily. “I should have foreseen this. I will leave you with Ross and Walters, Jane.

Jane gave a small nod.

“Jeremy, we need to go,” Alan urged.

“I’d like to help, too, my lord,” Ross said. “That is if you can use an extra hand.”

“Ross, I need you to get the magistrate. You and Walters need to make sure you tell everything you heard Lady Rollins say, and make sure they interview Jane. That would be a big help.”

“Thank you, my lord. I will take care of it,” Ross said. “We will take care of Jane.”

“Thank you,” Alan said.

Alan and his brother stopped at their townhouse and asked a waiting groom to hold their horses. They met Nelson as they ran to the house.

“Your mother sent Everly to find me, and he let me know what had happened. I’m here to help,” Jonathan explained.

“We need to get weapons and leave,” Alan said, opening his gun cabinet, they chose guns, and he and his brother grabbed their swords and overcoats.

“Be careful, all of you,” his mother said, as she walked into the study. “The man is unhinged. Take extra care.”

“We promise, Mother,” Alan said. “I have no intention of losing anything to this madman. I must find her before he hurts her.” Despite his best efforts, his eyes misted.

His mother hugged him. “You love her,” she whispered.

He nodded.

“You will get there in time, Alan. Elizabeth is a fighter.”

“From your lips to God’s ears, Mother,” Jeremy said. “We will watch out for each other.”

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ELIZABETH AWOKE BUT LAY STILL. Keeping her eyes shielded by her dark lashes, she tried to see and feel around her. Her legs and hands were tied, but she refused to panic. Thankfully, there was still daylight. Daniel sat across from her and looked to be sleeping. But it would be just like Daniel to trick her, so she kept her eyes as close to closed as she could.

The last thing she wanted was a confrontation with him. Silently praying Alan would rescue her. *But how would he know she was gone?* Unless someone discovered the driver and footman in the barn, she didn’t see the likelihood. She and Jane were supposed to be in town, so no one might know she was gone. Elizabeth tried but couldn’t recognize anything from the surrounding scenery.

She shuddered. He planned to marry her, and that would mean days in this cramped carriage with him.

Doing her best to control her breathing, she rested and remained still.

Abruptly, the coach turned the corner, and it sounded as if something fell off the coach from beneath the cab. Startled, she sat up.

“Ah! You are awake,” Daniel said, sitting up. I’m sorry to have to do this to you, Elizabeth, but you will pay for what your father did.”

“And that was?” she asked.

“He left me nothing in his will,” he said. “And to make matters worse, he took away much of my allowance.”

*He owed you nothing. You are a horrible person,* she thought to herself. Daniel was crazy and mean. She realized that he had sat up because she had. *He didn't hear the problem beneath the carriage.* As frightened as she was, she would not think about being injured in a carriage accident. If that helped her escape from this madman, so be it.

“Later, we will stop for the night. I will introduce you as my wife,” Daniel said. “I will decide on the last name soon. It could be fun.”

“I will never be your wife,” she spat. “Remember ... you will have to sleep sometime.”

“Ha! I see some of my mother's wit has rubbed off on you. Believe me ... you will be a wife to me. It is important in my revenge against your father.” He withdrew a pocketknife and casually cleaned his fingernails.

*Disgusting man,* she thought.

The carriage took a corner too quickly, throwing her into Daniel, and he pulled her close. Without the ability to move her hands, she could do little to free herself. The more she struggled, the tighter he held her.

“This is a surprise,” he taunted. His breath stank with the smell of stale whiskey.

“Unhand me, you lecher,” she demanded.

“You still wear jasmine,” he said, breathing her hair. “It became my favorite scent years ago.” He leaned down and nibbled her ear, tracing down her neck, lightly kissing her

cheek. Turning sharply, she found his ear and bit as hard as she could, drawing blood.

“You bitch!” he said, drawing his hand until he stopped midair.

“Are you going to hit me?” she taunted. “If you despoil me, you had better sleep with one eye open,” she seethed. Fear had deserted her and all she felt was fury. His face reddened with rage. *Perhaps that wasn't my best move.*

He said nothing for a long moment. “There's an inn up ahead and we will stay long enough for sustenance. There is much of the day to go. I will untie you, but you had better act the part of a loving wife.”

A grinding noise sounded from beneath the carriage and grew much louder. She noted the concern in his eyes. “We may not make it to the inn,” she said heatedly. “Your stooges have almost broken this carriage with their horrible driving.”

“Shut up, or I will forget about any kindness I might have towards you,” he seethed.

Shortly, the carriage turned off the main road, slowing down to a stop in the gravel drive of an inn.

Daniel reached into his pocket and withdrew the knife, freeing the bindings on her hands and feet.

They walked into the inn together with the point of his knife in her back, reminding her he was in charge. It was dark, and as her eyes adjusted, she recognized Alan and Jeremy sitting at a table in a far corner, both wearing hats. Alan met her eyes and shook his head. “Shall we sit over here?” she asked, indicating something on the far side of the room. She glanced again in Alan's direction, they were gone.

“Take that table,” Daniel said. “I want to be able to see the room.”

She did as she was told and sat down, relieved to have the knife out of her back.

“You were right, brother,” a familiar baritone voice said, approaching behind Daniel. “This was a perfect watering hole—you knew he couldn’t resist.”

“‘Tis a well-known place to assuage one’s thirst. By now, his flunkies have been secured,” Jeremy said.

“You’re too late, Halsburg. She threw herself at me earlier, and I obliged her needs,” Daniel hissed. “We will be married.”

Alan fought to maintain control. “No, you won’t,” he said, leaning over and whispering loudly. “You are going to make this easy.” He jerked Chadwick’s arm and helped him to his feet.

“You won’t get away with this. I will make you pay,” Chadwick claimed.

“I think not. It’s you that won’t get away with this,” Jeremy said, taking his other arm. “The king’s agents met us on our way out of town, and they are here to take you back to London.”

John Ruben stepped from the corner of the room with one of his men. “The king has expressed a serious interest in meeting with you. There is the matter of a carriage accident he especially wishes to discuss. We will have much to discuss.” Two of the king’s men jerked Daniel’s arm behind his back and removed him from the table. Away from Elizabeth.

“May I have a moment?” Elizabeth asked, stepping back from Alan. “I have something I want to say to Daniel.”

Alan looked at her. “Are you sure?”

“Very,” she said, walking to where her stepbrother stood secured by the king’s men and sneering in her direction. “This is for you, Daniel.” She drew back her hand and a crack sounded, as she slapped her stepbrother as hard as she could manage across his face.

Alan gently took her hand and pulled her away. “Thank you for your help, Mr. Ruben. You can take him away.” Alan pulled Elizabeth close. “He will never come near you again,” he whispered, seeking her lips and covering them with his own. “It terrified me when I realized you had been taken, my sweet Elizabeth.”

“I kept looking for you. And you came for me,” she said in muffled tones against his shoulder.

“When you disappeared, my heart struggled to beat. Now that I have you, it’s beating again.” He took her hand and placed it over his heart. “Do you feel that? It’s my heart beating for you.”

“I do,” she said. She wrapped her hands around his neck, twinning her fingers through the hair at his nape, unwilling to let him go.

“I was hoping you would do me the honor of becoming my countess. Will you make me the happiest of men and marry me?”

She nodded. “I will.”

Alan pulled her close and lightly grazed her lips before gently coaxing them open with his tongue. It took little persuasion.

She opened her lips and his tongue swept in and met hers, both swirling together in an entangled ritual of provocation

and enticement. Her tongue pressed past his lips in a mutual give and take. The moment felt heady and hypnotic.

When he finally broke the kiss, he gazed into her eyes. “What about marrying on your birthday, my sweet?”

“That’s very close. I like that idea,” she said.

## EPILOGUE

### *THE DAY after their wedding*

ELIZABETH ROLLED over and watched her husband, still asleep in their marriage bed. She could hardly believe the turn her life had taken since meeting this man. She still had to pinch herself to believe it was real. This handsome, wonderful man had made her his wife, and their wedding had been magical.

She and Alan were married by Special License in Hyde Park, next to the spot where his father used to take him to fish. The day Alan introduced her to that spot was the day she realized she was falling in love with him. They had taken their vows beneath the tree, with the clear, blue sky and the pristine water of the Serpentine providing the backdrop. When the vicar pronounced them married, snow had fallen. It had been a magical day for her. The day had been perfect.

Her mother-in-law and Madame Trousseau had insisted on a beautiful gown of rose-pink silk with a silver Alençon lace overlay and small seed pearls. Her russet-brown hair had been pulled back in a loose chignon with wispy curls escaping along the side and framing her face. Diamond pins were woven throughout the curls, and shoes made of white satin



with seed pearls had adorned her feet. A bouquet of greenery, red berries, and white roses with sprigs of lavender grass had complemented her ensemble.

As he stirred, she ran her finger down his chest, loving the feel of his skin beneath hers.

“Good morning, wife,” he said, pulling her close to him. “What are you thinking about?”

“All that has gone on in my life since meeting you. My stepbrother is being held for the crimes he committed and is suspected of causing the carriage accident that killed your uncle.”

“The threatening letters I received will help prove their case. Yes, the man is bad news. His abduction of you was a bridge too far. At least he didn’t hurt you,” Alan said.

“No, he didn’t. He would have if you had not found us,” she said.

“I don’t like to think of how close I came to losing you, darling. Luckily, Robbie, Trina, and Ross saved Jane, and she was able to tell us where you had gone,” he said.

“Ha! That little boy and that dog are quite the pair. Did the doctor say how his mother is doing?” she asked.

“Not well. He doesn’t expect her to live,” Alan said softly.

“Oh, no! What will happen to him? He cannot live where he is.”

“No ... and we don’t want him on the streets of East End. What would you think if we brought him to live with us?” Alan asked. “We cannot save his mother, but we can save Robbie.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “You are the most generous man I know. Robbie would love that.”

“Speaking of Robbie, he helped Mother deliver all the boxing baskets—including his own,” he said. “Trina was a big hit with the tenants. We had several requests for puppies—if she ever has them.”

A knock sounded at the door.

“That would be our breakfast, my darling. My appetite is ravenous,” he said, winking at her. “Are you hungry, my beautiful wife?”

“I am, handsome husband, but I think I need sustenance before I try more of the wonders you treated me to last evening,” she said, smiling. The passion they had created had been wonderful, but she loved this time, where they could talk, just the two of them.

“Put on your robe,” he said, handing it to her as he got up from the bed and covered himself with his own. He went to the door.

“I finally found it, brother,” Jeremy whispered, smiling in his sister-in-law’s direction. Stepping back, a footman pushed a silver cart in and put the food on a small table that had been set up for breakfast. The footman lit a candle in the center of the table and left.

“Thank you, Jeremy. I mean it,” Alan said, patting his brother’s shoulder before he turned and left.

“Shall we break our fast, wife?” he asked temptingly.

Elizabeth came and sat next to him. “This is so beautiful.”

“Why don’t you dish up?” Alan said.

She lifted the silver dome covering a silver plate. Beneath it was a black box wrapped in velvet. Slowly, she opened the box, maintaining her gaze on her husband's smile.

"It's the locket my mother wore," she exclaimed, picking it up and hugging it to her heart. She opened it up to a miniature of her mother and father's painted portrait, the one her mother had worn every day of her married life. "Where did you find this?" she asked, wiping away tears.

"Mother told me what happened to it, and Jeremy found it for me," Alan said. "There's more." He nodded at the box.

She dug through the paper and found a sapphire and diamond ring. "My mother's ring," she said, crying. "I thought I'd never see this again in my lifetime."

Getting up from her chair, she pushed her way onto his lap and pulled his face to hers.

"I love you, my darling husband," she said. "I am starving, and I don't think eggs and rashers will fill me up."

"Can you give me a hint of what you want, dearest wife," Alan teased.

"Yes ... and it starts with those toe-curling kisses of yours," she said, covering his lips with hers.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Bestselling Author, Anna St. Claire, is a big believer that *nothing* is impossible if you believe in yourself. She sprinkles her stories with laughter, romance, mystery, and lots of possibilities, adhering to the belief that goodness and love will win the day.

Anna is both an avid reader and author of American and British historical romance. She and her husband live in Charlotte, North Carolina with their two dogs and often, their two beautiful granddaughters, who live nearby. *Daughter, sister, wife, mother, and Mimi*—all life roles that Anna St. Claire relishes and feels blessed to still enjoy. And she loves her pets – dogs and cats alike, and often weaves them into her books as secondary characters. And she loves chocolate and popcorn, a definite nod to her need for sweet followed by salty...*but not together*—a tasty weakness!

Anna relocated from New York to the Carolinas as a child. Her mother, a retired English and History teacher, encouraged Anna's interest in writing after discovering short stories Anna would write in her spare time.

As a child, she loved mysteries and checked out every *Encyclopedia Brown* story that came into the school library. Before too long, her fascination with history and reading led her to her first historical romance—Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, now a treasured, but weathered book from having been read multiple times. The day she discovered Kathleen Woodiwiss,' books, *Shanna* and *Ashes In The Wind*, Anna became hooked.

Today, she focuses on the Regency and Civil War eras, although Anna enjoys any period in American and British history. Connect with her on her website – [www.annastclaire.com](http://www.annastclaire.com), through email—[annastclaireauthor@gmail.com](mailto:annastclaireauthor@gmail.com), BookBub – [www.bookbub.com/profile/anna-st-claire](http://www.bookbub.com/profile/anna-st-claire), Twitter – @1AnnaStClaire, Facebook – <https://www.facebook.com/authorannastclaire/>, or Instagram @annastclaire\_author.

EARL OF RENSHAW

COLLETTE CAMERON

*An Irish blessing for Maya—the sweetest Irish lass—and my  
faithful readers too.*

*May love and laughter light your days and warm your hearth  
and home.*

# CHAPTER ONE

*A VERY STORMY April afternoon*

*St. James Street, London, England*

BRACED against the blustery spring wind determined to finagle a way inside his black-caped greatcoat or sweep his hat from his head, Sanford Brockman, Earl of Renshaw and future Marquess of Trentholm, lifted his chin and glowered at the dismal charcoal sky.

Unlike the unfortunate souls he usually turned his infamous glare upon, causing them to quake in their shoes, the heavens did not care that they'd earned his infamous and formidable disfavor.

With the vengeance of a scorned lover, the tempest had come upon the city unexpectantly. Pouting pewter clouds poured forth every drop of precipitation they contained in an unyielding sheet of bone-chilling, soaking rain.

The petulant day matched his grave mood.

Hours before, Sanford had attended his sister's wedding, where he'd had to endure not only the beaming bride and groom and his blissfully married younger brothers' smug

expressions but the annoyingly frequent question from other guests: when was *he* going to find himself a bride?

Not any time soon, by thunder.

Why was everyone so blasted eager to see him dragged to the parson and leg-shackled?

In eerie confirmation, a jagged streak of orange and blue lightning lit the ominous firmament as angry thunder crackled and grumbled in the distance.

At the resonating boom, a woman scurrying past squeaked in alarm and, with a worried glance over her shoulder, ducked her head and quickened her already frantic pace.

Sanford had become so perturbed by the guests' repeated prying into his private life that he'd indulged in a moment of imprudent flippancy and said, "I assure you, when my betrothal occurs, it shall not be fodder for the gossip rags or newssheets."

Yes, he well knew his duty, not only to the earldom but to the marquisate. An heir, a spare, and perhaps, as Father had done, a third son to ensure the continuation of the line.

In his four-and-thirty years, Sanford had not met a woman he would consider taking to wife. Regardless, whoever the future Countess of Renshaw was, her lineage would be impeccable, and she would possess decorum, deportment, and a mild, biddable temperament. Should she be winsome, attractive, gifted with musical talent, fond of horses and dogs, and a tolerable chess player, so much the better.

Theirs would be a comfortable arranged marriage based on commonalities and no unrealistic expectations.

Today, when Lady Pandora Osborne—meddling matchmaker extraordinaire—had turned her gimlet eye upon



him with a distinct, contemplative, and wholly unnerving glint, Sanford had deemed it time to remove himself from the festivities posthaste.

Straight from his sister's wedding breakfast, he'd sought a much-needed reprieve from the merrymakers at White's. A glass of fine scotch had done much to warm his belly and mellow his peevish disposition.

Weddings were supposed to be a time of rejoicing and celebration, and yet he always found them tedious and exasperating in the extreme. All of that unbridled emotion, unrestrained giddiness, sycophantic posturing... *Nauseating*.

He was hard put to prevent a shudder and his upper lip from curling in disdain.

A once glossy but now mud-splattered ebony coach trundled past, the lobster-red wheels and horses' hooves churning the murky water flooding the cobbled lane and accumulating in narrow streams along the edges.

Filthy spray shot sideways. On the opposite side of the street, a gentleman shook his fist and cursed as he leaped out of the way and turned his back. A smattering of dirty water splattered the vaguely familiar man's side, but he'd pulled his hat low on his forehead, and his long cloak made it impossible to identify him. Another chap joined him—a servant of some sort, given his rough clothing—and they put their heads together in earnest conversation.

Not the best location for a serious discussion, particularly if they did not want another coach to drench them. They peered up and down the street before parting in opposite directions.

It seemed Sanford was not the only fellow stupid enough to take a walk in the worst gale of the year. However, he wasn't as imprudent as three of his four younger brothers and sisters. Every one of Sanford's married siblings had lost their bloody minds and married for love.

*Buffleheaded idiots, all.*

Marissa had not Come Out yet, so a chance remained she would make a wise match, unlike the others. He held his brothers and sisters in great affection, but, in truth, he did not understand them any more than they understood him.

Neither was he the least motivated to remedy that disparity.

Indulging in a rare parting from dignified behavior, Sanford snorted aloud, earning a curious glance and a toothy grin from a thin lad running by in an ill-fitting gray tweed coat.

*Love.*

That mystical, farcical, trumped-up, nonsensical emotion caused people to flout responsibility, obligation, and duty. To disregard life-long expectations, strictures, and even honor.

Ronan had married a governess emersed in scandal. Benjamin eloped with an actress—or had Isadora been an opera singer? It should've come as no surprise that his impetuous, unladylike, and wholly unconventional sister, Corinna, would choose as her husband a blackguard like Baron Strathmore, rumored to have set the fire that killed his entire family so he'd inherit the barony.

It did not matter that Strathmore had been completely vindicated.

He'd been tainted by disgrace. His reputation smudged beyond repair. Scandal left a stench in its wake that one could never be rid of, and that was why Sanford avoided any association with ignominy.

Stifling an oath, he clapped his hand to his head to prevent the wind from absconding with his beaver hat. Marching along, he held the hat in place and cursed the weather. He should not have sent the coach ahead to The Wicked Earls' Club to await him, but he'd needed the exercise.

Physical exertion always calmed him and helped to clear his thoughts.

In recent years, fewer nobles joined the earls' secret society, and several former members had married and left the club. With increased newspaper circulation, keeping the earls' personal affairs private had become nearly impossible. He wouldn't be surprised if the club closed its doors in the next decade.

An unforeseen pang of remorse stung him at the thought. The earls' comradery was not easily replaced.

Heads bent against the relentless wind and rain, a pair of women wearing thin shawls huddled beneath a tattered umbrella as they scooted along the buildings, using the structures as a partial buffer against the torrential onslaught.

Sanford stepped aside to avoid having his eye poked out by the umbrella. His foot sank into a deep puddle, the contents of which consisted of a repulsive mess of rain, manure, and other undefinable muck.

*Fiend seize it!*

Scowling, he shook his leg, glowering at the revolting residue clinging to the once-shiny shoe. He should've changed

into his boots before leaving Pelandale House earlier. Mouth pressed into a grim line to stubble the curse rising to his tongue, he increased his pace.

His stocking squished in his shoe.

*Squelch. Squelch.*

This confounded day just kept getting worse and worse.

Perhaps Sanford would skip The Wicked Earls' Club and spend the afternoon and evening at his cottage, Hydeaway House, instead. From time to time, he chose to stay there, relishing the peace and quiet. Something hard to come by at Father's mansion, where Sanford normally resided.

That was his one concession to selfishness. All else in his life was geared toward the earldom, to preserving its dignity and honor.

Sanford originally bought the quaint cottage to install a mistress in. Except no woman intrigued him enough to make that life-altering commitment. The place had become a sort of private sanctuary. He did not even permit his valet, Brewster, to accompany him, and thanks to the caretakers, Mr. and Mrs. Goggin, the house was always ready for him to pop in without notice.

A slow smile curved his lips.

Yes, that was what he would do.

That would also save him the inevitable gushing conversation about the wedding that was certain to take place at home. Of more importance, he would be spared his father's and stepmother's ever more frequent suggestions of a suitable bride.

Feeling much improved with his decision, Sanford turned the corner.

Ah, there was his coach.

Walton, the coachman, had likely taken refuge in The Wicked Earls' Club kitchen, where he typically enjoyed a hot cup of coffee, a tasty snack, and flirted shamelessly with the maids and cook.

The rain had abated to a drizzle—at least temporarily—as Sanford approached the club, and a few intrepid souls ventured outside. Coach and horse traffic increased as those eager to return home scurried forth before another shower deluged the city.

The dark clouds and the onset of late afternoon cast the street in a multitude of grayish shadows.

That same angry gentleman he had seen earlier gestured wildly at a trio of men forming a semi-circle around him. They all shook their heads and, appearing perturbed, peered up and down the street.

Sanford crumpled his forehead in concentration. He felt certain he must know the chap, but the fellow's name escaped him. Ah, well. It was of no consequence.

Anticipating a hot bath, a simple dinner, one of Mrs. Groggin's scrumptious desserts, and reading before a roaring fire as he sipped a superior cognac, Sanford rapped on The Wicked Earls' Club door.

The panel swung open, revealing a tall, liveried footman.

“Good evening, Lord Renshaw.”

“Please inform my coachman that I have changed my mind about this evening.” Sanford jutted his chin toward the vehicle.

“I shall await him in the coach.”

“Very good, my lord.”

Sanford turned away before the door closed and returned the nod of a gentleman with a lady on his arm.

He opened the coach and had raised a foot to climb aboard when he froze.

*What the bloody...?*

Someone cowered inside on the floor.

## CHAPTER TWO

*FIVE TERRIFYING HEARTBEATS LATER...*

*Inside a stranger's luxurious coach*

SOAKED to the skin and shaking so hard from bone-chilling cold and mind-numbing fear that her teeth chattered, Grace Dooley tried to curl into an invisible ball on the coach floor.

*Go away.*

Eyes squeezed shut, she prayed the stern-featured stranger she had glimpsed before ducking her head and pressing her face into her knees would leave.

*Please leave.*

*Shut the door.*

*I just need five more minutes.*

She needed a little more time to catch her breath and partially restore her equanimity before resuming her frantic flight. However, providence was not feeling benevolent. In truth, providence had not been kind or benevolent to Grace for over two months.

Nine weeks of hellish existence since her employer's fleshy son had returned after traveling abroad for three years. Six and sixty days of dashing into alcoves, putting a bracing chair beneath her chamber door handle, carrying a letter opener in her pocket, and fending off his inappropriate advances.

"Who are you?" the man snapped. "Why are you in my coach?"

The deep, grating voice seethed with annoyance and impatience.

Blast, he'd draw attention, and that was the last thing she wanted.

Jerking her head up, Grace's gaze collided with mahogany eyes, fringed with ridiculously thick eyelashes beneath severe raven eyebrows. Everything about this man fairly screamed power, privilege, and unyielding will.

She shoved several strands of sodden hair off her face with one hand while raising a forefinger to her freezing lips and sinking to her knees.

"Shh."

Dread clawing her spine, Grace searched past his broad shoulders for a terrifyingly familiar face.

"I should think it obvious." Even to a simpleton, which this gentleman clearly was not. "I am hiding."

She swung her gaze back to his.

"*Hide-ing?*" he pronounced the word slowly, dragging it out several syllables as if trying to discern the truth. Or perhaps he thought Grace was queer in the attic.

"Please, my lord."



Surely a man dressed as finely as he and who owned such a grand coach was a peer. Even if he was not, Grace had learned men adored flattery.

“I beg you, do not give me away.” She clutched her hands to her chest where her heart beat like a bird caught in a fowler’s snare. “I shall leave in a couple of minutes. I swear.”

Great shudders vibrated through her, and she wrapped her hands, stiff from cold, around her shoulders in a vain attempt to warm herself. Swaying, she closed her eyes, lightheaded from hunger and her petrifying flight with nothing but a small bag of her earnings and personal effects tied at her waist and hidden beneath her pilfered apron.

Lord above, she’d never been this wretched and cold in her entire life.

She had escaped the house cloakless and wearing a maid’s uniform that she had managed to hide piece by piece. It had taken her a fortnight to gather each article to avoid raising suspicion among the staff and her invalid employer’s dissolute son. It had been a blessed miracle that a chambermaid had left last month, putting the household another maid short and providing an unassigned uniform.

The reluctance of young, attractive females to work at Gibson House of late could be attributed directly to Hollace Wyndam.

*Reprobate, degenerate, bounder.*

His gaze probing, the lord’s high forehead creased into a stern three-lined frown before he veered his keen attention to his right and then his left.

“Why are you hiding?”

Every clipped syllable dripped with suspicion and perhaps accusation too.

Of course, he doubted her. He probably believed Grace had committed a crime.

Who wouldn't?

Even she recognized how guilty she appeared crouched in the coach. Could she be charged with trespassing for stowing away in the empty vehicle?

Theft for the garments she wore?

Grace bit her lower lip, misgiving churning her empty belly.

How much should she tell him?

More on point, could he be trusted?

Hollace Wyndam might well be an acquaintance of his.

"I am waiting." Annoyance fairly crackled around him.

The thunder had sent Grace bolting into the unattended carriage. For as long as she could remember, thunder and lightning had terrified her.

Everything about this gentleman, from his narrowed, flinty eyes, chiseled jaw, and wall-like shoulders and chest, suggested he lacked compassion and mercy. He brushed long fingers across that sculpted jaw, the movement jerky with impatience.

"I suppose you are trying to concoct a believable excuse for stowing away in my coach."

Grace stiffened her back and tipped up her chin, inexplicably angry with him.

No, not just him.

She was furious with all men of privilege who used their position and exerted their power over women to bend them to their will. Men like Hollace Wyndam, who believed he could crook his fat finger, and she would fall into his bed. And when she resisted, he'd threatened to lock her in her chamber.

That was when she realized she must escape him and hoped her friend, Joy Morrisette, and her doctor husband would temporarily take Grace in until she could find another position. But in her flight, she'd become lost, and the hackney driver she tried to hire took one glance at her rumpled maid's uniform and sneered before moving on to another fare.

"I am running away from my employer's son. I have been her companion for nearly a year, but since his return from touring the continent, he's been determined to force me to become his mistress."

She would never be any man's mistress. *Never.*

Not only because she had been raised to be a woman of moral character by Mrs. Hester Shepherd, the proprietress of Haven House and Academy for the Enrichment of Young Women, a foundling home and school, but also because such an arrangement would destroy Grace, wearing away at the core of her integrity and self-worth.

She shoved a sodden strand of hair off her cheek, then yanked her soaked cap firmer onto her head. "I even fabricated a faux fiancé to dissuade him, to no avail."

*Make of that what you will, you pompous, judgmental boor.*

The lean contours of his lordship's face grew impossibly severer.

Because he did not believe her...or because he did?

He removed his hat and skimmed a black leather gloved hand over jet-black hair, shoving it off his forehead as he heaved a great sigh.

“What am I to do with you?” he muttered, clearly inconvenienced and unconvinced.

Granite glittered in his eyes.

His regard unflinching and wholly unnerving, he replaced his hat.

Was he too much of a gentleman to toss Grace out on her bum, or was he considering calling a constable?

Still on her knees, she hobbled forward. Willing her shivering to cease so she might speak clearly, she managed through chattering teeth, “Nothing, my lord. You needn’t do anything. I shall be on my way.”

Before he pressed charges.

Contempt etched his ruggedly handsome countenance, and again she was not certain if he directed his scorn toward her or the unnamed man who had sent her on this perilous flight.

It mattered not whether he believed Grace or not. Her gut told her that he wouldn’t help her. Men of his ilk were all the same. Too toplofty, arrogant, and full of their own self-importance to deign to assist someone beneath their illustrious station.

She was not surprised.

Nevertheless, disappointment still sluiced through her.

The best she could hope for was that he would not have her arrested.

“I shall go right now.”

And pray no more thunder rattled the heavens.

Bracing her hand on the plush claret-colored velvet seat, Grace clutched her saturated bag and, poised at the opening, poked her head out.

“There you are!”

*Oh, God.*

“No.” A terrified half-moan, half-gasp escaped her.

Grace shrank back into the coach’s dimness.

Wyndam had found her.

Such potent dismay and fright engulfed Grace that she nearly swooned. Instead, she glared daggers at the shadowy form blocking the opening.

This was his fault.

If the big, brooding brute had not been determined to interrogate her, she might’ve escaped Wyndam’s clutches.

She raised what surely must be terror-filled eyes to his lordship’s.

Nothing shifted in his gaze or expression to indicate he empathized with her plight.

Wyndam trotted up to the coach. In truth, his approach consisted of an arduous, uneven gait.

Breathing heavily—the man was at least two stone overweight—he twisted his thin lips into a sly smile. Gasping, he fished a rumpled, soiled handkerchief from his pocket beneath his cloak, then mopped his sweaty forehead.

“I say, Renshaw, old chap,” he wheezed between great panting puffs. “Pray tell me, why is my”—he eyed Grace’s bedraggled and sopping uniform—“*maid* inside your coach?”

Ah, so Wyndam did know this Renshaw fellow.

“I am *not* your maid, Mr. Wyndam,” Grace snapped, beyond caring about courtesy. “I am—*was*—your mother’s companion.”

Was until this morning.

Grace hopped down, bumping into Renshaw and forcing him to take a step backward. Not before she caught a whiff of manly cologne. Sandalwood and cedar?

Wyndam generally reeked of sweat, and his fetid breath could curl the bark off trees.

A pair of women had stopped, expressions rapt, to watch the exchange, as well as a tall, handsome chap who appeared to be a coachman, and three expensively attired gentlemen preparing to enter the building before which the coach was parked.

A nice little crowd to witness her disgrace.

Grace had already peeved Renshaw. She might as well thoroughly provoke the man and pray he possessed a shred of decency beneath his greatcoat.

She pasted a brilliant smile upon her lips and linked her arm through the crook of Renshaw’s elbow. A wave of dizziness assailed her, but she locked her knees and blinked away the inky spots swimming before her eyes.

A tremor rippled up her spine and spread across her shoulders.

He shot her a questioning glance.

Mouth and throat oddly dry, she swallowed.

It hurt bloody awful.

Perfectly lovely.

The last thing Grace needed was to fall ill. At least not until she reached the Morissettes'. Brandon Morrisette was a doctor.

Mayhap Renshaw could be persuaded to take her to their house.

Not likely, however.

Not after she'd made a spectacle of him, even though it had been unintentional.

Renshaw's eyebrows shot to his impressive hairline, but before he could speak, she leaned into his side in what she hoped was an adoring manner. After all, she had no experience flirting or pretending to be enamored.

"Not that it is any of your business, Mr. Wyndam, but I am meeting with my betrothed."

## CHAPTER THREE

*STILL IN FRONT of the Wicked Earls' Club*

*A full five seconds later*

*BETROTHED?*

If Sanford had not had decades of controlling his reactions, his jaw would've hit the ground with a loud thud and perhaps bounced a time or two. Instead, he schooled his features and adopted a benign mien.

Was the chit utterly mad?

Had she escaped Bedlam?

No, Wyndam said she was his housemaid.

Though they did not travel in the same social circles, he'd met Wyndam previously once or twice.

He had been out of the country for some time, hadn't he?

Given the rotting sod's reputation, Sanford did not blame the girl for hightailing it. It did not take a genius to guess why she had fled her employer *if* she really did work for Wyndam's mother.



Gazing down at her upturned oval face and almond-shaped eyes such a dark blue that they competed with the deepest ocean, something unfamiliar twinged behind Sanford's breastbone. Curious, this sudden proclivity to protect her.

Having escaped the ill-fitting mobcap balanced haphazardly upon her head, several strands of hair as black and shiny as a raven's wing dangled around her slender shoulders. Bright spots of color glowed on her ashen face, and her eyes had taken on a glassy, unfocused appearance. She trembled, though whether from cold, fear, sickness, or all three, he could not discern.

Her eyes, framed by sooty lashes, silently begged for his help.

Sliding Wyndam a cautious sideways glance, she licked her lower lip, desperation fairly radiating off her.

Releasing a caustic laugh, Wyndam shook his head.

"Come, Miss Dooley. You will have to do better than that. Anyone who knows the Earl of Renshaw knows he would never—*never*—lower himself to wed a common chit so far beneath him. His tastes are much more refined, and his standards far, far loftier."

"You presume to speak on my behalf, Wyndam?"

Arctic air was tropical compared to Sanford's tone.

Wyndam shuffled his feet but did not apologize for overstepping. "I have wasted the better part of a day searching for you, gel. It is time to return home."

Who pursued a runaway maid, anyway? Unless she'd committed a crime.

Sanford examined Miss Dooley from beneath half-closed eyes.

Had she?

Many a pretty face concealed a wicked heart.

Wyndam reached for her arm, and she cringed, pressing into Sanford's side.

"No." A tremor shook her raspy voice. She coughed, an ugly rattling behind her ribs that betrayed her brave demeanor. She shook her head, the ugly, ill-fitting cap sliding farther to the side. "I shall not go with you."

"You will be dismissed if you do not." Wyndam's features hardened into condescending haughtiness.

*Bloody idiot.*

It was as obvious as the rather astounding pimple on his nose that Miss Dooley had already quit her position. Not a light decision for a woman in service.

Again, that ferocious, foreign need to protect her rose up within Sanford.

He, who had always scorned masculine displays of aggressiveness and prowess.

Wyndam terrified her, and Sanford needn't be a seer to understand why. He would wager his earldom that what Wyndam planned for Miss Dooley did not include dusting, cleaning fireplaces, polishing silver, or making beds, though a bed would likely be involved.

Miss Dooley's inky eyelashes fluttered as she swayed against Sanford.

The girl was on the verge of collapse, despite her bravado.

He instinctively snaked his arm around her narrow waist, steadying her and holding her upright.

*Devil take it.*

What a bloody, rotted conundrum.

As a gentleman, common decency demanded Sanford assist the girl, but her colossal, very public lie about being his betrothed tempted him to turn his back and leave her to deal with Wyndam alone.

She had put him in a deuced, discomfiting position, and Sanford detested being manipulated. He loathed being the object of speculation and rumors even more, which is why he'd spent a lifetime avoiding any hint of ignominy.

Now, within a span of a few minutes, a mere nymph of a girl had managed to place him in an impossible situation.

A snide, superior smile skewed Wyndam's mouth as he cradled his weak chin between his thumb and forefinger. He believed he had her trapped.

In point of fact, he did.

Rain began pelting them again, yet none of the bystanders scampered inside.

After all, how often did a person get to witness such a provoking scene?

"Your affianced is remarkably silent, Miss Dooley," Wyndam slid his gaze to the rapt onlookers.

A third woman had joined the other two, and they dipped their bonneted heads together to whisper behind their hands. None seemed the least affected by the rain. It proved quite remarkable what unpleasantness and inconvenience one would suffer for a succulent morsel of gossip.

Miss Dooley stiffened her shoulders and pulled herself erect.

Despite his anger and frustration, Sanford could not help but admire her fortitude. She had taken a gamble and lost, yet she did not wilt or dissolve into tears.

Head held high, she swept her indigo gaze over the assembled gawkers.

The earls standing at the entrance to The Wicked Earls' Club exchanged speaking glances, then entered the club. Their discretion could be relied upon.

However, a swift scan of the remaining bystanders confirmed Sanford's worst suspicion. They eagerly regarded the exchange, and no matter the outcome, this debacle would make titillating conversation in the upper salons in short order.

Miss Dooley met Sanford's gaze, an apology in hers. Defeat lingered there as well. And hopelessness.

A fragile, nascent smile curved her poppy-red lips.

Too red.

She was ill.

Only an idiot could miss the signs.

And still, Sanford could not summon the words he knew she desperately needed him to say. To keep her safe. To keep her out of Wyndam's clutches.

She stepped away, her movement stilted and uneven as she lifted a slender, pale hand to her forehead.

Primal satisfaction etched Wyndam's features as a predatory gleam glittered in his eyes.

The bounder thought he had triumphed.

Hadn't he?

No, by Zeus. He had not.

Sanford grasped Miss Dooley's elbow. "Come, let's enter the coach. The rain increases."

She turned toward him, dazed and confused. "I..."

"Just a bloody minute." Wyndam stomped forward a step. "If she leaves with you, I shall have her charged with theft within the hour."

She blanched, teetering, and Sanford felt certain he was the only thing keeping her on her feet.

Rage contorting his features, Wyndam pointed at the bedraggled gown and apron she wore. "That attire is not hers."

Excited whispers from the onlookers met his declaration.

Sanford arched an eyebrow in the superior fashion he'd mastered and which cowed most men.

"And what other clothing would a maid wear, Wyndam?"

Barely refraining from curling his lip in scorn, Sanford raked his gaze over the man, finding nothing to redeem the churl.

"Yes, but the uniforms do not belong to the staff," Wyndam blustered, just short of a sniveling whine.

*Pinchpenny.*

"I shall personally see that the uniform is returned to you, so there is no need to contact a magistrate, is there?" Sanford held the other man's gaze until Wyndam shifted his sideways.

"No." Wyndam pinched his mouth into a disgruntled pout resembling a goose's hind end. "But I expect them by week's end."

“My lord...?” Miss Dooley’s voice had diminished to a gossamer thread.

Sanford glanced down an instant before her eyes rolled back into her head, and she fainted dead away.

Swearing under his breath, he caught her and lifted her into his embrace.

Every instinct told him he would regret what he was about to do.

Blister it; he already did.

With a nod to Walton, he climbed into the coach and gently laid Miss Dooley on the seat. He arranged her as comfortably as he could, noting the shallow rise and fall of her chest.

She needed a physician.

“Where to, my lord?” Walton asked, his expression carefully neutral.

“Hydeaway House.” So named for the refuge the cottage had come to be. In truth, there was nowhere else to take this mystery woman.

The door clicked closed with a portentous snick, cloaking the interior in muted half-light.

As Sanford settled onto the other seat, the coach lurched forward. Chin on his fist, he regarded the minx who’d just upturned his well-ordered life.

“What havoc have you brought upon me, Miss no-given-name Dooley?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

*HYDEAWAY HOUSE, London*

*Early the next morning*

THE SOUNDS of someone puttering around the fireplace hearth stirred Grace from a deep slumber. Eyes closed, she put a hand to her aching head and turned over in bed.

*Wait.*

Where were the hard lumps?

She patted the plush mattress, and her eyes flew open.

Fern-green velvet met her shocked gaze as she stared upward.

*Green?*

No. That was not right.

The walls of her bedchamber at Gibson House were painted a faded, pale yellow.

Her former bedchamber, that was.

She no longer worked for Mrs. Wyndam.

Grace lurched upright and simultaneously gasped as pain stabbed her skull and every joint in her body screamed in protest at the abrupt movement.

Where was she?

How had she come to be here?

A cough rattled her ribs.

When was the last time she had been this sick?

Glancing down, Grace crumpled her forehead.

She still wore the maid's uniform, absent the apron, and someone had removed her mobcap and unpinned her hair, allowing it to tumble about her shoulders.

"Dearie, lie down." A stout woman, worry creasing her kindly, round face, bustled toward the bed. Cheeks apple-red, she brushed her hands on a ruffled white apron covering a rather startling floral puce gown.

She passed Grace a handkerchief. "You mustn't overdo."

She placed the back of her hand upon Grace's forehead and made a *tsking* sound. The aromas of violets and starch wafted from her.

"You have a fever, miss."

Through her befuddlement, Grace peered at her, trying to place the kind stranger.

She had no more idea who the servant was than she knew where she was.

"Where am I?"

She winced as the words emerged in a hoarse, scratchy rasp.



Rather than answer, the woman fluffed the pillows encased in lavender-scented cases, then urged Grace back until she partially reclined upon them. She then poured a glass of water.

“I’ll wager you are thirsty.”

Grace was. Terribly.

She accepted the water. The cool liquid soothed her fiery throat, and she drained the glass, then passed it back.

“Thank you.”

“I am Mrs. Goggin.”

The woman dampened a cloth in a nearby basin and, after wringing it out and folding it into a neat rectangle, laid it on Grace’s forehead before tidying the bedding.

It felt blessedly cool on her hot skin, and she closed her gritty eyes.

“I shall let his lordship know you have awakened, miss.”

“His lordship?” Grace whispered, forcing her heavy eyelids open.

“Yes, indeed.” Mrs. Goggin nodded, her chins folding and unfolding like a fleshly fan. Pride shone in her toast-brown eyes. “Sanford Brockman, Earl of Renshaw. Future Marquess of Trentholm.”

An earl.

Grace’s rescuer was a confounded earl.

No, a future marquess.

Just her rotten luck.

Memories of yesterday came flooding back, swamping her senses.

The dim coach.

The wet and cold.

Hollace Wyndam chasing her.

Renshaw's cologne. The curious crowd. Her paralyzing fear.

And Lord Renshaw's uncompromising visage...

Fingering the coverlet's silk edge, Grace asked, "Did his lordship bring me here?"

He must have done, of course.

Only, where *was* here?

Hands braced on her ample hips, Mrs. Goggin gave a proud nod. "Indeed, he did."

Wonder of wonders.

Lord Renshaw was not an unfeeling, cold-hearted cad, after all.

"So worried was he about you that his lordship even had Dr. Pritchard pay a call last evening to make sure you were not on death's door. Doctor will be 'round this afternoon to check on your recovery."

Mayhap not death's door but hovering about in the foyer, for certain.

A citrine-eyed white and black short-haired cat sporting a neat feline mustache leaped onto the bed.

"Ralph, you naughty scoundrel," Mrs. Goggin scolded, leaning down to remove him, but Grace shook her head.

"Leave him, please. I like cats. I like all animals, in truth. Except for snakes, but they are reptiles, not animals."

Grace had always wanted a pet, but circumstances hadn't given her the opportunity. Good fortune hadn't exactly fallen into her lap, beginning with being abandoned as a child.

Extending her hand, she permitted the cat to sniff her fingertips.

"Hello, Ralph."

Ralph pranced forward, purring loudly, and, with the superior air only cats are capable of, allowed her to rub behind his one black and one white ear.

"You have made a conquest. I always say cats know good people," Mrs. Goggin said approvingly. "I shall fetch his lordship and a wee bit of breakfast for you too, Miss...?"

She gazed at Grace expectantly, her hint as broad as her backside.

"Oh. I am Grace Dooley."

Grace bent her mouth into a weak smile.

"Thank you, Mrs. Goggin. You have been most kind. I am sorry to inconvenience you."

Another cough shook Grace's shoulders, making her lungs burn.

"Pshaw, it is no inconvenience. 'Tis nice to have another body around. As busy as his lordship is, his visits are infrequent."

Mrs. Goggin pursed her lips as if realizing she had revealed too much.

"I am truly grateful," Grace said to fill the awkward silence.

“I shall be back in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.” With another warm smile, Mrs. Goggin departed the bedchamber.

Ralph curled up on Grace’s lap and proceeded to fall asleep, his nose tucked beneath his paws.

Idly petting the cat, she stared at the pleated canopy.

Yesterday, she’d fled Gibson House, afraid for her honor, and today, she awoke in an earl’s home. Forehead furrowed, she glanced around the bedchamber. Though tastefully decorated with fine furnishing, this bedchamber lacked the ostentatious silk wallpaper, crown moldings, and plasterwork common in *haute ton* homes.

What, exactly, was this house used for?

Grace was not positive she wanted to know.

She had no sooner finished the thought when a sharp rap echoed outside the open door, drawing her attention across the chamber.

The doorjamb framed Lord Renshaw, reminiscent of yesterday when his broad shoulders had blocked the coach’s opening. He strode farther into the room, causing the small chamber to shrink considerably with his rugged, masculine presence.

Attired in black except for his shirt, cravat, and unadorned charcoal-gray waistcoat, he exuded the same measured reserve she had sensed in him yesterday. His raven hair, as black as the blackest midnight, had been brushed in the popular Titus style. It appeared he eschewed the current fashion of plastering his hair with scented pomade as a couple of rebellious ebony curls had fallen across his forehead.

She did not let his boyish appearance fool her.

This was a man aware of his power and position—a man not to be crossed.

He'd tucked a folded newsheet under his arm. Probably to read in the coach as he did whatever rich nobles did with their days. Stopping at the foot of the bed, he scraped his inscrutable mahogany gaze over Grace.

She must look an absolute fright, and Grace self-consciously combed her fingers through her tangled hair.

He did not speak, though she detected disapproval as the silence stretched uncomfortably.

Was he waiting for her to speak?

To thank him for his grudging chivalry?

Well, he *had* saved her, and she *was* grateful.

“Thank you, my lord. For helping me escape Wyndam and bringing me here.”

She sounded like a dying frog, and her throat ached something fierce.

Lord Renshaw remained stonily silent, and she dropped her gaze.

“If I might have paper and ink, I can write my friend. I am certain Joy and Dr. Morrissette will come around to collect me.”

“You did not think to do that before causing the debacle you did yesterday?”

February snow was warmer than his tone.

How stupid did he think she was?

“Naturally, I did. Several times, in point of fact, my lord.” Frost tinged her voice as well. “But Wyndam confiscated my

correspondence.”

Grace had been little better than a prisoner these last weeks. Nevertheless, she would not tell Lord Renshaw any more than she already had. He might’ve rescued her yesterday, but she did not owe this man an explanation.

Even if he was an aristocrat.

Turning her head, she coughed into the handkerchief.

Lord, she was miserable. All she wanted to do was slide down the comfortable mattress, burrow beneath the covers, and sleep. Instead, she must pen a pathetic missive to Joy and beg for help.

Grace peeked up at the earl.

Really, must he continue to stare?

Unkempt, in a strange house, ill, and obliged to him for coming to her aide, he must know he had her at a disadvantage. His silence was nothing short of rude, however.

He tossed the news sheets onto the bed.

They landed on Grace’s calves and startled Ralph awake.

The affronted cat leaped to his feet and—after giving his lordship a disdainful glare, which the lord returned with an indifferent gaze—bounded off the bed.

Grace looked between Lord Renshaw and the papers twice.

“My lord?”

Sweat beaded her forehead and upper lip. She doubted the small fire crackling merrily in the hearth was the cause. Mrs. Goggin said Grace had a fever. That was what came from barely sleeping or eating for weeks and then dashing about in the pouring rain and getting splashed by carriages for hours.

Lord Renshaw rested a shoulder against the bedpost, and though he gave the illusion of languor, the muscle flexing in his jaw betrayed him.

He was livid.

The epiphany struck her with such surety she involuntarily fisted a hand beneath the sheet.

Unquestionably, perfectly in control, furious.

At her.

With a casual flick of a long, manicured finger, he pointed to the newssheet.

“I took the liberty of circling the text I thought you might find of particular interest, Miss Dooley. I assuredly found it... compelling.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

*A HALF DOZEN awkward blinks later*

*Still in the bedchamber*

GRACE DID NOT WANT to read whatever Lord Renshaw thought she should. Instinct shouted that she wouldn't be happier than he at the content. Wary, she eyed him and then the papers.

His black eyebrows slashed together over his aquiline nose as he narrowed his eyes.

“You *can* read?”

“Yes.” *Snob*. “Three languages fluently. French and German, in addition to English and a touch of Latin.”

Grace was not certain why she shared that latter, except the earl made her feel beneath him. Inexplicably peeved, she seized the papers and swiftly perused the top one. A neat circle halfway down drew her attention.

*Sanford, Earl of Renshaw, to wed housemaid.*



*UH OH.*

Grace stiffened, her mind denying what her eyes had read. Fingers fumbling, she searched the gossip rags and newssheets, easily finding the godawful headlines, thanks to his lordship's diligence.

*Earl of Renshaw betrothed to mystery maid.*

*Ignominy surrounds the enigmatic Earl of Renshaw's secret betrothal.*

No. No!

Eyes blurring with fury and shame-induced tears, Grace stopped after the third. Closing her eyes, she collapsed against the pillows.

What had she done?

Had Hollace Wyndam contacted the newspapers and fed them that claptrap out of a fit of vengeful pique at having been thwarted? She would not put it past the rotter. It did not matter who had notified the press; the damage was done.

"Oh, Lord," Grace whispered, mortified to her marrow. Horrified that in her desperation to escape Wyndam, she had brought scandal upon a complete stranger—a peer of the realm, no less.

"I sincerely doubt the Almighty cares a whit about that contrived drivel." No humor colored Lord Renshaw's voice. "I cannot say the same for *le bon ton*."

Grace had gone from one unholy predicament to another. Only this time, *she* was the villain. And it felt terrible, dirty, and unsavory.

What was more, an apology would do nothing to remedy the situation. She had besmirched an earl's reputation, yet he still acted the gentleman and aided a complete stranger.

Opening her eyes, Grace forced herself to meet his irate gaze.

"I sincerely beg your pardon, my lord."

She clutched the handkerchief in her fist. "I did not think —"

"No, you did not, Miss Dooley," the earl snapped. His derisive laugh filled the room, a hollow and caustic reverberation. "Just yesterday, at my sister's wedding, I vowed that no scandal would surround my betrothal when I decided to marry."

"But we are not really betrothed. I can contact the papers and explain—"

"Explain what?" He cut her off again, his treacle-brown eyes sparking with ire.

"That you lied? You fabricated our betrothal? The truth matters not. Are you truly so gullible, so naïve, Miss Dooley, as to believe anyone gives a jot about the truth? Truth doesn't sell newssheets. Gossip, rumors, tattle, scandal, and disgrace does."

She could not argue against anything he said.

"I was not a housemaid but a companion to the elderly Mrs. Wyndam."

Grace did not know why she wanted him to know that insignificant detail. A servant was a servant to a man like him.

In a parting from his rigid self-control, incredulity sharpened his features. He would be a handsome man, breathtaking, in truth, if it were not for the perpetual sour and disapproving expression he wore.

“That matters naught. *You* are a commoner. A domestic. In service.”

He made it sound like that made her a leper or a diseased harlot with French pox.

Never had Grace felt more inconsequential or insignificant. Less worthy or important. Defensiveness and anger flared at the earl’s undeserved and undisguised scorn.

“I may not be a commoner.” The words were out of Grace’s mouth before she consciously processed the thought. She might be too. The truth of it was that her parentage was a complete mystery.

A hawkish and wholly skeptical eyebrow shied high on his forehead, fairly shouting,

*“Please. Do you expect me to believe that balderdash?”*

She lifted a shoulder. “I was raised in a foundling home. I have no idea about my lineage, but some of the girls there have been of the nobility.”

Not for one minute did Grace believe she was one of them. For one thing, she was Irish. She knew that much. A letter had accompanied her to the foundling home along with monies to pay for her stay until she reached an employable age.

Lord Renshaw stiffened, suspicion pinching the corners of his eyes.

“*What* foundling home?”

“Haven House and Academy for the Enrichment of Young Women.”

“Bloody, blasted...” He sent an infuriated glance upward. It was a wonder the plaster did not peel from the ceiling at the scorching glare. “Of all the rotted, deuced, confounded... *luck.*”

She felt certain the last word was to spare her tender sensibilities.

A cadence of a thousand drums beating in her skull, Grace squinted at him. “Why?”

He ignored her question and, instead, jabbed a finger toward the scattered papers across her lap and the bed.

“Have you, Miss Dooley, any idea the harm your carelessly uttered words have caused?”

Yes. Yes, Grace did, but her remorse was little comfort, and neither did it remedy the intolerable situation.

Shaking his head, his lordship paced back and forth at the foot of the bed, reminding her of a caged lion she had glimpsed once: Sleek, powerful, agitated, and angry.

“I received a summons from my father at half past six this morning.” His lordship gave her a side-eyed glance, those whisky-brown eyes simmering with repressed indignation.

“And that is a bad thing?” Perhaps he did not get on with his father.

“My brothers are bidden by our father. I, however, have *never* been summoned before.”

He took great pride in that. Grace could see it in his face and how he held his shoulders. Did that mean he was a man of character and integrity or a pompous twiddlepoop who rigidly complied with *le beau monde's* strictures?

Could he not be both?

As likely as snow in London in June.

“Why didn't you just leave me?”

He halted and spun to face her, puzzlement making the planes of his face more severe.

“What?”

“Why didn't you leave me then?” she repeated.

Grace searched his face for any sign that he recognized his part in the catastrophe.

“If you had, my lord, no one would've given any credit to a rambling maid's irrational declaration. But when you took me into your coach, you gave credence to the fabrication that there is something between us.”

The earl's jaw worked as he clenched and unclenched his hands.

Grace eyed him warily.

Was he a violent man too?

Had she hopped from the proverbial pan into the fire?

“Do you presume to blame *me*?” The muscle in the earl's jaw practically bounced in his agitation. “Do you have even an inkling of what Wyndam intended for you?”

Of course, Grace did. Which is why she had fled in the first place.

She arched an eyebrow in response. She was perfectly capable of dramatics too.

“Are you serious, my lord?”

Of course, he was.

The man was incapable of flippancy.

“I risked enduring your wrath rather than Wyndam despoiling me.”

Before Renshaw could respond, Mrs. Goggin swept into the bedchamber bearing a laden tray. “Seems to me you are partially to blame, your lordship. When your temper cools and your bruised pride heals, you will realize the truth.”

Grace sent her a grateful glance but doubted Lord Renshaw ever acknowledged wrongdoing. He had probably been a dour child, afraid of his own shadow, and never did anything untoward.

Imagining him as a grave toddler eschewing his toys in favor of sitting like a perfect miniature gentleman prompted a smile, which she swiftly wrestled under control. She did not need Lord Renshaw thinking she was half-mad too.

Mrs. Goggin set the tray down. “Now, go see what the Marquess of Trentholm finds so dire that he sent a messenger before the cock crowed and let this young lady rest.”

“We shall resume this conversation when I return, Miss Dooley.”

Lord Renshaw stomped toward the door, and it was a wonder he did not leave single marks on the pretty green and burgundy Aubusson carpet.

Defiance sluicing her, tired of men dictating to her and threatening her, Grace angled her head. “I shall not be here.”

Before she could blink twice, he spun about and marched back to the bed. Thunder etched his face, and Hades blazed in his eyes.

“You will be if I have to lock you in this chamber.”

Grace gasped and shrank away from him. “You would not dare!”

Had she escaped one prison for another?

“My lord!” Mrs. Goggin gaped at her employer, clearly flabbergasted at his behavior. “Surely you jest.”

“When have I ever jested, Mrs. Goggin?”

Grace could well believe the man did not possess a single humorous, teasing bone in his large, well-muscled, overwhelming body.

Countenance grim, he faced his servant. “Lock the door and take the key with you when you exit this chamber.”

“I cannot...” Mrs. Goggin objected, one hand at her throat and worry pleating the corners of her eyes. The side-eyed glance she slid Grace held an apology and trepidation.

“You can and you will.” Lord Renshaw speared Grace with a wrathful glance. “If Miss Dooley disappears, I shall never be able to clear my name. I shall not have the Brockman name, the earldom, or the marquissate besmirched by disgrace. Until I contrive a solution, Miss Dooley remains here.”

Did he hear himself?

“And an unmarried young woman confined to your home won’t cause *any* gossip?” Grace said with such sarcasm that his eyebrows nearly took flight.

She did not know why she goaded him. Truly she did not. The earl brought out the worst in her. Mayhap it was her fever. She'd lost her ability to hold her tongue around the pompous prig.

But really.

Keeping a young woman against her will. If he thought lips flapped about his betrothal to a housemaid, imagine what they'd say about forcing an unchaperoned young woman to stay in his house.

He'd probably be lauded as a man about town; she would be ruined.

“No one but the Goggins and my coachman knows you are here, Miss Dooley. I intend for it to remain that way. Oh, and lest you think you can bribe them, each is loyal and will abide by my wishes, even if they do not agree with my reasons.”

Another contrite glance from Mrs. Goggin as she poured a cup of tea confirmed the truth.

She would abide by her employer's dictate.

Grace had escaped one snare only to be captured in another.

She had been afraid of Wyndam, but his man... There was something imminently more terrifying about the Earl of Renshaw.

Arms crossed and lips pursed, she glared daggers at the obstinate brute. It was a wonder he did not incinerate on the spot, so scorching was her glower.

She had escaped once.

She could do so again.



As if reading her mind, he pointed a finger, his raven eyebrows crashing together.

“You do not want to experience my wrath should you defy me, Miss Dooley.”

“Pigheaded bully,” Grace muttered beneath her breath.

“Also, obstinate, mule-headed, stubborn, inflexible, uncompromising...” Mrs. Goggins made no effort to whisper.

“Indeed.” With a final scowl, Lord Renshaw strode from the room.

## CHAPTER SIX

*PELANDALE HOUSE, Grosvenor Square*

*Thirty minutes later*

THE FINELY SPRUNG coach rocked to a stop before the opulent Trentholm mansion. An intricate wrought iron fence on either side of the well-scrubbed stairs enclosed small patches of rich, verdant grass and rows of robustly pruned claret-colored roses.

For the first time in memory, Sanford had been called before his father, the Marquess of Trentholm, much like a child in a skeleton suit caught pilfering sweets from the kitchen. And he could guess why he'd received the early morning summons.

The confounded gossip rags.

How many underpaid sots had stayed up all night setting the small type for the tripe published this morning? How many of the upper ten thousand would gossip over breakfast at his expense and relish the pompous and haughty Earl of Renshaw's descent into scandal?

Oh, Sanford knew how Society viewed him.

Nevertheless, it was better to be considered a stuffy boor than a libertine or dissolute. What was more, and of significantly greater importance, he had managed to stay out of range of the gossipmongers' sights his entire adult life.

Until now.

Why had he played the gallant and, against his better judgment, taken Miss Grace Dooley into his coach? Mrs. Goggin had revealed the young woman's full name to him when she had told him his guest had awoken.

Though Sanford had known Miss Dooley meant trouble from the instant he'd seen her huddled on the coach floor like a street waif, an innate sense of decency prohibited him from leaving her to Hollace Wyndam's evil devices.

There'd been an inexplicable pull—an indescribable connection from the moment their eyes met. Everything Sanford believed about honor, station, and reputation had been weighed against helping a defenseless woman who would surely have been despoiled had he not taken her with him.

In truth, Sanford's ire was not aimed exclusively at the woman lying in one of Hydeaway House's bedchambers. Miss Dooley had been right. Had he left her outside The Wicked Earls' Club, he would not find himself in this untenable position. The onlookers would've believed her deranged or an opportunist.

Honestly, he was not entirely sure she wasn't one or both.

He stared at Pelandale House's lobster-red front door for several long seconds, dreading the confrontation.

*Egads, man.*

*Sanford Antony Edward Brockman, Earl of Renshaw, is not a coward.*

No help for it. Better to get it over with and then return to Hydeaway House and deal with the attractive baggage he'd left fuming in bed.

As Sanford stepped from the carriage, his brother Ronan's much too cheerful voice rang out.

"So, Father has sent for the errant eldest son. How fortuitous that our dear papa arises at five every morning and reads the newssheets while he breaks his fast at the ungodly hour of six."

*Bollocks.*

Grinning like a deranged Cheshire cat *and* a cat in the cream, Ronan, the middle Brockman brother, fell into step beside Sanford.

"I thought I would offer moral support, old fellow. I have received an official summons from our illustrious sire dozens of times. I would be happy to give you a few pointers."

"I just bet you would," Sanford muttered, making no effort to conceal his ill humor.

He cast a baleful glance at the blue sky. All hint of yesterday's gale had passed, except for a few scattered puddles here and there. If it had not been for that blasted storm, he would not find himself in this uncomfortable predicament.

Ronan leaned in and whispered, "I have found it is best to just nod and make affirmative sounds in the back of your throat until Father is done having his say."

Sanford snorted. "I do not need your advice, thank you."

"Nonetheless, I shall come along for moral support."

Something resembling a primal growl rooted around behind Sanford's breastbone in an effort to throttle up his

throat. Naturally, being the singular Brockman brother with a modicum of decorum, he forbade the animalistic sound to emerge.

“Halloo.”

His youngest brother, Benjamin, trotted up to meet them.

*Bloody, holy...*

Who else would deem it appropriate to intrude upon a private meeting?

Wearing a grin as gloating and imbecilic as Ronan’s, he threw an arm around Sanford’s shoulder.

“Never fear, big brother. We’ll see you through this interrogation.” He winked, the very devil in his gaze. “Ronan and I are quite the experts at this sort of thing.”

Yes. Yes, they were.

Both had been naughty imps as children, and that unfortunate trait had carried into adulthood. Their sons, *and daughters*, would likely be adorable hellions too.

Amongst the brothers, Sanford alone had inherited staidness, whereas his rascalion younger brothers had inherited penchants for precociousness and mischief.

They reached the top of the stoop, and Sanford looked between them, oddly touched at their brotherly, if somewhat misplaced, support.

“How did you know?”

“Rachael sent a note ’round an hour ago,” Ronan volunteered.

Benjamin added, “She thought you might benefit from our company.”

Leave it to their stepmama to watch out for him, even if Sanford did not need assistance.

“Do you suppose there’ll be bets on White’s books as to whether our dear brother will march down the aisle?” The wicked glint in Ben’s eye suggested he hoped so.

Probably.

The *ton* gambled on anything and everything, from whether Mrs. Clutterbuck’s excessive consumption of prunes might lead to another highly odiferous public incident to which young, athletic buck Mrs. Featherborne-Pinfield would choose as her next lover.

And bed to exhaustion.

“Assuredly,” Ronan replied. “Mayhap also a wager as to whether the girl is increasing, hence the hasty betrothal. There are *so* many possibilities.”

Sanford started to deny the latter, but with a sickening twist of his stomach, he realized he was not positive Miss Dooley wasn’t with child.

His gut knotted tighter.

And if she was, would everyone assume the babe was his?

*Bugger it.*

Several foul oaths paraded across his brain, but he refused to give his brothers the satisfaction of seeing him lose control.

Ronan raised his nose and gave an exaggerated sniff.

Once. Twice. Thrice.

“Do you smell something offensive, Ben?” he asked with fabricated innocence.

“Indeed,” Benjamin chuckled before he also sniffed in a manner worthy of a bloodhound. “Rotten fish.” He sniffed again. “Or...God forbid! Is that *scandal* I smell?”

Ronan gave a sage nod. “Yes, by Jove, you have hit the nail head-on. Who was that arrogant blighter who said scandal is like fish gone bad? The stench remains a long while, blah, blah, blah...”

“Leave off,” Sanford grumbled. “You have made your point.”

In a moment of arrogance, he had said something to that effect when Ronan had married Mercy, and his brother had taken umbrage. For his stupidity, Sanford sported a black eye for a fortnight, courtesy of Ronan.

Fate must be having a grand laugh at Sanford’s expense right now.

Likely the devil too.

Usually, disgrace followed a poor decision, not a chivalrous one. Sanford had gone and done the noble thing, and look where it had landed him? Had he walked away, his reputation would be intact, and he would not be in this deuced conundrum.

And Miss Grace Dooley would’ve been violently violated.

Her virtue for his pride?

It was nowhere near a fair exchange.

The truth of the matter was, Sanford had no idea what he was going to tell his father. It was highly inappropriate for Miss Dooley to remain at Hydeaway House. He assuredly was not going to pretend to be betrothed to the chit, despite the infernal flimflam in the papers.

Nothing would compel him to marry a member of the lower orders.

Nothing.

He rubbed the side of his nose as he and his brothers made the familiar trek to the study. The two bothersome bratlings prattled on about what dire punishment Sanford might expect.

“Father could cut off his allowance,” Benjamin put forth.

“Do you receive an allowance, big brother?” Ronan asked, his eyes wide and knowing full well Sanford had no need to do so.

A fresh-faced maid wielding a feather duster bobbed a curtsy as they passed.

Why, the solution was so simple as to be laughable.

Sanford could claim Miss Dooley was a newly hired maid to help Mrs. Goggin. Not that the perfectly capable and organized Mrs. Goggin needed anyone to assist her in tending the house.

But that did not explain the betrothal blather.

If only one person had heard Miss Dooley’s ludicrous declaration, he might’ve explained it away as a misunderstanding.

*The blustery wind and pelting rain distorted what she said.*

*She was in a feverish state and spoke delirium-induced gibberish.*

*Jealousy at having his maid leave his employ had prompted Wyndam’s childish fabrication.*

Unfamiliar nerves flitted around his midsection.

*Buck up. Stiff upper lip and all of that rot.*



Sucking in a steadying breath, Sanford rapped once on the study door with the knuckle of his forefinger.

“Come.”

Nothing in Father’s directive or voice betrayed his mood a jot.

Sanford entered, and his irritatingly chipper brothers filed in behind him.

Father quirked an eyebrow, his gaze trailing from son to son to son.

“To what do I owe this honor?” he asked.

“We are here to lend Sanford moral support,” Ronan volunteered, not bothering to hide his gleeful smirk.

“Aye,” Benjamin agreed, just as obnoxious and cocky. “He’s not accustomed to this sort of thing. Being the boring, perfectly behaved sod that he is.”

A chuckle shook Father’s shoulders as he leaned back in his leather chair and clasped his fingers together over his belly.

Well...that was unexpected.

And wholly welcome too.

The man before Sanford wasn’t irate or outraged. Perhaps this was not such a conundrum after all. Trying to gauge his father’s mood, he pulled an earlobe.

Rather than censure or anger darkening his visage, jollity twinkled in Father’s gaze.

Sanford narrowed his eyes.

Was father making a May game of him?

Father's attention drifted to the neat stack of newssheets on the corner of his massive desk.

"I should have liked to have been informed before reading about your betrothal in the papers, Sanford. To a servant, no less. Never thought I would see the day."

Ronan and Benjamin burst into guffaws, laughing so hard that they had to hold onto one another for support. So much for help from that quarter, the immature asslings.

A grin pulled Father's mouth upward, despite his valiant attempt to keep a banal expression.

Devil a bit.

Father *was* poking fun at Sanford.

"When do we get to meet the lucky young lady?" his father asked, hilarity preventing him from keeping his voice steady.

"Pardon?" Sanford shook his head.

Surely, he had misheard.

He quickly clarified the situation. It was one thing to have *le beau monde* think he was betrothed to a servant and another entirely for his family to believe such balderdash.

"There is no lucky young lady. Well, there *is* a young woman, but we assuredly are not betrothed. It is a huge misunderstanding. She is merely a maid I hired—"

Holding his hand up, Father cut him off. "Parlor maid? Scullery Maid? Chambermaid? Maid of all work?"

Ronan and Ben erupted in gales of laughter again.

*Queer in the attic blighters.*

"Um, a maid of all work," Sanford improvised. "On a probationary period."

His countenance gone serious, Father leaned forward. All humor had fled, replaced instead by sobriety. “You will have to do better than that, son. Her social status is immaterial if there is a jot of truth in what the papers report.”

“We are *not* betrothed,” Sanford emphasized again. “In a moment of desperation, she claimed we were. Hollace Wyndam would’ve forced himself upon her. I have no doubt he’s the source of the newssheets’ tattle.”

“Where is the girl now?” Father asked.

*Blast it.*

He would get directly to the point.

“She is safe but quite ill. She caught a nasty chill. The physician has been to see her and assures me she should recover, but she cannot be moved at present.”

That should satisfy his father.

“Does she have a name?” Father persisted.

*Or not.*

Sanford did not want to reveal Grace Dooley’s identity.

“I shall wager a bottle of cognac that he’s sequestered her at his cozy cottage.” Ronan wiggled his eyebrows. “*That* won’t cause any undue speculation.”

Sanford chose to ignore his brother’s taunting. “Naturally, she has a name, but I am reluctant to share it.”

“Does it escape anyone how protective Sanford is of this mystery woman?” Benjamin added that morsel.

“I am protecting my reputation and hers,” Sanford snapped.

Father pointed to an armchair before his desk.

“Sit down, Sanford, and let’s hear the tale and see what can be done to curtail the tattle. After all, above all others, you have strived to keep your name off the gossips’ tongues.”

“Too late for that,” Ronan put in merrily as he perched on the sofa’s arm.

“Aye, far too late,” Benjamin agreed, plopping onto the couch.

Settling into the chair, Sanford speared his brothers a glower. “There is no need for you to remain. Your *support*—and lack thereof—“has been duly noted.”

“I think they should stay.” Father looked at each of his sons in turn. “They may have useful suggestions about how to handle this situation. A lot of people would enjoy seeing you taken down a peg—”

“Or three,” Ronan quipped while waggling his eyebrows again.

“Or five,” Benjamin offered with a cheeky grin.

Yes, Sanford was a stickler for rules and propriety. And yes, he spoke directly, not mincing his words, but he’d never been purposefully cruel. Nor had he ever teased, jested, or taken pleasure in someone else’s misfortune as his family apparently thought appropriate in this situation.

Why it should rub him raw did not bear examining.

“It is comforting to know that my family holds me in such low esteem that you take pleasure in my distress.” He stood, not missing the sudden exchange of troubled glances between his father and brothers. “I shall bid you good day.”

“Now, Sanford. Do not take umbrage.” Father also stood, placing his palms atop his tidy desk. “No one meant any

offense.”

“Didn’t they?” He skewered each with an accusatory glower. “I beg to differ. Offense was exactly what was intended and accomplished.”

His family knew Sanford had no sense of humor. Jollity was beyond him, for whatever reason. When, as a young child, he had realized his inability to be cheerful, silly, or frivolous, he’d accepted his oddness. Unfortunately, no one else had, and he was continually judged and ridiculed for his sternness.

Just once, he would like to respond with levity and lightheartedness, but the truth was that he was as incapable of doing so as a horse was likely to sing an aria. When he tried, his jests fell flat as an oatcake. Tamping down the ridiculous hurt he thought he had long since become immune to, Sanford rolled a shoulder to affect nonchalance.

“I suppose you believe I deserve this turn of events, but lest you forget, it is not just my reputation being bandied about, nor is it only my life that will suffer the consequences. I am fully aware that I am regarded as the bothersome pebble in the family’s shoe, and perhaps I deserve a portion of the scorn and ridicule directed toward me. Nevertheless, in this situation, I had hoped for your support. That was a grave miscalculation on my part. One I shall not make again.”

Devil take it, he sounded and felt like an intractable child.

“Sanford.” Concern etched upon his features, Ronan rose and extended his arm. “We still need to figure out a plan. For your sake and the girl’s. You must want to help her, or else you would not have saved her from whatever it was you saved her from.”

Genuine chagrin pulled Benjamin's mouth downward. "I apologize, San. I was just having a bit of fun. Of course, we will do everything we can to help."

He veered a desperate glance at their father.

The truth was, Sanford had been a royal pain in the backside to his brothers regarding their choice of wives. It should come as no surprise they wanted their pound of flesh from him.

He stalked to the door, feeling the odd man out as he always had. He might hold a courtesy title and be the next Marquess of Trentholm, but Ronan and Benjamin had their father's affection and respect. Things Sanford doubted he would ever earn, no matter how hard he tried or how much it mattered to him.

Retreating into old, self-preservation habits, he schooled his face into a mask of neutrality and shoved his emotions to a fusty corner in his mind and heart to rot.

"I shall be staying at my house for the indefinite future." He skimmed his gaze over them. "And I shall not be at home to visitors."

"Ah, so the girl *is* there," Ronan said unnecessarily.

Sanford did not answer but took his leave.

He had a sick woman and a scandal to deal with.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *HYDEAWAY HOUSE*

*Three nights later*

“NO. STOP. DO NOT TOUCH ME!” Grace shook her head and slapped the hand groping her. “I shall not be your mistress. I would rather die.”

She tried to run—*God help me!*—but something had become tangled around her legs, holding them immobile. Fear choked her, making it almost impossible to draw air as she kicked and squirmed, desperate to escape.

Arms flailing, she arched her body, her heart beating so frantically it would surely burst.

Wyndam meant to ravish her.

He gripped her shoulders, shaking her.

“Nooo.”

He would not easily force her. She would resist him until death if she must.

Grace swung her fist with all her might, taking great satisfaction in hearing the resounding *thwack* when she made

contact with his cheek and heard his grunt. She cried out as pain exploded in her hand, yet she was not ready to give up the fight.

She balled her other hand.

“Let go, Wyndam, you bounder!”

*Smack.*

“Rotter.”

*Smack.*

“Blackguard.”

*Smack. Smack*

“Wake up, Miss Dooley.” A concerned male voice penetrated the fog entrapping her. “You are having a nightmare.”

That voice. It...was not Wyndam’s.

*Oh, thank God.*

“Wake up,” he insisted again in an urgent yet gentle whisper. “I am the Earl of Renshaw. Remember me? I took you into my carriage the other day.”

*Renshaw?*

The grumpy, self-important boor?

The man Grace had claimed was her betrothed?

The curmudgeon who’d ordered her locked in her bedchamber?

Breathing heavily, her heart battering her ribs, Grace forced her eyelids open and shrank back into the pillows at the form hovering above her, the fire and shadows casting his face in a sinister mold.



The earl eased back, his expression equal parts vexation and relief.

He lifted his hand and made to touch her, but she winced and turned her face away.

“I am only going to check if your fever has finally broken,” he said in a soothing tone as if she were a wild creature he feared would bolt or bite.

When she did not cringe away again, he gently placed the back of his hand on her forehead. The dim light made it impossible to tell for certain, but genuine concern appeared to radiate from his eyes. Dark stubble covered his face, and he wore only a shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows and exposing black hair-covered forearms, and ebony pantaloons which revealed sculpted thigh muscles when he moved.

She would wager her only piece of jewelry, a silver cross brooch that Mrs. Shepherd had given her, that very few people saw this starchy fellow in dishabille.

His blasted pride and all of that.

“Ah, yes. Excellent.” He gave a sanguine nod. “I think it has.”

“Where is Mrs. Goggin?” Grace asked, searching the room.

She wiped her palm across her damp forehead, her sweat-sodden nightgown clinging to her skin. She did not want to contemplate how she had come to be attired in the oversized, ruffled garment, which was likely the housekeeper’s.

The earl rose and, after turning up two lamps that bathed the room in a soft golden glow, crossed to the washstand.

“She is asleep. I sent her to bed three hours ago. She’s tended you without reprieve, and I feared she was on the verge of collapse. Then what would I do? She runs this household with the precision of an army officer and is irreplaceable.”

He tipped his mouth upward in what Grace thought might be an attempt at a smile. “Plus, she tolerates my idiosyncrasies.”

Was he trying to be humorous or glib?

If so, he had fallen short but in an endearingly awkward fashion.

But did that mean...?

Grace eyed him from beneath her eyelashes.

Had *he* nursed her these past hours?

She could not quite reconcile in her mind that the harsh man she had met in the pouring rain and who’d glared at her with thunder in his eyes as he threw newssheets on the bed, now tenderly wrung out a cloth.

“How long?” She swallowed, weak as a newborn pup. “How long have I been ill?”

“Three days. The physician has called twice daily.” The earl glanced over his too-broad shoulder as he folded the cloth. “Do you remember our conversation from before?”

Graced nodded despite feeling bloody awful and frailer than she could ever recall. “It is not something one forgets. I have embroiled you in a horrible conundrum.”

He did not refute her.

As Mrs. Goggins had, he poured her a glass of water.

Grace drank greedily before sighing and closing her eyes. “Please forgive me for being such an inconvenience. I never meant to impose upon you this long. I shall write my friends.”

His answer was to gently swipe the cloth across her forehead and cheeks. “Later. You are not well enough to go anywhere at present.”

Opening her eyes, her gaze locked with his.

The half-light muted his stern visage, and she could almost see the boy he had once been. Before responsibility and duty had leeches the joy from him. Or perhaps, he had never been cheerful and carefree but rather taciturn and severe even as a child.

She’d wondered about that before.

A couple of girls at Haven House had been like that. Always taking themselves seriously and critical of others’ joy and laughter. It was no way to live life, with all of its hardships and trials. Mrs. Shepherd, the proprietress, had always advised her girls to seize joy and happiness where they might.

“Life is either a glass half full or half empty. Your perception, attitude, and thoughts determine your happiness,” Mrs. Shepherd had said.

Forehead furrowed, Grace stared at the open door. “I thought I was to be locked inside this chamber.”

Making a rough noise in his throat, the earl scratched his bristly jaw.

“I was not at my best when I said that. I assure you, you were never locked in. I beg your pardon for my ungentlemanly outburst.”

“It is of no consequence,” Grace said with as much lightness as she could muster. It was not as though she had been aware either way.

Lord, how she wished she could strip off this wet gown, but what would she put on instead? A swift examination of the room revealed no sign of the maid’s uniform. Likely, Mrs. Goggin had taken the garment to mend and launder.

She shivered, and his lordship frowned.

“You are cold.” The earl narrowed his gaze, sweeping it over her in a manner that ought to make her blush but instead caused a queer tingling in her middle that spread outward to her limbs. “Your gown is soaked through. You will need to change at once, lest you relapse.”

His eagerness to see her well again caused no affront. After all, Grace had greatly incommoded the man. The sooner she was well, the sooner she could be on her way and done further inconveniencing him.

How had his interview gone with his father?

She did not dare ask, despite her avid curiosity.

“But what shall we use?” The earl scraped a hand through his already mussed ebony hair, then stood and planted his hands on his narrow hips. “I am not accustomed to keeping spare female clothing on hand.”

Why that information should please Grace made no sense at all.

“There is no need, my lord. I shall be fine as I am.”

For certain, Grace was not capable of changing herself, and she did not want Mrs. Goggin awakened. The sweet woman had been troubled enough.

A grin tipped the earl's mouth upward, and years of austerity melted away, leaving a devastatingly handsome man in its wake.

*Good heavens. He's beautiful.*

The Good Lord must've destroyed the mold after creating him, lest all females be reduced to gawping, tongue-tied featherbrains in his presence.

Grace tried not to gawk; she really did. But when he smiled, that flash of white teeth and a grin lighting his brown eyes, the Earl of Renshaw was irresistible.

"I have it." He snapped his fingers, looking well pleased with himself. "I shall be right back. You stay right there."

He pointed his finger, but not in the intimidating or demanding way he had a few days ago, but in an almost playful manner.

Besides, where would Grace hie off to in the wee hours of the morning, even if she could manage to stand without support? Which she was quite certain she could not. Sitting up in bed took every ounce of strength she possessed.

The earl strode from the room and returned in just a couple of minutes carrying a long white garment. "I honestly have no idea where this came from. I do not wear them."

Grace was not surprised. Heat seared her cheeks at the unwarranted and uninvited imagery that sprang to her mind at his innocent admission. It must be the fever. What else could it possibly be? It had muddled her thinking.

"It is a nightshirt," he offered needlessly.

"Yes, I surmised as much."

Regardless, the devil would fart fairy dust before the earl helped her don the too-big garment.

Pulling his eyebrows into a puzzled vee, the Earl of Renshaw held it up. "It is too large."

"Indeed."

Grace could not be sure; however, a bruise appeared to already be forming on his angular cheek. Remorse coursed through her. She had never struck anyone before.

Sending her a triumphant grin, he plucked a pair of scissors from Mrs. Goggin's sewing basket sitting beside an armchair she'd situated between the fireplace and the bed. With surprising efficiency, his lordship snipped a foot off the nightshirt's bottom, leaving an uneven hem.

"If I roll up the sleeves, it should suffice," he said with a satisfied grunt.

Grace regarded the garment doubtfully. Her gown was only half the problem. The sheets were damp too. If he would leave the bedchamber, she could pull the blankets over the sheets and lay beneath the coverlet.

"I am perfectly fine as I am, my lord."

Thrusting her chin out at a mutinous angle, she folded her arms. In truth, she was not positive she possessed the strength to remove her nightgown and put his nightshirt on.

Draping the cropped garment over his forearm, Lord Renshaw puffed out an exaggerated sigh.

"I do not intend to ravish you, Grace."

"The thought never crossed my mind."

It hadn't.

The Earl of Renshaw might be pompous and arrogant, but he did not infuse her with fear for her virtue as Wyndam had. Renshaw was a true gentleman.

Something akin to gratification skittered across his face but disappeared so swiftly she might've imagined it.

“But as I have assumed responsibility for you,” he said, “for the time being, I must insist.”

“And I must refuse.” Grace averted her gaze, then sighed. After all he'd done for her, he deserved an explanation.

“I am not being obstinate, my lord. In truth, I am not sure I can manage on my own, and it would be highly inappropriate for you to assist me.”

“I can drape a blanket around you, tent-like, as you remove your gown, and I promise to close my eyes and avert my face as you don my nightshirt. Either you comply, Grace, or I shall be compelled to change you myself.”

Her stomach dropped, and another chill swept over her, though her sodden gown mightn't have caused this shudder.

He did not jest.

An unflinching granite stare replaced the gentleness Grace had detected earlier. She had no doubt his lordship would see her nightdress switched if he had to sit on her to accomplish the task.

“You are a bully, Lord Renshaw.”

“I have been called much worse.” That muscle ticked in his jaw the merest bit, as it did when he held himself in rigid control.

“And I suppose you always get your way?” Grace would not win this argument, but this banter bought her a few more

seconds of dignity.

“Not always, but more often than not.”

She raised what surely must be dread-filled eyes. “Will you turn down the lamps first, please?”

“Of course.”

After his lordship complied and procured the promised blanket for modesty’s sake, Grace ducked her chin and fumbled with the row of buttons from her chin to halfway down her chest.

Blast, she was weak.

As frail as she was, she was not positive that she could lift her arms to pull them out of the sleeves. She was naked as a robin beneath the gown, and though she knew his lordship was right, she could not prevent a swell of resentment at his highhandedness.

“Are your eyes closed?” she asked, uncaring that petulance had crept into her voice.

“Yes, and I am looking away.”

Was that amusement in his voice?

The rotten blighter—finding humor in her predicament.

“I am unbuttoned, and I have raised the gown to my waist, but I cannot lift it over my head,” she whispered, mortified to her marrow.

“Clasp the blanket in front of you with one hand, and I shall help you with each arm in turn.”

“You better not peek.”

Or what? Grace couldn’t even dress herself.



“On my honor, I shall not. I give you my word.”

As she did not know the earl, his word meant nothing, but she supposed it might mean a great deal to a man of his ilk.

Head bent and blushing furiously, she complied.

With unexpected gentleness and care, he guided each of her arms from the sleeves and lifted the gown over her head. She held her breath, fearful the blanket would not stay in place.

“I shall slip the nightshirt over your head now.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

A moment later, a cloud of fabric smelling of cloves and cedar settled around her shoulders. Again, he slid each arm into the sleeves, and once he was done, he cleared his throat, the sound rough and choked.

“Can you pull the hem down now, Grace?”

“Yes.”

The earl was so close that she could feel the heat emanating from him. It beckoned to her chilled flesh, and she resisted the urge to lean into him and soak up his warmth. A peculiar tingling made her aware of him as a woman, which was the oddest thing.

She did not even like the man.

But she did not dislike him either.

In truth, the Earl of Renshaw rather intrigued her.

She shimmied the fabric over her hips and down her thighs with a few awkward wiggles. The effort exhausted her, and she sagged against the pillow, uncaring that the sheets were yet damp.

“I am done,” she said tiredly. “I just want to sleep.”

“Not yet.” Lord Renshaw scooped her into his ironlike arms.

Startled, she gasped and clutched his shirtfront. “What are you doing?”

He strode from her chamber and down a narrow passageway, its walls bare.

Come to think of it, there were not any gewgaws or paintings in her chamber either. The house was as stark as the man himself.

“I am putting you in my bedchamber. I have no idea how to change bedding and even less desire to learn. You will sleep in my bed, and I shall sleep in the drawing room on the sofa.”

A few moments later, he settled her onto his mattress.

Decorated in royal blue, forest green, and burgundy, his bedchamber bespoke a taste for the finer things without a trace of gaudiness. Grace would’ve expected heavy dark walnut furniture, but a cherrywood sleigh bed, matching armoire, and chest of drawers met her curious perusal. A full bookshelf nestled in the corner, an open book on the secretary beside the window, and three more tomes stacked on the nightstand indicated Lord Renshaw enjoyed reading.

After pulling the baroque Venice brocade bedspread to her chin, he brushed her hair off her cheek in a gesture so tender her breath stalled. He further surprised her by placing a chaste kiss on her forehead.

“Good. You are still cool to the touch.”

Was that his only reason for kissing her?

Well, of course, it was.

What else would've prompted him to do so, though he might've used his hand again.

"I shall leave the door open in case you need anything," he said as if he had not just shocked her to her core. "The house is not large, so I shall hear if you call."

Why did a man of his station stay in an unassuming house like this?

Surely there was a familial home or two he might reside in.

His lordship turned to leave, but Grace impulsively grabbed his hand.

It was big and strong and warm, and the contact caused a frisson to skitter from her waist to her neck.

"Thank you."

Facing her, he smiled again, a stiff upward sweep of his sculpted mouth. She could almost hear the creak of unused muscles, confirming it was not something he did often.

Why was that?

"You are welcome."

As always, his countenance remained inscrutable.

Nothing in his tenor revealed if his reply was automatic or sincere. That was the problem with this man—well, one of the problems. He was unreadable—always on his guard. She had never met anyone as capable of controlling his features, emotions, and tone of voice.

How awful it must be to never allow himself to relax, to be carefree and spontaneous.

"I am sorry I hit you." Grace was. She had no desire to cause him any further hurt or harm. In fact, the opposite was

true, which bewildered her to no end. Her attention shifted to the purplish welt on his cheek. “I am afraid a bruise has formed and will be quite evident by tomorrow.”

He lifted two fingers to the damaged flesh before he shrugged.

“It was not intentional. You were having a nightmare about Wyndam.”

What, exactly, had she said while fighting the blackguard in her sleep?

Better not to know, or she would blush from her cold toes to her flushed hairline.

“People might question how it came to be.” She would not have him suffer further on her account. He was not the monster she had first believed him.

“I shall claim to have walked into a door in my sleep.”

Grace could not decide if he was serious or jesting.

He sighed, the slight sound almost carrying an air of disappointment.

*Had he been joking?*

Lord Renshaw’s focus lingered on her face for an extended second, and Grace felt certain he wanted to say more. Regardless, he turned on his heels and strode from the chamber without so much as bidding her goodnight.

Long after his footsteps had faded and the house settled into the night’s comforting silence, she lay staring at the burgundy canopy overhead.

Grace could not shake the sensation, almost a premonition, that when she’d climbed into Lord Renshaw’s coach the other

day, she had forever altered the course of her life.

And his.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*HYDEAWAY HOUSE DRAWING room*

*Five days later – late afternoon*

LEGS CROSSED and with an open book, spine up, on his knee, Sanford unapologetically observed Grace dozing on the jade velvet sofa, her own book propped on her lap.

She wore his sea blue brocade banyan robe over her uniform to guard against the day's chill. The garment practically swallowed her. However, the color did astonishing things to those captivating blue eyes and her glossy raven hair lying in a thick braided rope over one shoulder.

He hadn't bothered with a jacket or neckcloth again today.

In any event, who would see him besides the Goggins, Walton, and Grace?

The man he faced in the mirror each morning, who suddenly eschewed decorum and etiquette he'd strictly adhered to for over three decades, was a stranger to him. Nonetheless, a contentment Sanford had never known had come upon him, and he was loath to disturb the tranquility.

He was even more unwilling to acknowledge the source of his newly found serenity, even if she lay a few feet away. To do so would be to admit he had begun to care for the winsome baggage. Never mind that she was never far from his thoughts and for all of the wrong reasons too.

Given the rumors circling the upper salons regarding him and that he had not spoken a word to his family in a week, the past days should have been trying and stressful. Furthermore, he was no closer to resolving the betrothal debacle than he had been when Father had summoned him.

Except, he'd found that staying at Hydeaway House—he was not hiding per se—and avoiding the inquisitive stares of his peers was rather restorative. He had not even visited White's or The Wicked Earls' Club, though he had continued his daily ride through Hyde Park at seven in the morning rather than the fashionable hour when half the *ton* paraded forth.

It was no hardship to refuse invitations since he had not received any, presumably because they'd been delivered to Pelandale House. Or, perchance, he'd been deemed a pariah, and none were forthcoming.

Honestly, he did not give a fig which.

The upper ten thousand would eventually come 'round.

Earls and future marquesses were not in such abundant supply that Society would ostracize Sanford for long once it was known he was still very much available on the Marriage Mart.

According to Doctor Pritchard, Grace had recovered enough that she should be capable of traveling in a day or two. That information had not been shared with her as yet. Neither

had she written her friends, though Sanford had promised she might when she had recovered sufficiently.

Having had days to ponder the situation, he had decided there was naught else to do but allow her to leave. As no betrothal announcement would be published in the papers, no banns read, nor vows exchanged, the *ton* would be left to speculate as they were wont to do in any event. He would just have to bear the discomfort of the rumors until something more noteworthy captivated the *haute ton*.

The unexpected averseness burrowing around in Sanford's chest at the thought of Grace leaving made no sense. He had known her little more than a week, and she had been gravely ill half of that time. How could he have come to enjoy her company to such an extent that he'd considered hiring her as a maid?—for all of ten seconds.

Although Sanford had not revealed Grace's name to anyone, he feared Wyndam would, the bloody rotter. When her identity became known, she would become a target for the chinwags, libertines, and other unsavory citizens of London's underbelly, not to mention those smelling of expensive perfumes, swathed in silks and satins, and glittering with a vulgar number of jewels who enjoyed drawing blood the most.

Then there were the men...

He could not contemplate their behavior toward her without a murderous rage billowing up inside him. They'd consider her as no better than a dockside slattern.

In truth, it was a wonder Wyndam hadn't prattled off at the mouth already. Which probably meant Father had interfered and *encouraged* the bounder to remain silent. Either by buying up his vowels or threatening to reveal an unsavory secret that would destroy Wyndam.



Though by nature genial and fair-minded, Father could be utterly ruthless when it came to protecting and defending his family.

“Here we are.” Mrs. Goggin arrived bearing a tea tray. “Tea and dainties,” she proudly announced.

Sanford quirked an eyebrow as he examined the plentiful display. The tea tray had become more and more extravagant with each passing day. While the housekeeper always served tea when he was in residence, the afternoon pastime had never been this elaborate.

Clearly, Mrs. Goggin was much taken with Grace (so was Sanford, truth be told) and meant to impress their guest.

Opening her eyes, a smile swept Grace’s face. “Mmm. Do I smell ginger biscuits?”

“Ginger cake, miss.” Mrs. Goggin beamed. “With whipped cream.”

“Oh, my goodness. You are an absolute treasure, Mrs. Goggin. I shall grow quite fat on your delicacies.”

“You could stand to add a little flesh to your bones, miss.”

That was the housekeeper’s mantra. Anyone who was not plump needed fattening up.

True, Grace possessed a slender figure, but she was delightfully rounded in the places a man appreciated. She swung her shapely legs over the sofa’s edge and set her book aside. Under the distraction of the tea service being laid out, Sanford looked his fill. She wore no shoes, just stockings.

Grace had very nice legs and ankles, indeed.

In point of fact, she was a beautiful woman. As he’d learned since her fever had broken, she was also intelligent,

witty, played the pianoforte and flute, liked animals, and was surprisingly well-read and adept at cards, chess, and archery, of all things. According to Grace, her cooking and baking skills needed improvement, although she could wield a needle with satisfactory skill.

In short, had she been of the nobility, he would've considered asking for her hand. No, he would have asked for her hand, for the truth was, such a remarkable woman would not last long on the Marriage Mart.

He would not have asked yet, of course.

One did not become affianced to a woman one had known a mere week, even if he might—probably was—falling in love with her.

Sanford rubbed his nose as Mrs. Goggin arranged the sandwiches, tarts, and biscuits. On second thought, many marriages of convenience and arranged marriages were, in fact, the result of swift betrothals and often between strangers. He was not opposed to such arrangements as a matter of course, but he would prefer a more compatible and companionable union.

But not to a servant, no matter how alluring her curves, how enticingly blue her black-lashed eyes, or how berry red her Cupid's bow mouth. And no matter that his heart ached with the emotion he felt toward her.

There was an established order to things: fish swam in the water, birds flew in the sky, and aristocrats married aristocrats. Commoners married commoners.

“Thank you, Mrs. Goggin.” Grace lifted the Masons floral-patterned teapot with practiced ease.

“My pleasure, miss.” With a bob of her head, Mrs. Goggin headed toward the door. “I have bread rising and partridge to prepare for supper.”

Pausing, Grace raised eager eyes. “Would you like my help?”

It was rather endearing, her willingness to pitch in when most of the women Sanford was acquainted with were so accustomed to being waited upon that it would not occur to them to offer assistance.

She had been asking to lend a hand since she had left her bed, but the doctor had advised against it, and Mrs. Goggin would not hear of it. Even with an extra person in the house, she was more than capable.

Mrs. Goggin shook her head. “Deary, you enjoy being waited upon. You will be back to work before you know it.”

She gave Sanford a behave-yourself look before she left, leaving the door wide open.

What did Mrs. Goggin think he would do?

Pounce upon Grace as Ralph, the dashed cat, was wont to do?

The notion was rather tempting, in truth.

If Grace were his wife, he could pounce upon her playfully anytime he desired. But she was not and would never be. So there would be no pouncing, tickling, or petting, more was the pity.

As the house wasn't large, they could hear Mrs. Goggin humming a hymn to herself as she pattered around the kitchen. A moment later, she burst into song.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound*

*That saved a wretch like me!*

*I once was lost, but now am found;*

*Was blind, but now I see.*

*Hmm, hmm, hmm...my heart to fear...*

A pan rattled, and the oven door clunked.

With the drawing room door wide open, Mrs. Goggin could also easily hear Sanford and Grace. No chance of anything untoward occurring, for he hadn't a doubt that the housekeeper unabashedly listened to every word he and Grace spoke.

Likely, she cocked an ear for extended silences and would have no qualms about marching into the drawing room unannounced and wielding a wooden spoon if she suspected any hanky-panky, as she called it.

A couple of hours ago, Herman Goggin had left to run several errands for Sanford, including delivering a note to his father apologizing for his outburst.

It was not like Sanford to feel sorry for himself, nor did he brood on offenses. In truth, he could not put his finger on why he'd acted rashly. Self-control, staidness, adherence to strictures, and mindfulness of propriety and etiquette had always guided his life.

Until now.

From beneath half-closed eyes, he regarded the enchanting woman across from him.

*Until her.*

Grace poured their tea with a countess's finesse. She glanced upward as she added three sugar lumps to his cup.

“I need to write my friends, my lord. I am quite recovered now and do not wish to impose upon your hospitality any longer.”

“I shall provide paper and ink after tea.”

The words left a bitter taste on Sanford’s tongue.

He had no choice.

*Unless...*

The idea popped into his head with the impact and ferocity of a cudgel blow to his skull. Blindsided and slightly dizzy, he could only stare at Grace for an extended moment.

Of course.

Why hadn’t it occurred to him before this?

It was the perfect solution.

Well, not perfect, perhaps, but it would sure as Hades make him happy, and he believed he could make Grace happy.

She drew her winged ebony eyebrows together.

“Is something amiss, my lord? You look like you have taken a fright.”

“Do you think you might call me Sanford, or if that is too informal, Renshaw?”

Grace set the teapot down and cocked her head like an inquisitive pigeon. “But you are a stickler for decorum. Besides, it would not be seemly.”

“Only when we are alone,” he persisted. Which he hoped would be very often. His blood sizzled at the thought.

*Very often, indeed.*

A fragile smile bent her mouth.

“Sanford, I shall be leaving soon.”

“You do not have to leave, Grace.”

## CHAPTER NINE

*A HALF-DOZEN painful heartbeats later*

AT THAT, Grace paused, searching his face. Sanford could almost feel the wisp of her gaze brushing over him.

“But you know I must. Unless you require a companion?” she quipped, her indigo eyes dancing. “A maid?”

Sanford rose and, in two steps, closed the distance to sit beside her. Taking her hand in his, he grazed his mouth across the knuckles, pouring all of his unspoken emotion into the action. The skin covering the slight bumps was soft, the veins blue against her ivory skin.

Her expression grew pixyish with confusion as she gazed at their hands.

“I have no need of the sort of companion you are accustomed to being.” He rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. “However, I propose a different type of companionship.”

*Fiend seize it.*

The right words would not come forth. Sanford had always been horrible at expressing warmer emotions.

“For a man who generally speaks directly and does not mince his words, I confess I have no idea what you refer to.”

A wary expression erased Grace’s earlier exuberance.

*Just ask her.*

“My lord?” Grace prompted, her ocean-blue eyes wide and her pretty lips parted.

“Sanford,” he corrected.

His name on her lips... A simple thing, yet a precious gift.

“Sanford?” she complied, appearing adorably confused.

He kissed her wrist, then her nose.

When she did not recoil or slap him, he grew encouraged.

“We have much in common, and I think we are well-suited,” he said. “I can provide you with everything your heart desires.”

He rushed on lest she interrupt him, and he lost his train of thought.

“I know we haven’t known each other long, but from the moment I saw you in the coach, I knew there was something extraordinary about you, Grace. I felt it deep within me—in the center of my very being.” His dormant soul had been awakened, unfurling like a butterfly freshly escaped from its cocoon. “I never hoped to find a remarkable, extraordinary treasure such as you.”

Not exactly poetry or flowery phrases, but Sanford had conveyed his sentiment without fumbling ineptness. He smiled, feeling rather foolish at expressing himself, but relieved as well. Grace alone could make him want to share his emotions—his innermost thoughts and dreams.



“I confess, you have completely captivated me, Grace, and I cannot fathom your leaving. I believe that we are meant to be together, that it was no accident that you sought refuge in my carriage.”

His voice became oddly hoarse and gruff. “It was destiny, sweetheart. You and I. Us.”

A winsome smile blossomed across her face, and adorable pink tinged her cheeks, but she met his gaze squarely. That was one of the things he most esteemed about her. No false modesty, feigned demureness, or artificial bashfulness.

Gathering Grace into his arms, Sanford lowered his head until their lips met.

Hers were soft and sweet and irresistible.

Every nerve in his body became alert, finely tuned to the soft, fragrant woman in his arms.

Sighing, she wrapped an arm around his neck and kissed him back. A shudder rippled through her, even as an electric jolt sluiced through him.

They would be so good together.

So bloody good.

Leaning her head against his shoulder, Grace gave him a tremulous smile.

“This is so surreal, Sanford.” Her eyes glowed, and her voice grew husky. “I feel the same way but did not dare hope \_\_\_”

“Then say yes, my darling.”

If only she would agree, Sanford might truly be happy. Together, they could be exquisitely happy.

*Please say yes. Stay here with me.*

“You are...?” Grace swallowed, the slender column of her throat working, her eyes wide with wonder and joy as she roved her gaze over his face. “You *are* asking me to marry you?”

He went perfectly still.

*What?*

*No.*

Did she think...?

Perhaps he'd not been as eloquent as he had believed himself and certainly had not been clear about his intentions. Sanford had not mentioned marriage or even hinted at a union; he wished Grace to become his mistress.

His hesitation must've shown on his face because she snatched her hand away. Shoulders back, spine ramrod straight, and eyes flashing azure fire, she glared daggers at him.

“Marriage is *not* what you are offering, is it?”

Scorn and fury turned her voice throaty. And perhaps unshed tears too, for a sheen of moisture glinted in those gorgeous blue eyes. He would wager Grace would eat a hog farmer's boot leather before she allowed a single tear to escape, however.

“No. I cannot offer you...more.” Sanford would not mislead her. “I thought because we get on so well—”

She threw a hand up, palm outward. “And I am without a position, so naturally, I would gladly hop into your bed. Willingly, eagerly, even gratefully become your *mistress*.”

The word reverberated throughout the room like a gunshot, and he winced.

Sanford had made an unpardonable miscalculation.

See what stupid sentiments did?

That drivel made a man soft in the head.

Made him take impossible risks.

“It is not like that, Grace.” He wasn’t proposing a purely carnal relationship. “You *are* special to me. I swear, I have never kept a mistress before.”

She snorted, a full-on, unladylike nostril exhalation worthy of a winded equine.

Sanford adored her all the more for her hoydenishness.

“Am I supposed to feel honored?” *In truth, yes.* “Do you think your offer is any less insulting or degrading than Wyndam’s, my lord?” *A great deal less.*

Each syllable cracked with contempt and offense.

“He would’ve forced me, but you think to entice me with promises of ‘*my heart’s desires?*’ My lord, you do not know what my heart’s desires are.”

*Botched that to Hades and beyond.*

“Grace, I...”

Sanford touched her arm. He must say something but could not fathom what would remove his foot from his mouth.

She jerked away, then stood, regal and magnificent in her wrath.

“My answer is no. Empathically, uncompromisingly, never in a thousand years, NO.”

She tossed her braid over her shoulder.

“Have you an inkling how offensive it is that you deem me good enough to be your mistress but not your wife? I may be a commoner, but I shall never be any man’s kept woman. Believe it or not, we baseborn have morals, pride, and integrity too. I know you believe those attributes are restricted to bluebloods, but I vow, there are more decent, ethical, and honorable plebians than aristocrats.”

Why did Sanford want to applaud her?

Because she was right, in every respect.

Chest rising and falling rapidly with her agitation, Grace poked a finger in his direction. He suspected she itched to slap his face or punch him in the nose. “People like me must earn respect while you and your kind demand it.”

A rapid succession of knocks resounded at the entry, followed by multiple footsteps and several exuberant voices.

Grace’s attention flew to the doorway, and she paled.

Good God above. The housekeeper had no doubt heard every word.

“Your family is here,” Mrs. Goggin called from the corridor, probably to spare Sanford and Grace a measure of chagrin. “I am kneading dough, else I would show them in.”

Just bloody perfect.

“Sanford?”

Rachael.

“Where are you?”

Father.

“He’s probably in the salon,” Ronan said.

Sanford's written apology, delivered not more than two hours ago, had apparently,

prompted his family to descend upon him without notice.

All was forgiven, it seemed.

As one, he and Grace faced the drawing room door, just as Father, Rachael, Ronan, his wife, Mercy, Benjamin, and his wife, Isadora, plowed in. Curiosity, affection, and wariness shadowed their faces as they shuffled to a stop inside the doorway.

Grace gasped. "Mercy?"

"What, no Marissa?" Sanford craned his neck and made an embellished pretense of looking for his youngest sister behind the others.

Father shook his head. "She is shopping with a friend and sleeping over afterward."

If Corinna and the baron were not on their honeymoon, no doubt they'd be here too.

"Grace." Mercy rushed to embrace her girlhood friend. "I had no idea you were the mystery woman I have been hearing about for nigh on a week now."

"And I did not realize you were married to Lord Renshaw's brother." Grace sliced Sanford an accusatory glare.

Mercy faced her husband. "Ronan, this is Grace Dooley. I have spoken of her often."

"And so you have, my dear." Ronan bowed. "A pleasure, Miss Dooley. What a coincidence that you and my wife were raised in the same foundling home."

“Indeed,” Father said dryly, pointing an accusatory stare at Sanford. “One has to wonder why you failed to mention that fact, son. Unless you were not aware.”

Sanford held his tongue.

This was uncomfortable enough without trudging down another bumpy path.

“Ah, you did know,” Father said, censure in his modulated tone.

Another first directed at Sanford by his sire.

Rocking back on his heels, Father grasped his lapels.

“By the by, Wyndam will not be a bother to either of you again.” His attention veered to Grace before settling on Sanford again. “I *persuaded* him it was in his best interest to leave town for a while. Without him adding fodder to the fire, the tattle should settle soon enough.”

Benjamin made a great point of examining Sanford’s bruised cheek. He pointed at his unmarred face. “Zounds, whatever happened to your cheek, big brother?”

Before he could respond, Grace said with an artificially sweet smile, “I slugged him in my sleep.”

Lord, that sounded bad.

At her honest admission, six pairs of eyebrows flew to hairlines.

“She was having a nightmare,” Sanford rushed to explain. “I tried to comfort her.”

Devil and damn.

That sounded worse—as if they’d been sharing a bed. In point of fact, to be absolutely truthful, Grace *had* slept in his

bed the one night. There'd be the devil to pay if she mentioned that.

Every eyebrow stayed elevated, but his brothers grinned. Mercy's and Isobel's mouths went slack, Rachael's eyes narrowed in speculation, and Father pulled his mouth into a grim line as disapproval flashed in his eyes.

From bad to worse to scandalous in less than two *tick-tocks* of the blue marble and brass ormolu mantel clock.

"We must have tea soon and catch up, Grace." Mercy's no doubt deliberate change of subject dispelled the awkwardness to a small degree.

A very small degree.

Grace curved her mouth upward as well. "I would like that."

Fashionable in a cerulean-blue and ivory gown and spencer, Rachael continued into the room. Concern flitted across her face as she glanced between Sanford and Grace, her gaze lingering on the banyan for a long second.

One might read all sorts of inferences in Grace wearing Sanford's robe. Particularly after the previous troublesome remarks.

"We are interrupting," Rachael said, consternation puckering her usually smooth forehead.

It was not a question.

Did no one realize introductions had not taken place?

Had everyone tossed civility out the window?

"Nothing of import, my lady." Grace dipped into a perfect curtsy. "I have just refused to become Lord Renshaw's

mistress. I have a letter to write so I might quit this house with all possible haste to keep my reputation and virtue intact.”

Sanford’s family turned appalled gazes upon him, and shame, unlike anything he had experienced, tunneled through his veins and set his face aflame. At that moment, he rather loathed himself. It would’ve been better to have let Grace leave his life than insult her beyond forgiveness.

She touched Mercy’s arm. “I hope Joy Morrisette and her husband will take me in for a time.”

Father made a rough sound in his throat.

“Nonsense.” Mercy shook her head. “You can stay with Ronan and me. I insist upon it. Our house has plenty of room, even with our girls.”

Ronan had been named guardian to two orphans. That was how he and Mercy had met. She had been their governess.

“I should hate to impose.” Grace appeared hopeful and simultaneously embarrassed.

“No imposition whatsoever, Miss Dooley. Mercy can help you pack, and you can accompany us when we take our leave,” Ronan said.

Sanford stabbed him a look that shouted, *Traitor. Betrayer of brothers.*

Ronan simply grinned.

“I have very little to pack. I shall not be above five minutes.” Grace met Sanford’s eyes. Hurt, betrayal, and, yes... something warmer and infinitely precious glowed in hers too.

“*I feel the same way—*” she had said.

Did she love him?



Did it matter?

Yes.

No.

Sweet Jesus, who was this confused, feckless, double-minded bottlehead?

Sanford opened his mouth, then closed it with an audible snap.

What could he say?

Especially in front of his transfixed family?

*I am a jackanape? A maggot-pated rotter? An unthinking, selfish boor?*

*You are far too remarkable and wonderful and dear to be any man's mistress?*

*Be happy, my darling?*

His only chance for happiness was about to walk out of his life, and there was not a dashed thing he could do to prevent it.

*There is one thing*, his infuriatingly straightforward conscience insisted.

*No*. Absolutely not.

It was unthinkable. Preposterous. Inconceivable.

Sanford *could* not.

He could not ask a common maid to be the next Countess of Renshaw.

He'd be the laughing stock of not only his family but the entire *le bon ton* as well.

Yes, his cursed pride kept his mouth firmly shut as he watched the only woman he had ever loved turn her back on

him. Cutting his heart from his chest with a rusty, serrated knife would've hurt less.

And yet, he would let her go.

With the poise and majesty of a peeress, Grace swept from the room, and Sanford knew beyond any doubt that he would never recover that part of him she took with her.

## CHAPTER TEN

*RONAN AND MERCY Brockman's Home, London*

*A week later – Early afternoon*

CURLED into the corner of the lavender and beige-toned settee in Mercy and Ronan's comfortable drawing room, Grace stared blankly at the newssheet in her lap. A moment ago, she'd glared so hotly at another nasty story in the paper speculating about the identity of Lord Renshaw's *secret* love, it was a wonder the paper hadn't incinerated.

Really.

Had people nothing better to do than conjure tattle?

Lord Trentholm had assured her and Sanford that the prattle would lessen with Hollace Wyndam gone from London, but when?

As grateful as she was for her friend's hospitality, this arrangement must be temporary.

Not only because Mercy was increasing, and soon they'd need to transform the bedchamber Grace used into a nursery, but because the chance of encountering Sanford could not be

ignored. This was his brother's house, after all. Although she had the impression that the brothers were not terribly close.

Grace meant to visit the employment registrars and submit her resume; if she could borrow the Brockmans' coach, that was. She had perused employment postings in the newssheets this past week, but most positions she qualified for required letters of reference from one's most current employer, which she did not have and could not get.

Nevertheless, she still possessed letters from Mrs. Shepherd and her first position as a companion. Hopefully, those would suffice, but if not, she could impose upon Dr. Morrisette and Ronan to write her letters of character.

Touching her chin with her forefinger, Grace narrowed her eyes in contemplation. "*Hmm*. I wonder if a position is still available at Balderbrook's Institution for Genteel Ladies?"

Another friend from Haven House, Chasity Noble, now Chasity Terramier, had worked at the girls' school and some time ago had invited Grace to apply as an instructor. It couldn't hurt to write Chasity.

*You are not completely undone, Grace Alexandra Marina Shepherd Dooley.*

*You are intelligent, resourceful, and healthy, and you have loyal, supportive friends. You shall overcome this, and one day you shall look back and realize you are better for having endured it.*

The self-talk did little to bolster her spirit. Grace would rally, though. In time. It was not her nature to mope or sulk.

Smothering a yawn—she had not slept through the night since leaving Sanford's—she unfolded her legs before setting the papers aside. The earlier rain shower had passed and,

arching across rooftops in a glorious colorful display, a rainbow had formed.

Weren't rainbows supposed to represent hope?

A promise?

Truth be told, Grace's usual optimism had gone missing, and Sanford was to blame.

No, becoming enamored of him was the cause. She had barely even permitted herself to acknowledge her budding sentiments. In her heart, she'd known it was impossible.

But when he had made his fervent declarations, he'd seemed so sincere and genuine that joy had infused her, and in her innocence, she had stupidly jumped to the wrong conclusion. And been mortified to her core.

*Nincompoop.*

Regardless, there was no time like the present to venture to the agencies. Wallowing in self-pity never benefited anyone.

"Lady Trentholm has invited us for tea this afternoon, Grace."

Mercy glided into the room, holding a note. The current fashion hid the gentle swell of her belly, but soon her pregnancy would be noticeable. "I hope you will say yes. You have not left the house since arriving."

Grace stood and shook out the skirts of her borrowed teal-hued morning gown. Mercy had lent her three gowns, as Grace had nothing but the pilfered maid's uniform. Sanford said he had sent for her things, but either Wyndam had chosen to ignore the request, or he had disposed of them.

Probably the latter.

“That is kind of her ladyship, but I cannot think it wise.” And why would a marchioness invite a disgraced servant to tea? No, best to refuse the offer and steer clear of any more scandal sheets.

Besides, Sanford might’ve returned to the familial home.

As if she had read Grace’s mind, Mercy glanced at the letter again.

“Rachael says she does not expect Sanford. He’s remained...ah...*elusive* since you departed.” She wrinkled her nose.

“His family is worried about him, Grace. He’s eschewed all of their attempts to see him.”

Why?

Embarrassment or self-righteousness?

Or was it possible he suffered too?

Mercy glanced up. “Rachael believes he’s mortified about how he treated you. Sanford has always maintained a stellar reputation, never flirting with anything remotely unsavory or questionable. Offering you hospitality in his home was way outside the bounds for him.”

“I...” What could Grace say to that? “I am responsible for the gossip in the papers, but he was still kind to me.”

More than kind.

Gracious, generous, considerate...

There had been a spark, an awareness, an intricate weaving of their spirits, and in another time and place, they might’ve been able to build a contented life. Circumstances had brought

them together for a time, but now they must go their separate ways.

Disappointment and pain seared Grace's heart. Sadness and heartache shrouded her, and she dropped her gaze lest Mercy detect the tears forming in her eyes.

Mercy crossed the distance between them and took Grace's hand.

"I am a good listener if you want to talk about it, dearest. I also can keep confidences, even from my husband, should you ask me to."

And Grace did want to talk about it. She and Mercy had been like sisters at Haven House. Perhaps getting another person's perspective would help her broken heart heal. Or, at the very least, give her direction.

Sighing, she resumed her seat, and Mercy sank to the cushion beside her. In short order, Grace recounted how Sanford had rescued her, her panicked public statement about them being betrothed, her time at his house, and her feelings for him.

"I did not think it was possible to fall in love so quickly." A tear slid down her cheek, and she shook her head in self-castigation. "I scoffed at such claptrap, but when it happens to you..."

She shrugged and, with a watery smile, accepted the lace-edged, floral-embroidered handkerchief Mercy slipped her.

"I feel like an utter fool, Mercy."

Grace stared out the window. A double rainbow glowed brightly beyond the panes now. She swallowed, the ache in her throat nearly choking her. Voice small and throat tight, she

confessed, “I thought...” Even now, her naivete galled her. “I thought the earl was asking me to marry him.”

Sighing, Mercy wrapped an arm around Grace’s shoulder.

“Sanford is a complicated man. I shall not pretend that I understand him. I do not think Ronan does either. The earl adamantly opposed Ronan’s marrying me and Benjamin marrying Isadora. Oddly, their parents embraced the unions, so whatever prejudices Sanford had, they were his own, whether self-contrived or adopted. He adheres to a rigid, self-imposed moral code, and I fear it will cause him much pain.”

Grace summoned an artificial smile. Marshaling her fortitude, she declared, “I have only known him a fortnight. Surely, it shall not take long for my heart to heal.”

Wouldn’t it?

Was love measurable in degrees or by time?

One either loved completely and utterly, irrevocably and unconditionally, with one’s heart, mind, soul, and spirit, or one did not. And as she had so brutally learned, sometimes love was not enough.

It could not compete with pride.

“I loathe seeing you sad.” Mercy gave her a little hug. “Say you will come to tea. The Brockmans are truly endearing. I think you will like them.”

“Yes, I think I shall go.” It might do Grace a world of good.

Or it could prove disastrous, but in either case, at least it would take her mind off Sanford for a short while. How long, exactly, did it take a broken heart to mend?

“I was going to visit the employment registrars today.”



What difference would another day make?

“We can do that tomorrow.” Mercy stood and patted her tummy. “I have shopping to do for the baby, and Bellamy and Arabelle want to come along and help. I promised them ices at Gunter’s too.”

Delightful, well-mannered children, the sisters could not wait for the babe to arrive. And to think, Mercy had been their governess before she and Ronan had fallen in love. Of the three Brockman sons, Sanford alone deemed himself too superior to marry beneath him.

Several of Grace’s closest friends from Haven House and Academy for the Enrichment of Young Women had married, and a few had married remarkably well. Made brilliant matches, truth to tell.

Grace would not be among them.

At least it wasn’t something she contemplated yet. Mayhap not for a very long while. Her heart had set itself on a certain tall, black-haired, whisky-eyed lord, and he’d taken possession of the organ, whether he wanted it or not.

Standing and stretching her spine, Grace bent her mouth into her first genuine smile of the day. “Yes, that sounds splendid. What time do we leave for tea?”

“Three.” A smile lit Mercy’s pretty face. “I am so happy you have agreed.”

Grace glanced downward at her gown.

“And, yes, your gown is perfectly acceptable,” Mercy said, angling toward the door. “It is a private family tea without all the pomp and ceremony.”

“And you are certain Sanford...” *Blast and blisters.* Despite the heat skating up her cheekbones, Grace strove to keep her features neutral. “That is, Lord Renshaw will not be there?”

“It is highly unlikely, according to Rachael. Despite numerous invitations, he has not returned to Pelandale House or been seen in public since you left.”

Had Grace’s departure impacted Sanford as much as it had her, or was he nursing a bruised ego? How she wanted to believe it was the former but suspected it was the latter.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*GROSVENOR SQUARE, London*

*Four o'clock that same afternoon*

WITH A START OF SURPRISE, Sanford glanced up and realized the miles he'd blindly walked these past hours had led him to Grosvenor Square.

To Pelandale House, to be precise.

To home.

Despite everything—his anger, chagrin, frustration, and yes, even his pulverized heart, he needed his family.

He'd spent a week avoiding them, the *haute ton*, White's, The Wicked Earls' Club, Tattersalls, and even his morning rides in Hyde Park. The truth was that when Grace walked out of Hydeaway House last week, he had sunk into a profound case of the blue devils.

Another first for him.

He could not eat, sleep, bathe, or even drag his sorry arse to his bed. The first three days, he'd remained in the salon and drowned his pain and sorrow in cognac. Until the Goggins had refused to supply him with another drop.

Pesky, nosy, caring busybodies.

He ought to turn them out onto the street without reference for their impudence. The old Sanford might've briefly considered it. The new man recognized their impertinence for what it was: affection.

A week spent in introspection—and not liking what he had learned about himself—had compelled him outdoors, lest he go mad with self-loathing.

Gazing up at Pelandale House, he battled conflicting emotions.

The desire to surround himself with those he loved and who loved him in return, and the absolute conviction he was unworthy.

Rolling his shoulders, he skewed his mouth into a sardonic smile.

Might as well go in.

He was here, after all.

These past days, he'd realized that he was a bloody, pompous sod. He owed his brothers and their wives an apology.

When had he become such a self-righteous, opinionated, unyielding blighter?

When had he elevated himself and his beliefs and values above others and become a condescending assling?

He owed Grace—*my dearest heart*—an apology too.

Was she still at Ronan and Mercy's?

Should he pay her a call?

Would she receive him?

No, better to pen her a note and beg her forgiveness.

Sanford did not dare hope for more.

After buttoning his rumpled jacket, he scraped a hand through his hair in a futile attempt to comb his windblown (and unwashed) hair. Climbing the spotless stairs, he grazed a hand over his unshaven face. He looked around furtively, quickly sniffed beneath his arms, then wrinkled his nose.

*Good God above.*

Decidedly off-putting.

He had never appeared in public this unkempt and odoriferous and would've scoffed at any suggestion he would ever do so. Nevertheless, here he was, resembling a rakehell coming off a week-long binge.

What was more astounding, Sanford did not give a tinker's curse.

Of one thing, he was certain. His family would accept him as he was. Hadn't they done so these many years, even when he did not deserve it?

Heaving a sigh, he let himself in.

"Good day, my lord." Sturges, the butler, silently appeared out of nowhere as butlers were wont to do.

To his credit, the servant's expression did not alter a jot as he took in Sanford's disheveled appearance. However, his nostrils may have twitched before he commandeered them into commendable stillness.

Muted laughter and chatter carried to Sanford from the drawing room.

A glance at the longcase clock revealed it was tea time.

“Private tea today?” Sanford would leave if guests were present.

It was one thing to intrude upon his kin looking and smelling like a mangy street mongrel, but another if his presence exposed them to ridicule or became more gossip fodder.

“Indeed, sir.”

Kindness brimming in his gaze, Sturges gave a sympathetic nod.

Likely as not, the servant knew exactly what had transpired at Hydeaway House. Servants always did. It was rather uncanny and not a little disconcerting.

“Do you wish to freshen up before joining them?”

The broad hint did not go unnoticed.

However, Sanford did not want to, even though his bedchamber contained a number of suits, boots, neckcloths, and so forth. In truth, he hadn’t the energy, though Brewster would assist him and could have him bathed, shaved, and garbed in fresh clothing in fifteen minutes.

That is, if the valet did not swoon or have an apoplexy upon seeing Sanford in his present state.

“I know I should, but I shall not.” He offered a half-rueful, half-depreciatory smile.

“I shall request a hot pot of tea and sandwiches,” Sturges said, no condemnation in his wise gaze. “Perhaps cold meat and cheese too?”

This morning, a glance in the looking glass revealed that Sanford appeared gaunt and half-starved. Mrs. Goggin was

nigh on to having a paroxysm because he had barely eaten this past week.

Love was a wondrous, awful, exhilarating, torturous paradox.

It had brought him, the top-lofty Sanford Antony Edward Brockman, Lord Renshaw, to his knees.

“I would appreciate it, Sturges.”

Sanford pulled his waistcoat into place—*what is that stain from?*—and made a half-hearted, if completely futile, attempt to straighten his limp-as-wet-straw neckcloth.

“Very good, sir.” Sturges fell into step beside him, his focus straight ahead, then asked, “I presume you want to announce yourself?”

The servant knew him well.

“I would.”

Just in case Sanford was not as welcome as he anticipated.

With a nod of understanding, the butler veered down a side corridor as Sanford continued onward.

Unfamiliar trepidation assailed him. Filling his lungs, he entered the drawing room.

And stopped dead in his tracks.

His heart toppled over itself, and he flashed hot, then cold, then hot again.

*Grace.*

*My precious love.*

How could she be even more beautiful than he remembered?

Arranged in a simple but elegant chignon, her silky jet-black hair shone, and her gorgeous eyes... Those eyes could compete with the deepest ocean's blue.

Chintz china teacup in hand, her eyes widened, and the color leeches from her face except for two bright crimson spots on her cheeks. Her pulse jumped at the juncture of her long, elegant throat and collarbone, a turbulent testimony to her discomfit.

Hand shaking, she fumbled with the cup, placing it upon the tea table where it rattled in its saucer and tea sloshed over the brim.

The room descended into pregnant silence, made worse by his family's inquisitive stares boring into him with the intensity of hot poker.

Idiotic of him to have not considered she might be here. Ronan and Mercy were not likely to ask her to remain at home while they enjoyed tea with the marquess and marchioness.

Sanford's gaze locked with Grace's, and everything faded until nothing else existed but the two of them. His soul cried out to hers, craving the completeness only she could provide.

*Give me another chance*, he silently begged.

He could not have looked away if his life had depended upon it.

Then everyone began talking at once.

"Sanford, dear. Do have a seat." Her face wreathed in a strained smile, Rachael exchanged a confounded glance with Father. "I shall ring for more tea."

"Sturges has already gone to the kitchen," Sanford said.



“My boy, I am so glad you have come.” Compassion and affection crinkled the corners of Father’s eyes as he moved to pump Sanford’s hand and clasp his shoulder.

“Have you been wrestling with bears? Or hogs?” Ronan quipped, never missing an opportunity to harass his older brother.

“Hush, darling,” Mercy gently chastised. “Now is not the time to tease your brother. Surely you see he’s not himself?”

Praise God for that.

Sanford never wanted to return to the unbearable snob he’d been.

Marissa ran to embrace him and then wrinkled her nose.

“*Eww*, Sanford. You smell.”

“You look bloody awful, old chap.” Benjamin also clasped his hand.

“Be kind, Benjamin,” Isadora admonished.

Sanford gave her a grateful smile, which she returned with a jaunty twinkle in her eyes.

He’d misjudged her and Mercy. Badly.

Benjamin grinned, though not unkindly. “Well, he does, darling.”

Corinna swept to his side and, without hesitation, embraced him. She was made of sterner stuff than Marissa. “I am glad you are here. Now the family is complete.”

When had she returned from her honeymoon?

His new brother-in-law, Caspian Graystone, Baron Strathmore, slapped his back and gave him a conspiratorial wink. “Good to see you.”

Grace alone remained silent.

Clasping his hands behind his back to keep from bolting to her and pulling her into his arms, Sanford cleared his throat.

“I owe all of you a sincere and heartfelt apology. I have done much soul-searching this past week and concluded I have been an unforgivable, judgmental prig.”

Surprise, guardedness, and approval skittered across his family’s faces.

He met Mercy’s and Isadora’s gazes, shame pricking his conscious.

“Mercy and Isadora, my behavior toward you has been unpardonable. I hope in time you might come to forgive me.”

Both angled their heads in confirmation, though neither spoke.

His brothers shared a speaking glance as they wrapped an arm around their wives’ waists in mutual protective gestures. That might’ve been Sanford and Grace had he the character and fortitude his brothers possessed. They had chosen to cock-a-snook at society and reaped a lifetime of rewards for doing so.

As if sensing how difficult this was for Sanford, no one interrupted him.

He shifted his attention to Grace, sitting statue-still, hands clasped so tightly in the lap of her teal gown that her knuckles showed white.

“Most of all, Grace, I humbly beg your forgiveness. You are the single best thing that has ever happened to me. That day you hid in my coach was the day I began changing—hopefully for the better.”

A concert of emotions played across her countenance, yet she did not speak.

Because this was not a conversation one had with an audience.

As per his usual ineptness, Sanford had mucked that up too.

He glanced around the room.

“Might I have a word in private with Grace?”

Apprehension flitted across her delicate features, and Sanford feared she would bolt.

“Just a few moments. Please.” He was not too proud to beg. Not anymore.

She replied with a short, terse nod.

Thank God.

“*Ahem.*” Father loudly cleared his throat. “I say, Rachael, didn’t you mention a new rose was blooming in the garden?”

Confusion swept across Rachael’s face.

“Roses do not bloom in... Oh.” Comprehension dawned, and she darted a glance toward the garden windows. “Erm, yes. I believe I may have mentioned it in passing.”

*Bless her.*

“Let us take a look, shall we?” Father encouraged, his arm extended toward the door.

“Oh, yes, let’s do,” Ronan drawled, not even trying to conceal his drollness.

With a serene smile upon her lips, Mercy elbowed him in the ribs.

“*Oomph.*” Chuckling, he rubbed the offended area.

Corinna rolled her eyes as she slid her hand into the crook of Strathmore’s elbow. “You are about as subtle as a purple pig wearing a poke bonnet, Papa.”

Leave it to Corinna to state the obvious.

“A purple pig?” Marissa giggled as she sauntered to the door. “Lady Pinkersham-Babott has a white poodle she dresses in a pink jumper. Poor thing has pink bows tied to its ears and tail too.”

“You can tell us all about Lady Pinkersham-Babott’s poodle in the garden, Marissa.” Rachael shooed everyone before her, like a mother hen herding her chicks.

The door closed behind her with a soft snick.

Grace lifted her chin, proud and magnificent.

“You have exactly two minutes, Lord Renshaw, and then I am joining your family to look at the nonexistent rose.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*STILL IN PELANDALE House's drawing room*

*Exactly ten tense heartbeats later*

GRACE FORCED a mien of calmness over her features. Her heart battered her ribs, and her blood crashed through her veins like a storm surge. It had taken all of her equanimity to sit calmly when Sanford entered the drawing room.

It made no difference that everyone was as flabbergasted as she was at his unexpected arrival. He looked simultaneously awful and wonderful, and despite the way they'd parted, she longed to run into his arms.

Expression guardedly hopeful, he approached, all lithe masculine grace.

Must he be so dashed handsome? So virile?

Endearingly rumped, Sanford kneeled beside her and gazed at her without speaking. The strong column of his throat worked beneath his shoddy cravat, as if he struggled to find the right words.

Against her better judgment and notwithstanding the wisdom screaming caution to her, she could not prevent

herself from touching his scruffy jaw. Dark stubble covered his face.

“You look as if you haven’t eaten, shaved, or slept in days,” she said softly, tenderness and love for this man overcoming her. Even now, when he had rejected her so cruelly, she could not deny him comfort.

Closing his eyes, he raised his hand to press her palm against his cheek. A shudder rippled through him, sending a jolt of awareness careening through her.

“I haven’t.” His voice emerged in a gravelly rasp. He opened his eyelids, capturing her gaze with his turbulent eyes.

So much emotion simmered there that she caught her breath.

“I miss you, Grace. Desperately.”

Her heart skipped a beat and then pounded an irregular rhythm, making it impossible to breathe evenly. To think clearly or rationally. She’d missed him too—Lord, how she missed him—but not enough to fling her self-respect, morals, and integrity aside.

Stiffening her resolve, Grace tamped down her love, forcing it to a dark corner and withdrew her hand. A person could only take so much before they shattered.

“What is it you wished to say to me, Sanford?” She tossed a frantic glance at the clock. “You only have a minute left.”

It was his turn to skim his fingers across her cheek.

Grace clenched her jaw and curled her toes in her shoes to keep from leaning into him.

“I love you, Grace.”

Pain pierced her heart, shredding the organ. He loved her, but not enough to marry her. It would have been better for him to never tell her. Now she would carry the truth of his love with her and also face the impossibility of them ever being together.

“And I love you, Sanford.”

She managed a tremulous smile. She was on the cusp of breaking. Of bursting into uncontrollable sobs.

This needed to end.

Now.

“But it makes no difference, does it?” She shifted to rise. “If you will excuse me, please.”

“Wait.” He grasped her hand and scooted to sit beside her.

Shaking her head, Grace refused to meet his eyes. She could bear no more.

“No. There is nothing more to say.”

“Please hear me out.” Desperation colored his rumbling baritone. “Then, I shall not stop you if you still want to leave.”

A surge of anger fortified her.

“Why should I, Sanford? So you can torment me further? Reiterate why I am beneath you? Why I am good enough to bed but not wed?”

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes.

“I cannot bear any more pain, Sanford. I cannot.”

With his thumbs, he brushed away her tears.

“I never meant to hurt you, Grace. I know I did, darling, but I have come to my senses. You made me see what

mattered. I have been such a stupid beef-witted fool—until you came into my life and made me understand what was truly important.”

He tipped her chin up with his forefinger, forcing her to meet his eyes.

The brown orbs held a promise.

“I spoke the truth when I said I believe we are destined to be together. I want to marry you. Please say it is not too late for us.”

*What?*

Grace’s jaw went slack, and she almost put her fingers in her ears to clean them out. Surely, she’d heard wrong.

“What?”

“Marry me, Grace.” Sanford pressed a hot kiss to her wrist. “I do not care about what anyone else thinks. I only care about you. Us being together.”

Afraid to believe he was serious but desperately wanting it to be so, she searched his earnest features.

“But you have always adhered to society’s strictures, Sanford. You must be aware that you will be mocked and ridiculed? Quite possibly shunned and cut, perchance even ostracized.”

Laughter echoed outside, and she cast a self-conscious glance toward the window.

Chatting gaily, the Brockmans wandered the tidy garden paths, stopping every now and then to point at a blossom.

“I no longer care about any of that,” Sanford said, drawing her attention back to him.



He shook his head and gave a self-deprecating chuckle, his focus shifting to the garden too.

“Have you seen how ridiculously happy my brothers are? How ecstatic Corinna is? Every one of my siblings married people *le beau monde* frowned upon, and I would wager my life, not one of them regrets it one iota.”

Grace had only spent time with Ronan and Mercy, but she had never witnessed two people more in love. She longed for that tenderness, that oneness.

“I want what they have, sweetheart.” Sanford skimmed his fervent gaze over her face. “I only can if you consent to be my countess.”

“I want to say yes.” Grace did with every ounce of her being. But what if he changed his mind?

“Are you positive, Sanford? I could not bear it if you had regrets or second thoughts later.”

“Never,” he vowed so ferociously she blinked up at him.

“I am a man of my word. My honor is paramount to me. I pledge before you and before God that I shall never love another. If you refuse me, I shall respect your decision, but I shall not stop trying to convince you. I shall never take a wife if you will not marry me.”

He was serious.

She could see it in the set of his chiseled jaw and the inflexible contours of his face.

He wanted her and no other.

Joy enshrouded Grace. “Then, how can I possibly refuse?”

He whooped and scooped her into his lap and pressed his rough face into her neck.

“Thank God. I was prepared to write poems and sing sonnets. Trust me when I tell you I do not have a voice. My singing incites hounds to howl.”

Giggling, Grace squirmed on his lap.

“You are scratching me, Sanford.” She scrunched her nose. “And you do need a bath.”

He lifted his head, a boyish grin splitting his face. “I think we should seal our betrothal with a kiss, and then I shall see to my appearance.”

“Oh, I quite agree.” She entwined her arms around his neck and raised her face to his.

He covered her mouth with his, plundering its depth until Grace’s head swam and her breath came in little panting gasps. If his kisses could turn her bones to butter, imagine what their joining would be like?

Persistent rapping on glass made them break apart and glance toward the garden. The entire Brockman family peered in the window, all wearing ridiculous grins.

“Does this mean you are truly betrothed?” Benjamin shouted.

Heart overflowing with happiness, Grace grinned and nodded.

Yes. Yes, she and Sanford were to be married.

“Go away,” Sanford growled. “And let me show my bride-to-be how much I adore her.”

“Take a bath first,” Marissa called before bursting into giggles and holding her nose.

Her parents ushered her away amid a chorus of laughter.

“Care to join me?” Sanford asked Grace naughtily while wagging his eyebrows.

“Why, Lord Renshaw, you have a sense of humor after all.” She leaned back and brushed a shock of hair off his forehead. “What other surprises can I expect?”

“You will have a lifetime to find out, my love.”

## EPILOGUE

*PELANDALE HOUSE*

*June 1829*

DRAWING little figure eights on his wife's shoulder, Sanford kissed her forehead, then her nose, and finally her mouth.

“Good morning, Lady Renshaw.”

Cracking an eye open, Grace yawned and stretched.

“What time is it?” she asked drowsily.

“Time for our children to wake their parents.” He raised his head, listening. “Quick, pretend to be asleep. I hear them coming.”

Sure enough, the sound of small feet pattering echoed in the corridor.

As they did every day, Sanford and Grace feigned sleep as their three children, Genevieve, Paul, and Raphael, rushed into their bedchamber. Genevieve had started the tradition as soon as she could walk, and it had continued with every child.

“Wake up, Papa. Wake up, Mama,” the children chimed in unison as they clambered onto the oversized bed and bounced

up and down. “Wake up. Wake up.”

Growling like a bear, Sanford reared up and captured the two eldest in his arms while Grace encircled two-year-old Raphael in hers. Amidst giggles and squirming, Sanford and Grace kissed and tickled their children.

“Mind Mama’s tummy,” Sanford warned. “You do not want to hurt your little brother or sister.”

“It is a girl,” Genny said with the confidence of the eldest child. “That is only fair. Two boys and two girls.”

Eight months pregnant, Grace would deliver their fourth child next month.

Sanford’s and Grace’s gazes met above their children’s raven heads, and they shared an intimate smile. With both parents possessing black hair, what other color would their offspring have? Genny and Raphy had their mother’s indigo eyes, but Paul’s were warm tobacco.

After another five minutes of play, their nurses discreetly knocked on the door.

“We’ll see you at breakfast,” Grace assured them as the children scrambled off the bed and waved goodbye.

Once they’d gone, Sanford placed his palm atop her distended belly. The baby kicked, and he grinned. “How are you feeling, my love?”

“Like a whale.” Grace placed her hand atop his. “I believe this one is the most active yet. I fear our daughter may be disappointed.”

Grace had agreed with Sanford’s request to live at Pelandale House since the mansion would come to him

eventually. Besides, Father and Rachael doted on the children as they did all of their grandchildren.

That, however, did not mean that he and his countess did not find opportunities to spend romantic interludes at Hydeaway House. A wicked grin tipped his mouth upward as he recalled last Wednesday. Strawberries and whipped cream might've been involved.

Propped up on his elbow, his head resting in his hand, Sanford smiled down at Grace.

“Every day I wake up and thank God you hid in my coach that day. I cannot imagine my life without you, darling.”

“And every day, I wake up and cannot believe this fairy tale life is truly mine.” Grace cupped his face before pressing a kiss to his chin.

He grazed a kiss across her mouth. “And this is our happy ever after, sweetheart.”

The End

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## FROM THE DESK OF COLLETTE CAMERON

THANK you for reading EARL OF RENSHAW. Not only is the book part of the Wicked Earls' Club series, but it is also part of my Daughters of Desire (Scandalous Ladies) Series.

While this story is a sweet Regency romance with mild inspirational overtones, I attempted to tastefully introduce romantic elements and sexual tension. The infrequent mild cursing in the story is not only authentic to the era but, let's face it...very few humans are so perfect they never let an expletive slip once in a while.

Enemies to lovers is one of my favorite romance tropes, as are fake betrothals, class differences, and second chances. EARL OF RENSHAW contains elements of all these, plus a little Cinderellaesque and forbidden love.

In modern culture, we do not think it is a big deal for people from different social standings to marry, but during the Regency Era, it was rare. Titles were used to acquire wealth, property, position, and power. Love matches happened occasionally, but marriages of convenience and arranged



marriages were the norms. Forced marriages were not unheard of either.

Even today, some elites deem anyone not born in their social class as inferior. Sanford was an utter prig, but Grace brought him up to snuff quite nicely.

To stay abreast of my other books' releases, subscribe to my newsletter, *The Regency Rose* (the link is below), or visit my author world at [collettecameron.com](http://collettecameron.com).

If you liked Grace and Sanford's story, please consider leaving a review. Reviews really do help authors.

Hugs,

A handwritten signature in a cursive script that reads "Collette". The letters are dark and have a slightly textured, ink-like appearance.

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EARL OF EVERMORE

TAMMY ANDRESEN

# CHAPTER ONE

THE EARL OF EVERMORE was the last rake standing.

His friends and compatriots at the Wicked Earls' Club, a haven for earls with a proclivity for naughtiness, had all fallen victim to a terrible disease.

Marriage.

And now the club was in danger of closing its doors forever. Or worse still, becoming a legitimate organization.

Evermore shivered as he walked through the early-morning spring fog. He'd not allow either of those unfortunate endings to happen.

He was a man with a plan.

Possibly.

All right. He was a man working on a plan. Which was why he'd stayed in the night before, gone to bed early, and was now up before the sun had cleared the fog to see an old friend.

The Baron of Beverly had once been Evermore's closest compatriot, but when he'd taken over the care of his sister, he'd become a much more serious fellow.

Rather than go out, he'd stayed in to play parlor games meant for children. Beverly attended all the most appropriate societal events, and he made connections with men of good standing.

By all accounts, he was not the man to help Evermore now. But Evermore knew another fact as well. Beverly's sister, who'd been a girl when she'd first come under Beverly's care, was now a young lady.

She'd had her first season, a successful one if the rumors were true. She'd been the toast of London.

Evermore tried and failed to remember her name.

Lily?

Tulip?

He shook his head. Whatever her name was, she must have plenty of offers, which meant that Beverly would soon be free to return to his old life.

The man was not an earl, Evermore knew that. And he also knew that with the public's infatuation with crime and the growth of the newspaper, it was getting more difficult to keep their private affairs private but...

If he could grow the club's numbers once again, he stood a chance of keeping the club open. They'd not been able to repopulate their numbers with fellow earls. Perhaps it was time to cast the club's net wider, to barons, viscounts, and marquesses with an eye for misdeed.

Because it was no fun to be bad alone.

Debauchery needed company.

He knew he was already compromising the founding principles of the club. It was meant for earls. Men who shared

common responsibility and desires.

But he also knew that the club would die altogether if he didn't do something.

So he'd written to Beverly and requested a meeting. The man had responded with an offer to visit before the breaking of fast for a brisk morning walk.

Which did not really bode well for Evermore and his intentions, but he was desperate and Beverly was a place to begin.

So he'd accepted.

Besides, he missed his old friend. He'd been feeling hollow of late and he could only hope that filling the club's roster would also fill the void.

Reaching Beverly's townhouse, he knocked on the door, a butler quickly showing him inside.

Beverly bounded down the stairs looking spritely and perhaps five years younger than Evermore remembered him.

"Good morning, old chap," Beverly called as he reached the entry. "Ready for a bit of exercise?"

"Ready," Evermore answered, wondering at the man's enthusiasm.

Evermore believed in caring for oneself. He boxed regularly and rode often, but he had to confess that Beverly, equally tall, appeared even more fit than himself.

He'd gone a touch soft around the middle and his skin tone was a little...pasty of late.

While Beverly looked healthy and lean with just the right amount of color to his skin.

“I must ask, to what do I owe this surprise visit? An unexpected treat to be certain; even so, unexpected.”

Evermore followed Beverly back out the door. “Unexpected? Just because we hadn’t spoken for a bit, doesn’t mean we aren’t still friends.”

“A bit? It’s been three years, old chap.”

“Has it?” he asked, scratching his head. He supposed it had been that long. “Still. A friend is a friend.”

“Excellent.” Beverley clapped him on the back. “Now tell me...have you decided to wed? Is that why you’ve come?”

“Wed?” he asked, his voice nearly breaking on the word. “What in all that is holy would give you that idea?”

Beverly chuckled. “I only assumed that if you were reaching out, it was because you’d decided to make a change in lifestyle.”

Evermore shook his head as they reached Hyde Park and entered. He generally rode through the park rather than walking. Between the early hour and their slower pace, he noted just how massive the land seemed. “Odd. But I was thinking the same of you.”

“The same of me what?”

“That you’d had a change of heart.”

Beverley grimaced. “What would give you that impression?”

Some of Evermore’s hopes dashed. “I have heard tell that your sister was a raging success.”

Beverly slowed his quick pace, staring over at Evermore. “Violet was well-liked with a fair number of suitors.”

Violet...that was her name! His hopes rose again at Beverly's words. "Has she accepted an offer?"

Beverly's brow furrowed. "No. Of course not."

"Of course not?" He stopped walking all together. "But isn't an offer the point?"

Beverly shook his head. "Perhaps for some but not for her. She is having fun, I believe, and would like her to have another season, possibly two before she settles down. And I, for one do not wish to see her gone so soon."

At least someone was having fun, he thought, because it certainly wasn't him or Beverly. Nor was his latest attempt at finding a compatriot successful. "You like being a nursemaid to your little sister?"

Beverly glared. "I like being her guardian. It gives me purpose, and meaning, and—" He stopped, his mouth clamping shut as he scrubbed at his face. "This is a pointless conversation. I can see now that you came because you had some hope I'd rejoin the ranks of the debaucherous. I won't. Once Violet does marry, I shall do the same."

It was Evermore's turn to scrub at his face. "We had fun once, you and I."

"We did," Beverly answered, his face softening. "And I will always be your friend. But for me, that life is empty."

Empty.

Evermore hated to admit that he'd been feeling empty too. He'd blamed it on the quietness of the club, but some nagging voice in the back of his thoughts said it was more. And somehow, Beverly's words were niggling into that feeling.



“I’m trying to save the club I currently run. It’s a place for errant earls, but our numbers have dwindled of late.”

“Dwindled? Why?”

Evermore thought that Beverly might actually appreciate this bit of information, which was why, removing his hat, he placed it over his chest. “One by one, the men of our ranks have reformed. Met women, gotten married. Lived happily ever.”

Except for him.

“So what you really want is to repopulate a club that reforms rakes? Why didn’t you say so?”

Evermore blinked in surprise. Partially because he realized that Beverly might help. But also because reformation was not what he had in mind at all. Did he?

---

Miss Violet Stanford, sister to Baron Beverly, watched her brother leave, walking side by side with a man she did not recognize.

She nipped at her lip as she watched him move, her gaze drawn to him as they disappeared into the swirling fog.

Her stomach dropped with disappointment as he vanished from view. Odd that she should be so fascinated. She’d not even seen the man’s face under the rim of his hat. But there was something about him...

Perhaps it was the way he moved. She pushed off the window seat as she crossed to her dressing table. It was more athletic, more confident than any man she’d ever seen.

Or was it the cut of his coat? Fitted to his broad shoulders and tapering to narrow hips.

She caught the briefest glance of a strong jaw before he'd faced forward once again but something had caught her fancy.

The man differed from every other she'd met this past season.

She couldn't quite tell what it was, but he had confidence and a certain...*je ne sais quoi*.

The gentleman of the *ton* had been fun at first but she'd already grown tired of them. She liked a certain level of activity and vigor that most of them lacked.

Her brother had assured her that she had all the time in the world to find the right man, but she'd not seen any of interest the entirety of the season. They all fawned and tripped and...

She set down her brush with a sigh as she rose to ring for her maid. It was early still but she may as well dress.

She preferred the mornings anyway, the world was quiet and peaceful. Besides, there was a chance that her brother and his guest might return.

Could she finagle an introduction? She had a powerful desire to meet the man who'd captured her fancy when none had before him.

Would he be as handsome as she imagined?

She could almost hear his deep voice. Feel his gaze upon her. Her breath caught.

Violet wished to marry. But the man had to be just right. She wished for a man who was more interested in a brisk ride than a spin about the dance floor if she were being honest. Dancing had its place, of course, and her first balls had been

exciting, but she was already tired of the crush of people. Still, she'd complete this season and participate in another if not for her own sake but her brother's. He'd given up much to raise her when their parents had passed and she'd honor his sacrifice by making the best match possible. A match that would make her brother happy he'd given so much to her.

Her maid arrived and she quickly chose a gown of fine muslin, a pale blue that complimented her eyes. Her blonde hair was swept up into a loose coif with pieces floating about her face.

She'd just finished when she heard footsteps on the cobblestones below her window.

Jumping up, she dashed for the door and half sprinted down the hall, starting down the stairs. The moment the butler reached for the doorknob, she slowed her pace, as though she'd been strolling down the stairs without intent.

The door swung open and sure enough, her brother entered with another man just behind him.

He stepped next to her brother, sweeping off his hat and... The air left her lungs in a whoosh. He was all that she'd imagined and more.

Handsome with dark hair and glittering brown eyes, his strong features were so masculine and just a touch devilish as his gaze rose to hers.

And then, her breath caught in her throat.

"Violet," her brother called. "What are you doing up?"

She tore her gaze from the mystery man. "Carl. Surely, you jest. I'm always up this early." And then she did her best to sweep the rest of the way down the stairs.

Carl cocked an eyebrow before he turned to his companion. “Evermore, may I introduce my sister, Miss Violet Stanford. Violet this is an old friend, the Earl of Evermore.”

An earl? How could such a fine figure of a man also be an earl? And how had they not met?

“A pleasure.” He gave her the sort of half smile that curled her toes in her slippers, his voice tilling down her spine.

“The pleasure is mine,” she managed to answer sounding only the slightest bit breathless.

Her brother’s gaze narrowed. “Violet, if you’ll excuse us, we have business to discuss.”

“Business?” she asked, knowing that she shouldn’t. She could already hear the disapproval in his voice.

Evermore gave her a wider smile. “I have a gentleman’s club that has dwindling numbers. Your brother is going to help me refill its ranks.”

“Oh,” she said returning his smile. Which only made heat bloom in her cheeks as their eyes met again. “How fascinating.”

“I don’t know about that,” her brother glared. “But the club is a worthwhile endeavor.”

She wanted to ask the earl why he never attended any of the balls she’d been too or if he’d be at one at some point in the future. But none of those questions seemed appropriate, and as her gaze flitted to her brother, she knew she ought to leave it alone. “Are you looking for men of the peerage?”

“I am,” he answered as he straightened up.

She ignored the low rumble of protest her brother made. Instead, she focused on the earl as she answered. “You ought

to come to the Winchester Ball with us on Friday night. You'd surely find the men you seek there."

Silence met her suggestion.

More heat filled her cheeks as she met the gaze of first the earl. His head was cocked to the side as though considering her words.

Then she turned to her brother who gave her a withering stare.

"Vi," Carl started, stepping closer. "Evermore does not wish to bore himself at such a party."

"On the contrary," Evermore answered, giving her the sort of smile that made her tingle straight down to her toes. "I'd be honored to join you."

Hope made her so light, she thought she might float away as she returned his grin. This man was all that her heart hoped he would be.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE NEXT FIVE days passed with agonizing slowness for Evermore as he awaited the Winchester Ball.

He told himself over and over that he was excited to go because the ball presented a great opportunity to meet potential club members but he knew there was another reason.

Violet.

They'd only exchanged the barest number of words. And she was the exact sort of woman he'd normally avoid. Proper, unwed, and unavailable for any of the sort of activities in which he engaged.

No trysts would be allowed with a lady such as herself. And even if he were to consider ruining an innocent, which he never had, it would not be his friend's sister.

Still, he found himself daydreaming of the blue of her eyes, like the sky on a sunny summer day. Or the silk of her blonde hair or the way her dress skimmed down her curves as she moved.

She'd captured his imagination as surely as her brother's words had stuck somewhere deep inside him.

Emptiness.

Did Beverly find his life filled now that he cared for Violet? He'd certainly intimated that very fact. He didn't wish for his sister to leave and as soon as she did, he, himself, would marry. He had the opportunity to return to his former rakish ways and he'd chosen to remain a man of responsibility. Of order.

Evermore scrubbed his jaw as a sea of dancers undulated before him.

He ought to be watching for men on the fringes. They'd congregated in shadows or quiet corners or perhaps sequestered in the gaming room.

Instead, he found himself searching for Violet.

Unable to see her, he settled for scanning the crowd for her brother instead. Beverly had secured him the invitation even as he'd delivered the not-so-subtle warning to remain far away from his sister.

Evermore understood. He was a known rake and she an innocent.

But as he scanned the crowd for the tenth time, he knew he at least wanted to see her again. What would she be wearing? She'd been stunning in her morning dress, how would she look in an evening gown?

He stopped himself. He needed to focus on what he'd come here for. His club.

He was fighting to preserve a way of life. Granted that life was full of gaming and debauchery but still...it was his.

He began to skirt around the crowd, intent upon finding the rooms where the men of less regard had sequestered themselves.

But just as he found the hall that would lead him to the back stairs, he caught a flash of blonde in the candlelight. Was it her? His imagination?

But then he saw her... Violet.

Her hand was on the arm of a man he didn't recognize, but he knew the type. His eyes were the slightest bit blurry, his cravat just a bit unkept, and his hand too...

Its position on her arm was far too familiar.

His gaze swung to Violet's face and her brittle smile. She tugged the slightest bit even as the lord in question continued to pull her toward Evermore.

"Lord Beasley," she said giving another tug. "I'm sure that my brother is looking for me. If we could just—"

"No—" Beasley waved his hand. "It'll only take a minute. And besides..." He stopped, his gaze sweeping down her body in a way that made Evermore wish to give the other man a solid shove. "I've been trying to speak with you privately all season."

"Privately," she returned, her voice rising as she stopped once again. "Forgive me, my lord, but I don't think that's wise."

He gave her another tug as he moved through the crowd, his hand now clamped on her arm. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course, it's wise."

Evermore stepped in Beasley's path. For the briefest moment, he considered that Beasley was the exact sort of man he'd come here to find. Morally ambiguous and well into his cups, but just now, his mission had been altered.

The club could wait.



He didn't think about the fact that the club had been his only concern for months as he'd watched his compatriots fall. Instead, he focused on the woman who needed a bit of help. His help.

A man like Beasley might ruin her reputation with such behavior and he'd not have it. Ignoring the voice that asked when he'd suddenly grown concerned with ladies' reputations, he braced himself for the moment that Beasley would run smack into him.

The man wasn't looking at all as he moved toward the empty hallway behind Evermore. His gaze was fixed on Violet, his look growing more triumphant, the closer he dragged her.

Evermore's chest expanded. Rake that he was, even he didn't go about dragging innocent women down abandoned hallways. Didn't the man have any standards?

He widened his stance as he tensed all his muscles. One way or the other, Beasley was about to discover the error of his ways...

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VIOLET WAS DUMBFOUNDED by the behavior of Lord Beasley, but that shock was quickly turning to panic as his grip tightened on her arm.

He'd requested a dance early in the evening when he'd appeared his usually jovial self and her dance card had still been empty, so she'd happily obliged. But when he'd come to retrieve her, he'd had a far different affect.

Blurry-eyed and adamant, he'd not even completed half of their dance before he'd begun to pull her toward...

Well, she didn't know quite where they were going, but he wasn't loosening his grip.

And with his insistence and ungentlemanly behavior she was growing more and more afraid.

"Lord Beasley," she tried again, giving another tug. "You must return me to my brother. He would not like—"

"Quiet," Beasley stopped, looking down at her with a slight sneer and an expression that bordered on lecherous. "I've been nothing but kind all season. What has that achieved?"

She blinked in surprise. They'd danced a handful of times, he'd called once or twice. She'd done little to encourage him. "Let go," she said, yanking her arm. "Or I shall be forced to —"

He tightened his grip to the point of pain as he yanked her again, nearly making her trip on her skirts.

He took another step and that's when she noticed the dark hall just beyond the crowd. Surely, he didn't mean to take her down there?

Panic, hot and strong, pulsed through her as she attempted to slow his progress. "Lord Beasley," she cried. She'd have to cause a scene and employ the help of the crowd around them. This simply could not stand. It would cause a scandal but better that than to allow this man to ruin her.

She opened her mouth to call for help when Beasley stopped short. The force of his halt, reverberating through her.

Her eyes flew to him. Beasley was planted in the very large chest of another man. Her eyes travelled up, the other fellow was far taller, and she let out a gasp as her gaze met with the dark, glittering eyes of the Earl of Evermore.

Handsome as ever in the glowing candlelight, his hand clamped over Beasley's. "I must insist that you unhand Miss Violet this instant."

All the air rushed from her lungs as she realized she'd been saved.

Beasley stuttered for a moment, his grip loosening before his jaw hardened again. "I shan't."

"Then you shall feel all five of my knuckles on your nose. I assure you I'm a regular at my club." And then Evermore gave Beasley's arm a shake. She noted how much stronger Evermore was than the other man by the way Beasley's teeth snapped together, making a loud clink as his head went back and forth.

"I'm not afraid of you," Beasley answered even as let go of her arm. She nearly wilted in relief but quickly recovered and stepped up next to Evermore.

"No?" Evermore asked, leaning close. "Then you won't mind hearing that I shall find you alone in the very near future and you and I are going to have a private discussion on what gentlemanly behavior looks like." And with that, Evermore let the other man go, pushing him toward the empty hall.

Then, tucking Violet's hand in his arm, he started back into the crowd. "Let's find your brother, shall we?"

Her fingers slid over hard muscle as she tilted her chin to look up at him. "Lord Evermore, I..." How did she thank him for stepping in when she'd been so afraid? She forgot all about

her brother's subtle disapproval as she looked up into Evermore's handsome features.

He stopped for a moment, looking down at her with a small half smile. "Are you all right, Violet?"

"Fine," she answered, swallowing down the lump that had risen. "But I was afraid and you..."

His smile grew wider. "It was my pleasure. I'm only glad I happened upon you in your time of need."

And then he started moving again.

"Thank you," she finally managed to say.

"You're quite welcome. Now, where do you think we'll find your brother? I'm sure he'd like you returned to his side as quickly as possible."

She'd left him near the punch table to join her friends nearly an hour before her dance, which meant he could be anywhere by now.

"I'm not certain..." She nipped her lip as the crowd pressed them closer together, her hip brushing his. Which sent a jolt of sensation sliding through her.

He didn't answer, instead his gaze scanned the crowd. "Any idea? If we need search for him, it might take hours."

"My lord," she started, realizing he likely didn't wish to spend a great deal of time looking for her brother. "You needn't trouble yourself. I'm sure I can find him."

He looked down at her then, one of his eyebrows cocking up in a breathtakingly charming gaze. "And leave you to fend off the jackals on your own? Never."

She smiled despite herself. “But I know you’ve come here with a mission. Have you found any men to repopulate your club?”

“Not yet,” he answered, looking unconcerned. “But the night is young and I’ll not leave a lady in need.

“Then again, I must say thank you,” she said even as her breast brushed his upper arm. A shiver of excitement raced down her spine and she could swear that he tightened in response.

Had he? Did she have an effect on him that way he did her? How did she find out?

## CHAPTER THREE

WHAT WAS WRONG WITH HIM?

A lady could traverse a ballroom alone. He needn't stay. But it wasn't just that he felt obligated.

"It's my pleasure," he said as he looked down into the glittering depths of her blue eyes. He wanted to be with her. The feel of her body brushing his was wreaking havoc on his senses and he didn't give a wit that he was missing a valuable opportunity.

Why her? He was a seasoned hellion with loads of experience seducing women. Why was an innocent having such an impact on him?

Her other hand wrapped about his arm. "Tell me more of your club."

His club. What he ought to be thinking about. "There isn't much to tell. It's just a gentleman's club meant to support men in their pursuits as lords." Which was true. Granted, he left out the pursuits like gaming and whoring, but all gentlemen's clubs were places for men to act away from the eyes of society.

He frowned. The idea of illicit behavior in private places was far less appealing than it ought to be.

Violet's lips parted, her gaze searching his. "You look distressed. Sincerely, if I am keeping you from your intended pursuits, I can find my brother on my own. You needn't stay."

"It's not that, I promise." He stopped, turning toward her. "I am enjoying your company a great deal. I..." Dear merciful saints, he sounded like a lovesick pup.

But her answering smile made him forget his dissatisfaction with himself. She looked so lovely that he bent closer, his free hand coming up as he stroked a thumb over her cheek. Her breath caught, her eyes growing wider even as she leaned a touch closer.

Her body was pressed to his side, their gazes locked as he dropped his chin lower once again. He could not kiss her in the crowded ballroom, but for just a moment he wished he could. He'd sacrifice nearly anything to taste her.

Even his freedom? The question made him back away a touch as he dropped his thumb. "Tell me. What do you enjoy besides these parties?"

She shook her head. "I like to ride. I enjoy the country. I'm looking forward to our return, but this..." She looked about, her smile slipping, "is not my favorite."

His brows rose. "Your brother indicated that you were enjoying yourself. I thought..."

She nibbled her lip. "I appreciate all his efforts, squiring me about. I would not let him know that I do not enjoy them."

Something warm slid through him at the intimacy of knowing a detail about her that even her brother did not. "Your secret is safe with me."

Her hand gently squeezed his arm. "I would feel better if you shared a secret with me as well."

A secret? His chest expanded as he stared down at her. Did he confess that the goals he'd been working toward suddenly seemed insignificant? "My secret is that I have no idea what my future—"

"Violet," a voice called from her right.

He looked up to see Beverly standing not ten feet away. He nearly cursed. He should want to see Beverly but nothing could be further from the truth.

"Hello," she called back. "There you are. We've been searching for you."

"We have?" he asked, moving closer. His gaze met with Evermore's, hard and accusatory.

Evermore winced. He'd been warned. But he had good reason for being with Violet. "Lord Beasley..." He started drawing up to his full height.

Violet's hand spread out on his arm before she gave him a tiny pat. "Was not being himself," she supplied.

Beverly drew up short. "What does that mean?"

Evermore stepped in front of Violet, leaning toward Beverly. "Fool had been drinking as near as I could tell. His behavior..."

Beverly's eyes widened. "Violet?"

She came up to his side once again. "It's fine. Lord Evermore was my knight in shining armor. But I shall never accept a dance with Beasley again."

Beverly gave Evermore a long look before he reached out a hand to his sister. She took it with only the briefest hesitation. Then Beverly leaned over. "There is a card game on the second floor that would prove most enlightening to you."



He gave a stiff nod, his eyes flicking to Violet. He'd much rather continue circling the ballroom with her. "And what shall the two of you do for the rest of your evening?"

She shook her head even as her brother looked at her too. "I find myself rather taxed."

Beverly gave a brief nod before he looked back at Evermore. "We shall leave then, if that's what you wish. But tell me, Lord Evermore, would you care to join us?"

He drew in a quick breath. He should stay. He'd been given the exact information he needed, but as his eyes flitted back to Violet, he had a powerful urge to go.

He paused as he tried to decide.

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VIOLET HELD HER BREATH.

Would he stay or would he come? The decision felt extremely important, which was ridiculous. It wasn't as though it determined her entire future.

And what did her brother's change of attitude mean? He'd clearly disapproved of her speaking with Evermore the last time they'd met. Had he changed his mind about that? Would he approve of Evermore if Evermore courted her?

If he even would. But she found herself hoping...

Handsome and dashing, had he not just rescued her? What woman did not wish for a man like him?

She shook her head, knowing that she was making too much of this. Still when his gaze met hers again, she held her breath.

“I would be honored,” he answered with a quick bow.

The air rushed from her mouth, her shoulders going a bit limp a moment before she straightened up again, excitement replacing her relief.

Something crackled between them. Did he feel it too?

Her brother started toward the exit, Lord Evermore falling in step behind them. It took every ounce of her energy not to look over her shoulder as they made their way out of the fray.

And as they reached the front steps, the cool night air, hitting her skin, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Evermore came to her other side, his body close enough that she could feel the heat of it.

They entered the family carriage, Evermore sitting next to her brother, his gaze fixed on her.

“Quite the crush tonight,” her brother said.

“Indeed,” she answered, only half listening to his attempt to make conversation.

“Curious that you happened upon my sister in her time of need.”

Violet’s breath caught. Was that curious? What did it mean?

Evermore only smiled. “Indeed,” he answered, repeating her word.

Her brother smiled too and then he looked at her and winked.

Her brows rose. What did he mean by such a gesture? Hope she knew she shouldn’t feel was rising up in her chest.

She'd enjoy ending her time as a debutante with a man who was her brother's friend, no less.

But the conversation turned to less-curious topics as they made their way home. Her brother handed her out and the three of them stepped inside. "The night is still fine. Does anyone mind if we sit in the garden for a bit? I'd like the air."

"Not at all," she answered as they passed through the house and out to the back. Settling about a table, the night sounds added a peaceful air she leaned back in her chair.

But her brother quickly rose again. "My apologies. I've forgotten to request beverages for us."

Her brow furrowed as she looked at her brother. Surely one of the footmen would be out to ask at any moment. But before she could say so, he was gone. "That is odd," she answered as she watched him go, a smile playing at her lips. If he were leaving the two of them alone...

But her brother was quickly forgotten as Evermore slipped his fingers about hers. Her head snapped to him. "I do believe he is giving us a moment of privacy."

"Privacy? I'm a debutante, I'm not allowed such a luxury."

Evermore laughed softly. "True. Which is why I suspect this moment will be very brief." And then, he leaned over.

Her breath caught as he came thrillingly close, his lips brushing her temple before he returned to his seat. The tingling sensation he caused, however, lingered as she stared at him.

"I find..." he started, staring at her. "I find that I am very glad to have made your acquaintance and relieved I was able to intercept you this evening."

A rush of air caught in her lungs. "As am I."

“I do not mean to be so forward, but I’d like to see you again, if I may.”

Her mouth opened and then closed. She wished to see him too. Very much. “I’d like that,” she finally managed to say, her fingers tightening about his.

“I have to confess,” he shook his head. “Many would not consider me a good prospect for a woman such as yourself.”

She cocked her head to the side but she was not able to ask more as her brother returned and Evermore’s fingers slipped from hers.

Why had her brother seemed irritated that she and Evermore had met and why did Evermore declare himself unfit? He was an earl, for pity’s sake.

They sat outside making quiet conversation until well past midnight. And finally, Evermore rose, with a bow. “You mentioned that you like to ride, Miss Violet. Could I tempt you to ride with me in Hyde Park tomorrow afternoon?”

Her brother rose too, his smile almost smug.

“I’d like that,” she answered, excitement filling her at the idea of such a ride. But first, she needed to know what Evermore’s comment earlier meant and if her brother would approve of the match.

## CHAPTER FOUR

EVERMORE HELD the reins of both horses as he waited for Violet. He'd been attempting to decide how to proceed. A part of him still clung to his old life. His dream of reconstituting the club.

But another part could not let Violet go. He wanted to see more of her, touch her, get to know her.

His hands tightened on both sets of reins. She'd gotten under his skin and she was slowly eating away at his former life.

Or perhaps that process had begun already. He thought to the former emptiness he'd been feeling. Hollow as though what most of what he did was meaningless.

Violet appeared before him, on her brother's arm, as they both made their way out toward the stables.

He no longer felt meaningless or hollow. Instead, the future began to dance before him. A wife to protect, children to raise. Life spent not in London drinking and gaming, but quiet nights in front of the fire filled with conversation and laughter, and the gentle touch of a lovely woman.

He let out a long breath as he fully understood why Beverly had no desire to return to his former ways.

Once a man started down another path, there was no going back.

He smiled as he handed the reins to the groomsmen, stepping forward to fully drink in the sight of Violet.

Her dark blue habit hugged her curves, her hair pinned back under her bonnet. She was the picture of perfection and he held his breath to behold her.

Which was likely why he didn't answer when Beverly called out, "Good afternoon."

A smile spread wider over Violet's face as she ducked her chin, breaking their eye contact. It was only then that he realized he hadn't answered. "Good afternoon."

"It's a lovely day for a ride," Beverly said as he glanced up that the sky. "Though a bit early for fashionable company."

Evermore winced. He had sensed Beverly's hesitation upon Evermore's first meeting with Violet. Last night's rescue had seemed to calm whatever fears his old friend had.

Evermore knew it would have been better to ride through the park closer to five when all of society would be out. But he also understood that Violet wished for a quieter outing where she might be able to ride unhindered, which was why he'd arrived at three. "I can assure you we will be seen at five," he murmured attempting to explain to his friend that he had nothing but the best intentions in mind.

Beverly raised his brows but said no more as he took Violet's gloved hand and placed a light kiss upon the back. "I'm glad we're going early," she murmured, confirming his hunch. "I like the quiet times in Hyde Park. It reminds me of home."

"But you like society too," Beverly said as he studied her.

“Of course I do,” she answered with a bright grin.

Beverly seemed to relax. “I could send a groom if you think you might be in quiet corners of the park,” Beverly offered even as Violet stepped up to her horse.

Evermore came up behind her, more than willing to take her tiny waist and help her into the saddle.

She hardly weighed a thing as he lifted her and he was reminded of his desire to protect this woman.

She settled in, adjusting her skirts as she slowly answered. “We will stay on the main trails. Plenty of people will be out, even at this hour.” Then she leaned over and patted her brother. “Try not to worry. Lord Evermore will keep me safe, I’m certain.”

Beverly’s gaze met his with a steady, narrowed-eyed glare that was a clear warning. But he said nothing as Evermore stepped around Violet’s horse and swung into the saddle of his own.

He nudged his horse forward, Violet doing the same as they made their way to the park at a slow canter.

“I must ask,” he said as they turned a corner toward the park, “Your brother seems very concerned that you like society.”

Violet sighed. “He does. I think he worries that it’s one of the jobs our mother would have completed if our parents had lived. He’s done a wonderful job of being my family and guardian, but I think that he believes if I enjoy my time in society than he will have done a good job of taking her place.”

Evermore winced. Why hadn’t he done more for his friend when he’d lost his parents and taken over the care of his sister?

Evermore had been too busy in selfish pursuits. “Your brother is a good man.”

“He is,” she nodded as they entered the park, starting down a wide trail and picking up a bit of speed as they went. “The best.”

“You care for one another a great deal.”

She nodded. “I’ll not marry unless he approves wholeheartedly. We’ve no other family and the man I choose will become family for both of us, not just me.”

Evermore’s mouth tightened. Would Beverly ever approve of him? Last night Evermore had thought the other man might but then he’d chosen the incorrect meeting time and he seemed to have fallen out of his friend’s good graces once again.

They moved into a gallop, Violet’s horsemanship excellent as they made their way through the park. He moved to the lead, taking a side trail toward the perimeter of the park. He was tempted to push faster but thought better of the idea. While Violet clearly had the skill, he did not wish to be found recklessly riding through the park, which made him chuckle. A week ago, he would not have cared.

But as they neared the edge of the Long Water, he slowed his horse, sure that both the animal and Violet would appreciate a rest.

“Done already?” she called as she came up abreast of him. “I was just warming up.”

He laughed as he turned to look at her. “How can your brother think that you would wish to trot slowly in line with the rest of the crowd?”

She shrugged. “The process has its advantages, and as I said, I wish for him to think he has made me happy because he



has.”

Evermore understood.

She pretended to like society so that her brother would think that he'd fulfilled his duties.

But Evermore could now see how a quicker marriage might really benefit Violet as well. She could live a quieter life, her brother secure in the knowledge he'd made a good match for his sister.

“He mentioned that you'd enjoy another season or two. Is that true?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I'd like to marry the right man. I shall spend a great deal less time in ballrooms once I find him.”

Satisfaction swelled in his chest. He'd like that too. While he had little appetite to participate in the opulence of society, the idea of marriage... Well, it had taken on a great deal more merit.

With that in mind, he slowed both of their horses and swung down from his. “Would you like to walk along the bank for a few minutes?”

She nodded. “It's so peaceful here now, it would be lovely.”

Helping her from her horse, her body moved close to his, her smell wafting through the air, a floral mix of lily and sage that complimented the clean smell of the grass and water. He held her close for a moment longer than was necessary as he looked down into her upturned face.

But slowly, he stepped back. The rake in him had to hold himself back from kissing her right then and there because he

knew that he needed to woo her properly.

But as her arm thread through his, her body brushing against him, proper thoughts were once again brushed aside in favor of rakish ideas.

She was so close and with every touch, the tension in him tightened a bit more. They walked along the back, almost no one about and as they reached the shade of a tree, he stopped, tucking himself and her under the branches.

“I have to confess, Miss Violet, that I find you quite enchanting.”

“Do you?” she asked, swaying close once again. “In that case, I must confess that I feel the same.”

He’d known, of course. But to hear her say it, his blood roared in satisfaction. And he could surely convince Beverly that he was a sound choice.

But first, he’d woo the lady.

And while he knew that following the rules would win him points with Beverly, he also knew that just a touch of rakishness often pleased the ladies. He’d never hurt Violet, but he could sense that she’d grown tired of society and she might enjoy another small break from its dictates.

Which was why, leaning against the trunk of the tree, he pulled her close in his arms, her body willingly pressing to his.

“Evermore?” she asked, looking up at him with a question even as her breath trembled from her lips.

“My given name is Aiden,” he murmured as he moved closer, his hands sliding up her arms as she molded to him.

“Aiden,” she repeated softly, her lips parted.

His name on her lips was the final straw. He wanted to taste her, claim her as his own. With that, he closed the distance between them, placing his mouth over hers.

## CHAPTER FIVE

AIDEN'S LIPS on hers was like nothing she'd ever felt before. Soft and warm and yet so masculine, they brushed over hers with all the confidence his body language had promised, sensation coursing through her.

A tingling that started where their lips met pulsed all the way down her core. That place between her legs began to ache as he lifted his mouth and then kissed her again, a second light pass of his mouth.

One of his hands traced down her spine while the other cupped her cheek. She'd imagined her first kiss a thousand times but not one of her fanciful dreams even came close to matching the reality of his mouth over hers.

Her skin sang under his touch even as he pulled back, his thumb tracing around the edge of her lips. "So lovely," he murmured one corner of his mouth pulling up as he looked down at her, his eyes so deep and mysterious that she nearly forgot to breathe.

"I..." she started, searching for the words in the hard planes of his face.

The other corner of his lips tipped up. "We should go. I promised to keep you on well-traversed trails."

The words were like a bucket of water being poured over her head.

Her brother...what would he think of the way she'd just behaved? And while she knew she didn't love the proper path, she'd planned to remain on it for his sake. He deserved nothing less. And what had she gone and done? She'd kissed a man in the open air of the park.

She quickly glanced around, not seeing a soul, and a small sigh escaped her lips.

At least, she hadn't been seen. But still. She attended the balls, put her best foot forward for Carl's benefit.

They walked to their horses, her arm in his, but she was again lost for words. This time, not out of wonder but worry.

"Violet," he whispered as they reached the side of her mount. "Please tell me that you don't regret our kiss."

She looked up at him then. "I don't regret your actions at all." The kiss had been wonderful. Beyond that. But she still should not have indulged.

His brow furrowed even as his hands came to her waist. "My actions?"

He lifted her easily as she landed lightly in the saddle. "My brother has given up so much. I just wish to make sure that I return any grace he's given me."

His gaze widened in understanding. "I see. No wonder your brother is so content to be your guardian. You could not be more considerate."

Those words appeased the worry that had been weighing down her stomach. "Thank you." Still, her actions just now...

“But I fear I did not keep the promise to him when he asked about bringing a footman to accompany us.”

Aiden gave a quick nod. “The next time we ride, we will have a footman accompany us. On my honor.”

The assurance that there would be another time further alleviated her worry. If his intent was courting, then the kiss was just a precursor. She let out a long breath. “Good thinking.”

“Shall we finish our circle about the park? We can leave at a leisurely pace just as the fashionable hour begins.”

She nodded as he climbed into his own saddle and they set out to finish their ride.

When they finally arrived back at her home, she was thoroughly tired and extremely glad she had gone. She hadn't had such fruitful exercise in months.

And most of her worry had gone, only a lingering doubt remained in her mind.

But even that was quickly doused with his next words. “Do you have any events you plan to attend?”

She nodded. “Another ball in two days' time at the Winthrops'.”

He gave her a dashing bow. “Then I shall see you there.”

Color infused her cheeks. Surely, she need not worry if they were making plans to meet again?

She made her way inside, wishing to speak with her brother. Did she want to confess? Was she ready to ask him more about his old friend who'd made such a grand entrance into her life? She wasn't certain.

But she was disappointed to learn that he'd gone out for the evening and wouldn't return until late.

She determined to speak to him the next day. But the next day he was away on business, and busy the day after, and the day after that. She was used to such journeys and she did not mind the time alone. In fact, it gave her a great deal of time to fancifully daydream about the kiss she'd just had and the man who taking up increasing space in her thoughts. Aiden.

But before she knew it, the Winthrop ball was upon her and she'd yet to speak to Carl about the man to whom she wished to give her heart.

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EVERMORE STOOD JUST inside the doors of the ballroom anxiously awaiting Violet's arrival. He'd hoped to speak with her brother before tonight, but Beverly had not responded to his missive.

He hoped that was not because the man did not approve. The kiss had only confirmed what Evermore had suspected.

Violet was the woman for him.

Sparks had erupted at the gentle touch of her lips. He was a man who knew when attraction ran deep, and the one with her did.

But it was more than that. She loved her family with all her heart; she was gentle, kind, and yet still full of life and energy.

He'd have to find a way to prove to both Beverly and Violet that he was the man to join their family.

"Lord Evermore," a man called from his right.

He turned his head to see Beasley coming toward him. He straightened, irritation making his hands clench into fists. “Ready for that chat I promised?”

Beasley held up his hands. “I come in peace.”

Evermore didn’t give a wit. “Then leave the same way.”

Beasley stopped. “If you’re hoping for an apology, you have it. And I promise to never step foot near the fair Miss Violet again. I forgot myself, I know. But I shall make amends”

Evermore glared all the harder. He didn’t care for the man’s apologies or his explanations. And as he was attempting to improve himself, he’d not start a brawl here, though he was tempted. “If you mean those words, you’ll leave my sight before I have a chance to put them to the test.”

“I hope you do.” The man gave him the sort of slippery grin that set Evermore’s teeth on edge.

“What does that mean?” His spine straightened as he glared down at the shorter man.

“Just this. I’ve heard that you have a club a man like me might be interested in joining.”

Bloody hell. This was not happening. His jaw clenched. He’d see the club to the grave before he let in a man like Beasley. “The club is not interested in you.”

Beasley moved a half step closer. “Hear me out. I need a place to exercise my baser appetites. A place away from gently bred women and you need new members, if the rumors are true.”

How had that spread? He’d only talked to a few people about his dilemma. Or was the lack of numbers at the club a



problem still? He didn't think so.

“Your appetites need adjusting, Beasley. That is all.”

Beasley grimaced. “You're angry. I understand. I didn't know you had an interest in the girl.”

“She's hardly a girl,” he growled out.

“Right.” Beasley stopped moving forward. “Still. I'd like to join the club and I think I might be just what you're looking for.”

His mouth twitched even as the man finally turned and started in the other direction. He watched him go, battling down the irritation that had risen like bile in his throat.

But a voice from his left stopped it cold. “Why would he be perfect for your club?”

Violet. Shit.

## CHAPTER SIX

VIOLET STOOD NEAR AIDEN, her gut clenching as she waited for his answer. What sort of club did he run that Beasley would be a good fit? The man was worse than a cad.

Aiden's gaze met hers, his dark eyes unreadable as he stepped up next to her. "Violet."

That was hardly an answer.

But she had that feeling of sick dread again. The one that told her that her brother might not be in support of this match. She wished she'd had an opportunity to ask him. He'd arrived home shortly before they were scheduled to leave for the ball. On the short ride over he'd been full of a harrowing tale where one of the dams in the country property burst and he'd spent the better part of the last two days attempting to fix it. She couldn't find the right time to bring it up.

She'd wished she'd gone with him, but he'd left in the dark of the night to return to their property, and now he looked exhausted from the work.

She turned back to see him quietly speaking to a friend, dark circles under his eyes.

Carl worked so hard...

"You didn't answer my question."

He grimaced then, a frown pulling at the corners of his mouth. “There is no scenario where Beasley and I were ever compatriots. Of that, I can assure you.”

She let out a deep breath, relief making her shoulders sag. “That’s good. He’s...” She struggled to find the correct word.

“A fool to even speak with me on the subject.” And then Aiden offered his elbow. “Let’s walk, shall we?”

She slipped her hand into his arm and he started them around the ballroom. But the moment they reached the doors to the large terrace, he stepped outside, pulling her with him. While several people milled about in the cooler night air, she still breathed a sigh of relief to be out in the quiet night.

They made their way to the edge of the terrace where it was even darker and shadowed.

And as the crowd milled, Aiden placed a hand at her back and slipped further into the dark, behind a bush.

Amazingly, no one seemed to notice. “How did you...”

“It doesn’t matter,” he answered as he pulled her close. “But I need you to know that I will make certain that not only does Beasley never come near you again, he pays for what he did the other night.

Had she been irritated? Worried? “Aiden,” she said, softening against him. “No harm was done.”

His hand spread out on the small of her back, his face dropping close. “I have every reason to believe harm was intended.” His other hand slipped under her chin as she tilted up her face to his.

“It doesn’t matter now. You were there and all is well.”

And then his lips brushed against hers. “True. But your safety is the duty of the men around you, and I need you to know that I take that very seriously.”

Her heart gave an extra throb in her chest even as his lips kissed hers. Her eyes fluttered closed as he kissed her again, a bit firmer with a deeper press.

She thread her arms about his neck, leaning against him as he kissed her over and over until finally he slanted her lips open, his tongue running along the bottom seam of her lips.

The sensation that burned through her stole the air from her lungs even as he repeated the touch, probing a bit deeper into her mouth.

And then, his tongue touched hers, tingles moving straight to the part of her that had been aching for days.

She moaned into his mouth and he backed up the tiniest bit. “Shhhh,” he whispered then leaned close to her ear. “We don’t want to be discovered.”

She drew in a sharp breath even as he planted a soft kiss on her neck just under her ear. Even that bit of skin was beyond sensitive, and she had to bite her lip to keep from moaning again.

His hand slid around to her waist, and then up her bodice. Everywhere he touched ached for more until he reached her breast.

And as he cupped the globe of flesh, he flicked his thumb over her nipple, causing her to give a soft cry of pleasure.

“Shhh,” he said again even as he repeated the touch. Her dress fell off the shoulder, revealing a good portion of skin but he managed to push it down further as he kissed a trail over her chest to the top of her breasts.

How she wished she wasn't wearing a corset. Every fiber of her being wanted him to explore lower. To bring his mouth to her aching nipple.

But instead, he eased back. "Violet," he said hot against her ear. "Soon enough..."

Soon enough? Was that a promise? "Please," she said, not even knowing what exactly she asked for. More touches? More words?

He chuckled against her earlobe, his lips drawing the flesh between them. "I know. I ache too."

Did he? She unwound an arm from around his neck and started an exploration of her own. Over the breadth of his shoulders, down his chest, along his stomach and then lower...

His hand came over hers just as she passed by the top of his trousers. "We can't. Not here."

She dug her fingertips into his lower abdomen. He was right. She knew it and yet...she didn't want this touching to end.

The swell of music from the ballroom faded away, the noise of the crowd growing stronger.

Aiden held her close still but his gaze scanned the terrace and ballroom beyond. "We should return before we're missed."

She nodded, knowing full well that what she would miss most was his intimate touch.

As they reentered the ballroom, slipping into the crowd, she winced at the stuffy air, her ears and nose assaulted by the noise and stench.

Aiden skirted them around the edge, finding her brother where she'd left him, only now he spoke with two men rather than just one.

He smiled when he saw them, waving them over.

Violet let out a long exhale of relief that her brother hadn't noticed their absence or didn't think anything of it.

Aiden led her over, her hand slipping from his arm as she joined her brother's side.

The two men, both handsome, gave her a long stare as a blush rose in her cheeks.

"Lord Mason, Lord Elms, this is my sister, Miss Violet Stanford."

"Pleasure," Lord Mason said, his gaze lingering as it travelled down her frame.

"Lord Mason," she said with a small curtsy. "Lord Elms."

"Miss Violet," Lord Elms rumbled as he looked back at her. He was wickedly handsome with blond hair and light eyes.

Aiden cleared his throat next to her.

Her brother's gaze flicked to Aiden. "And this is the man I was telling you about. My very old friend, Lord Evermore."

Both men turned to Aiden, seeming to forget all about her as they exchanged greetings.

"Lord Evermore," Lord Mason dipped his head closer. "If you've time, we'd like a private word."

Aiden gave a stiff nod. "Of course." And then the two men turned, Aiden falling in step behind them. It pained her to see him go. Perhaps it was what they'd just done in the garden or

the fact he was walking away without a word or even a backward glance.

“Lord Evermore?” she asked, calling out to him in time that he turned back to her.

“Yes?”

But she didn't know that to say. She couldn't ask for a dance or even request that he return to her side without appearing too forward. With a sigh she said, “Thank you for the turn about the ballroom. It was refreshing.”

He gave her a quick nod and then followed the other men disappearing into the crowd.

“I'm glad we have a moment alone,” her brother said as he turned to her.

She watched the spot where Aiden had disappeared for another moment before she turned to her brother. “Why is that?”

“We need to talk.”

“About?”

“Lord Evermore.”

Her insides dropped again. “Who were those men?”

“They were perspective members of his club.”

Her brow furrowed. First Beasley and then those two. All of them had been a bit... “Why do I not like any perspective members of his club?”

Her brother's jaw worked for a moment before he answered. “You've always been perceptive.”

“Be that as it may, feel free to explain in greater detail.”

His mouth twisted. “It’s not a regular gentleman’s club...”

Her throat closed as an unexplained panic began to flutter in her belly. “What sort of club is it?”

“It’s a club for rakes,” her brother replied with a grimace.

For a moment the world darkened. Evermore was a rake. Her throat went dry as she began to count the number of liberties she’d allowed him. She had assumed he was planning to court but what if...what if he was just using his rakish charm to take advantage?

“You allowed me time with a rake?”

Her brother’s brow furrowed. “It was one ride in the park where you stayed in the eye of society.”

That was what she was supposed to have done. Suddenly, her brother’s suggestion of a footman made a great deal more sense. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Those two men wish to join Evermore’s club. If he accepts, I doubt we’ll see much of him again.”

Her heart cracked. Her affection had been growing while he might choose a club over her? “Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

Her brother sighed. “I can’t tell if he’s ready to reform or not. Sometimes I think he is, and others...” He looked down at her with a wince. “I can tell you are developing feelings for him. I thought to test him now before your relationship developed much further.”

All her brother’s behavior suddenly made sense. He wanted his friend to reform. Might even support Evermore’s courtship provided that the man actually wished to give up his old ways.



And now he'd devised a test to see how serious Evermore was. And all of that might be fine except for one important detail.

Violet had already fallen in love.

"Carl," she whispered, her voice trembling. "I think I should like to go home."

"Home?" Carl asked, his voice taking on an exasperated note. "But you love parties and balls, and I rode all of the afternoon to be here to take you."

Her brother was wonderfully kind, but honestly, did the man never think to ask her what she might wish? "Carl, I love you. And I love all of your attempts to make me happy. You are the best brother, but..."

"But what?"

"I far prefer the country." The words fell from her lips before she could hold them in. "And I want to make a strong match that will serve you and myself well so I will continue to attend these social functions, but I do not love balls or parties."

He looked thunderstruck as he stared at her. "I go for your benefit and you for mine?"

That made her smile a bit. "I'm afraid so."

He shook his head, his brow puckered into a frown. "Perhaps we should begin talking a bit more."

That made her smile despite the dread firmly lodged in her chest. "I think so. But I don't know if I can stand here and wait to see if Lord Evermore returns or if he decides the men he met tonight are far more interesting than me."

Her brother winced. "Oh. I didn't think of that. That would be terribly painful."

“Yes,” she answered. “Which is why I think we ought to leave.”

But her brother’s gaze looked into the entry. “I’ve got a better idea.”

She blinked in surprise. “What?”

“Come on,” he said, starting toward the doors. “I’ll show you.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

EVERMORE SAT in the club chair, a cigar dangling from his fingers as he set the glass of whisky on the table to his left. He didn't care for the burning liquor tonight. He'd much rather remember every touch with Violet later when he held her in his arms for their dance.

She'd turned to molten lava in his arms this evening. The passion between them so bright, it turned his blood to fire.

But she was so sweet too. Kind and thoughtful.

He was a lucky man.

And he'd been pulled away from the woman he meant to woo by the two jesters before him.

Fine.

They were perfectly pleasant men. He'd guess they were handsome, he could never really tell, and they both were well-mannered enough.

Thus far, they'd discussed the weather, and the news of London, which meant they had enough grace to make polite conversation before asking what they wished for.

Which he was certain, was entrance into his club.

He frowned.

The club had been existence for a long time. And its mission was sound. And perhaps, it had served its function of reforming rakes too well. He'd been reformed before he could start the next generation of wicked earls.

Shame.

But there it was. The club was dying. Perhaps the new order no longer needed the likes of the Wicked Earls' Club.

But he was exactly like Beverly. He'd turned some corner thanks to Violet, and he couldn't go back.

She was his future.

The idea of partaking in the club left him hollow.

"So," Mason asked, shifting in his seat. "I hear that you have a rather interesting club."

He grimaced. Had. He'd had an interesting club. How did he explain? "Our numbers have dwindled greatly of late."

"We might be able to help with that," Elms answered, running a hand through his light hair. "If all that Beverly said was true, we could be just the men you're looking for."

How odd that Beverly was both allowing him time with his sister while pushing the club for him.

He sat forward as he cocked his head to the side. "What did Beverly say precisely?"

"That you needed new members of a club for men with certain tastes..." Mason wiggled his brows.

"Did he?" Was Beverly trying to keep him away from his sister? Was that his game? "He encouraged you to seek me out for the club?"

"He said that you came to him looking for members."

Evermore's grimace turned into a scowl. He had. Did he tell these men he'd had a change of heart? Did he groom them to take over the club? That would be months of work, and meanwhile, the other issues stood.

It was getting harder to hide their activities.

He ran a hand through his hair even as Elms held up his hands. "We're aware the club has traditionally been a place for earls. But we feel we bring the right zeal for the activities in which you partake."

"Mason gave a salacious laugh. "I for one can drink, game, and whore with the best of them."

A noise in the hall caught his attention. What had that been?

"What do you say?" Elms asked.

He stood. "I need to think on it all, gentleman, but truly, I must be honest that I don't think it's going to work. The world is no longer meant for clubs of that kind."

The men stood too, their faces set in matching frowns. "Then why did Beverly approach us at all?"

Evermore had already turned toward the door as he answered. "I shall ask him myself."

And then he left the room and turned into the hall. Just as he made his way out of the door, he saw the disappearing skirts of a woman as she made her way around the corner to the back stairs.

Who was that?

But his gut already told him that it was Violet? Had Beverly brought her up? His stomach dropped.

He needed some answers.

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VIOLET CHOKED BACK A FEW TEARS. “That was your plan?” she asked her brother.

He winced. “I didn’t intend for us to eavesdrop. I just...”

“What?” she asked, stopping on the stairs. “What was your plan then?”

She looked up at him, truly wondering. “I thought we’d catch them on the way out the door and we’d know from his face what his decision had been.”

Of course her brother didn’t know that she’d allowed Aiden liberties. Nor did he understand the depth of her feelings. “Carl. Did it occur to you that it might be a very painful moment to see his rejection as I stood there in a crowd of four men?”

He dropped his chin. “I’m sorry. That was callous, wasn’t it? I just didn’t wish for you to suffer in the waiting. I’d devised the test after all. I didn’t want to do harm to you.”

She shook her head. “Next time, please tell me up front.”

“I will.” But then he cocked his brow. “And you’ll be more honest with me as well?”

She shook her head. They’d both kept things from the other to try and spare the other’s feelings, hadn’t they?

But Carl’s heart wasn’t about to be broken.

Her eyes closed. “He’s going to restart his club, isn’t he?”

She opened her eyes to see the pained look on her brother’s face. Tears sprang to her eyes.

“I’m not, actually.” Came a voice from the top of the stairs.

She spun about, seeing Aiden standing above them. “You’re not?” it came out as a strangled cry of relief.

But she’d hardly had time to do more before he’d made his way down the six steps and was on the step just above her. “I’m not.”

And then he reached for her hand.

“May I ask why?” her brother rumbled from next to her.

“Someday, I shall be very angry with you,” Aiden answered to her brother. “But not today. Because today, you made me realize exactly where my priorities lie.”

“My intention all along,” her brother murmured with a wink.

“Well, I, for one, would like to know exactly what those are,” she allowed too much without a promise and she’d not do so again. But even still, hope was blooming inside her, making her feel lighter with each passing moment.

He took her hand, bringing her fingers to his lips. “My priority is you, my love. And making you my wife.” Then he looked at her brother. “Provided you agree.”

Her brother paused for a moment before he gave a large smile. “I do. I think you’d make a fine pair.”

“Really?” Violet asked, her heart leaping into her throat. “You mean it?”

“I do,” he said, his gaze holding hers for several moments before he looked at Carl. “May I come tomorrow morning to discuss the terms?”

“You may,” he answered, taking a step down the stairs and leaving her side so that Aiden could take his place. “But for tonight, I suggest we return home and have a quiet drink in celebration. I’ve been made aware that my sister is not all that fond of these outings.”

A laugh bubbled from between her lips. Was this really happening? Just moments before, she’d thought she’d lost him forever.

“Truly,” she whispered. “You wish to wed?”

“I do,” he said again. “Do you?”

She gave a stiff nod. “Of course. I would not have allowed...” But then she tapered off, looking at her brother’s back as he moved further away, giving them a bit of privacy.

He winced. “I didn’t intend to act rakishly. Reform shall take me a bit. But I do have the best of intentions when it comes to you, my love. You have captured my heart. I promise you that.”

Emotion overwhelmed her as she looked up into his dark eyes. “And you mine. I love you, Aiden.”

“And I you,” he said as he placed a tiny kiss on her lips. “Now, let’s go before your brother decides not to support my suit.”

She gave him a smile even as he placed an arm about her waist. “You really are set on reform if you’re concerned about that.”

“For you, anything,” he answered with a grin as they followed several feet behind Carl.

She could hardly believe how this night was ending. She’d gotten her fondest wish: a husband who would make her and



her brother happy. What more could she ask for?

## EPILOGUE

EVERMORE'S new wife sat firmly in his lap, which was exactly where Violet belonged. He kissed her again, her body pressed to his in the most wonderful way. He slid his hand up her side, tracing the curve of her waist as their breath mingled. Pulling back just a bit, he looked up into her eyes, wishing to remember this moment for the rest of their lives.

“We did it.”

“We did,” she answered with a smile as her finger traced his bottom lip. “The ceremony was so lovely.”

He held her closer still. Her brother and a few close friends had been in attendance as they'd said their vows. They were on their way to the wedding breakfast and then on to his country estate where her brother would join them in a few weeks' time.

The carriage rolled to a stop even as he kissed her again.

She allowed him a few more kisses before she pulled away. “Should we go inside?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I think I should prefer to remain in the carriage.”

She swatted at his arm. “You don't mean that.”

He did, actually. But that was another point. “We’re not at your brother’s home. Not yet. We’ve made a stop on the way.”

“Where?” she asked, sliding from his lap as she parted the curtain to look out the window, her brow crinkling in confusion.

“This,” he said as he ran a hand down her arm, “is the Wicked Earls’ Club.”

She looked back at him, her eyes wide before she turned back to the building. “Why are we here?”

He glanced out too at the familiar red-paneled door, the gold W nailed into the wooden slats. “Our wedding marks a beginning and an end.”

The curtain fell from her fingers as she spun back to him. “Oh, of course!”

She grasped her hands in his. “Are you grieving the loss?”

He shook his head. “I’ve never been happier, my love.” He took her hands in his. “But I thought we’d take down the W together.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re taking it down?”

He nodded. “I’m turning the building into an orphanage for abandoned children. I think it best we remove the evidence of the building’s past.”

She gave a quick nod as he maneuvered to the door of the carriage, stepping out and then helping her down.

Together, they made their way up the steps. Gently, he pulled the W from the nail it hung upon, handing it to Violet. “It’s made of gold.”

“It is not,” she said with a gasp. “What will you do with it?”

“I shall sell it and use the money to renovate the inside for the children.”

Violet shook her head. “My love, how much you’ve reformed.”

He gave a laugh then as he pulled her close. “Not too much, my wife. There are some parts to marriage this former rake is greatly looking forward to.”

She laughed with him, her voice taking on a husky note. “You must show me.”

That was all he needed to hear as he swept her into his arms, and started back for the carriage. “With pleasure.”

He hardly looked back at the club as he carried his new wife into the vehicle and planted her firmly back in his lap.

The chapter that was the Wicked Earls had closed. And while Evermore would miss that part of his life, as would all the men that came before him, the future with his new bride awaited him.

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*Hugs!*

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Her Wicked White

Her Wanton White

His Wallflower White

Her Willful White

Her Wanton White

His White Wager

Her White Wedding

### **Lords of Scandal**

Duke of Daring

Marquess of Malice

Earl of Exile

Viscount of Vice

Baron of Bad

Earl of Sin

Earl of Gold

Earl of Baxter

Duke of Decandence

Marquess of Menace

Duke of Dishonor

Baron of Blasphemy

Viscount of Vanity

Earl of Infamy

Laird of Longing

### **The Dark Duke's Legacy**

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## A NOTE TO READERS:

Dearest readers,

When I began the Wicked Earls' Club five years ago, I never imagined being here! Over 30 novellas, 13 authors, and 5 years of debauchurous fun!

I was a new author with an idea and no idea what I was in store for starting a multi-author world but somehow, it's all come together to be the project of a lifetime.

Thank you so much for supporting us. It has been a joy to write these books for you. And for me, the Wicked Earls has seen me grow from that new author into a seasoned veteran. I couldn't have done it without you and I just want to say thank you one more time.

This is a wrap on the Wicked Earls. But stay tuned... I can never sit still for long and naughty lords are my favorite diversion!

All my best,

Tammy Andresen