



WICKED EARLS' RETURN COLLECTION

TAMMY ANDRESEN - ANNABELLE ANDERS

MADLINE MARTIN - AMANDA MARIEL

AILEEN FISH - MAGGIE DALLEN

KATHERINE ANN MADISON - ANNA ST. CLAIRE

MEARA PLATT - LAUREN SMITH

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WICKED EARLS' CLUB BOXED SET

TAMMY ANDRESEN   ANNABELLE ANDERS   MADELINE MARTIN  
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WICKED EARLS FOREVER

COORDINATED BY TAMMY ANDRESEN

Before we begin...

I don't know how many readers are aware, but I am the creator of the Wicked Earls Club. I wanted a group project that was special... and I have found it in this group with an amazing set of authors who joined me!!

The stories that follow in this set are all the previously published books in the third round of the Wicked Earls' Club.

But in January of 2024 we will be putting out 10 brand new stories in the Wicked Earls' Club. This book will be titled Wicked Earls Forever and will be available as a boxed set on major retailers.

The very first book in the new round of books is called, The Earl of Evermore and you can find a sneak peak of Evermore in the back of this book!!!

# EARL OF BAXTER

BY TAMMY ANDRESEN

## PROLOGUE

*JULY, 1815*

*WAR WAS GLORIOUS*, Mason thought as he lay in the dank basement of some seaside church on the very edge of death. They didn't tell soldiers that, of course. That they were about to die. No, they told them that they were nearly better, would recover any day now.

He was too sick to tell them they needn't lie. He was prepared for death. He'd welcome it, in fact. Hell, he'd pushed so hard on the front because—and this wasn't something a man ever said aloud—he'd wanted to die.

If he were honest, he should never have lived. Hadn't his father told him that over and over on the rare occasions in which he bothered to visit his bastard son? "You shouldn't have survived. Should have died with your mother."

Mason shook his head. He'd done his absolute best to make his father's wish come true.

"There now," a soft feminine voice crooned close to his ear. "No need to fret, you'll be all right."

"I won't," he answered, raising a heavy hand and swiping at his eyes. When he dropped his hand, he blinked open his scratchy eyelids to look at the woman who had such a sweet voice.

No, not a woman. A girl. A *child*.

The girl tilted her head to the side and sunshine from a window above cast her in a holy light. His breath caught. He hadn't thought himself capable of such a movement. His lungs expanded with the breath, drawing a deep gush of air—leading him to wonder if he'd died already and this was, in fact, heaven.

The child had a halo of blonde hair, twisted back from her face with just a few soft tendrils falling about her cheeks, highlighting her large blue eyes and the soft pink tint that flushed her skin. She looked just like the cherubic angels he'd seen in paintings in his father's house, the one time he'd been allowed to visit.

"You're beautiful," he murmured, drawing in another long breath. He tried to raise his hand again and touch her face, but his arm wouldn't work.

"Thank you." She smiled at him, the look indulgent and amused. "But you're a bit old for me."

He might have laughed, if he could get the sound out. He hadn't meant it like that. She was clearly only a child, but she had the sort of beauty that was so rare in his world. Maybe it wasn't beauty at all, but innocence. Whatever it was, she seemed to glow with it, as though she truly was of another world. "How old are you?"

"I'm twelve." She took a wet rag and wiped down his face with a gentle touch, light as her soft fingers brushed back his hair to make way for the damp cloth. "How old are you?"

"That is young," he answered, closing his eyes again. This time in pleasure. It would be nice to die with such a tender hand at his face. "I'm one and twenty."

"One and twenty?" she said, patting the cloth to his temple and helping to ease the fierce throbbing in his skull. "You're young too. At least, that is, far too young to die."

He shook his head. "I watched men far younger lose their lives," he said to himself, then wondered if he should have shared such darkness with someone so young.



She ceased bathing him. The words were on the tip of his tongue to ask her to begin again, but then the soft bristles of a brush touched his hair and he nearly groaned aloud, the brush felt so good on his scalp. She was exquisitely gentle, and his fever-ravaged body reveled in the touch.

She sighed in answer. "I'm sure you did. I've had to watch that too, I'm afraid. You and I, we don't get the luxury of naiveté, do we?"

He wished he could cry out in protest. He was a man, after all. The world was meant to be hard on him. But she, she was still just a girl. Her blue eyes should dance with delight, not death. "It isn't fair." His fists clenched in the sheet at his side and some measure of strength returned to his body. It was as though she were breathing life into him. "A girl as innocent as you should not have to see the darkness of the world."

She shushed him with a soft pat and a gentle stroke on his arm. "That's very kind." Then her fingers stilled, her grip tightening in his arm. "But death isn't the worst this world brings. I know that for certain."

A wave of anger washed over him. "What's happened to you that makes you say such things?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter now."

"Tell me," he gritted out. Somehow. It was important to know.

She shrugged. "My father wasn't a good man."

Dear lord. He knew about bad fathers. He'd suffered at the hands of a father who'd been callously cruel. But somehow, this girl seemed even more vulnerable. "Why not?"

She shook her head. "He gambled away every shilling we had. The money from his family, my mother's money. Even the money she left me. He told me he'd replace it but..." She trailed off, clasping her hands in her lap. "Then he took his own life. The priest here says he'll go to Hell for it."

Her voice shook, and he tried to lift his fingers once again and stroke her face. He almost succeeded.

“My father will join him. Perhaps they’ll be friends.”

She shook her head, her eyes growing wide with a fear he didn’t understand. “Do you ever worry that you’ll go there too?”

He narrowed his gaze, lifting his head. “You are an angel. Hell is not the place you’ll go.”

“I might,” she whispered. She’d stopped grooming him and her small fingers slipped into his larger hands. “I have to leave this place. But the things I’ve done. The things I am going to do...” She shivered. “God forgive me.”

He wanted to ask her what she planned. What terrible sins she’d committed that had her so worried. More than that, he wished to assure her that she needn’t worry. Of course, God would forgive her. She was a helpless child just trying to—

“Clarissa,” a voice boomed across the basement. Her hand dropped from his and she scrambled to her feet. Only then did he realize she’d been sitting on a narrow strip of cot, her hip pressed to his. He felt cold without her heat.

“Yes, Father?”

For a moment, his thoughts jumbled. His father, here? The voice of the other man had reminded him of his own patriarch. Cold and cruel. But that was nonsense. How could the duke have come here? He realized he’d used what little energy he’d had talking with this girl.

But he pushed his eyes open again. Fear for Clarissa washed through his body and he started to sit up too, but a small hand pushed him back down.

“What have I told you about sitting idle?” The angry voice drew closer.

“It’s the devil’s work,” Clarissa answered. She folded her hands in front of her and bowed her head.

“That’s right.” Footsteps approached as robes swished. “If I catch you being idle again, it’s the switch for you.”

“But he needed attending,” she said, her voice rising as an edge of defiance crept in.

Mason watched as her chin tilted up and her folded hands curled with tension. The air whistled and then a crack rang out. He opened his eyes, shocked. Clarissa hadn't made a sound, but she'd tucked her hands behind her back, and he could clearly see a red welt forming across her ivory skin.

His body jerked on the cot as rage welled inside him. His little angel was being punished for those brief moments of comfort she'd given him? The injustice made him want to scream a battle cry. But his body refused to cooperate.

And then she lightly touched his fingers again. Looking down, past her simple dress of serviceable fabric, he noted that her feet were bare.

The priest must have seen it too because he demanded, "Where are your shoes?"

She dropped into a curtsy. "I shall get them."

The other man's lip curled. "What have I told you about not wearing them?"

He felt her slight tremble. "That only harlots and—"

"Enough," Mason's voice ripped from his chest. "That is enough." Something deep inside him stirred. He had to live. This little angel needed protecting and there didn't seem to be anyone else to do it.

"Mind your business, Captain, or you'll have to find another place to recover. The gutter would suffice."

His little angel was already backing away. "No need, Father. I'll get them on right now." And then she scurried away.

Mason stared at the priest, who watched Clarissa's retreat, his back stiff and straight, his expression unyielding. He made a promise to himself, right then and there to get better. She needed him. Clarissa. And he would rescue her if it was the last thing he did.

# CHAPTER ONE

*DECEMBER 1821*

MASON SAT IN THE PLUSH, upholstered chair, waiting for his half-brother to join him in one of the many sitting rooms in the Mayfair estate that the Duke of Devonhall called home. His father had died six years ago.

The Demon Duke was what society had called him. Of course, Mason hadn't known that until later. But his heir, and Mason's half-brother, had taken over the title upon their father's death. And then the new duke had promptly tracked down the brother he'd never known. He'd found Mason slowly recovering in the basement of a church in Dover where he'd been dumped by the British army to recover or die.

The new Duke of Devonhall had swept his brother away but not before Mason had begged the man to find a girl. A little blonde with eyes the color of the sea on a sunny day.

Bash had raised a brow. "Girl? How old? Please tell me you don't fancy her?"

Mason had spit on the dirty floor. He'd never sully thoughts of her with such base feelings. "It's not like that. She saved my life and hers is beyond wretched. One good favor deserves another."

Bash had tried to find her. But by then, the priest swore that some lady had taken his little angel away. Given her a

home, Father Byron claimed. Mason had had his doubts, but little proof.

Still, when the Prince Regent had awarded Mason a title for valor on the battlefield—he had a feeling Bash was behind that honor—Mason had used his newfound power as the Earl of Baxter to see that the priest was sent to the furthest reaches of a Scottish island in a hamlet with a flock so small, there was little chance the man could do more damage.

He'd have liked to kill the man, but then again, his father was surely in Hell and while Mason suspected he'd join him, killing a priest seemed like a golden ticket straight below. He'd often debated if a bad priest still counted but, in the end, he'd settled for the man living his life in near isolation.

Of course, Mason hadn't been able to resist telling Father Byron exactly why he was being sent to an island in the middle of nowhere. The priest had attempted to hurt an angel and a man had to pay for his crimes.

Bash swept into the room in his usual fashion. His brother radiated confidence and power. "Did you close the deal? I need that club. The Den of Sins will be mine."

Mason looked up at his brother. Bash's infatuation with this particular gaming hell was a mystery to Mason, but he generally didn't ask his brother why he wanted things. Bash was a harder-looking man, his features more prominent and more aristocratic than Mason's. They shared the same dark hair and penetrating eyes, both well over six feet as their father had been. But Mason's features were more classically handsome. His father had told him once, in a sneer, that he looked far too much like his mother to ever be accepted in society. "No aristocrat is that pretty."

Perhaps his father had been correct. But with Bash's help, society had accepted him nonetheless. Well, for the most part. "I closed it."

Bash gave him a salacious grin and sat across from him. "You are prolific. No one has your negotiating skills, you charming devil, you." He laughed then, a hand at his stomach.

“So the Earl of Gold accepted your offer to be a partner in a secret gaming hell. I’ll be damned.”

Mason’s fist clenched. “Let’s not use nicknames, shall we. They’re tawdry.”

Bash scrunched one eyebrow as he gave Mason a sideways glance. “You don’t like yours, I take it, Earl of Bastards? I personally think it has a nice ring to it.”

Mason frowned. “Your nickname, Duke of Decadence, has a ring. A bastard is just what I am.”

Bash scowled, sitting forward in his chair. “That’s not true. Not anymore. You’re an earl now.”

Mason gave his brother a practiced smile. It was light and airy and meant to hide the turmoil that was always close to the surface. “True.” He needn’t discuss the particulars of being raised a bastard. The truth was, Bash had suffered nearly as much being the legitimate son. A cruel man was cruel to everyone.

Besides, their terrible father wasn’t what he wished to discuss. Nor was the deal with Goldthwaite.

Funny, he’d spent the last six years building an actual life. Gaining favor among the *ton*, placing himself in a position of power.

It had been to thumb his nose at his father, of course. The man had wished for his unwanted son to die under some Frenchman’s boot. He’d almost succeeded in convincing Mason that it would be best for everyone. That was until he’d met Clarissa. Rather than die, Mason had become one of the most powerful earls in all of England.

But everything had changed today.

“I found her,” Mason said, his hands spreading out on his thighs.

Bash fell back in his chair, his brow furrowing in confusion. “Who?”

“Clarissa.” He smacked one of his palms on his knee. “After all these years, I finally met her again.”

Surprise widened Bash's eyes. "No. How?" He scrubbed his jaw. "I thought you'd dreamed her or imagined her. A fevered delusion or something."

Mason smiled at that. There were times he'd wondered himself. But last night, he'd seen his angel again. Flesh and blood and no longer a girl but a woman. "She looks just as beautiful," he murmured as much to himself as to Bash. Honestly, she was even more gorgeous now. Then she'd been a child, but yesterday, a woman had stood in her place. Tall and fair, and lovely beyond his wildest imaginings.

"Where?" Bash asked, leaning forward once again, resting his elbows on his knees.

That was the tricky part. "She is living with the Earl of Goldthwaite." When he'd left her, she'd been an orphan in Dover. She was the last person he'd expected to meet while negotiating the sale of a gaming hell, the Den of Sins.

Bash's hands slapped against his thighs. "I know you are aware that we need the Earl of Goldthwaite to make our new club a success. Not all of us are the new leader of exclusive clubs like you are. Goldthwaite is pivotal to our plan."

Mason snorted. It was true that he'd become the proud head member of the Wicked Earls' Club. His job was now to facilitate activities for the other earls who were part of the secret club. But sincerely, he'd only taken the position as a way to gain power.

He'd agreed to help finance the Den of Sins for the same reason. With gold came influence.

But long before he'd decided to spit on his father's grave by being one of the most powerful men in England, he'd made a promise to a girl who'd saved his life. "I won't upset Goldthwaite." Probably. Maybe. Well, who knew, really?

But his goals no longer aligned with his brother's. Clarissa was far more important than anything else.

One thing was for certain, he needed to see Clarissa again. And he knew when he'd see her again. In two days' time, the

Earl of Goldthwaite was to marry Clarissa's friend, Penny, and he was invited to the wedding.

This would be his chance to find out if she really was his little angel. And if she was, he needed to know what had happened to her and how he could help.

---

CLARISSA SHIFTED in her pew at the front of the church, attempting to ignore several factors.

The first was that she'd not stepped foot into a house of God since she'd left the *care* of Father Thomas Byron six years prior. Penny's wedding had been the only reason she'd returned to one. She'd never miss her best friend and savior's marriage even if the devil himself rose up through the floor.

She was just a bit afraid he might.

Memories of her brief time at Byron's parish sent shivers through her body, and she wrapped her arms about her middle. He'd been a cold, cruel man and Clarissa still remembered every line of his face. Even worse, she could still hear the swish of his switch.

But fortunately for her, Penny had found her and swept her away, taking Clarissa to her dilapidated house in the East End of London. It hadn't been much, but it had been a home. At last, she'd been treated with love and respect. And Clarissa was forever grateful.

If Penny, barely eighteen at the time, hadn't taken Clarissa under her wing, there was no telling what might have happened to her. Clarissa bit her lower lip. Best not to think about bad things anymore.

She looked up at her friend as Penny held the Earl of Goldthwaite's hands in her own. Penny had taught her so much about the sort of person she wanted to be.

Penny cared for others. Always.

That's what Clarissa would do with her life too.



Clarissa was good at it. That helped. She never minded kissing away a hurt on a child's knee or holding a little one after they woke from a bad dream. In fact, she'd considered becoming a nurse. She'd cared for soldiers who'd been wounded at the church and she'd loved making them comfortable when they had so little relief from their injuries.

Clarissa didn't want a life filled with pursuit of personal pleasure. In fact, in her mind, they led to a person's ruin. Just like her father. She still worried that her father's secrets might taint her life. Would people donate to her cause if they discovered what her father had done? Or worse, what she had?

No. It was better to stay far away from material goods. She'd keep herself distanced from the sin in this world and focus on helping people. She thought back to one soldier in particular. A captain who'd been on death's door. Even as ill as he'd been, Clarissa could tell he was handsome.

And he'd tried to help her when Father Byron had been in one of his moods. She wondered if that man had recovered after all. And she still dreamed of the silky feel of his hair under her hand.

Which led her to the third very distracting thing currently in the church.

Two nights ago, she'd met a man at the Earl of Goldthwaite's home. The Earl of Baxter. Something in his eyes had reminded her of the soldier she'd cared for all those years ago.

It wasn't him, of course. Earls did not get sent to the basements of churches to recover. But just when she'd thought she'd ceased thinking about her soldier, something always brought his memory back.

When she was younger, she'd dreamed of marrying him. He'd find her again, sweep her off her feet, tell her he'd always loved her, and carry her away to her destiny. But that sort of dream was for little girls. She was a woman now and she had other children who depended on her. And her own demons to battle.

As if to remind her of that fact, Natty pulled on her hand. She was the youngest orphan in Penny's care and Clarissa shifted the girl onto her lap, brushing a kiss on the top of Natty's head. These little girls were the reason she'd never marry. Well, that wasn't exactly true. These girls would live with Penny and Logan. But there were others out there. Who lived in places worse than the church she'd been sent to.

She'd run one of Penny's orphanages and take care of children in need. And then she'd be far away from the temptations of this world.

But a gaze had been on her the entire ceremony and the intensity made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

Turning, she met the dark gaze of the Earl of Baxter. He sat two rows back, directly behind her seat.

He was a guest at the wedding and his eyes had been burning holes in her back since she'd arrived.

Dark and stormy, his expression caught and held hers, almost hypnotic in his stare.

She drew in a gasp, trying to understand his intensity even as that feeling overwhelmed her again. She knew those eyes. She was sure of it.

She shook her head. That was impossible.

She likely just imagined the resemblance. She'd only seen her captain's eyes open the one time, a lifetime ago. How could she even remember them? Would he remember her if he were the man she's nursed. Surely not. A man like him probably had a busy life, filled with obligations. He'd never waste his time musing about a child from the past.

She forced herself to turn back again and pay attention to the wedding.

"Clarissa?" Natty plucked at her sleeve. "Who's that man?"

"What man?" she asked, pulling the child a bit closer.

"The one who won't stop looking at you. Who is he?" Natty's little face was now trained over her shoulder. "I don't

like him.”

Clarissa smiled. “A woman of strong conviction.” She brushed back Natty’s hair. “He is Logan’s friend. So that makes him our friend.”

Natty drew her brow together. “He doesn’t look friendly to me.”

Clarissa pressed her lips together as she held back a chuckle to keep from encouraging the child. It was just that Natty had a way of saying the absolute truth in the most honest way possible. “You should not judge people on looks.”

“Really? I saw a bunch of dirty men by our old house and they turned out to be mean.”

Clarissa shook her head. The child had a point. “All right, fine. Then Lord Baxter might not look friendly, but he doesn’t look mean either.” He looked...intense. Unsettling. Powerful. Handsome. Interesting.

Natty turned back over Clarissa’s shoulder and stuck out her tongue.

“Natty,” Clarissa bit out. “That is enough.”

“He looks like a wolf who wants to eat you. Like in that story.”

At that moment, the priest loudly announced. “May I present Lord and Lady Goldthwaite.”

The small gathering broke out in applause and Natty forgot all about the wolf, as she’d called Baxter, but Clarissa was still aware of his eyes on her back. She made herself continue to sit straight ahead but it was only by sheer force of will.

Why was Baxter looking at her with such intensity? Was he a predator as Natty had suggested?

Finally, she stole a single glance back again, her eyes clashing with the dark pools of his. “I’m not a wolf,” he murmured.

“What?” she said as she stood from her seat and then began to exit the pew to follow the bride and groom outside.

“I’m not the wolf.” He stepped out next to her, his body even larger than she’d imagined as he kept pace with her. “I’m the huntsman.”

Her breath caught. Not only did he know the story of which Natty spoke, but he was sure he was the hero and not the villain. “You’ve read *Children’s and Household Tales*?”

A smile pulled at the corners of his lips. He was a handsome man, his jaw strong, his nose straight, and his lips full. But that smile turned him from handsome to devastating. “Of all the questions you might have asked, that’s the one you chose?”

## CHAPTER TWO

CLARISSA STARTED down the aisle and the earl stepped next to her, his hand coming under her elbow. Mason didn't need to touch her. She required no aid, but he couldn't help himself.

It was her.

Same name, same hair, same large blue eyes.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered. In fact, in her dark red dress, she was breathtaking. She actually physically stole the air from his lungs with her beauty. Which caught him completely off guard. He meant to be her protector, her benefactor. But then again, he'd expected to find a girl.

Which was foolish. Six years had passed, of course she'd grown into a woman. He'd just always pictured her as an innocent child.

Which made his gaze drop to the ground. Was that attraction he felt tingling in the tips of his fingers? Bloody hell. This wasn't about his own wants and needs. Finding Clarissa was about helping her. Always had been.

Bash stepped behind them both. He ignored his brother as he focused on the woman next to him.

She gave him a curious look in return as she tactfully pulled her elbow from his grasp. The little one she held stuck out her tongue again. "Tell me. What question should I have asked, then?"

“Is she yours?” He swallowed, looking at the adorable little girl nestled in Clarissa’s arms. He hadn’t even considered that she might have married, started a family, until he’d seen her with the child in her lap. The thought shouldn’t hurt. If she had married, then she was safe and protected. But the possibility of a married Clarissa didn’t stop his chest from tightening.

“What?” Clarissa moved further away from him.

“Clarissa,” the little one asked as her fingers tightened on Clarissa’s arm. “What does he mean?”

“Hush, Natty,” Clarissa said.

The tension knotting his insides loosened. Natty had called her Clarissa. Not mama. How old was his little angel now? She’d been twelve. That would make her eighteen or nineteen now, he’d wager.

She was tall for a woman, thin but shapely. She looked lovely holding a child. He curled his fingers into a tight fist to keep from reaching out and touching her again.

They made their way out into the cold morning, snow swirling down from the sky. Clarissa left his side and headed toward Penny, the two women embracing, even as Clarissa continued to hold Natty in her arms.

“The children are the orphans,” Bash said just behind him. “She and that Penny woman took them in.”

“Of course.” How could he not have realized that? He wasn’t thinking. Seeing her again had muddled his thoughts and dulled his senses. Nor should he be feeling relief at the knowledge that she was still in need of a protector.

He wanted to know her. Hell. He wished to hold her.

He’d also frightened her with his intensity. He took a steadying breath. He was a negotiator, a charmer. That was his skill. But he’d spent the entire ceremony staring at her like a raving beast.

Hell, he was scaring himself. He ran a shaky hand through his hair as he looked at her again. He itched to skim his hand

down her golden hair. What would it look like undone?

“The kid is right.” Bash chuckled. “You look like a wolf ready to eat her alive. You need to relax. Where is my light-handed brother? The best negotiator in all of England?”

“I can’t help it,” he answered without thinking. Then realized what he had revealed. He repeated to himself that this was not a case of attraction. Or, at least, it hadn’t been. And it shouldn’t be now. She was an angel. A person in need of protecting, he should not subject her to his sudden and base feelings of desire. “I’ve been looking for her for the past six years.”

“Is that why you keep travelling back to Dover?” Bash asked, shaking his head.

Mason didn’t bother to answer. Clarissa gave him another sideways glance. The flash of her blue eyes held him captive again.

“So you’ve really searched for her all these years?”

“Yes,” he said through clenched teeth.

“How did she save your life again?” Bash asked.

He let out a sigh. “It’s difficult to explain.”

“Try.”

He gave his brother his best glare. “She gave me water, food, even while I was ravaged with fever. Mopped my brow and she...” He paused, swallowing. “She talked to me. Often. When I thought I was completely alone in this world, her voice...”

“Bloody Christ,” Bash murmured.

But Mason didn’t pay him any mind. Clarissa’s gaze met his again. It was time they had an actual conversation. They’d barely exchanged a few clipped words and he’d searched for too long, worried far too much to allow her to slip through his hands now.

Finding her alone proved harder than Mason anticipated. The crowd kept them apart and she kept moving in whatever

direction he wasn't.

He grunted in frustration as the carriages began to pull up. Clarissa moved to one and began to load the children inside. After she'd put three little girls in the carriage, she climbed in too.

He only had a split second to decide. But as the door began to close, he sidestepped Bash and grabbed the handle, pulling the door wide and entering into the carriage.

It was a good thing he didn't stop to think. Because if he had, he knew what his mind would say. That he was a bloody idiot.

Clarissa sat facing forward with a child on either side, the oldest girl facing back.

He sat down next to the child, pulling the door shut behind him and tapping his cane on the back wall for the driver to start. No turning back now.

The reins snapped and the carriage started to roll.

"What are you doing?" Clarissa gasped.

The girl on the seat next to him jumped up and scurried to the other bench, squeezing herself next to the other girls.

Inwardly, he winced. If he were attempting to woo her into a deal, like he did in business, he would have considered this a very poor start. "We need to talk."

She stared at him, blinking several times. "What is it you wish to say, huntsman?"

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WHAT ON EARTH WAS HAPPENING?

Clarissa stared at the earl across from her. "Clearly you're mad," she said, her heart beating against her ribs. Was it fear? Somehow, she didn't think it was. "Why would you jump in here with everyone watching?" So much for avoiding worldly



sins. Now she'd be considered close to ruin thanks to the Earl of Baxter.

He cocked his head. "Are you married?" Then he winced.

Did he regret the question? Why?

She willed herself to breathe, quieting down the thrumming in her veins. His actions and questions were getting ridiculous and completely inappropriate. "You should know that I have a pocket in my dress."

It was his turn, finally, to look confused. "I beg your pardon?"

"In that pocket is my derringer," she lied, but she'd always been good at the bluff. It's why she'd made a decent thief. And was even better at protecting herself. "Which happens to be pointed directly at your chest." Leaning forward, she gave him a long look. "These girls mean the world to me."

His brow creased. "You do know that I donated a large sum to your orphanage, correct? And that I helped Goldthwaite secure a new home for all of you. A very nice one." He held out his hands in front of him. "I'm here to help you."

His words eased some of her tension. She'd forgotten that he'd been one of their donors. She'd have to talk to Penny. Had they collected enough funds to keep the place running? Perhaps she could stop worrying about her father's secrets and her own misdeeds. Finally. "Thank you?"

He combed his fingers through his hair. "You're welcome."

"You climbed into my carriage to share that?" she asked, still trying to decide what to do. Did she scream and have the driver stop? Did she find out why the earl was here? She still couldn't shake the feeling she knew him.

Without a word, she reached for his cane and plucked it from his hand and then swung it up and tapped on the wall. "Stop," she called, and the carriage immediately drew to a halt.

“I thought you might hit me,” he said, gently pulling his cane from her grasp.

His fingers brushed hers and the strangest tingling of nerves shot all through her body. “It was one possible plan.” She sat back down and slid her hand back in her pocket. “I believe it’s time for you to exit.”

He leaned forward, the intensity of his gaze making her heart race and her blood rush in her veins. “But I have so much more to say.”

“Such as?” she huffed, her chest tightening. He made her nervous, and not just because he’d jumped in her carriage. There was something about him that was...exciting. And familiar. Which was ridiculous. She didn’t know this man. He couldn’t be her captain. And she wouldn’t ask. Any minute now he’d leave the carriage and her life forever. Logan would follow the carriage and the rest of the party would overtake them.

“Did you live in a church in Dover six years ago?”

His voice remained even, though she was dimly aware of his hand tightening on the top of his cane. Her own breath ceased in her throat. A jolt of pure energy shot down her spine.

It was him. Her soldier from all those years ago sat across from her now. And more than that, he’d tracked her down, jumped in her carriage. He’d remembered her and she’d recognized him, even all these years later. It was a miracle.

The Captain. The one man to whom she’d spilled her darkest secret. Despite the cold winter air heat made her flush. What would he do with the information he knew about her? Why was he here and why had she told him so much? He’d looked so vulnerable then.

But the truth was, she didn’t know a thing about him.

And then there were the letters. Three in the last six months, all from a person in her past, dead set on revenge. The writer hadn’t given his identity but he’d said he knew things about her. Things that would destroy her life. He wanted money in exchange for his silence.

“No,” the single word popped out of her mouth before she could think it through.

His eyes widened. “You’re telling me that you are not the Clarissa who cared for soldiers in the basement of a church in Dover during the war?”

She bit her lip. She’d dreamed of meeting this man again. But what if he were the author of those notes here to collect?

Her stomach turned. A million times she’d wished for this reunion, prayed for it.

But he couldn’t be the person who’d wrote those letters, could he? He was an earl and he’d donated to the charities. Why would he need to blackmail her?

Relief made her limp. But still. She had to end this meeting quickly. The Earl of Baxter already knew too much about her past.

And yet, her life wasn’t just about her anymore. Even if it were sheer coincidence that he’d arrived now, every one of his friends had donated to her cause. Large sums of money were going to Penny and her to build multiple orphanages. And she intended to build her life over again. Make herself a new person. A person who orphans *should* trust with their futures. But this man was from her past. The past where she’d done awful things. What would happen if they knew they were entrusting their money to a thief? “I am not.”

His eyes crinkled. “I don’t believe you.”

Her breath caught. It was all beginning to make sense. The intensity of his gaze. The way he’d jumped into her carriage. He knew about her past. Or parts of it. Not her own sins. And he could never know about that.

This was the man she’d dreamed of marrying. He’d been the center of every romantic fantasy she’d ever had in her life. He was...everything.

How would he react if he discovered she was little more than a common thief? She’d stolen from the collection tray, taken from the priest’s personal possessions. That money had gotten her and Penny back to London from Dover. But her

thieving hadn't ended there. She'd even stolen food a time or two when she and Penny had been near starvation.

He saw her as the girl who'd cared for him. But what if he knew the whole truth? What would he think of her then? It was better that he never knew who she really was. She could begin fresh and he would remember her as the girl who cared for him. Nothing more and more importantly, nothing less.

"Is that what you wished to ask?" she couldn't look at him as she spoke. Part of her even now wished to confess that it had been her. A voice inside her begged to toss herself across the carriage and into his arms. "You've got your answer. Thank you very kindly for your aid. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's my friend's wedding and—"

The door of the carriage yanked open and suddenly Logan filled the doorway. Without a word, he grabbed Baxter by the collar and began hauling him from the carriage.

Baxter grabbed the door frame, stopping Logan from pulling him all the way out. "Settle down," he called to Penny's new husband.

He knew he was about to take a beating. That was fine. But he wasn't ready to leave Clarissa's company. He'd waited too long to find her again.

In response, Logan reared back and landed his fist directly in Baxter's face. He took the shot without saying a word and with only the smallest grunt of pain.

"Stop," a third male voice boomed. "He's an idiot, not a danger."

Baxter grabbed his face, falling back on the floor of his carriage and Clarissa couldn't help herself. She dropped to her knees next to him, pulling his hands from his face. "Let me look." It was the perfect excuse to caress him.

Her touch was light as she slowly moved his hands. One of his eyes was already turning a rainbow of colors where Logan had hit him. But men didn't die from black eyes.

"I had that coming," Baxter said on a sigh. His face was drawn into deep lines of regret.

“There now,” she shushed softly, still holding his hands. “You’re all right.” She’d like to stay there forever.

But her words didn’t seem to soothe him. In fact, he turned to granite under her touch. He sat up, nearly knocking his head into hers. “What did you just say?”

She dropped his hands, her limbs falling like dead weights in her hands. “What do you mean?”

“I know it’s you...” His voice was so quiet that shivers of fear made her shoulders curl in. She had to hide. That was a strange feeling for her. Clarissa never hid from anything. Except from this. No one could know how she escaped from that priest all those years ago.

Then a new thought occurred to her. If her captain discovered she was a thief, would he pull their funding? She wanted to believe he would never, but then again, it was large sums and she...wasn’t truly worthy. Not yet. She would be someday but, in the meantime, this man could send her entire life crashing at her feet.

## CHAPTER THREE

MASON GRABBED her hands in his, confusion clouding his mind even as his heart pumped wildly. Why had she lied to him? Did she not remember him? Not recognize his title? “Clarissa,” he said as he leaned forward. Bash was arguing with Goldthwaite even as the girls on the bench began to cry. “Tell me the truth.”

Goldthwaite and his bride stood just outside the carriage, his brother just behind them. He heard the other woman gasp.

“I’m not who you’re looking for,” she cried as she tried to pull her hands away. “Please. Let go.”

Someone grabbed his boot and began to pull him from the carriage. He looked over his shoulder to see Goldthwaite tugging at his leg. Mason just managed to reach up with one hand and grasped the grab handle meant for passengers to hold when the carriage really began to sway. “We’re just talking,” he gritted out.

“Mason,” Bash yelled. “Get out of the carriage already. You promised.”

He had. But he hadn’t meant it. “I just need a few minutes.”

Goldthwaite stopped pulling. “You’re going to be dead in five seconds if you don’t get out of that carriage.”

Mason shook his head. He was still holding one of Clarissa’s hands with his free one. He looked deep into her blue eyes, which had widened with fear and swore under his

breath. No wonder she didn't want to tell him anything. He'd scared her near to death.

Mason slowly let go of her hand, sliding her gloved fingers through his. "I'm getting out." He drew in a deep breath. Damn, he'd made a complete mess of this. "Clarissa."

"Don't." Goldthwaite pulled on his foot again. "Don't ever speak to her again."

His chest tightened.

He supposed this meant she was protected. That was what he'd wanted.

A chilly wave of disappointment coursed through him. Six years he'd looked for her. Searching registries, asking priests and nuns. How could this be the end of all that? Sure, he hadn't pictured the beautiful woman before him but he had envisioned her in his life. Somehow, he'd always believed that with her, he'd be...better. Whole. He needed to get to know her and to have some sort of relationship with this woman.

Hell. If Goldthwaite would let go, he'd marry her.

The realization jolted through him, but along with it came a calm. That would be the ultimate form of protection, and honestly, completion of the onslaught of feelings coursing through him.

"Goldthwaite. I'm the man you sent searching for Penny in the snow, remember?" He didn't let go of the strap. "I'd never hurt Clarissa."

"How do you know her name?" Goldthwaite asked.

"He thinks he knows me," came Clarissa's quiet voice. "But he's wrong."

"Wolf," the littlest girl inserted.

He shook his head. "No." He looked at Natty then. "I'm not the wolf. I already told you. I'm the huntsman." He'd sent that priest away for her. He'd always protect her. Always.

Natty's eyes widened and suddenly she was sliding down on the carriage floor too. Which left absolutely no room for

anyone to move.

Then she leaned forward and studied his face, turning this way and that. Finally, little fingers pried up his eyelid, as she studied his eyeball.

“He’s right,” she finally said, letting the skin go. “There’s no wolf in there.”

He couldn’t help it. It was funny. And this little girl was an unlikely ally and a chuckle burst from his chest. “Thank you.”

She nodded, then she pointed to his cane, currently on the seat of the carriage. “That’s not a very good weapon. You should have an axe. Or at least a sword.”

Even Goldthwaite had stopped spitting and growling as he plucked the child from the floor and swung her into his arms. “Natty. He’s not a real huntsman, he’s an earl. A strange one but an earl nonetheless.”

“An earl?” Natty asked. “Like you?”

“That’s right.” Goldthwaite reached his hand out to the next child, pulling her from the carriage too.

Natty tapped his shoulder. “Is he going to marry Clarissa the way you married Penny?”

Both Clarissa and Goldthwaite quickly and emphatically expelled the word “No,” as he pulled the third child from the carriage. Then he grabbed Clarissa’s hand and started attempting to maneuver the sitting woman from the carriage floor with one hand.

Mason knew he looked ridiculous. He still held the handle with one hand, and one leg had been half pulled from the carriage. And his large body mostly held Clarissa in her spot on the floor. “Stop pulling, Goldthwaite,” he said, much of his calm returning. “I’ll move in just a moment and then you can get her out.”

He knew where she lived. He understood who she was even if she denied it. There would be other chances. He’d make certain of that. They needed more time. Did she truly not recognize him? He needed to find out.



“Or you could get out,” the man returned. “And I could continue with my wedding breakfast.” Then he paused. “Which you are no longer invited to.”

“Bloody hell,” Bash said from behind Goldthwaite. “I told you not to cause a scene.”

“You knew he’d try to compromise Clarissa?” Goldthwaite let go of Clarissa and turned back to Bash. “Why did you let him come?”

“Even I didn’t know he’d be that much of an egotist. But he’s been looking for a Clarissa that he met while he was wounded in the basement of a church in Dover for the past six years. Thinks she’s her. I keep telling him that he dreamed the girl.”

But Goldthwaite’s eyes flashed back to Clarissa and they held...a question. He knew that Clarissa had been there.

Triumph surged in Mason’s blood. “She saved my life,” he said to Goldthwaite. It was in the other man’s power to never allow him to step foot near Clarissa again. “And now I want to repay the favor. That’s it.” It was a lie. She was cared for and he’d come for more than that. He knew he was acting irrational, mad even. But he’d looked for so long and then he’d been afraid she’d married and...

Clarissa jolted next to him. He felt the sudden movement shake through him.

Then she began to scramble up, as though possessed, trying to get away from him. He reached out and grabbed her hip with his free hand. “Settle now.”

She stilled but her breathing was harsh. This was the woman who’d threatened him with a pistol. Who’d taken his cane straight from his hand. She didn’t seem to be afraid of anything. But she was frightened out of her wits now. Why? What had he said?

“I don’t need your help,” she said, her hand coming over his. “Do you understand?”

Using the handle, he pulled himself up. “No. I don’t actually. Not at all.”

Her hands came to his chest, the touch causing a streak of lightning to course through his veins. But then she pushed off him and rose from her spot on the floor. “Too bad,” she mumbled and then took Goldthwaite’s hand and let him help her down from the carriage. “Goodbye.” She huffed as Goldthwaite set her down. Spinning, she slammed the door shut and banged on the side of the vehicle. Like that, the carriage, which he was now alone in, began to rumble down the street.

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CLARISSA KNEW there were going to be questions.

Honestly, she questioned herself. Because part of her had wanted to ride off in that carriage with him. And that frightened her most of all.

She wished she were a better person. The sort that could pursue a life with a handsome lord who’d spent years searching especially for her. The very idea he had, filled her with light and hope.

But Clarissa wasn’t the sort of person who could take that life. She’d done far too many terrible things...

She watched the carriage until it disappeared, not looking back at Logan. She wasn’t ready to answer them. Her thoughts swirled with emotions that she couldn’t quite name.

“He’s not dangerous,” the other man said. “At least, I don’t think so. He hasn’t been in the six years I’ve known him.”

Logan harrumphed. “He’s stark raving mad if you ask me.” Then he tugged on her elbow. “Come on.”

She turned back then, grateful Logan would hold his tongue until they’d left this stranger’s company. Logan began marching her and the girls down the street.

“Wait,” the other man called. “I’ll double my contribution to the orphanage if you don’t pull out of the club.”

“I don’t need your money,” Logan gritted out, still moving away.

But Clarissa spun back to the other man. If she could get an orphanage up and running, perhaps the guilt inside would ease and she could finally move past the sins of her past and into a future. Her captain’s face rose into her thoughts again but she pushed the vision of him away. “Triple.”

“You can’t negotiate on my behalf,” Logan groaned. “I don’t want any part of that club and I can finance the orphanages myself.”

Clarissa came to a halt, turning back toward Logan. “You’re that rich?” She was sure Penny knew the details of all this, but her friend hadn’t shared that with her. They’d been busy planning the wedding and celebrating the fact they no longer lived in the East End of London where life had been a daily struggle.

“The richest,” the other man answered. “And the smartest too. I’m the Duke of Devonhall, by the way. And I am most pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Clarissa...I’m afraid I didn’t catch your last name.”

“Walters,” she lied. It was Penny’s last name. Hers was Hershel. But she didn’t want these men to be able to find anything about her. Not that it mattered, she supposed. If Logan could finance them, she could begin her new life.

Would Logan help her with the blackmail? Shame stole her breath. Then she’d have to tell him and Penny about all the terrible things she’d done. Could she tell the Earl of Baxter who she really was? Her head dipped down. She couldn’t. What if he asked how she’d managed to escape? Would she be able to lie to him again? Did she want to? “It was very nice to meet you, Your Grace.”

The duke stared at her and she became aware his eyes were the exact color and shape of the Earl of Baxter’s. How odd. And disconcerting. It was like he was still staring at her with that intense gaze.

And on another man, she understood, there was nothing dangerous in those eyes, the Earl of Baxter's were just... full of zeal. He'd said he wished to help her. But would he still feel that way if he knew the truth?

"It was nice to meet you as well, Miss Clarissa Walters. I'm sure we'll meet again."

"You won't," Goldthwaite grunted. "You can consider our partnership dissolved."

The duke groaned. "It's the holiday and your wedding so I am going to let that slide, but I'll be by tomorrow to discuss this further."

"No," Logan answered as he began to move again.

"Please," the other man added with a laugh.

"You find this funny?" Logan fired back.

"It's a bit humorous when you think about it. My brother, the calm and collected man, is the one ruining a deal. People always find him charming but today..." The duke shook his head.

Brother? Clarissa's chin pulled back. How were an earl and a duke brothers? Most odd. But she didn't ask.

Logan muttered a choice word under his breath. "I don't care—"

"You should." The other man was still following them. "I'll tell you what. Let's meet at my house. Then all three of us —"

"No." It was Clarissa's turn to interrupt. She hadn't shared much of her past with even Penny. Clarissa had told her friend the money that had financed their trip was from her late father. But Baxter knew the truth on that account. Her father hadn't left her with a shilling. What if the two men began piecing bits together? And what if they found out someone was attempting to blackmail her? They'd never allow her to be in charge of children if they discovered her past. "Do you need to meet with them at all?"

Logan gave her another long look. “Clarissa,” he said softly. “You were the one who just attempted to up his contribution.”

She dropped her head, not wanting to answer. Because he was right. With startling clarity, she realized that Logan had become the first man she’d trusted in her life. But then again, it was easy with him. He loved Penny, and Clarissa, looking on, could see that love in every glance and touch he gave her friend.

The duke stopped walking toward them, one of his eyebrows cocking up. “I’ll leave you two to chat.” And then he moved around them, heading for the far carriage.

The man knew when to press his advantage, she’d give him that. He also knew when to exit.

Logan ushered her into the vehicle with Penny. The one the couple should have been alone in, enjoying their first moments as man and wife. Guilt stabbed at her chest.

“I’m sorry,” Clarissa said as she took the seat across from Penny. “I didn’t mean to—”

Penny shook her head. “It’s not your fault.” Then she reached out and squeezed Clarissa’s hand. “Are you all right?”

Clarissa squeezed back. If she were the sort who cried, she might have a mist in her eyes. Her friend was the kindest person in all of England. “I’m fine.” Part of her wished she could tell Penny everything. All the secrets she’d kept all these years.

Logan snapped the door closed. “He thinks he knows Clarissa from a church in Dover. From six years ago.” Logan looked between the two women. “When and where did you find Clarissa?”

Penny paled as she looked back across at her friend. “Why don’t you tell him?”

Clarissa let out a long sigh. There was little point in lying when Penny knew the truth. “I’m the girl he thinks I am.”

Logan sucked in his breath. “So he isn’t mad after all.”

Clarissa parted her lips to reply, then hesitated. What option did she have? She'd already started telling Logan the truth, and now, she had to continue. She tucked a strand of curly hair behind her ear. "He still jumped into my carriage in the middle of the day. That makes him a bit mad." Or very valiant. Because today had mirrored more than one fantasy she might have had about the man. No, he didn't scare a group of children, but in her daydreams, he made some sort of grand gesture and then professed his undying love.

Logan gave a quick nod. "True." Then he scratched his chin. "Do you think he's really been looking for you for six years?"

Her stomach twisted. Was it bad that she wanted it to be true? "I don't know."

"What happened between the two of you the first time you met?" Penny asked quietly.

Clarissa looked down at her lap. She remembered how strong he'd looked even lying on the cot, near death's door, and how he'd tried to defend her against Father Byron. Her heart fluttered. "He was dying. Ravaged by fever and barely eating or drinking. He had a wound to his leg, a bayonet slice. I changed his bandages and mopped his brow. Gave him water."

Logan cleared his throat. "In other words, you cared for him. For how long?"

She shrugged. "Two or three weeks."

"Oh my," Penny whispered. "Do you think he's in love with her?"

"See," Natty chimed in. "I told you that Clarissa was going to marry an earl."

Clarissa snapped her chin back up. "No, I'm not." The words came out harsh. "I am going to take care of orphans. Run the girls' orphanage. I'll work for Penny." She had to. Her soul depended on it.

"You could marry if you wanted to," Penny whispered. "We can hire someone else to run the orphanage."

Clarissa shook her head, looking out the window at the bleak December landscape. "I wasn't meant to marry."

## CHAPTER FOUR

THIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN Mason's least dignified moment since becoming an earl.

He was still on the floor of the carriage as it rumbled down a busy London street.

But his head was too full to bother with getting up.

Besides, he deserved to be on the floor. He knew how to convince people to give him what he wanted, but with Clarissa...he'd been a raving lunatic. Completely ridiculous. All reason had left his head.

What was it about him that made people reject him so? Hell, even his own father hadn't wanted him. His mother had left him. Only Bash stuck around. But Bash often needed him.

And Clarissa. She'd saved his life. Somehow, he always thought he'd return the favor. Sweep in and save hers. And then she'd love him too.

Not in that way. At least not in his imaginings over the last several years. She'd been a girl the last time he'd seen her, and he'd pictured himself, ever older, to be her benign savior.

But now? He'd take her love. And he'd give as much as he got back. More.

He was meant to find her now, when she was all grown up. He could see that.

He wanted to laugh at himself. No wonder everyone thought he was mad. He'd been about to wax poetic about fate and chance and the meaning of life in an empty carriage.



But it was just that life had felt hollow. The only time he'd ever really felt whole inside was when his body had been ravaged by infection. And he'd been with her. Funny how that had worked.

But he'd gone and mucked up their first real conversation. Not only did she not want him but he'd scared her half to death. How was he going to fix that?

The carriage drew to a stop, but he still didn't move. Didn't even know where the vehicle had taken him.

The door snapped open but this time it wasn't Goldthwaite but Bash who stood in the doorway. "What in bloody Christ are you still doing on the floor?"

He grunted. "Thinking."

"About how you just ruined the best deal of my life?" Bash groused.

Mason shuddered. "Are you going to stop being my brother since I took away your deal with the Den of Sins?"

It was Bash's turn to grunt. Which sounded exactly like Mason's. "I'm your brother. You can't get rid of me that easily."

Mason breathed a quick sigh of relief. With Bash on his side, anything was possible.

"But you are going to help me get that deal back."

Mason shook his head. "I don't think that's happening."

Bash reached in and began hauling Mason into a sitting position so that he might exit the carriage. Which was in front of the Earl of Goldthwaite's home. Apparently, no one had told the driver not to come here. "Of course, it's happening," Bash answered. "I need that club."

"Why?" Mason asked. "You've got plenty of money." He hadn't questioned Bash before today but suddenly it seemed odd.

"I'm the Duke of Decadence. Debauchery is what I do. Gaming, women, drink, and any other delights." His lip

curled. “The club will be the final nail in father’s coffin.”

Ahh. “Now that I understand. I swear I became a success just to tell father that he was wrong about me.” He ran his hands through his hair. “Well, that and to have the means to find Clar—”

Bash’s eyes widened. “She means that much?”

“You both do. You two are the reason I am alive.” He scrubbed his scalp. “And I need to see her again. I have to convince her I’m not the wolf.”

Bash shook his head. “You really are off your game. Normally, you’re the best negotiator I know. But if you were trying to convince her you are kind or gentle, you couldn’t have picked a worse method.”

He dropped his head into his hands. “The truth hurts. What do I do now?”

Bash shrugged. “You’re asking me? What do I know about it?”

“You decided to find me. Give me a new life. How do I do that for her?” Mason leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees.

Scratching his chin, Bash frowned. “Give her a career. That’s what I wanted to do for you. Or, since she’s a woman, marry her. Or offer to marry her. You’d be providing the ultimate protection.”

His teeth clinked together. If only that were the solution. “After the stunt I just pulled...”

“Fine. Career then. She wants to start an orphanage. Help her with that.”

Mason’s eyes widened. Normally he was the brother who figured out what people wanted and then made an offer they couldn’t refuse. But today, Bash had been the expert negotiator. “You’ve been taking notes.”

Bash grinned. “My little brother taught me well.” He nodded toward his carriage. “But don’t make the offer today.

Let's be respectful of their family." Then he grimaced. "Which means no jumping in their carriage."

Mason sighed. Bash had a point there. If he wanted Clarissa to trust him, he couldn't go around acting like a wild man. And he'd use any excuse to be part of her life, but he couldn't help but hope, if she learned to trust him, she might allow him to offer even more. Like her hand in marriage.

Goldthwaite's carriage stopped and the door snapped open as Goldthwaite climbed out.

"We're leaving," Bash called. "Though I'll have you know you're one of the few men to refuse a duke as a guest."

Logan gave Bash a dead stare. "I'll take my chances." And then he handed out his bride.

Mason's breath caught as Goldthwaite reached in again, helping Clarissa out as well.

She looked so beautiful standing in her red velvet dress, snow dancing behind her. Marry her? It was a damned fine idea.

Only, there was little chance she'd say yes after today.

But then again, he was the Earl of Baxter. And in the end, he knew how to negotiate a deal.

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CLARISSA ROSE from bed the next morning, sure she had dark circles under her eyes. She'd barely slept. Peeking from beneath her pillow were the three blackmail letters she'd received. The first had just been veiled threats but the last had demanded one thousand pounds in order to keep her theft a secret. She didn't have any money of her own and whoever had sent that letter wanted the payment by the end of the year. Which was in less than a week.

She didn't know what to do and she couldn't allow the Earl of Baxter to distract her now. She had to focus on her

future. On the children and on Penny. Her past couldn't hurt them.

But it all made her so tired. A look in the mirror confirmed her suspicion. She looked like she'd barely slept a wink. With a sigh, she began to dress.

Though Logan had provided a maid for her, Clarissa had never had one in her entire life and wasn't entirely certain how to use the woman.

Clarissa opened the wardrobe and pulled out a pale blue wool gown that Logan had recently given to her. He'd provided wardrobes for all of them. She ran her hand down the fabric. She supposed there had to be a few good men in the world, if Penny's husband was any indication.

But the likelihood of her meeting one seemed impossible, especially for her. The priest who'd run the orphanage had just been cruel. That was easy enough to avoid. But her father had been insidious. Not only had he spent all of the family's money, but he'd managed to convince Clarissa to sign over the small amount her mother had left for her. He'd sworn he was helping them. Maybe he'd really believed it.

But in the end, he'd squandered their finances and he'd made Clarissa participate in her own undoing. She'd had no money, no future, and no way to change that. Except, of course, by breaking the law.

It made her sick to even think about it. And that was why she'd never trust a man again. Or herself. That was the more important detail.

A soft knock came at her door.

"Who is it?" she asked, working the elaborate row of buttons on her dress.

"It's me," Penny called. "May I come in?"

"Of course," she said, crossing the room to open the door.

Penny didn't say a word as she began to do Clarissa's buttons for her. When the dress was all buttoned, Clarissa

caught her friend's gaze. "You should be in bed with your new husband."

Penny touched her cheek. "I was worried about you."

Clarissa's heart lurched. She hated to worry Penny. "Thanks to you, I am fine. Look at where we live. What our life has become."

Penny nodded. "Did the Earl of Baxter scare you yesterday?"

Clarissa dropped her chin. How did she explain that the one who frightened her most was herself? This was the man that had been the object of her fantasies for years. And then he'd arrived like a fierce storm with an intense gaze and a handsome façade claiming never to have forgotten her. That he'd been searching for her for all this time and that he wanted to help her.

He was also the person who knew more about her past than anyone. She supposed it wasn't just society from which she hid the truth. And she didn't keep secrets just because of the money for the orphanage. She kept them even from herself.

She was ashamed.

Penny patiently waited, taking a seat on the bed.

Swallowing, she tried to explain to Penny. "No. He's not scary. Just..." Her words faltered as she rubbed her temples. "He just knows things and—"

"Things I don't know?" Penny clutched her hands in front of her chest.

"Well, you know far more about me than anyone, but I thought he was going to die and so I told him about—" She stopped. Clarissa didn't even want to confess that her secrets involved her father's suicide and his gambling debts.

Penny paused. "You've never shared much about your life before I brought you to the orphanage."

Clarissa's back stiffened. "There isn't much to say."

“You can tell me anything, you know. I’ll always love you.”

Clarissa looked at Penny again before she crossed the room and wrapped her friend in a quick hug. “Thank you.” But she didn’t share. How would Penny feel about trusting Clarissa with the lives of children if she knew that Clarissa had allowed a man to swindle her entire future right out from under her? Or how she’d financed their return to London? Or that her past was awful enough to allow for blackmail? Clarissa barely trusted herself.

Penny narrowed her gaze. “You’re not going to tell me anything, are you?”

Clarissa sighed, looking out the window. She couldn’t look Penny in the eye and lie. “There is nothing to tell.”

She heard Penny give a soft gasp. Likely her friend knew that Clarissa was lying. But it was better that Penny suspected rather than knowing for certain that Clarissa was no good.

Penny crossed her arms over her chest, her foot tapping on the floor. “Clarissa. Haven’t we been together long enough that you know you can trust me?”

“I do trust you,” she cried, looking back at her friend. *It’s me I don’t trust*, she wanted to say. But she held her tongue.

Penny let out a quick huff of frustration. “I love you. And you’re very strong, but you’d do well to let a few people in once in a while to share your burden.” Then Penny spun about and left without a backward glance. Clarissa slumped back down on the bed. She was driving the only person she trusted away. Was she making a mistake in guarding her past? But what if sharing her secrets only made things worse?

## CHAPTER FIVE

MASON SAT at his desk at the Wicked Earls' Club and stared at the polished mahogany that surrounded him. It was a beautiful room in a very masculine way.

The club was located on the East End of London, just as the streets grew narrower and more crowded. They were close enough to let respectable London slip in and out unnoticed but far enough out of the swankier streets to keep their activities quiet.

Not that Mason was a man with a great deal of illicit activities. He left most of those for his brother.

The club was less of a place of debauchery for him and more of an access point to all of respectable society. With every connection he made, he grew more able to control the world around him.

Except for Clarissa, of course.

Was he in love with her?

He couldn't say. Most likely. She was one of the few people who'd managed to make him ache with joy at a simple touch.

But all that he'd accomplished didn't make her want him, apparently.

He'd change that, however. Very soon, in fact. It wasn't love. Not yet. But he could offer her everything in this world she'd ever wanted. All she had to give him in return was her hand.

As if in an answer to his thoughts, a knock sounded at the door.

“Baxter.” A dark-haired man named Keyworth opened his door. “There’s a Goldthwaite here to see you.”

“Send him in,” Mason answered.

The man’s only response was to chuckle. A few seconds later, a Goldthwaite did in fact enter the room, but it wasn’t Lord Goldthwaite but Lady Goldthwaite who entered the room. Penny.

Surprise widened his eyes as Mason stood. “My lady,” he asked, cocking a brow.

“My lord,” she answered. “Thanks for seeing me.”

“Well to be fair, Keyworth didn’t actually tell me that it was you.”

She smiled. “My fault. I asked him not to say.”

“Tricky,” he murmured, gesturing for her to take a chair.

She shrugged and then sat. “I was afraid you might not see me if you knew.”

“Sincerely that isn’t true.” He gave an easy smile, recognizing an opportunity to get more information about Clarissa. “I’m delighted that you’re here.”

Penny cocked her head to the side. “I didn’t expect you to be charming.”

He laughed at that. “Funny. I’m rather known for it, actually.”

Penny gave a slow nod. “Logan says that you’ve been more successful at gaining entry into society than he has so it makes sense that you would have such a skill. It’s just that...” She paused, looking up at the ceiling.

“Just that...?” he prompted.

She looked back at him, a small grin curving her lips. “That you didn’t choose to use any of it on Clarissa yesterday.”



He blinked, sitting back in his chair. “I suppose you’re right.” He ran a hand through his hair. “It’s just that she stripped away all my usual tools and tricks. I found myself rather...” He had been about to say raw.

“Is that the reason? The real reason you were so gruff yesterday? It’s not because you are threatening her?”

His heart began to speed up in his chest. “Threaten her?” He sat forward. “I need you to understand. She is the only reason I am alive today. I would do anything to repay that favor.”

Penny drew in a deep breath as she reached into her reticule. “So you did not send her these?” She pulled three letters from the bag and slid them across the desk.

His brow furrowed as he picked one up and scanned the contents. White-hot anger coursed through him as he read them one after the other. Someone was attempting to hurt his Clarissa after all. “I would never...”

Penny gave a tight nod. “It’s coincidence then that you arrived at the same time as these letters?”

He shook his head. Thoughts of fate were swirling about his mind again. “She shared these with you?”

“No. I found them tucked under her pillow.”

That made him pause. “And you decided to come here and call me out, alone? What if I had been the blackmailer?”

Penny’s eyes widened. “I suppose Clarissa and I have a bit more in common than I sometimes admit. I’ve gotten used to solving my own problems.”

He shook his head. “Fortunately for you, I want nothing more than to keep Clarissa safe. She means the world to me.”

Penny’s smile softened. “You affect her too.” Then she frowned. “Or perhaps, you had the exact opposite effect. All the guards she carefully keeps up around her have slowly been slipping down but yesterday...” She paused, drawing in a shaky breath, “They all came flying back up.”

Mason clenched his fists under the table. He had to remain his usual cool self. “Her normal walls. She’s always guarded?”

Penny nodded. “She’s never liked to talk about her past... before the orphanage. I know her father is a painful memory, but after all these years, I still don’t know why.” Penny paused pressing her mouth together. “She indicated you might know something about that. And now with this,” she gestured toward the letters, “it’s even more important she opens up.”

His brows went up again. He wasn’t the only one seeking information. “She didn’t tell me much. Just that her father gambled away every penny and then took his own life.”

Penny grimaced. “I’d puzzled out that much myself. Though she must have had some money. She paid for our carriage fare back to London.” Penny’s brow furrowed. “Is she ashamed because he committed suicide? Father Byron was forever telling her Mr. Hershel would burn in hell for such a sin.”

“She said something about him spending her money too.” Mason leaned forward. “Did she have money of her own?” How had she paid for the fare? Something niggled deep inside. He sensed this was important but he didn’t understand why.

Penny shook her head. “Oh. I don’t know.”

He scrubbed his face. He didn’t understand why that would have mattered but then again, she’d specifically mentioned it.

“What do you want with Clarissa?” Penny asked as her fingers gripped the edge of the desk.

That was blessedly simple. “To protect her.”

Penny blinked. “That’s it?”

He shrugged. “She saved my life. It’s the least I could do.” Then he cleared his throat, sensing a potential ally. “I’d marry her if she’d allow it. In that way, she’d have money and protection forever.” With this blackmail hanging over her, marriage was the easiest and best answer. His money, his title, they’d protect her reputation in a way that even Goldthwaite couldn’t.

Penny gasped. “Natty was right after all.”

“Natty?” The little orphan. The way Clarissa held her made him want to tuck Clarissa against his side and keep her there forever.

“So you want to marry Clarissa? After all this time? Because she cared for you when you were ill?”

“Well, to be fair, the marriage idea is relatively new.” As in yesterday. “I know she doesn’t need my financial assistance any longer with your match, but I could still care for her. And I could certainly protect her from this.” Mason waved his hand across the open letters. He left out the part where attraction had slammed into him like a bucking horse.

He scrubbed the back of his neck. But rather than draw her closer, he’d pushed her away yesterday. He supposed he understood Clarissa’s walls. He didn’t really want to explain that she’d been the first person he could remember to touch him with such gentle affection. That he woke in the night aching to feel her touch again.

Penny nodded. “Thank you for sharing.”

“Lady Goldthwaite.” He held up a single finger. “Tell me. What does Clarissa see for her own future?” He gave her another easy smile, wanting her to trust him. “Do I even have a chance of swaying her to be my wife?”

Penny softened, her gaze warm and understanding. “You might. What she wants most is to care for others. Run an orphanage. She talked of being a nurse. Mayhap you should convince her you need her care too.”

He raised a brow. That was it? That would be so easy. Because she needed him. And, because, he did in fact need her too. Quite badly.

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CLARISSA SAT LOOKING out at the grey street. She should be teaching the girls their letters. Instead, they chatted with one

another as she played her conversation with Penny over in her mind.

And the events of yesterday. Because she had the nagging feeling she'd handled them both badly.

She'd lied to Baxter about her identity. When all he'd wanted to do was protect her. It wasn't his fault she wasn't to be trusted with his affection.

And then Penny. Clarissa had pushed her away too.

She lowered her chin onto her fist.

Three weeks ago, they'd moved into this house with Logan after ruffians had attempted to burn down their home. Logan had rescued them, then brought them to his safe home. He'd also secured financing for the orphanages they wished to open.

She drew in a breath. Her whole life she'd tried to help the people around her, but inevitably her sins outweighed her good deeds. Were those ruffians connected to her past? To the letters? She should have told Penny and Logan but she'd been so ashamed. Closing her eyes, she chastised herself for being a fool. Was she hurting them by keeping her secrets? Would she do harm to her friend and the children?

And the Earl of Baxter. He was better off remembering her as the girl who saved him. He'd only be disappointed by who she'd had to become to escape the horrid priest.

He was the one person she wanted to remember her as good and right and...someone to be admired, not hated.

Her fists clenched as Logan's carriage drove up to the house. Logan stepped out and then handed out Penny. Their heads bent close together as they talked. But the conversation didn't appear to be one of lovers. Their bodies were tense, their mouths pressed in firm lines.

Penny looked up at the window and grimaced when she saw Clarissa. Clarissa pushed back, her own body growing tense. What was wrong with Penny?

After standing, she started for the door. "I'll be back shortly, girls," she called as she made her way out the door and

then down the hall.

They entered the house when she was halfway down the stairs and she didn't bother with greetings. "What's the matter?"

Penny stopped too, her frown deepening. "I think we should talk."

Clarissa started down the stairs once again. "I agree. Hence why I asked what was wrong."

"Let's step into the sitting room."

Clarissa's stomach twisted. Clearly, whatever Penny needed to say was serious. "All right."

She followed Penny into the other room, not bothering to sit but crossing back to the window. Somehow, watching the world made her feel less frightened.

Penny cleared her throat. "There's no point in hiding anything from you. I found your letters and I spoke with the Earl of Baxter."

The window was forgotten as Clarissa spun back around. Blood rushed in her ears. What had they pieced together? They knew? Both of them? "You did what?"

"How could you not tell me someone was threatening you?" Penny's chin notched higher.

Clarissa curled into herself. "I didn't want to worry you."

Penny shook her friend. "You are my family. I will always help you."

Clarissa ducked her head. "I'm not the person you think I am."

"You are exactly the person I think you are. Strong and loving. And you deserve the best future you can have."

Clarissa's chin snapped up. "What does that mean?"

"Did you know he's quite charming?"

"I know I don't give a fig," she fired back.

Penny nibbled at her lip. "He says he wants to marry you."

Her heart began to pound in her chest, her hands covering it in an attempt to make the organ slow. Had he said that before or after he'd read the notes? The words accusing her, correctly, of being a petty thief. "He doesn't even know me." She clenched her hands into the folds of her dress as the world seemed to spin in a dizzying fashion. Because her first reaction had been excitement, not dread. "And what I know of him I don't like." Lie. She liked him so much, she ached inside.

Penny cocked a brow. "Really? He's handsome and singularly focused on...well...you."

Clarissa let out a huff. "That doesn't concern you?" She took a step toward Penny. "He dove into my carriage. Logan had to pull him bodily out. Or, at least, he tried."

"All true." Penny rubbed her chin. "I did just marry. I'm seeing everything with a romantic flare. But still. He's an earl. I'm not saying you should agree to marry him just that perhaps, you should get to know him."

"No." The single word cut through the air like a hot knife slicing through butter.

"Why?"

Clarissa gave her head a shake. "I'm not like you. Good things don't come to me. Especially when they're offered by men. They fall apart in my hands and—" She stopped talking.

Penny stood. "That isn't true. I would have never made it through the last six years without you. You're one of the best things to happen to me."

Clarissa shook her head. "Logan is the best. I've hardly been able to help at all." To her dismay, tears pricked at her eyes.

How could she explain that she'd love nothing more than to accept Baxter's proposal? But he needed to be protected... from her. From the choices she'd made. How could a thief become a countess?

Penny crossed the room, wrapping her arms about Clarissa. She tried to resist the touch but as her friend's warmth wrapped about her, she collapsed into it. "Don't say

that. You've been wonderful. All the love you give the children. The help you gave me. I was supposed to rescue you the day I took you from the church, but I sometimes think you saved me. Gave me hope and direction when I had none."

Clarissa squeezed her back. The words soothed some of her hurt. "Thank you for saying that. But you don't understand. So many times I've tried to help people and failed. I don't know if I'm good—"

Penny shook her head so vigorously that Clarissa pulled away for fear of getting knocked in the chin. "You're the best, Clarissa."

"You don't know that."

"I do," Penny started.

"No." Clarissa bit back. "You don't. And he doesn't either. But I can tell him that he needn't bother pursuing me. Where is he?"

Penny dropped her arms biting her lip again. "I don't think —"

"Tell me," Clarissa said before her friend could finish. "I need to speak with him. It's too hard..." She didn't finish. Because what she might have said was that it was too difficult to be this tempted by a future that included a husband and a man who didn't hurt her, or leave her, or tell her she was worthless.

Penny flinched. "You know that building near our old home? The strange one with the red door and the emblem with a W?"

Clarissa gasped. She knew it exactly. "I'll be back soon."

Penny shook her head. "You can't go alone. I'll come with you."

"I'll bring a maid." She waved her hand. She had no intention of bringing anyone. She and the Earl of Baxter needed to have a private conversation.

## CHAPTER SIX

MASON PACED BACK AND FORTH, trying to decide how best to proceed. His conversation with Penny had solidified his feelings.

This was what he'd been working toward. Clarissa.

He winced, his head dropping into his hands. He'd ruined their first meeting yesterday. Like a fool.

He heard the door of his office slowly open, the wood giving the faintest creak. Turning he drew in a sharp breath as Clarissa peeked into the room. "Is this a bad time?"

"No," he said simply. "How did you get in here—" Then he paused. "Never mind. I already know Keyworth let you in."

She stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. Then she drew in a deep breath. He watched the rise and fall of her chest as her hands twisted together. "I suppose I should start with a confession."

He took two steps toward her until she held out her hand. He stopped but his fingers itched to touch her. "Confession?"

"I lied yesterday," she whispered. "It was me. We met in the church."

His chest was so tight he could hardly breathe. "Did you lie because I frightened you?"

She shook her head. "You don't frighten me."

He couldn't hold himself back and he took another step. "Then why lie?"



She drew in a ragged breath. “You know about my father. And now you know that someone is...” She looked at the wall to her right, averting her gaze. “You know where I came from and how I got there and...” She stopped, her chin dropping.

He couldn't hold back anymore. Closing the gap between them, he reached up and touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers “Are you worried that I won't keep your secrets?” As far as secrets went, it wasn't much of one. His father had said and done far worse. It wasn't until he'd met Clarissa that he'd been able to let that go.

She shrugged. “I was. I told myself that if you shared my past, people may pull their funding for our orphanage. Who wants to support a woman whose father gambled away every penny to his name? Who is the victim of extortion?”

He cupped her cheek. “Those are not your actions. Trust me. I understand.”

She looked up at him, her eyes sad. It made his gut tighten and his other hand clasped her waist. “You don't.”

That surprised him. “Then tell me.”

She shook her head, her velvet cheek rubbing against his rougher palm. “That's not what I came here to say.”

“What did you come to say then?” He settled her body closer and, to his amazement, she didn't resist. Her curves, so soft and tempting fit against him in a way that made him ache.

She held his arms, her fingers lightly playing over his muscles. His head dropped closer to hers. She was so still, completely different from yesterday, he didn't want to spook her in any way.

She looked up at him, her sweet breath fanning over his cheeks. “Penny told me about your conversation. About how you said that you wished to...”

“Marry you?” He tried to calm tumbling his thoughts. Normally he excelled at this but not with her. He rushed ahead, so glad to have her in his arms to have this moment. “I do. I will. Just say the word. I can protect you from all of this.”

But her eyes only widened and then lines of pain formed around her mouth. “I can’t marry you. I can’t even see you again.”

His heart skipped a beat, but he stayed still. Pain lanced through him but he forced himself to slow down. Breathe deeply. The most important thing that mattered was she was here in his arms where she was safe. “Explain it to me.” He had to get to the bottom of why she rejected him.

Then he slid his hand onto the small of her back, supporting her upper body with his arm.

She relaxed further into him. “My father, he left me, all alone.” Her voice caught on the last word. Damn, he wished he could take that hurt away for her.

“He should have never done that. You were only a girl. You needed him.” His nose brushed the tip of hers. He did all he could do now, give her comfort. And assurances. “I would never leave you like that.”

Her eyes widened even as her hands tightened their grip on his arms. “That’s not what this is about.”

“What’s it about then?” He slid a hand into her hair and her head tilted back.

“I can take care of myself,” she whispered.

Her actions belied those words. She was like clay in his hands, but he didn’t say so. He’d blustered yesterday. That wasn’t the way. Today, he’d be the calm support Clarissa needed. “You’ve done a good job.”

She shook her head again. “Penny’s done a good job. I’m exactly what my father said I was.”

That made a sick lump form in his throat. He knew all about the hurt of a father’s words. “What did the bastard say?”

He felt her jump in his arms. “Why do you say it like that?”

“I told you. I know about terrible fathers.” He tensed but forced his muscles to relax. “What he said is not a reflection on you.”

She shook her head. “Penny said the same...”

He couldn't help himself then. He could feel her hurt. The same hurt she'd soothed so many years ago in him. Tilting his chin, he placed the lightest kiss on her lips. She gasped, her fingers clutching him even as her lips melted into his. Gently, he lifted his head to gaze down at her.

“Clarissa,” he whispered. “Please tell me what he said to you. What troubles you so much. I promise to never repeat it, not even to you if that's what you wish, but you need to lighten your heart. Let me do that for you.”

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DEAR LORD, Clarissa wanted to tell him. The one thing she'd never said to a single soul. But once she confessed, she couldn't take the words back. They'd be out in the world.

She made a halfhearted attempt to pull away, but he held firm. She was glad. She hadn't realized how heavy her burden had been until he'd held part of her weight. “Then you'll know everything.”

He kissed her again. Another gentle sweep of his mouth against hers. Desire and pleasure warred with the battle to hold onto her will. When her arms snaked about his neck, she knew she was losing.

It was just that he felt so good.

Strong, lean, and hard, he was like an anchor in this moment. She felt a bit of moisture on her eyelashes and realized that her eyes had misted over.

“It's all right,” he murmured. “I've got you and I'm not going anywhere.”

She trembled. Somehow he pulled his mouth away and words began to tumble from her lips. “He told me that I was to blame. That I was no good and that I never would be. Don't you see. Those letters. They only prove it's true. I bring pain to the people I love.”

“Blame for what? How can you be anything but good?” he asked. “Whoever sent those. That is the villain. Not you.”

A door banged in the distance and the laughter of men and women filtered down the hall and into the room.

The noise reminded her that they were not alone. That the safety she felt was an illusion.

She backed up a step, or she tried. “I should go.”

“No,” he said, splaying his hands out on her back. “We’ve barely begun talking. You were going to explain to me why we can never see each other again. Remember? Not many women turn down an earl’s proposal, so I am curious to know why.”

She cocked a brow. “Proposal?” But she relaxed against him again. He just felt so...right. “As far as I know, you proposed to Penny. Complicated since she’s already married.”

He chuckled and then placed a light kiss on her neck just below her ear. The tickly brush made her gasp and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Well, I’d rectify that, but you’ve already sworn the answer will be no.”

That made her smile. “I did indeed.”

“Which leads us back to your explanation. What did your father say was wrong with you?”

She swallowed. She couldn’t. Without realizing it, she shook her head back and forth.

“My father was the Duke of Devonhall but my mother...” He paused, his thumb sweeping across her lips. “Was not the duchess.”

“Oh,” she gasped, drawing him closer.

“My father hated the very sight of me. I was a reminder of his weakness, his lack of perfection.” He began to massage her scalp. “In fact, he told me on more than one occasion the world would have been a better place if I were never born.”

She choked on her indignation. How could a father be so cruel? Wanting to give him comfort, Clarissa threaded her

gloved hands into his hair. She wished she could take them off and feel the texture of his hair. Were the locks as inviting as they looked? “How old were you?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps six the first time. Eighteen the last. It was the very last thing he said to me before I left for the war and I did my best to fulfill his wishes.” His eyes crinkled at the corners. “Now that I think on it, I was about your age now when I threw myself in front of a bayonet, sure that I’d make his wish come true.”

She swallowed hard. Because something in his words rang with such familiarity that she ached.

“And then you came to the church.” Her heart hammered out of her chest so quickly she was sure he could feel it.

“That’s right. And a girl touched me and spoke to me so gently that I was sure I was supposed to be here on this earth. That there were reasons to live and love after all.”

She stiffened and he felt it because he tightened his arms too. “I didn’t do—”

“Don’t say anything. You’ve no idea what you did.” His other arm wrapped about her too and she was crushed against his chest. “So tell me what he said to you and then we can decide whose father is more awful.”

She shook her head. Because his father was awful, but she had the sinking feeling that her father had been right. “I can’t.”

And because he had a beautiful memory of her. And that was the way she wanted him to remember her. A girl who’d saved him. Not this tainted, compromised person she’d become.

And then with one great pull, she wrenched herself away and threw open the door, sprinting down the hall.

She didn’t stop until she reached the front steps. Clarissa blinked in the grey light, her eyes still needing to adjust as she heard the front door click behind her.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SOUND of the door jolted Clarissa from her panic. She blinked several times, glancing up and down the darkening street.

Why had she just run away? And why had she let herself out into the evening? Alone. With no carriage in sight.

She turned back toward the door. She'd head back inside, apologize to Baxter for being such a ninny and ask him to kindly fetch her carriage.

Penny's words about not travelling alone echoed through her thoughts as she pulled on the knob to find the door locked.

She tugged harder as though the door might give. What did she do now? Drat.

Raising her hand, she grasped the brass knocker and gave it a few sharp claps against the plate. This was not the most dignified reentrance back into the club, but her pride would have to wait. She wasn't walking about this neighborhood searching for her carriage as it likely circled the block. It would likely return any minute but Clarissa had lived in this section of town and she knew what sort of men lurked in the shadows.

Which were growing longer by the moment.

As if conjured by her thoughts, the distinct sound of footsteps behind her made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

She rapped on the knocker again.

“I don’t think anyone’s coming,” a voice cackled behind her.

She held her breath while reaching into the pocket of her gown. This time, she’d remembered her derringer. And she’d use it if necessary.

A tiny gun, it fit into her hand, its weight a reassuring friend as she turned to face the man who’d spoken.

Only when she’d made the half circle, she realized there were three.

Her derringer would only take care of the one.

Her fingers shook but she tightened them on the butt of the weapon. Worst of all, she recognized one of the men. Clarissa didn’t know his name, but she remembered his face.

Missing teeth, filthy hair. He was one of the men who’d harassed Penny and tried to burn down their home.

Well, she knew which one she’d aim at. If she were going to die tonight, he was dying too.

“Lovely to see you gentlemen on this fine evening,” she called, straightening.

All three stopped. “What does that mean?” the shortest on the end spit as he asked. “We’re not making a social call.”

She slowly pulled the weapon from her pocket. “Really? I thought certain you’d come to taste the delights behind this door.”

“Delights?” a tall thin man in the middle asked. “What sort?”

“Don’t let her trick you,” the third barked. “We’re getting paid to do a job.”

Paid? Were they part of the blackmail plot after all? She smiled at him, cold and humorless, but it was the best she could muster under the circumstances as she swallowed, trying to silence the blood rushing in her ears. “Tell me, fine sir,” she looked at the third man. “You seem excessively intelligent. I must know your name.”

He squinted, dirt showing in the lines on his face. “None of your business.”

“Just tell her, Carter,” the middle one chortled. “She’ll not be able to repeat it after we’re done with her.”

“Carter,” she murmured. “Good to know.” Then she raised her pistol. “The Earl of Goldthwaite is looking for you.”

Just then the door clicked open behind her.

The sound made her breath hiss from her lungs, relief nearly making her limp.

But as the man she’d just addressed raised his own gun, she didn’t think as her muscles tightened again and she fired, smoke filling the air.

---

MASON STIFFENED as he watched Clarissa run from his office. From what little he knew of Clarissa she wasn’t a quitter. He was surprised she’d run from this conversation.

But that was a topic to mull over later.

He heard the front door click closed and knew it would only open again with a key.

She hadn’t called her carriage back, which meant she was on the street alone.

While she was familiar with this neighborhood, he also knew she was now dressed as a lady and not as a simple woman.

He started down the hall after her, but the Earl of Darling stopped him as he made his way down the hall. One of the earls who frequented the club, Mason attempted to shrug the other man off, but Darling stopped Mason with a hand at his arm. “You’ve had a great many female visitors today.” The man cocked his head to the side. “Most unusual.”

A knock sounded at the door. Likely Clarissa. “One is a married woman,” he muttered, shrugging off Darling’s hand



and starting down the hall again.

Darling shrugged. “Doesn’t stop most of the men in this place.”

“True,” he said. “But the other is soon to be my wife, so I’d prefer if we don’t speak of what happens in this place.”

Darling gave a stiff nod. “Wife? Why’d you have her here then?”

Mason let out a quick sharp breath. Darling was far more decent than most of the men here but now was not the time for discussion. Another knock sounded at the door. “I’ll explain another time, excuse me.”

Darling gave a quick nod as Mason started down the hall once again. But Darling’s question stuck. Because the man was right.

Mason should have bundled her back in her carriage and seen her home. She’d be far safer and unable to escape their conversation as she’d just done.

Voices filtered from outside, sharp male calls made Mason barrel toward the door.

Talking long strides for the last two steps, he twisted the lock in the door. “Earls,” he called out. “You’re needed at the front door.”

He didn’t wait to see who heard. Instead he wrenched open the large wood barrier and stepped out onto the landing. His heart nearly stopped. Clarissa stood just in front of him with a small pistol raised in her gloved hand.

Just as another man fired, she shot too and the entire world slowed for a moment.

He watched her bullet hit its mark. Heard the whistle of the lead as the other shot whizzed toward them. It had been like this in battle too. Every move played out in his mind. He knew exactly what to do.

Grabbing her waist, he thrust her to his right just as a ripping pain collided with his left side.

He drew in a sharp breath. He'd been hit. But that didn't matter now as long as Clarissa was safe.

Men poured from the house, brandishing ash shovels, swords, pistols.

"I want them all captured," he bellowed as he clasped Clarissa closer to his side.

Without waiting to see what happened, he moved her toward the back alley where his carriage surely waited. He needed to get her out of here. Now.

"Baxter?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Mason," he corrected.

"Mason?" Her hand fluttered to his chest. "Did I kill that man?"

He looked over at her, her normally pink cheeks gone pale. "No, love." He likely lied. If the man wasn't dead, he would be soon. "But he'll rot in prison."

Clarissa nodded tentatively. "He's one of the men who tried to burn down our orphanage right before Logan took us in. If he's still alive, he can be questioned."

That made Mason smile. There was his brave girl. "You're glorious, you know that, don't you?"

They reached the line of carriages waiting and he spotted the Earl of Goldthwaite's. Heading for the conveyance, he snapped open the door and pushed Clarissa inside. He grunted, his side beginning to ache terribly.

But he hefted himself in and then sat on the bench across from her. "You did wonderfully."

She shook her head. "I did horridly. I just shot a man. And I caused the trouble to begin with. I should never have run out. Don't you see? That's exactly what my father meant."

"Meant?" he asked, squinting his eyes into the shadowy carriage.

"He said that I had the curse. Exactly like him. And that everything I touched would turn to ash in my hands." Her

voice trembled as she raised them to her cheeks. “I’ve done terrible things.”

“He’s wrong and nothing you’ve done could have been that bad.” He wanted to touch her, hold her close.

“He isn’t,” she whispered. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” She looked out the window rather than at him. Her hands slid to her temples as her eyes closed.

Mason’s voice was gentle but firm. “Tell me then. Explain it to me.”

She slipped off her bench and came to sit next to him. “Do you know the priest who took me in?”

Sick dread filled his stomach. He was weakening and he couldn’t hold his body against it. He slumped down in his seat. “What about him?”

“Ended up on an island that’s nearly deserted.”

“Clarissa,” he said, his voice cracking. How did he explain he’d arranged the priest’s exile?

“I think they sent him there because money was missing.” His gut churned as he caught an inkling of where this was going and how he had contributed to her fears.

“He was sent there because he was a mean man who didn’t deserve a flock.” He squeezed his eyes shut but then opened them again because he needed to see her face and know that she understood. “And if you are the reason that money is missing, good for you. Not everyone is strong enough to do what’s necessary to get themselves out of Hell.”

She let out a small cry and in the darkening carriage he didn’t know what it meant. Had his words hurt? Helped? But then she pressed her hand to his stomach, leaned over, and kissed his lips.

Longing and love coursed through him as he raised a hand to her cheek. No kiss had ever been sweeter. Her lips were warm pillows of comfort and his mouth clung to hers. “None of those things were your fault.”

But she jerked back and lifted her gloved hand. The white of the fresh glove marred by a startling amount of blood. “Mason?”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

COLD FEAR GRIPPED her as she stared at her hand.

“Mason?” she said again, her voice sounding strangled. “From where are you bleeding?” And then she began pulling at his clothes.

It wasn't hard to find the wound. On his left side, blood oozed down his shirt. He reached a tentative hand behind his back. “Good news, the bullet went clean through. It's really just a flesh wound in my side. A graze.”

“How is a flesh wound considered good news?” she cried, ripping off her cloak and balling it up, then pushing it against his skin to apply pressure to stop the flow of blood.

He hissed. “You know I'm right. You've got a great deal of practice in caring for wounds. I can attest to that. It just hurts.”

“I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I need to slow the bleeding.”

“No. It's good.” He covered her hands with his. “We need to continue talking.”

“You can't be serious.” She looked into his ashen face then. “Why did you let me blather on while you were hurt?”

“Because you're hurt too.” He lifted his hand and placed it over her heart. The feel of his fingers on her chest made her ache. She wanted to rest her forehead against his and close her eyes. Forget the rest of the world. “Your father was wrong and you're wrong too. And you need to know that. You are not bad. You're one of the best people I know.”

“Mason,” she huffed as she leaned over and brushed her lips against his again. “You were shot while standing next to me. You don’t think that proves I bring destruction to those around me? That I am not good?”

A small smile touched his lips. “No, I don’t. The club is in a neighborhood that’s gotten increasingly rough over the last decade. Perhaps it’s time to move.”

She shook her head. “You’re not listening to—”

“You’re not listening.” He grabbed her arm. “I sent that priest away. I’m so sorry that I caused you guilt with my actions. But I couldn’t allow more children to be under his care. And I chose to protect you today.” He coughed then, wincing as he did, and fear made her shiver.

“Mason?” Part of her wanted to be angry with him. He’d sent Father Byron from the church? But all she could feel was worry. He was hurt. What if something happened to him? He was the one person in the world to whom she’d confided all her secrets. She needed him. More than that...

“Listen,” he said as the carriage slowed, reaching Logan’s house. “We’re marrying tonight or tomorrow.”

“What?” Her stomach fluttered. Had he lost his mental faculties?

“I’ve had one goal all these years. Find you and keep you safe. You have to let me do this just in case.”

At those last words, tears once again sprung to her eyes. He was worried he would die and his last wish was to see her cared for? “You’re going to live.”

“We both know I might not. It’s a gunshot.” The carriage stopped and for a moment they both held still. “I wanted to die, Clarissa. Right up to the moment I saw your blue eyes staring back at me and then...I wished to live again. You’ve grown into a beautiful woman whom I admire and...” He gave her a gentle smile as his fingers stroked her cheek. “Whom I think about all the time. Let me provide for your future. Whether I live or die, as a countess, you’ll be protected from

his accusations. Whoever he is. He won't be able to touch you."

Her throat closed as emotion overwhelmed her. A sob broke free of her lips as she pressed a kiss to his forehead. "You're not going to die. I won't allow it. And I know you'll keep me safe whether or not I'm your wife."

He closed his eyes at that, his head falling back on the seat. "We'll discuss it after I see the doctor." He shifted, wincing. "But let's get inside."

She straightened, realizing he was right. She drew in a deep breath. She had to clear out the emotion and allow her brain to begin working.

With that, she snapped open the door. "Help," she called, sliding out of the carriage and racing up the stairs. "I need help."

Logan and his butler came rushing out the door. Within minutes they had Mason settled into a bed. The doctor had been sent for and Clarissa set to work dressing the wound.

She'd cut away his shirt and as she stared at the muscular ridges of his chest, she pressed her lips together to keep from whimpering.

This man had to be all right. How had they circled back to this?

And since they'd only just found each other, there was so much to say. She'd love for him to convince her that she'd been wrong all these years and there was a chance they might be happy together.

And she wanted to hear more about his father, his childhood. She wanted to wash away his fears the same way she now washed blood from his abdomen.

Quite without meaning to, she began to sing as she worked. Amazingly, the pressure had stemmed the bleeding and she was careful not to interrupt the clotting as she wiped.

The hole was smaller than she'd imagined, and hope began to creep in. He might be all right.

“We’re back,” Logan called from the door. A doctor stepped in behind him.

“Thank goodness,” Clarissa breathed.

Logan, however, gave her a hard glare. “Penny told you not to go out alone. What were you thinking?”

“Logan,” Mason said from the bed. “That discussion can wait until later.”

Logan’s jaw clenched but then he gave a stiff nod. “Fine.”

Mason looked at Clarissa, his eyes pleading. “Give Logan and I a moment, love.”

“The doctor might need help.” She knew she should go as Mason wished, but she didn’t want to leave his side.

“Wait in the hall. It will only take a minute.”

With a deep breath, she turned and headed to the door. She hadn’t knelt in prayer since she’d left Dover but as soon as she reached the halls, she dropped to her knees and clasped her hands.

*Please let Mason be all right.*

---

MASON WINCED as the doctor gently rolled him over.

“At least the bullet went clean through,” he murmured. “And the bleeding has slowed significantly. Both good signs. The risk going forward is infection.” He looked toward the door. “Did I hear that Miss Hershel did a stint caring for soldiers?”

“Yes,” Mason gritted out. “I was one of them.”

“Ahh,” Dr. Walters said as he pulled out a bottle that looked a great deal like whiskey. “We’ll sterilize the best we can and get Miss Hershel to change the bandages regularly.” He frowned as he lay Mason back down. “If we can ward off infection, you’ll recover.”



Mason didn't respond.

The wound was even more shallow than the one he'd nearly died from six years prior. He drew in a breath as hope filled his lungs.

He thought about Clarissa's claim that she was a bad person.

He didn't believe it. Not even for a second.

But in case luck wasn't with him, he would be prepared. "Logan," he grunted as the doctor began to measure out liquid for sterilizing. "There is something you should know. The men that attacked us tonight are the same ones who tried to light the orphanage on fire a month ago."

Logan drew in a sharp breath. "Penny told me about the letters. Is what happened tonight connected?"

"I think so," Mason clenched his fists as the doctor moved him again. Pain radiated out from his side. He blinked away the haze from his eyes. Right now, he needed to focus on what helped Clarissa the most. "I'm going to need to ask you a favor."

"What's that?" Logan stepped closer.

"You know the Archbishop of Canterbury?"

The other man straightened, his eyes widening in surprise and then registering understanding. "Now?"

He reached out placing his hand on the other man's arm. "We don't want to be caught unprepared. We'll marry first thing in the morning. As a countess..."

Logan placed a hand on Mason's shoulder. "I appreciate the thought, but the wound is small enough."

Mason shook his head. "I built this fortune for her. I have every intention of making sure she gets it."

"It's not entailed?"

Mason shook his head. "You already know I was a bastard. The title was given to me five years ago with nothing attached to it but a crumbling castle somewhere in the north.

Everything else is mine. We'll need a lawyer as well to make certain every penny goes to her."

"She'll resist. I'm certain of it. She's more stubborn than any woman I've ever met."

Mason gave a shallow laugh, pain radiating through his side. Negotiating was his strength and, as he was injured, he held the trump card. An advantage he'd use to the fullest. It was not his finest moment as a man, he knew that. He had to wonder who was truly the bad person in this relationship because he was using his injury to coerce her. He grimaced but pressed on. "I know my angel. Leave sealing the deal to me."

Logan gave him a small smile in return. "I have every faith in you. You even got me to join a business I was ready to quit. Clearly your skills are exceptional."

Mason closed his eyes. He appreciated the compliment. But right now, he needed to prepare his argument.

He hated to do it. Clarissa was the most important thing in his life, and he didn't wish to jeopardize that by manipulating her into a marriage; but he also couldn't risk leaving this world without giving her every protection that was at his disposal.

"You're in good hands with Dr. Walters. I'm going to leave before the hour grows too late." Logan gave his shoulder a light pat. "I'll be back shortly."

"Thank you," Mason replied. "Send Clarissa back in on your way, please."

"Good luck."

Mason closed his eyes. He'd need it.

He didn't have to open them again to know that Clarissa had entered the room. He heard the swish of her dress, the soft pad of her slippers. But more than that, he felt the way the air changed in her presence. Like the energy before a storm. It charged the room.

"Can I help you?" Clarissa asked.

He pried open his eyes, only to realize that she hadn't been speaking to him. It was the doctor she looked at.

“There’s blood on your dress,” he murmured. “We’ll have to buy you a new one.”

“It is a pity,” she sighed. “It was brand new and one of the nicest things I’ve ever owned.” Then she brushed back his hair. “How could you save my skin and ruin my dress?”

He let out a short breath, trying not to laugh. It bloody hurt when he did. “I wasn’t half as brave as you.”

Her fingers stilled in his hair. “We’ve been over that. My bravery was really foolishness that might yet get you killed.”

He winced. Clearly, he wasn’t quite on his game. Then again, her guilt would go far in his argument. “I should have taken you away from the club the moment you arrived.”

She leaned down then, and her lips brushed his temple even as liquid poured onto the wound. Why hadn’t the doctor warned him? His fists clenched as burning pain coursed through him.

One of her hands wrapped around his wrist, a soft stroke against the tense muscles in his arm. “I should never have gone there at all. I put you in danger. I…” Her fingers tightened.

He wasn’t going to lose this battle. “I should have moved the club’s location. It’s not the first incident and it won’t be the last. The fault is mine.”

She paused, relaxing her hand. “Did you just best me at blame?”

He opened his eyes to look into the clear blue of hers. “You saved my life six years ago, Clarissa. I’m here today because of you. I refuse to accept that you are the reason bad things happen.”

Her lashes fluttered down, covering her eyes. “You’re the only one.”

“No,” he said it too emphatically, pain twisting his insides. “I guarantee that Penny does not think that.” He knew the next point to strike in his argument. “And the orphans? Do you think Natty thinks you’ve made her life worse?”

Her face spasmed. He knew he'd struck a chord. "Of course her life is better. But that's Penny's doing, not mine."

He shook his head. He was very close. He knew exactly what she wanted. He hated manipulating her but he needed her at his side. "Listen to me. You are a caregiver. You always have been. You know how to touch people in a way that heals them inside and out."

Her eyes flew open then, staring into his once again. "Do you really think so?"

He wasn't just trying to get his way this time. He meant the words with his whole heart. "I know so."

"I'm going to need to lift him to get the bandages around his middle," the doctor interrupted.

Clarissa straightened. "Let me help you."

Part of Mason wanted to forge ahead. But allowing a break in the conversation would only strengthen his argument. He remained quiet as the doctor helped to lift him and Clarissa wrapped fresh bandaging around his middle.

Some women might agree to marry an earl simply because they wanted to be a countess. Others because of his wealth.

But not Clarissa.

Clarissa would consent to it because of the children. And he loved her for it.

He only hoped she didn't hate him when she realized the way he'd manipulated her.

## CHAPTER NINE

CLARISSA WRAPPED the bandages about his middle and tried to ignore the way, even injured, his muscles rippled beneath her hands.

The man had always been her weakness.

She'd dreamed of him before she'd barely understood what love was.

And now...here he was trying to convince her to marry him.

And she'd said no.

Ridiculous. Except her father's voice echoed in her head. Bad luck...ruined his life...never be worth a shilling.

Tears stung at her eyes. She didn't need shillings. But she did want to be good. Good for others, good for herself.

She skimmed her hand down Mason's bare arm. Would she be good for him or would she destroy him with her misdeeds like she feared she would?

Her fingertips tingled as they skimmed his body. Was she allowing the tension that crackled inside her to coerce her decisions? She wanted to be near him. She couldn't deny that fact.

Clarissa wanted to believe him when he said she'd saved his life. Because that changed everything.

She straightened, eyeing the fresh white bandages wrapped about his middle. They looked wholesome except for the

blood that was already seeping through the one side. She winced as she gently pulled the blankets over him.

“I’ll be back in the morning to check on him,” the doctor said. “Can I leave him in your capable hands?”

Part of her was tempted to say no. Someone else should be in charge of keeping him alive. But who? She’d done it before, and she would do it again. “I’ll do my best.”

“I’ll be fine. Thank you, Doctor.” Mason reached for her hand and laced his fingers through hers.

“You don’t know that,” she said the moment the door clicked closed. “What if you’re not all right? What if an infection sets in again?”

He tugged on her hand, pulling her closer. “You’re right. It’s a possibility to be certain. And if I die, it won’t be your fault. People die. It’s part of life.”

She drew in a sharp breath. An acidic sensation spread through her stomach, the idea of Mason dying too sad for her to register. “Your death would be directly the fault of several of my actions.”

“Clarissa.” He tugged again, and she found herself sitting next to him, her hip pressing against his, his heat seeping into her side. “You didn’t shoot me. In fact, if we’d like to be technical, you shot the man who shot me.”

She winced, her heart thudding in her chest. It hurt her to think of hurting another person no matter the circumstances. “Do you think I killed him?”

“No,” he soothed. “But I can tell you when I think of you running an orphanage, those children will be lucky to have someone who can defend them.”

Those words soothed like a balm to her raw insides. “Really? I didn’t think of it like that.”

“I saw you holding Natty. In the church. It made me ache because I could remember the way your fingers felt stroking my skin. It helped the broken parts inside me heal.”

How did he know she'd needed to hear those very words? For years, she'd needed them. "I want to help people."

"I know you do, sweetheart," he answered, his voice smooth and so easy. "Now. Would you consider allowing me to help you to help others?"

"How?" she asked. A tremble ran down her spine and she found herself leaning closer. She needed to touch him. It was like his heat and strength soothed her most open wounds.

He reached up and cupped her cheek. "Marry me."

"What?" That made her try to draw back, but his hand held her firm. "You don't want me..."

"I do," he said. "I told you. I believed I was worthless until I met you. You showed me another way." His fingers tightened. "And now that you're grown..." He paused. "I know you feel the connection between us."

A lump formed in her throat and she swallowed it down, blinking back emotion. "Mason."

"Listen," he whispered. "I might die. If I do, I have a fortune, Clarissa. You could use it to fund all the orphanages you want. Think of it this way. My father, who thought I wasn't worth the air I breathed, would have created the largest social project in all of England. That would be the perfect justice."

Despite her worries, Clarissa smiled at that. "I suppose it would be justice for me too. My father thought I ruined his life. Imagine if I saved so many others."

He squeezed her fingers. "He was wrong. Worse, he was selfish. You didn't ruin his life, he did that himself and then used you as a scapegoat."

Something in those words made her think as she never had before. Had her father been lashing out for his own failures? She'd never been able to ask. He'd taken his own life just before the creditors had taken everything else.

If her neighbor hadn't taken her to the church, she might have been one of the assets carted off. "Do you really think

that?”

“I do. Just like I think that my father hated my life because I was a reminder of his weakness.”

She nodded. That made sense. “And so you think we should marry so that I have access to your fortune in case you die?”

“That’s right.”

“And if you live?” She pressed closer again and she felt his pulse speed up under her fingers against his wrist.

“What do you mean?” He slid his gaze to the far wall.

“Will I still be able to open several orphanages? It’s important to me to help people in my own right.”

“As many as you want.”

---

HE NEARLY HAD HER. He could feel it. He could always sense when he was close to closing a deal.

She pressed her lips together, a crease forming between her eyes. “And what is it you want from our union?”

His heart skipped a beat.

What did he want?

Her.

Always her.

But he didn’t want to frighten her. “Besides continued retribution against my father for making me feel so worthless?”

She gave him a soft smile. “You don’t need me to start orphanages.”

He closed his eyes. Didn’t he? “I don’t have your hands, sweetheart. They’ve got the touch.”



She leaned down then, her lips trailing along his forehead, his cheek, along his jaw. “Is that it? That’s all you want?”

How did he explain that for once in his life, he wanted someone at his side who held him with tenderness? Who’d soothe and support him? “I’d like a baby someday.” Where had that come from? “One that I love and support and give all the things in life I never had.”

“Oh,” the single word floated from her lips on a sigh.

And that was when he knew. He’d found the one thing she may very well want more than a parcel of orphans. A baby of her very own.

He should have known.

The way she touched him and held Natty, the way she cared for the other children who lived with her. It was a mother’s love. She was a natural.

And he’d meant the words. He wanted that too. He just hadn’t realized until he’d actually spoken them. “Do you want that too?”

Her voice was so soft, he might have missed it. “Yes.”

“Then marry me, Clarissa. I’ll give you everything you want in this world. One way or the other.” Which was true. Even if he died, some other man would step into his place. She’d be wealthy, a countess.

But that made him ache. To think of another man holding her close.

Because he loved her. Had for a long time.

“You would be happy with me as your wife? You’re not worried that I bring bad luck?”

“Not even a little.” Letting go of her hand, he gingerly pushed himself further up in the bed. “Clarissa, will you be my wife?”

She gave a tentative nod. “Yes.”

Victory sang in his blood. He’d closed another deal. And this one brought him more riches than any before it. It brought

her.

Now he just had to convince her to love him as much as he did her.

Either that, or he'd have to keep getting wounded. Because the gentle stroke of her fingers was his life's blood.

## CHAPTER TEN

THE NIGHT WAS LONG.

*Not entirely unpleasant*, Clarissa mused as she watched Mason sleep. She'd dosed him with laudanum.

Rest would help him heal better than anything else.

She'd fallen in and out of sleep, restless, and she woke often to make certain he was comfortable.

She'd agreed to be his wife. A countess. How could this actually be happening?

He'd offered her the very dreams she held close to her heart. As many orphanages as she could dream of running. A way to prove she was a good person. A family of her own. And best of all, he'd offered himself.

She leaned forward and allowed her fingers to stroke along his jaw. His skin was still cool to the touch. A good sign.

He breathed evenly as he continued to sleep.

So this was love.

Her heart hammered in her chest. She should have realized sooner. The way she'd dreamed of Mason.

But would she hurt him by agreeing to be his wife?

She wanted to believe what he'd said about her father being selfish. And the priest. She smiled into the darkness to think of Mason sending him away. And Penny.

Penny's life had become wonderful. She was a countess too and she'd found the love of her life. Perhaps Mason was right after all and Clarissa had been living with needless fear.

He shifted in his sleep and then murmured her name, his hand reaching out. She clasped it in her own and without thought, slid next to him on the bed. His warmth seeped into her, the firm press of his lean frame and in the dark of the night, she found herself drifting off to sleep.

She had no idea how much time had passed but when she woke, dawn filtered through the windows.

And Mason was awake.

His dark eyes looking straight into hers.

Clarissa nearly gasped to see him. His skin was pale, but his eyes glittered with that same mysterious fire that threatened to engulf her. "You're awake."

One corner of his lip curled up. "I am. It was a beautiful sleep with you pressed to my side."

"How do you feel?" She started to sit up, but he reached for her, stilling her movements.

He lightly stroked her arms. "Sore but otherwise fine."

She touched his forehead and smiled with relief. "Still nice and cool."

"We're marrying today," he said.

"Today?" She did sit up then. "Really? So quickly?"

"Did I not mention that?" He relaxed back into the bed. "Sorry, sweetheart. I'm not myself."

That seemed reasonable enough. He was injured after all. "It's fine. But how did you manage to get all the details into place while you've been bedridden?"

"Mostly it was Logan," he answered.

Her brow scrunched. "How long have I been asleep?"

He laughed at that. "Not that long."

She drew in a deep breath. She supposed it didn't matter. After rising, she poured a glass of water from the pitcher, and brought the glass to his lips.

He took a long drink. "I'd like to try and eat this morning too. Need to keep up my strength."

She gave a tentative nod. "Should we change the bandages first?"

"Sounds good. Then I insist you go get ready. I'll feed myself." He winked as though he didn't have a care in the world.

She scrunched her brow. "Your health is more important."

He gave her an easy smile. "It will do my health good to see you looking beautiful for our wedding."

She frowned, staring down at him. Their focus should be on his health, not on the wedding and certainly not on her appearance. "The wedding can wait. Breakfast first."

He shook his head. "Clarissa."

"You're the patient," she said as she swiped her hand across his forehead. "I am the caregiver. I insist."

His eyes closed and he let out a long breath that sounded distinctly like a sigh. "How can I argue with that?"

"You can't," she replied, stroking his cheek. "Now let me change your bandages and assess the wound."

He gave a slight nod and she pulled down the covers, then began to unwrap the white cloth. She frowned as she finished unwrapping him. He'd been able to lift up to help her, but the wound itself looked a bit red and raw.

"How do you feel?" she asked as she applied a salve on the skin.

"Fine." He gave her another easy smile. "It's just healing. That's all."

She rewrapped his midriff, then pulled the bell to have a tray delivered. She looked back at him, studying his face to see if he grimaced or gave some indication that he was in pain.

But his smile was still there, his gaze aching soft and decidedly sweet.

He seemed, for all the world, to be healing.

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MASON FELT LIKE HELL. But he'd been in a worse situation and he could fake it for at least the wedding.

And the consummation.

He needed to be with Clarissa once. Just in case...

He'd watched men with lesser wounds succumb to infection. As it was, he was young and strong and likely to live, but still. He wanted to touch her, feel her, and he couldn't risk missing this chance. Somehow, all the time between his last injury and this, the years had felt like borrowed time. And that he'd been preparing for this very moment.

The one where he made certain that Clarissa lived a long and healthy life full of riches of every kind.

He supposed it didn't matter if he lived or died.

Clarissa was all that mattered.

He drew in a shuddering breath. When he considered her living her life without him, with another man by her side he faltered. But he'd take what he could get. And he was grateful for whatever time he got with her.

Clarissa had left to dress and prepare for the wedding while he rested. Which mostly meant thinking. He grimaced. He wished she'd return. He didn't want to miss a second with her.

A knock came out the door and he snapped his eyes open, hoping she'd returned.

But it was Logan who cracked open the door. "May I come in?"

He slumped back on the pillows. "Of course."

“I thought you might appreciate some help dressing.”

“Dressing?” he asked, wincing as he tried to rise again. Why hadn’t he thought of that? His thoughts were muddled. He swiped at his brow trying to clear his mind.

“You can’t get married without a shirt,” Logan chuckled as he raised a hand. “I’ve brought you one of mine. Yours is...in tatters.”

That made Mason chuckle, a small grin titling up the corners of his mouth as he tried to swing his legs over the bed.

“Let me help you,” Logan said, lunging toward him to catch his elbow. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“I’m sure,” he answered. How did he explain he was willing to spend every last bit of his energy to capture this moment? He didn’t. Which was why he took Logan’s hand and hauled himself out of the bed and onto his feet.

Logan slipped the shirt onto his arms and Mason shrugged the garment up over his shoulders. Logan’s manservant entered the room and Mason’s shoulders slumped with relief. He could use the man’s aid.

In a quarter hour they had him ready and he walked down the hall, keeping his shoulders straight. He didn’t want to give anyone an excuse to cancel this event.

As he entered the library, a vicar stood by the large windows that overlooked the garden. Next to him, stood his brother, Bash. Mason looked over at Logan and nodded a silent thank you.

The children and Penny were already there, the girls once again in their red dresses, bouncing on their heels.

They made him smile. He should like to see them grow up. But then he shook his head. Best save those thoughts for later.

A soft rustle came from the door and he turned to see Clarissa walk through the door.

His breath caught. She wore a gown of pale blue silk that brought out the creaminess of her skin and the soft blue of her eyes. The dress hugged her curves, even as her hair cascaded

over one shoulder from the coif she'd used to pull it back from her face.

She looked more like the angel he envisioned her to be than she ever had before, and he could barely breathe as he stared at her. "Clarissa." His voice came out rough and hoarse with emotion.

She crossed the room, reaching his side as she held out a hand to slip her gloved fingers into his. "Are you holding up all right?"

"Never better," he answered, drawing her closer.

He meant the words with all his heart. With her here, he forgot the pain. His insides hummed with contentment at the sight of her. There was an ache too, but that was need. A desire to touch her, draw her close, and keep her there.

Her smile was gentle as her fingers squeezed his. "I'm so glad to hear it."

"Are you ready to get married?" He brushed her cheek with his other hand.

"Most unusual," the vicar muttered, shifting.

Clarissa pressed her lips together, but her eyes danced with merriment. "It is, isn't it?" Then she loosened her fingers, sliding them up his arm until they rested in the crook of his elbow.

"I think it's just right."

He led her over to the vicar and the ceremony began.

The words filtered over him, passing through his mind. But as he stared at the woman he was marrying, the sight of her would stay with him until his dying day.

She was an angel.

She'd saved him once and he'd be a fool not to see that his gift of life most assuredly would end sooner rather than later.

Hadn't his father always told him it would be so? He shook his head. He'd not think of him now. This moment was for all the happy thoughts.



“Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?” The vicar’s words nearly made him jolt, he’d been so lost in his thoughts and the vision before him.

“I do.”

She was his angel now. Slowly he leaned over, partially because of the pain in his side and partially because he wished to savor the moment and kissed her.

Clarissa was his wife.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

CLARISSA STARED at the man she'd just married, her stomach twisting with wonder and a touch of fear.

Everything had happened so quickly.

Before she could think an action through, it was being enacted. Like this wedding.

She was thrilled, but also...afraid. Was this the right choice? To marry? Should they have waited until he'd recovered? Her thoughts were a jumbled mess as they joined their guests in the breakfast room.

"I must insist we take you back to your room," she said to Mason as he gingerly lowered himself into a chair.

"Just a few minutes." He reached for her hand, bringing the back of it to his lips. "I just want to cherish this moment. We only get one wedding."

She narrowed her gaze, trying to figure out what was bothering her about his behavior.

But his brother approached. "Welcome to the family," he said, then the duke enveloped her in a rather large hug.

"I must confess, you're not what I expected in a duke."

The man winked. "I know. That's the entire plan."

She looked back at Mason, who gave a quiet sort of sad grin. "He prides himself on being the opposite man from our father."

“Your father?” she asked, shifting toward the duke. “I thought perhaps that Mason got the worst of it, being the...” She let her words trail off.

“Oh, he wished me dead, regularly. So I suppose Bash knew that he was at least wanted alive.” Mason grimaced as he rose from the chair once again.

Bash leaned down and held out an arm to his brother, helping him the rest of the way. “Yes. He wanted his precious heir to live, but I never quite lived up to his standards.”

Clarissa winced. She knew something about that. “Fathers,” she sighed as she shook her head. “Do you know anyone who’s got a good one?”

They all chuckled. “There must be some.”

Penny walked over to join them. “My father was the best sort of man.”

“No wonder you’re so happy all the time.”

Penny gave her a mock glare. “You’re lucky it’s your wedding.”

Clarissa shook her head. “It is. But it doesn’t make my words any less true. She’s always positive.”

“And you are always kind,” Mason answered.

Heat flushed her cheeks. It was a lovely thing to say. And honestly, the wedding had been perfect. Small, intimate. The only flaw...she was worried about Mason. He should be in bed.

His hand brushed her upper arm. “I think you’re right. It’s time I returned to my room.”

She nodded. “Rest is the best thing for your recovery.”

He didn’t answer as he waved goodbye and began to pull her toward the exit.

Bash stopped them, his hand coming to Mason’s shoulder. “Congratulations, brother. While I intend never to marry, I look forward to you two making an heir that can take over a dukedom and an earldom.”

Mason shook his head. “You know it doesn’t work like that. You’ll have to make an heir of your own.”

“Not going to happen,” Bash muttered, but Mason was already steering her from the room once again.

She had that same feeling she’d had at the wedding. Like she no more began to get comfortable and then things changed again. “Mason,” she said as she slipped an arm behind him, resting her hand on his back. “I’m glad you’re going to lie down but I’m worried. We seem to be rushing everything. Are you feeling—”

“I’m just excited.” He embraced her shoulders. “I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole life to finally marry you.”

That melted her insides a bit and she forgot her worries as she opened the door to his room.

The bed had been made with fresh linens, and the room cleaned while they’d been gone.

He sat on the bed and then slowly pushed back until he was lying down, his hands resting on his stomach. She pulled off her gloves, setting them on the side table. “Would you help with my boots, sweetheart?”

She turned toward him, grasping the leather at the heel and shaft and sliding it off his leg and down his foot. Then she did the other. Not waiting to ask, she began untying his cravat, then undid his shirt and pulled him back up to sitting to slide them both off.

He groaned softly. “I love the feel of your hands. They’ve always made me feel so...”

“What?” she asked, her hands stilling on his bare arms.

“Perfect,” he answered, bringing one of her palms to his lips. “I’ve never touched softer, gentler fingers than these. They make a man ache with want.”

She wound her fingers into his hair at the base of his neck. “You’re exaggerating.”

“I’m not,” he said as he pulled her closer, His head resting on her chest. The feel of him pressed against her bosom stole

her breath. “I already told you. I thought I would die in that church. I was sure I would, just as my father wished. Only your hands and your voice brought me back. And I’ve devoted that extra time you’ve given me to providing the best life for you.”

She looked down at him, reaching for his face and tilting it up toward her own. “I just have one question for you?”

“What’s that?”

“If you’ve done all this for me. What have you done for yourself?”

---

MASON OPENED HIS MOUTH, but no words came out.

Yes, he’d married her for her benefit. But it had been for his too. A little gift to himself to make his life worthwhile. The hope of seeing her again had pushed him to thrive and now, touching her, he felt truly alive. “What helps you, helps me.”

“Your father made you feel worthless. You found something to live for, but did you find real worth in yourself?”

He rumbled out his dissent. He didn’t have time to worry about such questions. He could feel his strength fading and he’d need the last of it to touch her the way he wished.

Himself? He didn’t give a damn about what happened to him, only her. But he did plan to take this moment for one thing he wanted. “Clarissa,” he whispered as he looked deep into those clear blue eyes. “Would you be a dear and take off your dress?”

She cocked a brow. “No.”

Damn. He didn’t want to have to persuade her. It used precious energy. Energy he should likely be using to heal. But right now, he just wanted her. “You asked what I was doing for me. This is what I want. Your skin against mine.”

She shook her head. “No. That can be after you’re better.”

He dropped his head against the soft pillows of her chest. “I don’t want to wait. What if I don’t recover and we never consummated? Someone might contest our marriage. We can’t have that.”

“So it’s actually for me,” she said, lifting his face again. “And something is becoming clear. You’re worried you won’t live.”

He grimaced. She was right, of course. But he wasn’t telling her that. He’d watched men die from far smaller wounds. Of course, some lived with larger ones. But he’d already had his turn at that. “The doctor says I’ve got a good chance to fully recover. But we need to have everything in place, just in case.”

“Or, we need to take better care of you to increase your chances.”

By way of answer, he slid his hand up her dress and cupped her breast in his hand, massaging the flesh as her nipple peaked in his hand. “I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll let you do all the work.”

“Mason,” she hissed as he gave the stiffened flesh the lightest tweak. “You’re too sick.”

“I swear,” he whispered, working the flesh until she melted into his arms. “This is what I want more than anything in the world.”

“More than anything?”

He forgot he didn’t feel that way as she arched against him, her head falling back. He reached for the other breast giving it the same treatment as he began to undo the buttons all along the back of her gown. “More than anything.”

She stepped away then and, for a moment, he thought she’d make another stand against him, and he didn’t know if he had the strength to convince her again. But Clarissa tugged on each sleeve and the dress’s bodice slumped at her waist. With remarkable efficiency, she stripped down to nothing but her chemise.

He was certain his eyes burned with fire as she stepped back toward him. This was what he'd wanted.

And as she pressed to his chest, no corset or gown to mar her shape, he groaned as he traced every curve with his hands. "My god, Clarissa. You're so beautiful."

"I can't believe you think that," she gasped as his hands skimmed her breast again. "I spent years dreaming of you and..."

He stopped moving his hands, his head snapping up. "You what?"

Color infused her cheeks. "I would daydream of you. That you'd find me. That we'd marry. I never expected you to be an earl, of course. But in my dreams, you'd tell me you'd been looking for me. That you loved—"

She'd been thinking of him all this time too? It wasn't just him? "I do love you, Clarissa. I love you with all my heart."

Her mouth came down on his, their kiss burning in its intensity as their tongues mingled together until she finally raised her head again. "I love you too." She kissed him again. "I have for a long time."

He knew how significant that was. To know that she loved him made it even easier to think of his life as complete. He'd done all the things he'd needed to prove his father wrong and make these last several years worth living.

He tugged at the falls of his breeches, wanting to do more than just tell her how he felt. He wanted to make her his.

It wasn't fair. If he'd had his strength he would have made love to her slowly, kissing every inch of her, bringing her to finish multiple times before he finally took her. But as he'd tried to warn her, this was selfish on his part.

When he got the trousers around his thighs he lay back, pulling her on top of him. He managed to only wince a little when her weight came down on him and then he was pulling up her chemise and sliding her knees on either side of his hips.

His staff pushed into her soft folds and he groaned to already find her wet and ready.

“Mason,” she gasped into his ear. “Tell me what to do.”

But he was already sliding into her slick folds. Tight as she was, he felt the moment he pushed against her maidenhead. “I just need to push past this part,” he gritted out as he thrust inside her.

She stiffened but made no sound.

“Are you all right?” he asked, kissing her temple. But inside, he glowed with satisfaction. To be inside this woman... He stroked her back. This was where he'd belonged.

“Yes.” She grazed his temple with a kiss. “Are you?”

Always the caregiver.

“I'm wonderful.” And then he slid out of her and back in. His body spasmed, need already overwhelming him. “Clarissa,” he murmured, his hand cupping her backside. “I want you to be happy.”

“I will be,” she answered, kissing his mouth. “I've got you.”

He didn't answer as he moved inside her again. He quickened the pace, knowing he only had so much energy to give but she met his thrust and soon they were moving together.

He felt her tightening around him, her breath coming in short quick gasps and he groaned, his own end making every muscle in his body taut.

And then when he wasn't sure he could stand another moment, she broke apart in his arms, crying out her finish.

He came too, his seed filling her even as he collapsed back against the bed. They'd had today and that had to be enough.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

CLARISSA WOKE as the sun began to set. How long had she been asleep?

After being awake for most of the night, she'd fallen into a deep sleep. Her body was snug against Mason's side and she blinked to realize she was naked and warm. Too warm.

Her eyes widened as she pushed up looking down at her sleeping husband.

His skin was pale and clammy.

Fear trickled down her back as she lifted her hand to touch his forehead. He was burning hot.

"Mason?" she asked, wrapping an arm about him. Was she warming him or trying to control her own trembling which had begun deep in her core and was spreading through her body? "Mason. Can you hear me?"

He moaned softly, his head sliding back and forth across his pillow.

She let out a soft sob. She'd made a terrible mistake. She should have never allowed the wedding and certainly not their activities after.

But she'd wanted him to be happy.

She loved him.

And he'd wished to be with her.

Her earlier thoughts came back. His almost fatalistic attitude. Like he expected this to be the end.

Was he planning to leave her? Or had he just known that infection was coming?

She winced. She should have seen this fever coming. And she should have done more to protect him.

This was why she hadn't wanted to marry. She never could get it right.

She choked back a cry as she rose from the bed and tucked Mason tight in the covers. Then she hurriedly dressed and stoked up the fire. Working quickly, she got fresh water and slowly dripped some into his mouth.

Gently, she sponged down his face, ridding his skin of its clammy appearance.

She wanted to check his wound, but she'd wait until the room was warmer.

But waiting made her insides frantic and so she sat down at the dressing table, tapping her toe as she stared at him. Her mind worked through everything he'd told her. About his father wishing him dead. About his own attempt to throw his life away on the battlefield.

His choice to dedicate his life to her.

It was almost as though he were throwing his life away now that he'd accomplished the one goal he'd set out to do.

Though he said he was over his father's words, Clarissa wondered if Mason actually valued his own life.

She straightened. He was going to start caring for himself, not just her.

Because she'd never forgive herself if he died.

She clenched her fists. If he wouldn't live for himself, he'd live for her. She stood again. It was time to make her husband well.

Working through the evening, she kept him warm and dry and hydrated as best she could.

At one point, he partially woke, and she had him sip a tea infused with ginger root to aid in bringing down the fever.

She heard the clock strike one in the wee hours of the night when she climbed into the bed next to him and pressed her body to his.

He was still hot but as she touched his forehead, hope bloomed in her chest. He was cooler than he'd been this afternoon, and this was often the time of day when fever was the worst.

There was hope.

With that in mind, she pressed closer, wrapping her arm about his chest. If there was a problem, she'd feel it.

With that in mind, she closed her eyes.

Then, she fell asleep.

---

MASON WOKE to the early morning light, which still burned his eyes. It told him several things.

First, he was still alive.

A small smile spread across his lips. He'd thwarted death once again.

His father would be so disappointed. But he also shifted and felt the warm solid form of his wife pressed next to him.

His wife.

At his movement, her eyes snapped open. "Mason?"

"Yes," he croaked. Everything hurt.

She raised her hand to his forehead, her fingers pressing against his skin. They felt warm and achingly soft.

"Thank God, you're nice and cool." Her breath blew across his cheek, fanning his skin with warm air.

"Truth be told, I'm nice and warm with you next to me."

She frowned, her brows drawing together. "How long have you been fever-free?"

“I don’t know. I just woke feeling less cold and achier.”

Her frown deepened. “We need to discuss some things.”

“What things?” But she was already rising from the bed and he grimaced as her heat left him. She crossed the room and pulled the bell cord.

“Things like how you were prepared to give up,” she said as she gave a good hard tug. “How you were preparing to die.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t actively want to die. But I’ve been close before and that changes a person. You have to be prepared for the possibility.”

“You lied to me about how well you were feeling.” Her arms crossed over her chest.

He winced. “Sorry about that, love. There were just a few things I wanted to accomplish just in case...”

“But those things endangered your life.” She crossed over to him again, even as her voice grew louder. “Did it ever occur to you that losing you would be devastating? I’m in love with you...”

He shuddered as he looked up at her hurt expression. Damn. He should have thought of that. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, sweetheart. I just assumed...”

“What did you assume?” she asked, her voice dropping low again.

He closed his eyes. “That I was already on borrowed time. That this was the end.”

“You know how you told me my father was wrong?” Her weight sank into the mattress next to him and she reached for his hand, slipping her fingers against his palm.

“Yes,” he answered, bringing the back of her hand to his lips.

“That he was selfish, and I didn’t ruin his life, he ruined his own with his bad decisions.”

“That’s right.”

She drew in a deep breath, then leaned down and rubbed her cheek against his. She whispered close to his ears. “You were never meant to die. Your father pushed you to take risks the first time and nearly succeeded in ruining your life. But that’s because he was only thinking of his own mistakes. They’ve nothing to do with you. You deserve a full, happy life.”

He swallowed down a lump. She’d hit that note deep within him that he rarely acknowledged. “I took my mother’s life with my own. I’ve done nothing for this world.”

“Not true,” she breathed, her chest pressing to his. “Together, we will make a difference. We’re going to open orphanages alongside Penny and Logan. Start a family of our own. Children who will continue to do good in this world. You’ll do far more than he ever did.” Then she sat up. “We both will.”

His throat clogged with emotion. “What if I don’t? What if that selfish bastard’s legacy is deep within me? You heard me yesterday. I...”

“Stop,” she said, pressing her hand to his cheek. “You were trying to take your very last pleasures, which I understand. I just don’t want you to think like that. Think like your life is the most precious gift in all the world. Because it is to me.”

He opened his mouth to speak, to argue but then he thought about what he’d say to her if the conversation was reversed and he closed his mouth again. “We’re going to have to teach each other how to value ourselves.”

She grinned at them. “That’s an excellent way to think about it.”

He shook his head. “I won’t regret yesterday. It was the best day of my life.”

“Oh Mason. You’re insufferable. You nearly put yourself into an early grave.”

“But at least this time it was with love instead of worry and regret.”

She laughed then. “Never again. Do you hear me?”

“I’ll try.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “You’ll help me when I need it, won’t you.”

“I will. Always.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MASON SAT in a chair next to the fire, watching his wife read.

It had been a week of wedded bliss. He'd never been happier.

He was recovering nicely, though he needed to sleep a great deal. Fortunately, Clarissa was excellent at keeping him company during his naps and at night, and in the early morning hours. He grinned.

"What are you staring at?" Clarissa gave him a mock look of annoyance.

He chuckled. "My beautiful wife, of course."

She sighed, setting down the novel. "It still seems like a dream."

He reached for her hand. "Do you miss Natty and the other girls now that you're here with me?"

She nodded. "Yes. I do. But I've seen them nearly every day and I'm excited to begin my own journey. As a countess, I won't be working in an orphanage day to day like I planned..."

He winced. He was so happy with her at his side but she'd given up a great deal to make that happen. "You're not disappointed, are you?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. I married the best negotiator in England, I've been told. And he will certainly start acquiring properties for more orphanages while I begin hiring staff and supplying goods for children in need."

“I think I can do that,” he grinned as he gave her hand a squeeze.

“Once you are recovered.”

A knock sounded at the door as the butler entered. “The Earl of Goldthwaite is here to see you, my lord.”

“See him in,” Mason let go of Clarissa’s hand, rising.

Logan entered, a frown marking his jaw.

Mason skipped the formalities. “What’s wrong?”

Logan stepped forward. “When the orphanage first caught on fire, I put out a call in the neighborhood. I’d pay handsomely for information.” He rubbed his hands on his thighs. “A woman has come forward. Says that the men who attacked us were always coming in and out of a place on Fletcher Street.”

Mason straightened as Clarissa stepped up next to him. “What does that mean? Is that where my blackmailer—”

He slipped an arm about her. “Perhaps.”

Logan cleared his throat. “There is only one way to find out.”

Mason gave Clarissa a squeeze as she let out a gasp.

“You’re not going to go there, are you?” She looked up at him, her eyes filled with fear.

He hated to worry her but this was his job. “I’ll be fine, love.”

“But you’re still recovering.” She looked to Logan. “Send the Bow Street Runners. You needn’t go.”

Mason stepped away from his wife. He hadn’t wanted to worry her, but he’d had a suspicion about who had sent those letters and he wanted to confirm or deny those fears. “We’ll take them with us for certain. Whoever did this, should be arrested and prosecuted.”

She reached up and touched his face. “We’ve only just put my past to rest. Why do this now?”



He leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her lips. “Sweetheart, I promised to protect you always. Remember?”

His statement was met with silence.

“Logan will keep me safe.”

“I will,” Logan answered. “But he’s right, Clarissa. This man has been threatening you for months. It’s time we took care of it.”

“Bring Bash too,” she said as she looked down at the floor.

“Fine,” he replied. His brother was damn good with a pistol. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

And then he slipped away from his wife.

An hour later the carriage rolled up to the front of a dingy-looking building.

“This place looks about right,” Bash said from his seat next to Mason.

“The woman who came forward said they were in and out of the first floor. The residence on the left.”

“That’s amazingly specific,” Bash replied, craning his neck to look out the window.

Logan pushed back his curtain as well. “She lives just above. Said she saw the man who stays there in a priest’s collar on more than one occasion.”

Mason’s fist clenched as he let out a low rumble. “It’s him. Father Byron. I’m sure of it.”

“So what’s next?” Bash asked. “Are we going in there and pummeling a priest?”

“We’ll wait for the Bow Street Runners,” Mason answered. Not because he didn’t wish to race in and plant his fist directly in Byron’s face but because he’d promised Clarissa.

And he’d always keep his promises to her.

“Seriously? You dragged me from the club to sit in the carriage?”

“Clarissa insisted he bring you for assistance.”

Bash chuckled. “That’s because my sister-in-law is extremely intelligent.”

Mason didn’t respond. A carriage pulled up behind him and two men stepped out. The Runners.

As silently as they could, they climbed out of the carriage. Quickly, introductions were made. Jensen was large with fists like anvils while Hastings was wiry and had the look of a man who could get out of any scrape.

Mason allowed the two men to move to the head of the group as they all stepped into a narrow hall.

“The first door on the left,” Logan whispered.

Jensen gave a swift knock on the door.

“Who is it?” a voice called from inside. Haughty and cold, Mason knew the sound of that voice anywhere. Byron.

“It’s me,” Jensen called back.

“Who?” Byron snapped and then the door swung open.

It was over before it had even begun. In a matter of seconds Jensen and Hastings had the priest pinned to the floor. Mason didn’t even look at the man as he stepped into the filthy stinkhole. Scattered on the desk were various pieces of parchment. Picking one up, his hand closed into a fist. He’d been attempting to write another letter to Clarissa. This one detailing an exact drop location for the money.

Mason let out a cold laugh. “This is all the proof you’ll need, gentleman.”

“Proof?” Byron shrieked. “I’m only asking for what’s mine. She stole from me. I—”

Mason let out a snarl of protest. “Never speak of the countess like that.”

“Countess?” Byron’s eyes widened from his spot on the floor. “You married her?”

“I did.” He drew up to full height despite the ache in his side. “I told you five years ago you’d pay for your crimes. He

had me shot. He was attempting to extort money from my wife. Before that, he abused the children under his care.”

“That’s enough for me,” Jensen said. He pulled Byron from the floor and began escorting him outside. “You’re coming with me.”

Hastings looked over at Mason. “What did he mean that your wife owed him?”

The room stilled as both Logan and Bash looked over at him. But Mason gave an easy smile. “I sent him to a tiny Scottish island after what he did to her. Since then, he’s created some wild story about her stealing from him. This woman is the same one who’s been running an orphanage in London. Plans to open several more. He’s attempting to denigrate her character in revenge.”

Hastings gave a quick nod. “Been harassing her since her friend married the Earl of Goldthwaite?”

“That’s correct,” Logan answered. “Tried to burn down the orphanage with the children inside.”

“Scum.” Jensen spit. “Probably thought he’d found his golden goose.”

Mason nodded, relief making his shoulders dip. It was over. Clarissa was safe now and forever.

The rest of their life could begin.

## EPILOGUE

*APRIL 1822*

*Eight months later...*

MASON SAT behind his desk at the new location of the Wicked Earls' Club, a satisfied smile gracing his lips as he assessed his latest handiwork. The interior of the new location was nearly identical to the previous location. Dark wood paneling lined all the walls, rich and gleaming.

His office was near the large ballroom that graced the second floor. Tucked in a quiet corner, it allowed him to observe the happenings of his Wicked Earls while being mostly unseen.

A knock sounded at the door and the Earl of Alnwick entered, his flashing grin reminding Mason how wicked many of the men were. That was fine. They didn't know what was headed their way.

"The earls are all here." The man said. "They barely fit, even in that large room."

Mason tipped back in his chair. He'd invited all the members, old and new, to see the new location. The old members were essential to his plan. "Excellent. I'll be out in just a moment."

Alnwick paused. "I wasn't sure about moving the club. We'd operated in the old location for a long time."

Mason nodded. “It was my hesitation too. But this place...”

“It’s perfect.” Alnwick glanced around him, beaming with approval. “I agree.”

Mason smiled back. He hadn’t actually said the words out loud, but they were in agreement. “It is. Tucked just enough off the beaten path to keep us anonymous while still keeping us and our guests...safe.”

Alnwick gave a jerk of his chin and then turned to leave. Just before he stepped out the door, he turned back. “I like that you invited the old members, even if they did give up on our way of life.”

Mason chuckled. “We’re all earls. Every one of you will marry eventually.”

Alnwick cocked a brow. “Not if I can help it, I won’t.”

Mason’s grin broadened. Perhaps one of the old earls could think of a potential bride for Alnwick. The man was in desperate need of reforming.

But that project could wait.

He knew a man who needed his help even more.

His brother.

The Duke of Decadence.

He and Clarissa had stayed up late last night discussing that very topic.

His brother looked to all the world to be the happy-go-lucky duke, but they knew better.

The door clicked closed as Alnwick left and Mason rose from his chair. He’d go greet the guests. Introduce them to the new club. Then he’d leave at a respectable hour with the rest of the former Wicked Earls to return home to his wife.

Clarissa.

Even thinking about her now made him ache with need to hold her close.

He spent hours every night holding her in her arms, his hand covering her growing belly.

A child.

One he'd love with every fiber of his being. That child would grow up knowing that he or she was loved every day.

He pushed open the door, eager to greet the earls and then get home.

Back to his heart.

He barely made it an hour in the company of those men before he slipped out the back into his waiting carriage. The dark London streets surrounded him like a blanket as he made his way home.

He found Clarissa where he always did. In their favorite sitting room, a fire roaring in the grate.

She grinned as she saw him. "You didn't make it very late."

He shook his head. "We've got an orphanage to open tomorrow. I need my rest."

She rose and wrapped her arms about his neck. "Natty is over the moon you're going to allow her to cut the ribbon."

He hugged her close, kissing his wife's lips. "Are you sad you won't be living with the orphans?"

"No," she gave him a bit of a push. "I've already told you. What we're doing, starting homes for children, is just as important."

"I agree," he murmured, holding her even closer. "And you were right. We'll prove both our fathers wrong."

She smiled at him cupping his cheek. "We already have."

"We have indeed." He kissed her then as he swung her into his arms.

Plans for his brother would have to wait.

Tonight was about him and his beautiful wife.

And their love.

Which would surely feed him for a long full lifetime.

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*Hugs!*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tammy Andresen lives with her husband and three children just outside of Boston, Massachusetts. She grew up on the Seacoast of Maine, where she spent countless days dreaming up stories in blueberry fields and among the scrub pines that line the coast. Her mother loved to spin a yarn and Tammy filled many hours listening to her mother retell the classics. It was inevitable that at the age of eighteen, she headed off to Simmons College, where she studied English literature and education. She never left Massachusetts but some of her heart still resides in Maine and her family visits often.

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# EARL OF TEMPEST

BY ANNABELLE ANDERS

## CHAPTER ONE

“ARE you sure it’s okay for both of us to go in, Clarissa?” Lady Lydia Cockfield, daughter of the Duke of Blackheart, had never in a million years imagined she’d enter such an establishment as the *Wicked Earls’ Club*—a *Gentlemen’s* club, frequented by *earls*.

And if the name was anything to go by, she could only assume they were *wicked* ones.

Lydia tilted her head back to stare up at the mostly unimpressive building, her arm locked with that of her friend and mentor, the Countess of Baxter.

“You’re not afraid to enter vacant warehouses on the docks in East London, but you’re reluctant to enter my husband’s gentlemen’s club?” Clarissa teased, looking extraordinarily pretty despite wearing a plain gown for today’s errands. The married countess, not quite a decade older than Lydia, smiled impishly as she pounded on the door a second time.

“Bully for you, Clarissa. As Lord Baxter’s wife, you’ve had years to get used to—” Lydia waved her hand in front of the door and then lowered her voice. “—all of this *wickedness*.”

“Not quite eight years.” Clarissa sighed and then the heavy door swung open for them, revealing a giant of a man. Although he was dressed impeccably, he was obviously not one of the members. It showed in his bearing, as well as the scars on his bald head and the watchfulness in his eyes.

Upon seeing the countess, he bowed. “My apologies for keeping you waiting, Lady Baxter.”

“Not at all, Ben. Lady Lydia and I only just arrived.” Clarissa smiled. “We’ve come to have a word with my husband. Is he busy today?”

“No more than usual. May I take your coats before showing you up?”

Lydia squashed down her nerves as she handed over her coat and scarf. If either of her two older brothers discovered that she’d come here, they would banish her to Crescent Park for the rest of her life.

Thank heavens Blackheart was on holiday with his new wife, and Lucas and Naomi were residing at his estate in Kent, preoccupied with their little family.

When Lady Baxter had written to her at Crescent Park, suggesting Lydia travel to London to volunteer at one of the orphanages she and her husband had founded, Lydia had leapt at the opportunity. It had been precisely what she’d needed to get over... well, to move on with her life.

And as she’d become more aware of the lost childrens’ plight, she had not been able to settle for such limited involvement.

Which led her to the Wicked Earl’s Club today.

A strand of dark hair had slipped out of her chignon, and she brushed it back.

Not even Lucinda, her twin sister, was here to question any of her decisions.

Dismissing any guilt, and curious now that she was actually inside, Lydia trailed behind Clarissa, awed by the dark wood paneling, the rich and gleaming tables, and the ornate sconces and chandeliers. Contradictory to her expectations, most of the gaming tables were occupied.

Even early in the afternoon, it seemed, gentlemen of the British aristocracy wagered and drank.

A few curious eyes followed her suspiciously at first, but she was quickly forgotten when a scantily clad woman stepped onto the floor bearing a tray of drinks.

What would it be like to be so composed, dressed so provocatively in a room filled with nothing but men?

“She’s not a prostitute,” Clarissa whispered over her shoulder.

“I didn’t think she was!” But Lydia had wondered...

“The men aren’t allowed to touch her without permission. If they do, they are given only one warning; after that, their membership is revoked. This is a gentlemen’s club, not a brothel.”

“So they aren’t allowed to be *completely* wicked?” Lydia’s question was only half-joking. She’d always heard otherwise but supposed Clarissa likely wouldn’t approve of her husband overseeing that sort of establishment.

Recognizing a few of her brother’s acquaintances standing at a table with a large spinning wheel, she couldn’t help asking in a hushed voice, “Is Blackheart a member?”

Even though he was married now, that didn’t mean he hadn’t been *wicked* once.

“Members’ names are never shared, not even with family—or should I say, especially not with family. To be honest, it’s likely the main reasons they pay—anonymity and confidentiality.”

“So he is?”

“Be good, Lydia.” Clarissa’s blue eyes twinkled as she wagged a finger over her shoulder.

*So he was.* But would he remain a member now that he’d married?

Lydia smothered a grin and slid her hand along the smooth wood of the rail as they climbed a wide carpeted stairway.

Most of her earlier trepidation had vanished. She’d expected the club to be darker somehow, with smoke-filled

rooms and garish décor.

Instead, everything was both refined and luxurious. A perfect design, incorporating the masculine simplicity of dark wood with tasteful art on the walls and plush tapestry-like carpet.

And if wealth had a smell, this would be it. Mahogany, expensive cologne, and cigar smoke.

“They pay for more than that,” she murmured quietly.

But she was forgetting why they’d come here in the first place. She increased her pace to catch up with Clarissa and... Ben.

With Blackheart away, the only approval she’d needed for this endeavor was from her dear aunt Emma and that had been easily obtained. Even so, she and Clarissa were going to require additional funds to help pay for operations and some of the renovations. She didn’t have time to imagine the goings-on behind the closed doors of the Wicked Earls’ Club.

“Do you really think Baxter will help? He hardly knows me.”

“Oh, but he knows me,” Clarissa all but sang. “And since I am your partner in this project, I’m confident he’ll offer up a significant donation.” She stopped behind their giant guide, who was peering inside a small opening of a particularly ornate door, and Lydia halted behind her.

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“I MIGHT CONSIDER INVESTING, Tempest. But I can’t speak for Bash or Gold. You have to know that neither is fond of you. Have you never considered trying to be the slightest bit personable?” The Earl of Baxter, a gentleman of not quite forty, known for his charm and charisma, leaned back in his plush leather chair. The two were meeting in Baxter’s corner office on the second floor of the club he managed.

Jeremy didn’t find Baxter’s comment at all amusing but brushed it off. Because he had, indeed, come to discuss



procuring investors to go in on the purchase of Ludwig Bros. Shipping, and the earl hadn't turned him down outright.

"Doesn't matter if they like me or not, so long as the investment turns a pretty penny." And in the end, when their estates didn't fall into disrepair for lack of funds, they would thank him.

Even if they did consider him an ass.

"It shouldn't matter, no, and yet it does." Baxter leaned forward again to peruse the documentation provided.

Jeremy could practically recite each page from memory. He'd turned every stone before putting this deal together and was determined Ludwig Bros. Shipping would be in his control in a matter of days. He'd have unfettered access to everything: records of past shipments, past customers, and...

Past payments. He would clear his brother's name once and for all.

The fact that he stood to profit significantly from the deal didn't hurt either.

"I suppose—" A knock on the door cut Baxter off.

Without being granted permission, one of Baxter's employees pushed the door open just enough to stick his head inside. "Your wife, here to see you, My Lord, along with another lady."

Baxter had been married nearly a decade, which made it rather embarrassing to see his eyes light up like a lovesick fool. "Send her in, Ben."

Jeremy glanced at his fob watch just as the door opened wide, allowing Lady Baxter, a lovely young blond woman to enter, followed by...

Oh, hell.

Even with her ebony hair tied back in an austere knot, cheeks pink from the cold and wearing clothes that had seen far better days, Lady Lydia Cockfield was more beautiful than ever.

Unresolved emotions ambushed him.

If he'd wanted to meet up with members of the Cockfield family, he'd have lingered at Galewick Manor, his country home in Sussex. Ignoring his instinct to stiffen in his chair, Jeremy remained seated. To do otherwise would imply that he cared one way or another.

The earl rose and moved around his desk, taking both of the countess' hands in his with a welcoming smile. "Clarissa, my love, you're a sight for sore eyes today." For a moment, Jeremy wondered if the man was going to actually kiss his wife in front of him.

"Working hard today, Mason?" The petite lady moved closer to the club owner as Baxter's arm slipped around her waist. In Jeremy's present state of mind, practically nothing annoyed him more than a happily married man.

God might as well open his wounds and rub salt in them.

"I never do." The besotted man obviously wasn't at all annoyed with the interruption.

Feeling almost voyeuristic, Jeremy slid his gaze away from the couple to Lydia, who hovered near the door, her dark lashes fanning out beneath her eyes as she stared down at the floor.

He didn't need to stare into her eyes to know that they were the most brilliant cobalt that existed and felt sucker-punched when she peeked up and caught him watching her. Pink tinged her cheeks before she quickly glanced away.

"Lady Lydia and I are here on business, Mason." Lady Baxter stepped away from her husband and clasped her hands together primly at her waist.

Baxter turned his attention to his wife's companion. "Hello, My Lady. You are acquainted with Lord Tempest, are you not? But of course, you are. Galewick Manor and Crescent Park border one another."

She nodded. "My brother's and Lord Tempest's estates neighbor one another's. Only a small stream separates their land."

“We’re practically related.” The words rolled sardonically out of Jeremy’s mouth. “Hello, Lydia.”

The last time he’d seen her, he’d ordered her to stay away from him. Along with the rest of her backstabbing family.

“My Lord.” She flicked her eyes in his direction for only a second, the blue flashing like the hottest fire, before settling them back on Baxter.

“Lady Lydia and I have a proposition for you, darling,” Lady Baxter lounged on her husband’s desk as she fluttered her eyelashes up at him. “There is a warehouse that begs to be turned into an orphanage.”

“Another one?” Baxter cocked a brow, albeit quite enjoying his wife’s flirtation.

“As long as there are orphans,” she answered.

“And where is this warehouse?”

“Near the docks, at the intersection of Wapping and Tuesday Street,” Lydia answered.

“The old fish-packing plant,” Jeremy mused. He knew the area well.

It was also dead center of one of the most dangerous districts in all of East London.

Baxter’s eyes narrowed. “Please, don’t tell me you’ve been traipsing around alone down there, Clarissa.”

“Not traipsing, inspecting. And most definitely not alone. We had Wiggs and Drake in tow.”

“Even so...”

“It’s quite sound and large enough to house up to three hundred children.” Lydia was all business now, not looking nearly as demur as when she’d first entered the gentleman’s office. “And what better place to open an orphanage than where most of the orphans are?”

“You mean thieves and pickpockets,” Jeremy corrected her.

She pinned her stare on him. “I mean *children*. Some aren’t much older than five or six. With workhouses as their only other option, the poor innocents fall victim to the gang bosses. But what if they had another option? An option that would provide them with a safe place to live that wasn’t under the thumbs of criminals? And food and shelter? And, depending on their abilities, education? Doesn’t everyone stand to gain?”

“How so, My Lady?” Baxter asked.

“If we deprive the gang bosses of cheap labor, they’ll have to go elsewhere. That makes for safer offices and docks for the entire district. And less crime means more legal commerce.”

In theory, she had the right of it. “Gang bosses don’t relinquish their resources easily,” Jeremy countered. Having investigated some of the Ludwig Bros. more questionable practices, he knew this all too well.

Crime would always be present on the docks. Battles would always be fought over who controlled commerce.

Lydia lifted that chin of hers and swung her attention back to him. “I’m not naïve, Jer—My Lord. I quite understand that there will be difficulties. But we are here to speak to Lord Baxter, if you don’t mind.”

“No, no.” Baxter rubbed his hands together, looking rather like the cat who’d eaten the canary. “Lord Tempest, here, might be an even better person to help you.” The bastard grinned at Jeremy. “Something like this would help attract those investors. Show your more charitable side. Soften your reputation, so to speak. It could be an opportunity to show that you aren’t simply a machine who crunches numbers.”

“We don’t need help purchasing it,” Lydia said. “I have funds to do that, myself.”

“But we need help financing day-to-day operations,” Clarissa explained.

“Until we can attract other benefactors.” Lydia appeared quite serious.

“Tempest, what do you say?” Baxter eyed him. “In the meantime, I could meet with Gold and my brother to discuss your little project. Perhaps even a few others.”

The club manager had him between a rock and a hard place. If Jeremy didn’t have support, purchasing the shipping company could prove more difficult than he’d hoped.

Money to finance operations for an orphanage was a drop in the bucket compared to what Baxter and his friends could bring to the table.

“I’ll have my engineers take a look at it,” he conceded.

“It’s been declared sound.” Lydia didn’t appear at all happy with this turn of events.

Well, that made two of them.

“By whom? The seller?” Judging by the look on her face, he’d assumed correctly. “I’ll check it out myself.”

“Perhaps the two of you could discuss the details while you escort Lady Lydia to my wife’s carriage. If you both wouldn’t mind excusing me a moment, I’d like a private... moment or two with Her Ladyship.”

“Not at all.” Jeremy crossed to the door, not acknowledging the dark-haired beauty when he passed her. Hell and damnation, even her fragrance still affected him—something sweet but also floral. He opened the door and turned around. “Are you coming, My Lady?” He cocked one brow in her direction, noting her curves were even more voluptuous than they had been before.

She joined him at the door and then tilted her head back, smiling brilliantly. “How could I refuse?”

He hated it when she did that. He narrowed his eyes and frowned. “I don’t suppose you can.”

## CHAPTER TWO

LYDIA'S LIPS trembled when she smiled at him, but she refused to be anything other than professional. She had come here today on business and would not allow her emotions to get the better of her. Even if her knees did, nearly give out on her, when she skirted around him.

He stiffened and scowled, and the part of her heart that had finally started to heal broke open again. Just a hint of his scent, spicy with a hint of cedar, had her remembering other times that they'd walked together.

He assumed she was unhappy because he'd refused to trust her judgment regarding the condition of the warehouse. He assumed she was not happy that she was going to have to work with him, rather than Lord Baxter.

But he was wrong. Her unhappiness came from seeing him this way—dearest Jeremy—hardened and jaded.

Jeremy Gilcrest was an earl, and by nature, had never been an overly demonstrative gentleman, even before his brother's death the year before. He'd been reserved and his smiles had been rare. Duty had always come first. And because of this, many had considered him unfeeling.

But she'd known better.

Jeremy had not been heartless—not with her and not with the people he had cared for.

The fact that he'd shut them out was why she was unhappy. Her throat thickened with emotion at the thought.

“Do your brothers know you are here?” His voice skated over her senses as he trailed behind her. He hadn’t offered his arm, and he did not touch his hand to her back protectively.

“Blackheart is on the Continent, and Lucas is in Kent. Aunt Emma has taken up residence at Heart Place in Blackheart’s absence as my guardian.” She straightened her back. “But I’m not a child.”

“Ah, yes. Dear Aunt Millicent. She’s the deaf one, is she not? The one who wears obnoxiously thick spectacles.”

“She is a little hard of hearing but I’d hardly call her deaf. When did you become so cruel?” Lydia refused to look at him.

“You are not yet nine and ten, and Blackheart abandons you in London to fend for yourself? What on earth is he thinking?”

On her eighteenth birthday, less than ten months before, even though Jeremy had been in mourning for his brother, he’d taken her for a romantic stroll through the meadow that stretched between Galewick Manor and Crescent Park. He’d gently tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and the two of them had strolled to the waterfall at the tip of both estates.

He’d told her the bluebells reminded him of the color of her eyes. And he’d kissed her.

The gentle pressure of his lips on hers had sent her heart racing. The feel of his arms pulling her close had made her blood flow hot.

Now, he acted as though they were strangers.

“I did not expect to see you here,” she informed him.

“Oh, really?”

Lydia clenched her jaw.

Four months before, he’d specifically asked her to keep away from him. Against her heart’s desire, she had honored that request.

*Wednesday, November Fourth.*

She'd awoken believing it would be the happiest day of her life, but by the time the sun had set, was left nursing a broken heart. She would never forget the date. It was imprinted on her soul.

He'd presented himself at Crescent Park in the morning and then disappeared into the study with both of her brothers. He had come to ask for her hand and although a marriage between the two of them would be a benefit to both estates, it was also going to be a love match.

Such an alliance would have been a celebrated one—the daughter of a duke to a neighboring earl.

But there had been no celebration that day.

When he'd emerged from Blackheart's study, Jeremy had not come to her in the drawing room, dropped onto one knee, and declared his undying love.

He had marched angrily past the drawing room, slammed the front door behind him, and then ridden off on his horse as though the hounds of hell had been chasing him.

Her brothers told her the meeting had not concerned her and then refused to give her any other explanation. None of it made sense, and so—even though it was snowing—she'd donned her half-boots, woolen coat, mittens, and scarf and traversed the well-worn path to Galewick Manor. What could her brothers possibly have done to offend him?

She had been concerned but not overly so. It had to have been a simple misunderstanding. She could fix this. She would talk with him, apologize for her brothers, and he could continue courting her.

She'd entered the library at Galewick Manor feeling hopeful, but that hope had faltered when he'd greeted her with cold and unwelcoming eyes. She'd seen him tired and hurt and filled with despair, but she'd never seen him angry.

He'd ordered her to cease her visits. He didn't want to have anything to do her family ever again. And that had included her.



She'd begged him to tell her why, to make her understand, but just like her brothers, he'd failed to give her the reason why.

By the time she'd trudged home, her hope had died.

Four months had passed since he'd broken her heart. She hadn't laid eyes on him again until today.

But for the murmuring of masculine voices from below and an occasional cheer, the two of them approached the staircase in silence. Three ladies now circulated amongst the gentlemen in the gaming area below, all of them scantily dressed in identical gowns.

From her vantage point, Lydia noticed feathers tucked into their chic but messy buns, their curled hair twisted into tall styles atop their heads.

Trailing her hand along the smooth railing, she felt unusually plain and drab as she descended to the main floor.

"Not all ladies are daughters of a duke," Jeremy chastised, apparently misreading her lingering gaze. He gripped her elbow in case she needed steadying as they began their descent, his disdain somehow palpable even in his touch.

Lydia fidgeted with her gloves when they finally arrived at the club entrance, spotting the same large man from before.

"Mr... Ben? Would you please have Lady Baxter's carriage brought around?" she asked primly, aware that Jeremy was watching her, leaning casually against one of the large columns that flanked the door.

She hated that she was wearing one of the plainest gowns she owned—a brown muslin, patches on the skirt and unadorned by any embroidery or lace. She and Clarissa had both agreed it would be best not to stand out when they visited the docks.

She also hated that she wanted his good opinion and that the skin where he'd touched her still tingled.

"I won't hold you to Lord Baxter's suggestion. I'll find another sponsor." It might delay the opening of the orphanage,

but as Blackheart's sister, she wasn't without connections.

"I'm afraid the decision isn't mine to make." He continued staring at her, unsmiling.

"But if you are involved, you'll have no choice but to work with me, perhaps daily at times. And quite possibly my brothers as well. I thought you never wanted to see us Cockfields again."

"Some things are worth the trouble." He pushed away from the wall.

"You mean this other project Lord Baxter mentioned?"

His mouth remained set and hard. "Yes."

Was that all she was to him now? *Trouble?*

Lydia rolled her lips together, wanting to ask what he'd been doing these past four months, wanting to breach this gulf between them. But also stinging from the animosity rolling off of him.

He'd once welcomed her questions. He'd once allowed her to comfort him. "How is your mother? Is she here in London?" she asked instead.

Pain flashed across his face. She only recognized it because she'd seen it so many times in the past.

"She is here but she is... recovering. She had apoplexy on boxing day." His voice sounded unemotional and flat.

Lydia's hand flew up to her chest. "I am so sorry. I would have visited her if—"

"She's not taking visitors." He refused to meet her gaze now, choosing instead to stare at the gaming tables. "Don't come here again. This isn't a place for ladies."

"Oh." That must mean he spent a good deal of his time here then. Did he flirt with the ladies when he gambled? "I didn't know you were a member."

"The club's membership is private." The ice in his voice slashed through to the core of her bones. The look in his eyes

informed her that his personal life would be kept private as well.

From her.

She hugged her arms in front of her, rubbing the spot where he'd touched her elbow.

Very well. She refocused.

“If I'm going to finalize the purchase of the Tuesday Warehouse, I'll need your answer soon, before the owner begins entertaining other offers.” If they were going to have to work together, she could at least move things along. Not because she didn't want to know him again, but because he obviously didn't want to know her.

If only she knew why!

“Your coat, My Lady.” Ben reappeared with the pea-green woolen cloak he'd taken earlier and, at the sound of a carriage outside, disappeared out the door. Holding the garment, she again wished she'd worn something prettier that day, and then immediately squashed the thought.

“Is shabby and ill-fitting the new style, then?” Jeremy asked, watching her struggle to find the openings to the sleeves. “Not your color at all.”

His behavior was not only boorish but outright rude!

“We dress this way for the docks. I wouldn't normally—” The coat slipped away from her for the third time, and she all but growled. “Have you lost all sense of propriety? A little assistance would be appreciated!” It was his fault, of course, for making her feel so clumsy.

“What good is propriety?” He all but mocked the notion.

Lydia's heart cracked. Was he so unhappy that he didn't care about *anything*?

“You once thought it was something that mattered.” She tilted her head back in frustration, allowing the coat to hang to the floor, her left arm in the sleeve, her right arm free.

“I once thought a good many things mattered.” Despite his words, he reached out and lifted her coat for her anyway.

Even through her coat and clothing, his touch affected her. Concentrating on her buttons, she took a step away from him and tried to recenter herself again.

“Why an orphanage, Lydia?” he asked. “Why not leave something so... *impossible* up to one of the dowagers? I’d think organizing charity events would be more suitable for you.”

“Charity events?” she huffed. “And opening an orphanage isn’t impossible!”

“For God’s sake. You’re not up to something like this. It’s a massive undertaking.”

“Someone has to do it. If not us, then who? I never realized before how many children were without homes. *There are thousands of them!* After meeting Clarissa last spring, and then volunteering at one of her orphanages over the holiday, I...”

But his brandy-colored eyes looked cold and bored. She glared. “You wouldn’t understand. Why did you ask if you didn’t care to know the answer?”

“Just making conversation. I thought you wanted me to respect your all-important proprieties.” His mouth twitched, as though he’d tasted something bitter. “Regardless, you’re too young to take this on, and when you get tired of it and the varnish on your pet project fades, you’ll likely do more harm than good.”

“I’m not the fickle one.” She lifted her chin. “Once I begin something, I follow through with it.”

“In that case, perhaps you ought to reconsider your decision now. Best to get out early rather than after you’re in over your head.”

Lydia stared. Was that why he’d ended things between the two of them? Had he wanted out before things went too far?

But it was not. His reason had had something to do with the death of his brother. The thought reminded her of all that he'd been through over the past year.

“Is she expected to recover—your mother, I mean?” Lady Tempest had always seemed rigid, demanding, and even less demonstrative than Jeremy, but with both his father and brother gone, she was all he had left.

“I don't know.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Where the devil is that carriage?”

He was anxious to be away from her.

Lucky for both of them, Clarissa and Lord Baxter had begun descending the staircase and would soon be joining them. Lydia forced a smile. “If you'll let me know what you've decided after you've had your engineers go in, I'd rather not wait any longer than necessary to have your answer.”

“Tomorrow. You and Lady Baxter are welcome to meet me at the warehouse at noon.”

Ben's voice, and presumably the driver's, carried inside as the other couple joined them.

“Is everything settled?” Clarissa asked, sliding her gloves on and glancing between the two of them curiously.

“As settled as it can be without knowing if termites have eroded the damn thing,” Jeremy answered grimly.

“Ladies are present, Tempest.” Clarissa's handsome husband shot a scowl in Jeremy's direction.

“Pardon me. The *dashed* thing.”

“Yes.” Lydia bit her lip. What could have possibly occurred for him to change his opinion of her family so drastically, to change his opinion of her? Perhaps meeting him here today was fate. “We should know more tomorrow. Are you ready, Clarissa?”

Jeremy was going to have to talk with her eventually. And this time, she wouldn't give up until he gave her some answers.

Because, truth be told, *nothing* was settled.

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“HAS Lord Tempest always been so... cynical?” Clarissa asked as their driver pulled the carriage into the road. The two ladies were seated beside one another, facing front. Clarissa’s hair was not as pristine as it had been when they’d first arrived, and a few of her buttons were askew, but as the two of them were finished with their errands for the day, Lydia refrained from commenting.

“He’s never been overly friendly, I’ll admit. But he changed last year, especially in November... What with the circumstances surrounding his brother’s death... and Naomi and Baby Amelia and my brother Lucas...” Lydia exhaled a weighty breath.

“Lord Lucas married his brother’s widow, and is now raising the man’s daughter. Oh, but the child is Tempest’s niece. How could I forget that?” Clarissa winced. “And Mason had to go and insist Tempest take part in this Tuesday Warehouse project! I know he thought he was doing what was best, but if I ask him, he can fix this.”

“Jeremy minds more than I do.” Lydia met her friend’s concerned look with a weak smile.

“Ah...” Clarissa studied her closely. “I take it he has hard feelings, then?”

That was putting it mildly. “I thought he was handling it well enough, last summer. He even attended their wedding. I thought...” Unexpected tears pricked the back of her eyes. “I thought that he and I...”

“Oh, Lydia.” Clarissa stared back at her, horrified. “Tell me you’re not in love with him?”

“I’m not!” Lydia shook her head adamantly.

“Oh, but you are. I can see it in your eyes.”

Lydia silently cursed her inability to dissemble. Her twin sister, Lucinda, was far better at it. Of course, if she were here, and not with her new husband and his family, Lucinda would see right through her as well.

“Lord Tempest is considerably older than me.” Lydia felt the need to defend something that never was and never would be. “Twelve years, actually. But I didn’t think age mattered if two people were truly in love.”

“It’s not his age that’s the problem. And you’re right, it doesn’t matter. Baxter is older than me by nine years. And even if it did, you seem far more mature than most girls your age. You are something of an old soul. But I have a hard time picturing you with him. You are so... optimistic and well-mannered and sweet, and he... is not.”

“He used to be—in his own way.” She pinched her lips together. “Our families were close, before Lucas and Naomi...”

“But that is hardly your fault.”

“I agree, believe me. But he is holding it against all of us.” His turnabout simply didn’t make sense. He’d attended the wedding; he’d given the couple his blessing. “At least, I think that’s what it is.”

“What else would it be?”

Lydia shook her head. “I wish I knew.” Perhaps it was something she had done—something she’d said. She’d even questioned that she wasn’t pretty enough—that he’d decided he wanted to marry someone who was more sophisticated. Only...that was not like him at all.

“One day, he seemed to truly care for me—more than care for me. And he kissed me—twice. And then the next... I might as well have been one of his worst enemies.”

“Did he lead you to believe he would make an offer?”

He had. Although he’d not made any promises.

“Perhaps I only saw what I wanted to see. For as long as I can remember, I have been at least a little in love with the dark

and mysterious Jeremy Gilcrest. Of all my brothers' friends, he seemed... special. Unlike his younger brother, he wasn't overly boastful, and he didn't joke about ungentlemanly pursuits. My greatest fear growing up was that he would marry some other woman before I was old enough to be taken seriously. In the end, I suppose, it didn't matter."

"Sometimes," Clarissa tilted her head, "these things simply need to work themselves out. I went six years without knowing where Mason was. I didn't know if he was alive or dead—I didn't even know his true identity! And then... there he was." She smiled dreamily and then shrugged. "And the rest is history."

Lydia couldn't help but smile, knowing how happy her friend was. Even if she was a little jealous.

Clarissa tapped her gloved finger to her chin thoughtfully. "If a tragic event changed him, perhaps the opposite could change him back."

Lydia pictured a scenario where Jeremy became very involved with the building and opening of the orphanage. A scenario where he changed children's lives for the better. "Do you suppose that is what Lord Baxter was hoping for?"

"It didn't occur to me before, but it seems like something he'd do. Perhaps your Lord Tempest merely needs a nudge in the right direction?"

Or perhaps he needed a weighty shove.

"I don't want to get my hopes up." Lydia rubbed her chest. The ache in her heart had just begun to dull.

"It can't hurt, can it?" Clarissa asked.

"I'm not so sure about that." She sent the other woman a weak smile. Even if Jeremy didn't find hope again, at least she would have a chance to learn the truth. And then, perhaps she could move on, putting her love for him to rest once and for all.

"If you don't try now, you'll always wonder. Whereas, if you at least try, even if you fail, you'll know you did everything you could."



Clarissa was right. Perhaps Lydia needed to consider these circumstances an opportunity—a chance to help Jeremy find hope again.

And furthermore, she wasn't ready to give up on love quite yet.

With determination chasing away her doubts, she met Clarissa's gaze. "He's meeting us at the warehouse tomorrow at noon. If he agrees, he won't be free to walk away from his commitment as easily as he walked away from me before."

"Not if Baxter has anything to say about it," Clarissa mused. "And regardless, you and I are going to improve the lives of hundreds of children. How can anyone turn their back on something so worthwhile?"

But Lydia had never seen anyone's eyes look as cold as Jeremy's did today.

"It's a beginning, anyhow," Clarissa added and Lydia nodded.

Or it could be the end. The proverbial nail in the coffin of what might have been.

## CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING, Jeremy planted his cane on the road, sounding an even thumping rhythm as he neared the entrance of the Tuesday Warehouse, located on the corner of Tuesday and Wapping. Since his own office was located nearby, he'd decided to cover the distance to the warehouse on foot and instructed his driver to pick him up here at noon—he glanced down at his fob watch—in one hour's time.

A few urchins dashed past him and ducked into an alleyway, likely looking for trouble. He twisted his mouth into a wry grimace. He supposed these were precisely the sort of residents Lydia wanted for her orphanage.

With the engineer's report tucked safely in his jacket pocket, he was tempted to tell her the structure wasn't sound. She had no business taking on such a project anyhow—saving thieving orphans, for shite's sake.

She was naught much more than a child herself.

If he kept telling himself that, he just might believe it.

A dark figure pacing up ahead caught his eye, and when he recognized her graceful profile, a drumbeat pounded in his head.

What in the hell was she doing loitering outside on her own? At the docks, the section crawling with the worst vermin humanity had to offer?

She turned her head and waved, looking... so Lydia-like.

Seeing her again... it was too much. He set his jaw and increased his pace, refusing to soften just because he would be in the presence of sunshine and light.

He had no option but to work with her... to ensure this little venture was a successful one.

He'd been given no choice but to step in like some sort of hero. Jeremy shook his head. That wasn't why he was here. That wasn't why he was doing any of this.

Fucking Baxton. He glanced up and down the street, looking for the earl's conveyance, and seeing none, cursed under his breath when Lydia turned to offer him one of those damn smiles.

"Tell me you aren't here alone." His gaze roved down her lush figure.

She could wear one of her maid's gowns, rub dirt on her face, and go barefoot, for all he cared, but Lydia Cockfield did not belong anywhere near White Chapel.

"My driver is around the corner, so I'm not really alone. Lady Baxton sent word this morning that Little Alex wasn't feeling well, so they won't be coming. And since I didn't want to put this off..." She shrugged. "The door's open. Have you heard back from your engineers yet?"

Jeremy clenched his fists together, tempted to tell Baxton precisely where he could shove any other reputation-repairing *suggestions* he might offer in the future. If the numbers weren't good enough for his potential investors then...

He sighed.

Because he needed the investors.

"I have." He stepped toward the warehouse, and the door opened outward with a scraping sound. The scent of the docks—tar, whale blubber, and... something that distinctly resembled decades of perspiration—hung even heavier inside than it had on the street.

"And...?" She skipped along beside him.

"No major issues."

She didn't appear surprised, nor did she smirk victoriously as she entered the building. He'd known she wouldn't—not unless he goaded her. As long as he'd known Lydia, she'd been sweet, kind, and exhibited perfect manners.

Hell, she'd practically been raised to be a countess—his, to be specific.

It hadn't been discussed openly, especially after the fire that swept through Heart Place, killing her parents when Lydia and her twin were only four and leaving Blackheart to take over the dukedom.

It wasn't long after the fire that his own father passed.

But before that, there had been an unspoken understanding between their parents that he'd marry the oldest twin. He could have dispelled it, but, as Lydia had grown from a child into a young woman, he'd become more and more fond of the idea.

He swallowed hard, disgusted with himself for missing the friendships they'd all formed in the wake of their personal tragedies.

Friendships that were nothing more than ashes now.

Jeremy stared up at the ceiling, some thirty feet up, and then swept his gaze around the empty warehouse. Fluttering sounds had him noticing the white droppings on the floor. Of course, her orphanage was already filling up with all manner of feathered friends.

Wonderful.

“The open space allows for all sorts of possibilities.”

Her enthusiasm was unmistakable in how she all but danced into the empty area. Watching her, bittersweet longing crept over him—the memory of watching her dance under other circumstances. At one of the village country dances, and then later, with her brother at her come out.

Jeremy had been unable to request a dance for himself, as he'd already been in mourning. But she'd known he'd been watching, and she'd caught his eye as she twirled around and sent him a dazzling smile.

He shouldn't have attended at all but he hadn't been able to help himself. *Because she asked me to be there.*

"The kitchen will be built in back." She pointed toward a staircase. "Classrooms and sleeping chambers upstairs."

"What do you intend to use this massive area for?"

"Playing." She smiled back at him. "It will be safe, dry, supervised, and when necessary, can be converted for fundraising events. But we'll be able to host garden parties as well. There is an area outside for a vegetable garden, but there must also be flowers."

He cocked an eyebrow at that, and she lifted her chin defiantly.

"Beauty is one of life's necessities. It soothes wounded souls."

For an instant, he saw it through her unjaded eyes. But only for an instant.

"These... children. They have never been taught right from wrong. There will be discipline issues. They will likely rob the orphanage blind and the older ones will bully the younger ones."

He almost felt bad as some of the excitement left her eyes. But it was better this way. Better she did not enter into this venture wearing rose-tinted spectacles.

"You said it yourself," she finally broke the silence. "Some things are worth it."

She was not broken; she was not ready to give up. She appeared to be as determined as ever.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, and then followed her as she strolled across the room, their shoes echoing off the ceiling and walls. "It's dangerous, Lydia."

"I know." She spun around to face him. "I'm well aware, as is Lady Baxter. We have budgeted for security and close supervision—both during the daytime and at night. The children will have proper teachers and a nurse. I can afford the building and much of the renovation. But after that... That's

where your money comes in. At least until we can begin hosting art exhibitions and concerts to attract other sponsors.”

“So, you won’t be draining my coffers indefinitely.”

“We will not, unless of course, you cannot bear to walk away from us...” They’d been teasing, but at these words, the spark in her eyes flickered and she bit her bottom lip.

Feeling a twinge of guilt, Jeremy ignored the hurt in her eyes and rocked on his heels. She had obviously done her research. Her expectations appeared to be realistic, and her conviction to seeing this through seemed firm.

She said beauty soothed the soul. Her beauty would soothe any man’s soul.

*But not mine.*

“Baxter sent the terms over yesterday.”

She jerked her head up, blue eyes clear and intelligent.

God, he’d missed her.

After spending less than an hour in her company, he was having difficulty summoning the great bitterness he held for her brothers. He’d felt an inkling of it when she’d first stepped into Baxter’s office, but today...

All he saw was *her*.

He would help her with her orphanage. Someone had to. It might as well be him. Blackheart was a fool for leaving her with no one but an elderly aunt to keep her in check.

“Have you decided then?” She didn’t sound timid. She sounded as though she was presenting him with a brilliant opportunity.

“I’ll provide the funds.”

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LYDIA’S first inclination was to bounce on her toes in excitement and clasp her hands together in joy. Her second

inclination was to stifle the urge.

But this was Jeremy.

She responded with something in between. “That’s marvelous!”

But she did not jump forward and throw her arms around his neck as she’d really like to. And she absolutely did not press her mouth against his.

But this was a step in the right direction.

“On one condition.” He folded his arms across his chest, and she could almost believe he was only pretending to glare down at her.

Nonetheless, she tempered her excitement. “And that is?”

“You are never to come here without protection again.”

“But I—”

“And your driver does not count.”

Surely, he couldn’t be serious.

“I’m serious.” *Drat!*

He was not mock glaring at her now. This was all out, straightforward glowering.

“I’ll have the term added to the contract.”

Lydia signed. “That won’t be necessary.” It was a little thing, really. And once construction was underway, the building would be buzzing with activity—around the clock, if she had any say. “I won’t come here alone.”

She met his gaze in an attempt to convey her sincerity, and his softened.

For a moment, she could almost believe they’d gone back in time. But then—

“Oh!” She ducked and shouted out when a bird swooped down at her from the rafters. It didn’t really come close, but...

Jeremy was looking grim again.

“I’ve seen enough. Once I’ve studied the plans, I’ll do a thorough walkthrough with the project foreman.” He grasped her elbow, steering her toward the door.

“We have preliminary plans drawn up. I’m afraid I didn’t think to bring them.”

“You can send them to my offices by messenger.”

“You have offices?” Lydia glanced over at him.

“Did you think I spent all my time pursuing leisure?”

He pushed the door open, and they stepped outside again. Without fail, the scent of the docks energized her. “You are dabbling in commerce?” It made sense, really. Although quiet and watchful, he’d always kept himself busy.

He was a good deal like Blackheart in that way. Only without the bossiness of her brother.

“I’m purchasing a shipping company—Ludwig Bros.” Rather than showing any sort of excitement, his eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened.

“And this is why Lord Baxter insisted you help me? You need to convince some of his wealthy friends to invest?”

He turned her in the direction where her driver ought to be waiting. “Perhaps.”

Lydia walked silently. She’d heard of Ludwig Shipping before. She’d overheard Lucas and Blackheart discussing it. A shiver ran through her, and Jeremy pulled her closer.

He could act the uncaring rogue all he liked, but when push came to shove, he would always be a gentleman.

The street came into view, and she frowned. “Coachman John said he’d wait right here.”

Jeremy pursed his lips and then gave her an admonishing look.

“I’ve no doubt he’ll return shortly,” she added.

If either of them had been paying attention to their surroundings, Lydia might have been able to defend herself



against the small boy who appeared from nowhere and slammed into her legs.

Jeremy prevented her from losing her balance, but she dropped her reticule.

“Pardon me,” she began. The poor child was collecting her belongings for her, but when she reached out for them, he spun around, and from what she could tell, had all intentions of dashing off with it.

And he would have succeeded if Jeremy wasn't so agile.

The boy was skin and bones, his trousers too small, his shirt filthy, and his jacket at least three sizes too large.

Her grim-looking companion dangled the poor thing by his collar.

“Going somewhere?” He lowered the child so his feet touched the pavement again but didn't loosen his hold. “I believe you have something that belongs to this lady.”

The boy squirmed. He couldn't be much older than five or six and looked as though he hadn't eaten a full meal in weeks. He had full lips and a face that resembled those in paintings. But his eyes... they were a violet color, almost too large for his face, set wide and fringed with thick, dark lashes.

Rather than childlike innocence, however, suspicion and contempt lurked in them.

“Le' me go, Mister! Your 'urtin' me!” He twisted his little mouth, and a deep scowl etched on his forehead, barely visible behind shaggy black strands of hair.

Lydia couldn't help but notice that his fingernails were overly long and terribly dirty.

“You'll do well to hand over the lady's reticule, first.”

The child's struggling stopped, and he frowned. “'Ere ya go.” He held out her reticule, and Lydia cautiously took it from him.

“And your other hand.” Jeremy jerked the boy, who whipped his face around to stare up at him in surprise.

“I don’t ‘ave nuthin’ else—”

Jeremy jerked him again, and the boy turned back, opening his other hand to reveal the small coin purse that had been in her reticule.

Lydia took it but then promptly loosened the strings and opened it. “A reward for finding this for me.” She placed a coin into the boy’s hand.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Lydia!” Jeremy dropped his head back, rolling his eyes. “A *reward*?”

“What’s your name, sweetheart?” She ignored him in favor of the boy.

Those violet eyes narrowed. “Wot do ya need wif me name?”

“My name is Lydia. I’m purchasing the Tuesday Warehouse to open an orphanage. I simply wanted to know to whom I might extend a personal invitation.”

“I don’ loike orphanages.”

“But there will be plenty of food for children like you, and toys, and a warm bed. I just thought I’d let you know. There will be dozens of builders fixing it up over the next several weeks. And when it’s finished, you are welcome to come take a look. Even before it’s finished, if you like. Just ask for me.”

“Liddy?”

She laughed. It was close enough. “And your name is...?”

“Me name is Ollie.”

“An apology for Lady Lydia, Ollie,” Jeremy said.

Lydia could see that Jeremy’s hold was beginning to loosen. A gust of very cold wind chose that moment to rush down the street, and even as she longed for the comfort of a warm fire and a hot cup of tea, her heart ached knowing that this child wouldn’t have either.

“I apologize, M’ Lydy.” Ollie shivered, and Lydia glanced at Jeremy with a wince.

A carriage pulled up beside them, but it wasn't one of her brother's. "Hold this." Jeremy slid Ollie's collar into her hand. "Don't let him get away." Lydia obeyed even though she did not really believe that the child would run from her.

Jeremy shot a warning glance in Ollie's direction before greeting the driver.

*His driver.*

Opening the door, he reached inside and went rummaging through the box beneath the bench seat. While trying to see what Jeremy was up to, Lydia clung to Ollie, not because she wanted to imprison him so much as she wasn't willing to watch him disappear into the cold to God only knew where.

When Jeremy emerged, he was holding a bundle of...

Clothing.

"Here, why don't you try this one?"

Lydia loosened her hold as Jeremy assisted the child out of the oversized flimsy jacket he'd been wearing and into a properly sized woolen one. He then promptly wrapped a scarf around Ollie's little neck.

Lydia rolled her lips together, nearly overwhelmed by the urge to cry. Grateful for, and a little stunned by Jeremy's gesture, she watched Ollie scoop his old jacket off the ground and take a step backward.

"No more slamming into ladies, understand?" Jeremy pinned his gaze on the boy, who was looking more than a little surprised by this turn of events.

"Aw wite, mister." And then he bolted, vanishing as quickly as he'd appeared.

Coachman John, driving one of the Blackheart carriages, chose that moment to pull up behind Jeremy's less-pretentious-looking one.

"This is my ride." She gestured, staring up at him, feeling awkward all of a sudden. Jeremy was not a hopeless cause at all.

He glared back at her with cold eyes. “Go home, Lydia,” he growled. “And don’t come back alone. If I discover otherwise, you won’t see a pence of my money.”

But she found herself biting back a grin. “Thank you, Jeremy,” she said, walking backward toward the second carriage.

“Go home, Lydia.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Lydia sat across the room from her aunt in the drawing room, staring down at a book but not comprehending any of it. Not for the first time, the memory of Jeremy aiding little Ollie the day before played itself over in her mind.

He had provided immediate warmth to a child in need, and she refused to believe that austerity and indifference were all that remained of his character.

True, he'd not once smiled as he helped the boy into the new coat; he'd been clenching his jaw, and his eyes had been stern the entire time.

But his action had gone beyond charity. Compassion had fueled it. Not that there was anything wrong with donating funds—the orphanage would be quite dependent upon that sort of generosity. But surely, seeing the wonder in Ollie's eyes had to have touched him?

It was terrifying, and perhaps foolish, but she refused to give up on the man she knew he was meant to be. His actions the day before had strengthened her hope.

Hope that he could come to respect her affectionately once again, but more importantly, hope that he would thaw, that he could appreciate that life consisted of so much more than tragedy and loss.

“A visitor for you, My Lady.” Mr. Hill stood in the open doorway of her favorite drawing room. “Lord Tempest.”

Even though he'd told her he would come, her heart jumped while Aunt Emma merely nodded from where she sat knitting near the window.

"Excellent. Send him up, and could you have Mrs. Duckworth bring some tea?"

They were to discuss the plans, and then later, drive to the warehouse so that she could answer any questions he had.

A shiver of anticipation danced down her spine.

Jeremy appeared in the doorway, the plans she'd sent over rolled up in one hand, and then bowed. "Lady Lydia." He turned to her aunt. "Lady Emma, I hope you are well."

Aunt Emma, who was nearsighted, but not blind, and only partially deaf, held her opera glasses to her eyes. "As well as anyone my age can expect. You've certainly made yourself scarce. Come here, my boy, so I can get a look at you."

Lydia bit back a smile as she watched this proud man bow over her aunt's hand. She was secretly pleased that her aunt treated him no differently than she had all his life.

"You've lost weight. Likely worrying about your mother, no doubt. How is Lady Tempest? Dreadful business, this growing old. And do sit down. My neck's going to get a crick looking up at you like this." Before Jeremy could answer, she turned to Lydia. "Lydia, my dear, you and I will make it a point to visit Lady Tempest later this week. You will find time to come with me in between all this orphanage business of yours."

Lydia nodded but watched to see if Jeremy would provide any more details than he had the day before.

"She is fragile," he said softly as he took a seat on the opposite end of the settee where Lydia sat. Turning toward Lydia's aunt, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "She may not recognize you. Most days, she doesn't know me from Adam."

The admission was a startling one. No wonder...

*No wonder.*

“I’m so sorry, Jeremy.” Of course, his aunt would call him by his given name. She’d known him as a child, and then a young man. “I imagine her heart weakened from young Arthur’s passing. There is too much tragedy in this world.”

If Lydia had not been watching him very closely, she would have missed it. Despair flickered across his face.

His throat worked, as though he was swallowing unwanted emotion. And then his eyes shuttered once again. “We’re doing our best to keep her comfortable, for now.”

But Lydia realized something that perhaps even he didn’t know.

He’d lost the will to hold onto hope.

Aunt Emma nodded. “But I know you did not come to visit me. Feel free to go about your work while I knit.” She glanced down at the two needles and half-finished project on her lap, almost as though she’d forgotten it was there. “If only I could remember what I was working on. Was this the scarf for your sister? Oh, no, I forgot, it’s a blanket for the baby.”

Lydia met Jeremy’s eyes in an unexpected moment of shared amusement.

“Lucinda is expecting later this spring.” Her sister had married later in the same Season the twin sisters had made their come out... and then moved away and become quite caught up with her new husband’s family.

As she should.

However, it had left an emptiness in Lydia that she never would have expected.

“I remember,” he said.

Of course, she’d told him when she’d received Lucinda’s letter—when they had shared these sort of details with one another.

Lydia blinked, forcing herself not to dwell on the past. Jeremy was here on business. “What did you think of the plans?”

“I have a few questions.” He opened them, spreading them on the low table in front of them, while she placed a candle holder on each of the corners to keep the papers from rolling back onto themselves.

Over the next half an hour, while taking tea, they discussed the design, some issues she’d considered, and some she had not. In that time, both of them had moved to the center of the sofa, and Lydia became acutely aware of his thigh touching hers.

His scent—which reminded her of leather-covered books, and clove, and freshly cut cedar—only served to heighten her awareness.

She was so acutely aware of his presence that she could almost feel him breathing beside her. Altogether, she was more than a little distracted.

She straightened her spine and focused on what he was actually saying.

“I’m a little concerned about your garden area. If it was used for disposal, you might have problems with the soil...”

“I had not thought of that.” Lydia wrinkled her nose. When she’d first toured the warehouse, she’d only spied the yard from a window. Until it could be cleaned up, it was not at all inviting. She and Clarissa had also caught sight of a few vagrants. “I have no idea...”

“No way to find out other than to see for ourselves.” He’d turned to stare at her, and their faces were only inches apart. His gaze flicked to her lips, and then quickly back to her eyes. “Shall we drive over now then? Did you wish to change first?”

She barely heard his question over the pounding of her heart. When he’d kissed her last, she had welcomed it, but she hadn’t felt like her skin was going to burst into flames the way she felt now.

“Lydia?”

“Oh... oh, yes.” She glanced down at her day dress, which would have been perfectly acceptable if she was going



anywhere other than the docks. “I suppose I should.” She burst off the settee. “I’ll only be a moment.”

Jeremy only nodded at her. *Had he felt that too?*

Louise, her maid, was waiting inside Lydia’s bedchamber with the plain-looking gown cleaned and pressed. Not quite fifteen minutes later, Lydia reentered the drawing room, pea-green coat draped over her arm.

“I cannot wait for the weather to warm up.” She forced her tone to remain light and casual. She could only hope that he was unaware of how he’d affected her. “This winter has been unusually cold. And so much snow!”

As she exited Heart Place, her hand tucked into his arm, she found herself babbling about other ideas she had for the orphanage. It wasn’t like her to go on so, and of course, he knew that.

Unfortunately, as she sat down beside him, their proximity in the confines of the coach did nothing to settle her nerves.

“You’re excited.” His words broke in when she finally took a breath, and her insides trembled.

When she’d discussed her hopes with Clarissa two days before, she’d not taken into consideration what working with him might do to *her*. She was optimistic, yes, but if she lost him again, would she ever be able to fall in love again? She couldn’t imagine it.

“I am.”

“The Season begins in a little over a month, and construction should be well underway by then. If it’s all the same, I’ll manage all of this while you flit about with the *ton*.”

Flit about?

*Flit about?*

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ll hardly have time for both.” He shrugged.

“What? You—” She needed a moment to realized what he was saying. “I’ll have you know my priority is the orphanage.

And although I plan to attend a few select events and seek out donations.” She gritted her teeth. “I have no intentions of allowing the season to distract me. I thought you’d realized this by now.”

“Do you not intend to place yourself on the marriage mart, then?”

“I do not.” In fact, she’d put all thoughts of marriage from her mind the day after he’d told her to keep away from him.

“You’ll change your mind.” The arrogance in his voice had her twisting around to confront him.

“Of the two of us.” She pointed at him and then herself. “I... *I* am not the fickle one.”

He returned her gaze steadily, and she would have given ten years of her life to know what was going on inside his head in that moment.

“Why?” she couldn’t help but ask, her voice choking. *Why did you send me away?*

Her question had him looking trapped, and she hated whatever it was that had changed him. He was saved from answering, however, when the carriage came to a halt.

“I have other business to attend to today, so let’s get this over with, shall we?” The icy tone of his voice effectively put a halt to her curiosity.

It wasn’t often Lydia allowed herself to become angry, but she was sorely tempted to at that moment.

Except they were at the warehouse now, and the orphanage came first.

---

*WHY?*

He knew exactly what she was asking, but he wasn’t about to discuss it with her today. Or ever.

The secret wasn’t his to share.

He offered his hand for her to step onto the walk, but she grasped the side of the carriage instead.

He shouldn't be here with her. This situation was untenable. Baxter didn't know what the hell he'd been doing when he suggested Jeremy finance this damned orphanage.

And yet...

Damn his eyes, Jeremy *wanted to be here with her*.

And watching her bustle through the door ahead of him, he admitted that he wanted more than that.

But he could never give her what she wanted: marriage. He could not join their two families together—not while both of her brothers were intent on tarnishing Arthur's memory.

Tarnishing it with the very worse of accusations.

Pushing away the dissonance inside of him, Jeremy watched Lydia shove, and then slam her shoulders into the door, sending it flying open before he could catch up with her and do it himself. She glanced at him over her shoulder, scowling, but not bothering to hide her satisfaction at the insignificant triumph.

Better she release her anger on the door, he supposed, than on him.

Even so. "You'll hurt yourself." He strolled through the opening behind her.

"I'm fine."

She was so *'fine'* in fact, that she spent the next forty-five minutes marching him through the building, answering him as succinctly as possible, and glowering at him whenever she caught his eye. She made it painfully clear that she was determined to refrain from mentioning the past to him again.

All of which he, quite rightly, deserved.

"You should go to the balls and the garden parties," he offered thoughtfully once they'd returned to the ground floor. Even so, he couldn't keep his gaze from settling on her lush

hips as she preceded him toward the door leading outside to the vacant land in back.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she bit out without looking at him.

“I’ll take care of matters here—ensure things are finished properly. You really should land yourself a husband—perhaps a wealthy one who’ll happily add his blunt to your pet projects.”

She spun around to face him—eyes burning, her lovely cheeks flushed. “This is not a pet project for me!” He’d never seen her looking so worked up before. Not even on the day he’d ended things between the two of them. “What must I do to get that through your thick skull?”

Momentarily stunned, he inexplicably found his heart racing. She was impossible. She was a bloody *Cockfield*, he reminded himself. He forced himself to recall what her brothers had set out to do to Arthur.

“Time will tell.” He affected disdain in the face of her enthusiasm.

Because, unfortunately, he already believed her. She was *not* fickle, and even though she was far too young to be so diligent, she would not abandon a worthwhile project after starting it.

“Time?” She was pacing around in a circle now, gesturing wildly with her arms. “Time? How much time do you need? Is knowing me for most of my life not enough to prove my character to you? Or allowing you to hold my hand when we walked alone through the forest? What about the fact that I gave you permission to court me? To kiss me? Is it not—”

Jeremy swept her into his arms. He would silence the reminder of those memories with his mouth.

If she’d pushed him away, he would have released her. If she’d held her lips tightly together, he would not have dipped his tongue behind them.

But no.

She melted against him, like butter on warm bread.

She tasted like the tea they'd drank earlier, that, and the sweetest flower, like comfort and...

Good God in heaven, Lydia Cockfield tasted like *love*.

When he'd kissed her last fall, he'd been cautious, proper. He had not embraced her fully, held her small figure pressed tightly against his.

If he had, he wondered if he'd have had the strength to walk away.

She was as forgiving as an angel. But she was also warm, willing, and sensual. The feel of her breasts crushed against him sent white-hot arousal coursing through his veins. Her soft abdomen absorbed the pressure of his cock, taunting him at how it would feel to slide between her legs.

"Jeremy." She whispered against his lips, making his name sound like a fervent prayer.

Need threatened his self-control. He could remove both their coats and arrange them on the floor. She would be his for the taking.

She stiffened. "What's that sound? I heard something."

She shoved at his chest, her bosom rising and falling with each labored breath. Even though her lips were swollen and shining from their kiss, her eyes were wide.

And then he heard it too. Like a door being thrown open.

And if he hadn't spun around so quickly, he might have missed the sprite dashing through the door.

"Ollie?" Lydia recognized him just as Jeremy wrapped his hand around the child's arm.

A very thin arm.

A very thin and *coatless* arm.

## CHAPTER FIVE

JEREMY TIGHTENED his grip on this urchin for the second time in two days.

“I didn’t do anyfin”!” Ollie shouted. “Why you always grabbin’ me?” He jerked his arm in a futile attempt to break free.

Jeremy was grateful that the boy had interrupted them before matters had gone too far; however, for the same reason, he was also tempted to throttle him.

Lydia, however, didn’t suffer similar conflicting feelings and was already on her knees, running her hands down Ollie’s spindly little arms and legs. “What happened to you? Where is your coat?”

Bruises littered those pale arms, and crusted blood mingled with the dirt and grime on the boy’s trousers. Looking up into Lydia’s eyes, the unruly urchin ceased his fighting and Jeremy relaxed his grip. Rationally, Jeremy knew of the trials these children faced on the docks, but to see the consequences meted out on one so young...

It was a unacceptable.

“You said if I came I’d git help. But no one was here and since I don’ have no coins for the boss again, I came here an’ hid.” Ollie narrowed his eyes at Jeremy. “I wasn’ hidin’ from you and her.”

“Of course, you weren’t hiding from me,” Lydia all but cooed at the little trespasser. “I’m so sorry. This is all my fault

then. I should have been more clear..." She exhaled a guilty sigh. "We need to hire workers first. Who did this to you?"

She was doing her best to remain calm, Jeremy knew, but her voice trembled with emotion. She raised her fingers to Ollie's face and brushed back unruly strands of soot-black hair to reveal a bruise near his eye.

"Buck did. Said it was a lesson I had comin'."

"Buck?" Lydia looked confused, but Jeremy had no doubt that Buck would be one of the older boys in the street gang Ollie ran with.

"I wen' back wi' no' enuf coins for Farley."

Lydia's face fell with the realization. "Oh, Ollie."

"Buck's no problem. But Farley has a pistol."

Jeremy clenched his fists. He couldn't help but wonder if the pistol was one that had been stolen from Ludwig's.

"In that case, you'll simply have to come home with me." Lydia rested on her heels and nodded decisively.

*Oh, hell.*

"You can't just take a boy home with you!" Good Lord! Blackheart needed to return to London soon before his sister filled not only an orphanage but Heart Place with homeless urchins.

"But this is all my fault! I told him we'd be here." She gazed up at him.

"Tha' she did, m'lord," Ollie echoed.

The child would rob her blind.

After spending a few days in the lap of luxury, innocent little Ollie would likely show right back up at the docks with as much of Blackheart's silver as he could carry. He'd break Lydia's tender heart in the process. "It isn't safe, that's why. You know nothing about this boy."

Lydia herself would be vulnerable if Ollie took it upon himself to return to Heart Place with a few of his friends.

“But he is in danger.” She stared up at him fiercely, her cobalt eyes unwavering.

“And taking him into your home could place you in danger as well.” He pinned his gaze on Ollie. “I imagine Farley isn’t very forgiving when he loses an... employee. Am I right, young man?” Jeremy demanded sternly. No way in hell was he allowing Lydia to bring a street urchin home with her.

Ollie squirmed. “I don’ suppose he would be.”

Jeremy scrubbed a hand down his face. As soon as word got out about the orphanage, this Farley fellow, or some other gang boss, would no doubt start up trouble.

Their control already extended too far, and this just gave Jeremy another reason to neutralize them.

“I’m not leaving him here.” Lydia rose to her feet again and crossed her arms in front of her, pushing her bosom up and reminding him of what they’d been doing before being so rudely interrupted.

The housekeeper at his manor on Cork Street was something of a dragon and ought to be able to keep the boy out of trouble.

Maybe.

He stared down at the orphan, who was feigning innocence all too convincingly. “I might have a position for you.”

“You mean you would take him home with you?” Lydia gazed at him with so much delight and wonder that he was tempted to go in search of ten more orphans to welcome into his home.

And at that ridiculous thought, Jeremy clenched his jaw and scowled. “He’ll have to earn his keep.”

“But you have a warm bed for him, and food, and most importantly, he’ll be safe!” The scowl must not have looked stern enough because her ridiculous wonder flourished—in her smile, her voice, and the grateful clasp of her hands. “Did you hear that, Ollie? Lord Tempest is going to take you home with him.”



“But I’d rather go with you.” Ollie sidled up next to her.

Although doomed to be sorely disappointed, the child had excellent taste.

“You’ll come with me, or you’ll remain with your friends on the docks.” Jeremy supposed he ought to send a watchman over. And repair all the locks. They were lucky the warehouse hadn’t already filled up with vagrants.

“You’ll not regret it, Ollie.” Lydia took hold of the boy’s hand and glanced over her shoulder at Jeremy, her full, pink lips tilted up into that devastating smile of hers.

More worshipful wonder.

“We’re finished here for the day, are we not?”

Jeremy fisted his hands at his sides. “I suppose so.”

---

AFTER BEING DELIVERED BACK to Heart Place, assured by Jeremy that Ollie would be safely situated in the Tempest household, Lydia lay back and soaked in a long hot bath, feeling acutely aware that but for a colossal stroke of luck, she and Lucinda and her brothers could have ended up just like Ollie. Because she’d been orphaned at the age of four.

Only, her father had been a duke.

Was that why she’d agreed so quickly to work on this project with Clarissa? Because of guilt? She closed her eyes and tilted her head back as Louise carefully poured a pitcher of water, rinsing the soap from Lydia’s hair.

Life wasn’t fair. Was it wrong that guilt motivated her?

Working out her motivations would have been a good deal easier if her mind didn’t persistently return to the most astounding fact that Jeremy had kissed her! And not in the manner he’d kissed her last summer.

This kiss had been... alarming. *Devastating. Exciting.*

This kiss had been magnificent.

Her heart fluttered, and she shivered.

“Your towel, My Lady,” Louise assisted her out of the copper tub and helped her to dry off and then don one of her day dresses, a low-waisted jonquil muslin with a V-neck and sleeves large enough to store a small dog in each.

Too discombobulated to join her aunt in her knitting downstairs, Lydia sat down to make notes of what she and Jeremy had discussed.

Only... rather than summon words to write, her mind kept going back to those few moments before Ollie had interrupted them.

Jeremy had kissed her with the same desperation she felt. Did that mean he felt the same?

His lips had been hard and demanding, almost as though he was angry. At her? No, she decided, most definitely not at her.

At himself? Lydia dipped her pen in the jar of ink.

When he'd dragged his mouth along her jaw and then down her neck, he'd softened.

He'd fondled her. *He tasted me.*

It had made her want to taste him as well—to know the essence of his skin in every way imaginable.

Lydia frowned down at the large drop of ink that had plopped onto the parchment and then crumpled it in frustration and tossed it onto the floor.

She'd been exasperated with him one moment and clinging to him desperately the next. Remembering the feel of his body, all hard planes and muscles pressing into her, heat raced to her core.

This was useless. Lydia set down the pen and closed the jar of ink. Had he kissed her because he was regretted sending her away last autumn?

Throwing herself onto her bed, she squeezed her thighs together at the same time she allowed one of her hands to edge

over her belly, to just below her breast.

A knock sounded on the door, causing her to sit up guiltily.

“Come in!”

Clarissa peered around the door. “Mr. Hill sent me up.” Her friend looked elegant and sophisticated, wearing a puce linen day dress with a low waist and billowing long sleeves. As she entered the room, she removed her bonnet and then tossed it onto the bed.

“How is little Alexander?” Lydia touched her fingertips to her cheeks, hoping they weren’t flushed.

The young countess shrugged and waved a hand through the air. “He’s fine. That was just an excuse to leave you and Lord Tempest alone.” She dropped into the chair near Lydia’s vanity. “Tell me everything.”

Lydia shot her friend a disapproving glance but then sighed.

“Well?” Clarissa prompted her.

“He’s decided to invest, and he’s amenable to the plans we’ve had drawn up.”

“That’s not what I mean. Is there hope for him? Did the two of you discuss anything personal? Did he kiss you?”

Lydia bit her lip.

“He kissed you!”

“A thief attacked us on the street.” Lydia made an attempt to avoid discussing what had happened between her and Jeremy. Because she didn’t quite understand it herself.

“No!”

“He was a child, Clarissa, the most precious boy you’ve ever seen.” Lydia went on to tell her all about Ollie, and the coat Jeremy gave him, and how he’d returned today, bruised and beaten. And about the gang boss, causing both of them to frown.

“Mason has warned me that there could be trouble. He and Lord Tempest may be forced to deal with the gang bosses early on. But what can we do about the boy until then?”

“Jeremy took Ollie home with him,” Lydia announced and then paused abruptly. He’d surprised her. And yet, it was precisely what he’d have done before his brother died.

Clarissa tilted her head in disbelief. “Your Lord Tempest? A gentleman who had to be coerced into the project to begin with? He has opened his home up to an orphan?”

Lydia nodded. “He said his cook would put Ollie to work. And even though he says he’s only doing it to keep me from bringing Ollie home with me to Heart Place, I refuse to believe it.” She held Clarissa’s gaze, almost afraid to appear too hopeful. “I could see it in his eyes, Clarissa. He could no more leave that child alone there than I could.”

“But when did this kiss happen?”

Lydia smoothed the fabric of her gown and then shrugged. “Just before Ollie came running in.”

“Was it more than just a kiss?” Clarissa asked.

Lydia pinched her lips together, feigning innocence.

And obviously failing.

“Oh, Lydia.” The other girl was shaking her head.

Lydia hadn’t intended to tell Clarissa anything about it, but since she already knew... “It was glorious. Fantastic. It’s never been that way before, and I never wanted it to end.”

“Oh, dear.” Clarissa looked more concerned than delighted. “I should have thought this through better.”

“What?”

“It’s a good thing that kiss did end, though. Little Ollie deserves your thanks. You’re terribly young and if Tempest ruined you, Baxter would have to send for Blackheart to defend your honor.”

Which, all in all, would be an utter catastrophe.

“I really do need more friends who don’t read my mind like you do.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible, what with your emotions written all over your face.”

Lydia conceded with a shrug. It was true. “What should I do if he kisses me again?”

“What do you *want* to do?” Clarissa countered.

“Probably something that I oughtn’t.”

Her friend brushed her hands together decisively. “And for precisely that reason, the two of you cannot be alone together again. At least not until we know his intentions are honorable. I’ll host a dinner party next week. That will give him the opportunity to show his affection for you in a socially acceptable manner.”

Lydia held back a groan. “Next week?” She didn’t *want* to wait until next week to see him again.

“And in the future, I’ll not send you alone again to discuss the orphanage with him. I ought to have realized...” Clarissa wagged a finger. “But let him stew a little. He’s had a taste, now he must decide: is he prepared to commit to the entire meal?”

Lydia groaned. “I don’t know.” She wished it was as simple as that.

“Keep yourself busy. Visit Madam Chantal and ask her if she knows of any seamstresses we can hire. The children will need proper clothing and we might as well have them wear uniforms. And if you’ve time, drop by the employment agency as well. No time like the present to begin interviewing teachers and whatnot, now that we’ve secured funds.” The young countess rose and brushed at her skirts. “I can’t stay long. Mason is taking me to the opera this evening. He rather enjoys sitting in the dark with me.” A grin flashed across her face, but she schooled it and sent Lydia a warning glance. “Don’t do anything foolish.”

In the past, Lydia would have laughed outright at such a warning. But on the heels of Jeremy’s scorching kiss... “I

won't."

She walked Clarissa downstairs to the door and then watched her climb into the elegant carriage waiting for her.

What would it be like to... *sit in the dark* with one's husband in a private box at the opera? And to have children of her own?

Feeling lonelier than she had before Clarissa's visit, Lydia closed the door behind her and, after peeking inside the drawing room, wandered the corridors until she located Mr. Hill. "Have you seen my aunt this afternoon?"

"She went out with Lord Beasley one hour ago. She said she wasn't certain of when she intended to return." Mr. Hill seemed almost apologetic. Lydia must look as pathetic as she felt.

"Thank you, Mr. Hill."

This wasn't the first time her aunt had gone out with Lord Beasley, an elderly baron who'd courted Aunt Emma about a hundred or so years ago. And if Lydia wasn't mistaken, the gentleman was as smitten now as he must have been before.

Lydia needed to stop feeling sorry for herself and do something productive. Just as she went to return to her chamber, however, pounding sounded on the door, fists rather than the knocker. Curious as to who it could be, Lydia paused on the steps and waited for Mr. Hill to open it. When he did so, a gush of wind swept into the foyer, along with Jeremy, who looked fit to be tied.

"Is he here?"

"Who?"

"Our innocent little orphan," Jeremy growled.

*Oh, Ollie!* Lydia's heart sunk at the implication of Jeremy showing up here looking for him.

"You lost him already?"

"I didn't lose him. Mrs. Crump fed him, found him proper clothing and shoes, and then insisted he bathe, which, by the

way, had the entire household suffering his caterwauling for nearly half an hour. But when she sent him to collect coal from the cellar, he disappeared instead.”

“Oh, no.”

“I thought he might have come here. He paid very close attention to our directions after we delivered you yesterday.” Jeremy rubbed the back of his neck. And in that single motion, Lydia saw it. He was concerned that Ollie had returned to the docks and put himself in danger.

Worry swept through her at the thought.

“We need to find him,” she said. “We need to go back to the warehouse now.” She glanced down at her gown, which would stand out like a sore thumb amongst the fishmongers, beggars, and seaman ever-present along Wapping Street.

Jeremy shook his head. “It’s getting late. Perhaps Baxter —”

“Pardon me, My Lord, My Lady.” Lydia turned around to see Mrs. Duckworth, the housekeeper, hovering at the door that led to the kitchens. “This little one insists that he knows you.”

Tucked behind the housekeeper’s skirts, wearing perfectly fitted short pants, a shining pair of boots, and a pristine white shirt beneath a fitted jacket, hid a small boy who looked suspiciously familiar.

“Ollie!” Lydia gasped. Absent his usual dirt and grime, her little orphan was barely recognizable. Lydia rushed forward and took both his hands in hers and then lifted them out to his sides in admiration. “Just look at you!”

“Ahem.” Jeremy stepped forward with a scowl, and Ollie’s relieved smile fell.

“Tell me, Oliver, did or did not Mrs. Crump ask you to bring up some coal.” Jeremy pointedly swept his gaze around the gilded foyer. “You are a long way from my coal cellar. Did you get lost?”

Lydia bit her lip and watched silently. This was a matter to be settled between the two of them.

Ollie squirmed. “I don’t like no baths. That old woman dumped hot water over my head—tried to drown me.” And then he threw his arms around Lydia’s legs. “Don’t make me go back!”

Lydia pinched her mouth into a straight line and stared at Jeremy expectantly, all but biting her tongue so as not to interfere.

Hands behind his back, Jeremy stood firm, looking quite imposing but also... like that of a disappointed parent.

“You promised me you would assist in the kitchen, and in exchange, what did I promise you in return?”

“Hot food. And sweet biscuits, and a bed that ain’t outside,” Ollie admitted grudgingly.

“And what did you have when we arrived at Charles Street?”

“Stew. With meat. And a piece of pie.”

“And where did Mrs. Crump show you to afterward?”

“A bed with three blankets!”

Jeremy allowed silence to fall between them as Ollie considered his circumstances.

“You would give all that up because of a bath?” Lydia could not help herself. The child looked so determined... but also a little bit lost. “I can’t have you visit me for tea if you don’t bathe. All proper gentlemen know it’s important to smell properly clean when they visit a lady.”

At this, she thought she saw Jeremy roll his eyes heavenward.

“But I ain’t no proper gentleman,” Ollie said.

“Not yet, but with help from Lord Tempest, perhaps someday you will be one. You could learn to speak and read and write...”



Jeremy appeared as skeptical as Ollie.

But then Ollie loosened his hold on her legs, looking rather torn.

“Go outside and wait for me in the carriage.” Jeremy met Ollie’s gaze meaningfully. “If you aren’t inside of it when I come out, I’ll know you’ve made your choice. You won’t be given the same opportunity again.”

Ollie fidgeted with a button on the new jacket he was wearing.

“Choose wisely, Ollie,” Lydia said.

He glanced up at her, melting her heart with those violet eyes. “You mean it? You really think I could be a gentleman?”

“I do indeed. But you must learn to follow rules first. You must take your baths and do as Mrs. Crump tells you. You are worthy, Ollie, but you cannot run away simply because you’re a little uncomfortable. Do you understand?”

Ollie nodded.

“In the carriage, Ollie. At once.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, m’lord.” He turned to head back toward the kitchen before being halted by Mr. Hill’s voice. “Parden me, Mr. Ollie. The carriage is this way.”

Ollie turned around in both terror and awe as Mr. Hill reached out his hand and escorted the diminutive little man out the front door.

Likely, it was the first time Ollie had used a front door to enter any sort of home, let alone one of the grandest mansions in all of Mayfair.

## CHAPTER SIX

“REALLY, LYDIA? A GENTLEMAN?” The sarcasm in Jeremy’s voice echoed off the ornate walls of the suddenly empty foyer. “I knew you were naïve, but...”

His gaze trailed down her person, and as he did so, the look in his eyes changed from one of derision to something else. They were alone again, and he was as aware of it as she was.

“It is possible.” She forced herself to remember what they were discussing. “As a ward of yours.”

She expected him to groan or adamantly deny anything of the sort.

“He’s to work for me, Lydia.” He glanced over his shoulder to where Ollie had disappeared with Mr. Hill. “And we’re not off to a very auspicious start.”

“He is learning,” she pointed out. “It is a beginning.”

“He’s a little pest.”

“He is a pest that you were worried about.” Lydia could do nothing to stop the satisfied smile that stretched her lips.

Jeremy stared at the floor, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “How old would you guess he is?”

The question surprised her. “Five? Six at the most?”

“He is nine, Lydia.” Jeremy pinned his gaze back on her. “At least he thinks he is nine. He says he lost track of time

after his mother disappeared but believes he was nearing his seventh birthday at the time.”

“But he’s so small.”

Jeremy’s eyes darkened. “He only eats what he finds in rubbish bins or what he can steal.”

Lydia and Clarissa had discussed this aspect of an orphan’s life before. She ought to have realized Ollie was older than he looked.

As horrifying as the reminder was, though, she also felt a sense of peace.

Because Ollie was going to get proper meals now, and Jeremy did not look nearly as cold and cynical, as he had just a few days before. Of course, he was still not the same as he once was; the tragedies of the past year had scarred him. But...

He was not uncaring.

And he had kissed her earlier today—and he’d done it as though he couldn’t help himself. He’d been like a man starved.

Much the way she had felt.

Jeremy took a step closer and reached out and brushed his fingertips along the fabric of her sleeve. “How do you manage to look more beautiful each time I see you?”

It didn’t feel as though he was complimenting her, more like he was truly baffled by such a phenomenon.

“Jeremy.” All she could do was say his name. And of course, all of her feelings sounded in that single word. In that moment, the broken heart she’d lived with since that dreadful November day made itself known as actual physical pain. “What happened? Why do you hate us? Why do you hate me?”

He exhaled loudly, in such a way that she sensed the weight of the world crashing down on him.

“I don’t hate you, Lydia.” He blinked and turned to stare up at a rather large painting of one of her ancestors. But he

wasn't really looking at the painting.

"Then why?"

"I can't tell you why." His voice hardened. "You don't want to know. It wouldn't be fair for me to tell you, nor would it be fair for... others involved."

"My brothers?"

The muscles of his jaw twitched. "And others."

She couldn't help herself, she moved even closer to him until naught but a few inches separated them.

She stared down and grasped both of his hands in hers.

Jeremy's hands were not soft. They never had been. Ever since he'd inherited his father's title, she knew of several occasions when he'd taken the time to work in the fields with his tenants.

He may have been their landlord. They may have feared him a little, even. But they all respected him.

She grazed her fingertips over the callouses, which now sported ink stains.

Jeremy was not an idle person, nor was he a man who accumulated wealth for the sake of accumulating wealth. He seemed to be lost in his own frenzy, however. Raging against humanity in his grieving.

He did not resist her hold of his hand but neither did he do anything to encourage her.

For Lydia, of course, this was encouragement enough.

Because this was Jeremy.

"I've missed you." She'd wanted to tell him this since she first saw him in Lord Baxter's office and especially while she'd been walking alone with him through the Wicked Earls' Club.

He didn't answer but turned his head away.

She raised one of her hands to trail the line of his jaw. "If you don't hate me, then why...?"

He moved his chin side to side, and then he turned to stare at her again. How many times had she gazed into the warmth of his mahogany gaze, feeling safe and protected, but most of all, simply knowing that he was her destiny?

In that moment, she felt all of this... and more.

*Kiss me*, she begged him with her eyes. Heat that had once felt like flickering embers burst into a raging inferno.

She pressed up, onto her toes, and parted her lips.

Seeing confusion and indecision in his eyes, she closed her own and waited. She was not afraid that he would embarrass her. Perhaps she ought to be. But she'd also seen something else in his gaze.

She'd seen the same longing that must be reflected in her own.

On tiptoes, one hand cradling his cheek, the other now resting on his shoulder, she waited.

“Lydia.” The warmth of his breath fanned her lips. “Lydia.”

The temperature of her blood spiked, and a roaring sound filled her ears as it raced through her veins.

Oh, yes. So much yes.

When his mouth captured hers, he seemed to be seeking permission.

And... forgiveness. He was not demanding, impatient, and passionate as he'd been earlier. This kiss was quiet—searching.

When he traced the seam along her lips with his tongue, he did not press inside until she parted her mouth and welcomed all that he would offer.

“Lydia.” A shudder ran through him.

Her arms snaked up his chest and encircled his neck now, as though she'd been drowning for months and finally found something to keep her afloat.

Locked in his embrace, sobs threatened to overflow, and her eyes burned with tears.

“Jeremy.” Her throat caught. “Why did you hurt me so?” There must be some explanation.

He stilled then, and released her mouth, ending the kiss.

“What did I do wrong?” Her heartache and confusion could not be contained, the question escaping unchecked. She had to know!

He cradled her face in his hands, conflicting emotions burning in his eyes. “I didn’t want to. You did nothing.” He stared at her mouth and then into her eyes again. “What am I going to do with you, Lydia?”

*Love me! Love me! Love me!*

These words, however, she kept to herself. He wasn’t ready. If she pushed too hard, she’d lose him forever.

But there had to be a way. Deep down, she knew with every fiber of her being that Jeremy loved her as much as she loved him. Anyone else would consider her naïve to convince herself of this, but she didn’t care.

She simply knew this about him. *I know him.*

He reached up and, wrapping his fingers around her wrists, extracted himself from their embrace. Stepping back, he closed his eyes as though summoning strength.

Strength to resist her? Or his own urges? His own desires... and dreams?

“Work will begin in the warehouse tomorrow,” he said. “I’ll have contracts sent over for you to sign in the morning.”

When she didn’t say anything but only nodded, he took another step backward.

“Ollie is waiting for you,” she reminded him.

He made a quick bow and pivoted, his shoes echoing in the vast foyer as he strode toward the door.

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HE'D KISSED her twice yesterday.

Not once, but twice, for God's sake!

Jeremy leaned forward, urging the stallion he'd chosen to ride that morning faster as he raced along the nearly empty road that made up most of Rotten Row. Perhaps the speed could clear his head.

Zeus ate up the ground all too quickly, sending the cool morning air rushing past his face and in his hair. When Jeremy drew the spirited animal to a halt, the horse protested, throwing back his head and rising momentarily onto his hind legs.

Precisely how Jeremy felt, if he was to be perfectly honest.

The horse lowered his head and then rose up a second time but failed to unseat his rider. Jeremy had been prepared for it, leaning forward and digging his heels into the horse's sides.

Sounds of another rider approaching had Jeremy grimacing until the familiar voice called out.

"Incredible animal!" Baxter was dressed in full morning attire, top hat in place, and riding a white mare who, although nearly as large and haughty as Zeus, was much better mannered.

"He needs work, but he certainly shows promise." Jeremy rubbed his hand along Zeus's slick, black neck as Baxter drew up alongside them.

"Necessary, I know, but I'm almost sorry to see the magnificent ones broken."

Jeremy nodded, agreeing with the sentiment. He turned to ride the length of the row again, and Baxter followed.

"I was going to come by your office today," Jeremy admitted. The park was all but empty and perhaps a better place for this conversation than the club would have been.

“My decision to ride this morning was quite opportune then.” The earl sent an approving glance across the space between the two of them. “My countess tells me you’re amenable to financing the orphanage.”

“Yes.” Jeremy marveled that something he’d opposed so vehemently only a few days before had suddenly become one of his top priorities.

“Bash, my brother, has a few concerns about Ludwig.”

This caught Jeremy’s attention. “Devonshire’s considering investing then?”

Baxter scowled and then exhaled loud enough that Jeremy heard it over the pounding of the horses’ hooves.

“He and Gold aren’t enthusiastic. Aside from some of the shipments known to have gone missing, there are reports that those that have actually arrived at the Ashanti Coast were tampered with. Air pockets are getting caught in the firing chamber. Particularly troublesome when pistols explode in our own soldiers’ hands.”

Jeremy knew this. And since potential investors did as well...

“Which has effectively driven down Ludwig’s value,” Jeremy pointed out. “My first objective is to eliminate the vermin involved.”

Baxter jerked to a halt and pinned his gaze on Jeremy. “You know who to go after?”

“I have a few leads, and ironically enough, one of them was provided by one of our orphans. A gang boss by the name of Farley. Surely it’s not a coincidence that the name Farley has come up on more than one of my manifests?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Not under these circumstances.” Jeremy rolled a shoulder. “The Ludwig brothers themselves are apathetic at best, if not outright culpable. As far as I can tell, they’ve only encouraged such activity. Impossible for other legitimate businesses to



function in the climate that's come about." Legitimate being the keyword.

"There are rumors that they've badgered a few club members. Not good for business at all."

"One way or another, we need to neutralize them."

"My brother mentioned the same." Baxter seemed quite in agreement. "And now with the ladies involved..."

Jeremy nodded. His thoughts exactly. "I'll be thorough. Tell that to your brother and Gold."

"Until then, we can only hope to keep them at bay. But I've no doubt they'll make mischief, if not worse, at the warehouse. They'll fight it. If the children have other options, better options, the gangs lose their soldiers." Baxter stared straight ahead at the unoccupied run.

"One would wonder," Jeremy side-eyed the club owner, "if perhaps you were aware of the connection when you so innocently *suggested* I step in to fund their operations?"

Baxter chortled and then urged his horse forward again. "They don't call me the Earl of Bastards for nothing."

Jeremy could only chuckle at this. And then he wondered if, a few days before, he would have chuckled at anything.

Lydia had always been able to make him laugh when he was feeling dour, and apparently, that hadn't changed.

But it didn't matter. He couldn't allow her to melt his resolve.

She was Lydia, but she was also a Cockfield. And he couldn't look beyond the choice her brothers had made.

"What's really motivating you in all of this, Tempest?" Baxter asked out of the blue, almost as though he was reading Jeremy's mind. "I understand the potential for profits, but in the past two months, you've moved your office to the docks, set your sights on what ought to be a relatively troublesome investment, and now you're intent on rooting out a gang of treasonous villains. It's all well and good, of course, but why

now? And why you? Does this have something to do with your brother?"

Jeremy stiffened, and Zeus twitched and then jerked his head, turning sideways on the road and threatening to buck again.

Rather than answer Baxter's question, Jeremy soothed the animal, increasing the pressure with his legs and thighs.

Only when Zeus was under control did he glance at Baxter again.

The earl merely stared at him questioningly, waiting patiently, brows raised.

"My brother served valiantly," Jeremy answered. "Why wouldn't I concern myself with issues that threaten our soldiers?"

Baxter looked as though he knew more but simply tightened his mouth.

"Ludwig's profits will double. Possibly triple," Jeremy continued. He had analyzed every possible scenario and none of the numbers lined up with those provided by the current owners. "The greater the risk, the greater the reward. You, Bash, and Gold are simply going to have to decide if you've the bollocks to go all in."

"It's not me who requires convincing. As I said before..."

"Yes." Jeremy stared knowingly back at the other earl. "However, considering you're known as London's most charmed negotiator, I shouldn't be concerned, eh?"

Baxter snorted. "True."

"And as far as these gang bosses," Jeremy went on, "I've discussed the issue with a handful of Bow Street Runners. But I wouldn't mind a little help with manpower once we decide to raid, once I know more of the specifics."

"How many?"

"Twenty men. More if you can."

“Shouldn’t be a problem. Just do me a favor and try to give me a few hours’ notice. I’ll need to bring substitutes into the club.”

Jeremy nodded. The idea that he might be able to clear his brother’s name was one he couldn’t let go of. Or perhaps, the notion refused to let go of him.

Unfortunately, it was also possible the information he discovered could do just the opposite.

That thought summoned an elephant to sit on his chest.

Damn Lucas, and damn Blackheart, and damn them both to hell that they would turn their backs on his brother so easily.

“Is this orphan of yours the same one you’ve taken into your home?”

“Women talk too much.” But Jeremy nodded.

“Your newfound compassion knows no bounds now.”

“Lady Lydia didn’t allow me much choice. If I didn’t take him in, she would have taken him home with her to Heart Place. He’d have robbed her blind.” Jeremy shrugged. “It’s a small thing, and I might as well take advantage of any information he provides me. It won’t be long before the boy tires of earning honest wages. He may lead me right to this Farley fellow.”

Lydia would be hugely disappointed, and Jeremy felt an inkling of guilt for not making all of his intentions clear to her. But if he had, she would have only had questions. And she would have defended Ollie most ardently. They would argue. Her cheeks would flush, and her cobalt eyes would sparkle with passion, causing him to forget what they were arguing about in the first place and give into other, counterintuitive urges.

Urges that could only end in further heartache. Jeremy unclenched and clenched his fists. Because both his cock and his heart protested the assumption.

Baxter drew his horse to a halt again and glanced down at his fob watch. “Keep me apprised, Tempest. But I’d best turn

back. My countess will be expecting me to break my fast with her.” Tipping his hat, he grinned. “Give my best to Lady Lydia.”

Jeremy stared after him—a man who, born on the wrong side of the blanket, had elevated himself to become a bloody earl. As the white mare pranced toward the park exit, Baxter road away, his posture as noble as any man born into a title. Damned fellow knew far too much for his own good.

Jeremy couldn't help but wonder what else he knew.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

HAVING MET with two seamstresses at Madam Chantal's and arranged for them to make some drawings of potential uniforms, Lydia stood waiting for her driver outside of the Bond Street shop with her maid and exhaled a long sigh.

As busy as she'd kept herself over the past week, it was impossible to keep her mind from going back to the day Jeremy had kissed her.

Twice, he'd kissed her.

*Twice.*

But since then, it had become quite apparent that he'd decided to avoid her.

Rather than bring the contract to her himself, Jeremy had sent it via messenger. As promised, he had indeed included the requirement that she not visit the Tuesday Warehouse unprotected, and it was an enforceable clause.

But most importantly, the contract ensured that the orphanage would be funded for eighteen months from the date of opening. She could not convince herself the clause was worth arguing over in the face of his generosity.

Even if Jeremy had told her he was only doing this at Baxter's insistence.

Eager to move matters forward, after going over it with her brother's solicitors, Lydia had signed the contract and sent it back the very next day—via messenger as well.

In addition to the contract, Jeremy sent over an ambitious timeline, as well as his preferred contractors. She'd written back that she would like to discuss a few items, but again, two days had since passed without a response.

And he had not once referenced how Ollie was doing in any of them.

Was he avoiding her or his feelings? Or were they one and the same?

She'd seen regret in his eyes after he'd kissed her, and he'd looked almost fearful as he'd backed hastily toward the front door.

Coachman John effectively brought her thoughts to a halt as he pulled the carriage up beside them.

But while she'd been waiting, a pesky little idea had formed in the back of her mind. Would it be so very inappropriate to make an unplanned visit to Jeremy's Townhouse on Cork Street?

To visit Ollie, of course.

She bit her lip.

Visiting an orphan boy she'd taken an interest in ought not to be misconstrued in any way. In fact, it ought to be considered perfectly acceptable. Quite appropriate.

And in the event that she did happen to run into Jeremy, she had her maid with her to act as chaperone.

Nothing improper at all.

Unwilling to rethink her decision, she whipped open the sliding door to the driver's box. "Sixteen Cork Street."

Louise, of course, didn't question their new destination but did raise her brows half an inch.

The truth of the matter was that Lydia was very curious about Ollie's plight. So much so that she'd talked her nerves into settling down considerably by the time they arrived at Jeremy's modest Mayfair townhouse.

Modest by Heart Place standards, that was.

”No need to wait on us, John. Louise and I can return on foot.” Knowing her maid was always amenable to taking the air, Lydia waved the carriage away as Louise held the iron gate open for Lydia to pass through.

The brick façade of Jeremy’s townhouse was newly painted, and the wood door was polished to a high shine. Oh, she hoped Ollie had made the right decision and stayed with Jeremy after all.

She didn’t recognize the servant who opened the door, nor did he recognize her. She faltered, doubting her decision to visit for an instant. Matters between her and Jeremy were very different than they’d been before. She had practically been on a first-name basis with most of his servants at Galewick Manor.

The manservant stared down at her, awaiting some explanation for her visit.

Which in actuality, posed no problem for Lydia. She straightened her spine and lifted her chin. She was a Cockfield, after all.

“I am Lady Lydia Cockfield, sister of the Duke of Blackheart.” She summoned some of her brother’s demeanor. “I am here to meet with Ollie, the young boy Lord Tempest took in recently.”

The butler stared down his nose at her, but then stepped back, widening the door and bowing. “Of course, My Lady. This way, please.”

Lydia craned her neck around, taking in her surroundings. This was where Jeremy spent most of his time.

The foyer’s decor was very representational of him: subdued but decorated with tasteful paintings, quiet-colored moldings, and shining wood floors. There were several rugs, with simple but elegant floral accents, placed about.

The scent of lemon oil hung in the air as she followed the butler into a drawing room where the walls were painted an eggshell blue and the furnishings upholstered in matching

blues and golds. A very expensive-looking vase was propped on a table behind the long settee.

This room, she decided, would have been decorated by his mother.

“How is Lady Tempest,” she asked impulsively.

The butler frowned as though uncertain of divulging his employer’s personal information.

“My dear Aunt Emma asked me to inquire.” Involving one’s dear aunt into any occasion was certain to lend an air of respectability.

And apparently it did.

“She is improving. Her doctors are cautiously optimistic.” And then the butler clutched his hands behind his back. “Do make yourself comfortable, My Lady. I’ll have the boy brought down immediately, and if it is to your liking, your maid may wait in the kitchens with Mrs. Crump. Do not hesitate to use the bell pull if you have need of anything. I am Mr. Bartholomew, at your service.”

Louise glanced questioningly over at Lydia.

“I am not in need of a chaperone while visiting with a nine-year-old boy.” She smiled, knowing her maid would likely take tea with the servants below, and that she would enjoy that far more than sitting in a corner watching her fuss over Ollie.

As Louise all but flew out of the room, Lydia turned back to Mr. Bartholomew. “You said he would be ‘brought down’?” She’d have thought he’d be working below stairs.

“From the nursery, my lady.”

“Oh... thank you, Mr. Bartholomew.” Surely, Ollie would not be spending time in the nursery if he was also a servant? Pleasant tingles swirled in her chest as she contemplated the various possibilities of what this meant.

She could not sit down. She could not relax.



This was Jeremy's home. A home she might once have become mistress of but for some unknown reason that was being kept secret from her.

If she was to suffer because of it, for goodness sakes, she deserved to know the details.

If Lucinda was here, she'd surely find out. Lucinda would make everyone miserable until she had every last detail.

A sudden wave of longing crashed over her; there were times when her twin sister's absence felt like a missing limb—or, at least, how she imagined one would be. She wondered if Lucinda was feeling the same way or if she was too distracted with her new husband...

With some effort, she forcibly shifted her thoughts away from the lingering melancholy and back to the matter at hand. She was here now to check on Ollie and possibly Jeremy, if he was at home, that is, and if he would let her.

Lydia paced across the floor and then stopped to stare out a window facing the gardens. It was three in the afternoon. Was Jeremy meeting with one of his employees at the warehouse without her? Or was he at his office, going over numbers and contemplating new ventures to keep himself distracted from annoying ladies he'd once nearly been engaged to?

Lydia wouldn't put it past him to be tucked away in his study, hiding from her.

Because surely, if he was here, his butler would inform him that he had a guest.

She sighed just as the door opened and Ollie appeared. Wearing short pants and a white shirt with a laced collar, he was accompanied by a tall, slim woman who looked to be in her late forties. Lydia had seen enough women in this profession to know his companion was a governess. She had that air of authority combined with a no-nonsense presence. Ollie moved to lurch forward but was caught firmly by the woman's hand on his shoulder.

"Make your bow to Her Ladyship, Master Oliver."

The woman's voice commanded, but Lydia was pleased to also hear a note of affection.

*Jeremy had hired a governess for Ollie!*

All the warmth of summer swept through her.

Ollie bowed low, folding over completely to where he nearly lost his balance, and then rose. He glanced backward then as though asking his governess if he'd performed the gesture appropriately.

"Very good, Master Oliver." The governess nodded in approval.

Lydia rose. "Thank you, Miss...?"

"Mrs. Mumford."

"You are Ollie's... governess?"

"I am, my lady."

This was most unexpected!

As much as she wanted to pick the woman's mind as to how she'd come by her position and what her instructions were regarding Ollie, her purpose for coming was to ask Ollie how he was doing. He might not be straightforward with her when another adult was present.

"I thank you for bringing him down, Mrs. Mumford. I'll send him back upstairs to resume your daily schedule as soon as Oliver and I are done chatting."

"Very well, my lady. We have not yet completed our handwriting exercises today." She stepped backward. "I will take my tea and return to collect him."

Lydia smiled down at Ollie as the governess took her leave. So many changes might be exciting for him but might also be overwhelming.

Lowering herself onto a settee, she gestured for Ollie to take the place beside her. "Won't you sit down with me?"

He squirmed and tugged at his collar but did as she asked, those violet eyes flashing around the room and filled with

curiosity.

“All of this is very different from what you are used to, isn’t it?”

He turned his gaze back to her. “I didn’t expect none of this.”

Taking responsibility for an orphan could not be so simple as this. “I’m glad you decided to stay with his Lordship. I would have worried if you’d done otherwise.”

Ollie bounced restlessly, his hands flat beside him on the cushions. “When’s he sendin’ me back, do ya ken? I have to make sure me brother ain’t gettin’ into too much barney.”

“Barney? I don’t know what you mean.” Nor had she realized he had a brother. “Does Lord Tempest know about your brother?”

“He does, m’lady. Says he’ll find him too. But I don’t think he can. If Buck don’t wanna be found, ain’t no one who can. Except for Farley. He can find anyone. He knows all the bloomin’ hidin’ places.”

“Does Buck need to hide a lot?” Ollie had mentioned this Buck boy before.

Ollie plucked a small figurine of two small boys off the table and rubbed his fingertips along the smooth carving. “Yeah, he does. He’s older than me.”

Ollie was worried about his brother. A brother, who, apparently, got into a good deal of barney.

“How old is Buck?”

“He’s four and ten.”

Five years older than Ollie; he must be considerably larger. And she remembered Ollie telling them that Buck had been the one to cause the bruises when they’d discovered him in the warehouse. “I’m sure Buck is fine, then. And if Lord Tempest says he’s going to find him, I’ve no doubt that he will.”

Ollie tilted his head sideways. “Buck’s always messin’ up. And fightin’ when I’m not there to talk him outta it. Got his

face right cut up past winter.”

“You are not responsible for what your brother does,” Lydia said, patting his leg.

Ollie sighed, eyebrows crinkled in an expression that looked too old for his small face. “He’s my brother, I can’t help it.”

The floor creaked, and Lydia glanced up. She had not heard Jeremy enter the room. For a moment, his eyes looked almost haunted, but the expression flickered and disappeared when he dipped his chin in her direction.

Lydia licked her lips, staring at his bared arms where his shirt sleeves were rolled up. He must have been working in his study after all.

Every button on his silk gold waistcoat was fastened, and the bottoms of his buff breeches were neatly tucked into shining Hessians.

“Mr. Bartholomew informed me that you...” Jeremy gestured behind him, almost as though providing a reason for his appearance. “I did not realize we had a meeting.”

“We did not,” Lydia answered.

Jeremy cocked a brow.

“I came to have a visit with *Master Oliver*,” Lydia explained.

Nothing in the world could hold back her pleasure at Ollie’s elevated circumstances. But she could not tease Jeremy about this or gloat. What on earth had transpired to cause Jeremy to decide to raise Ollie as a ward and not a servant?

“Mrs. Mumford is waiting in the foyer for you, Oliver.” Jeremy’s voice was cool and commanding.

Ollie hopped up, but when he moved toward the door, Jeremy stopped him with a question. “Did your letters give you as much difficulty this morning?”

Ollie shook his head. “Not so hard as the day before. Yer tricks ya told me helped.”

“Very good.” Jeremy’s lips twitched, and Ollie’s mouth stretched into a wide grin before he scrambled across the room. After struggling only slightly to pull the heavy door open, he exited and then very purposefully pushed it closed behind him, leaving Lydia alone with Jeremy for the first time in nearly a week.

Jeremy had not moved from where he stood, feet planted wide, hands behind his back.

He looked very much the Earl of Tempest today. Imposing, haughty...

*Adorably austere.*

“Please, don’t tell me you came here without a companion,” he said.

“My maid is in the kitchen with your housekeeper, taking tea.” And since he appeared to be quite at a loss, Lydia folded her hands in her lap graciously. “Won’t you sit down?” she invited for the second time in less than a quarter of an hour.

...while sitting in a drawing room that was not her own.

She wasn’t going to allow him to chase her away so easily this time. She never ought to have allowed him to chase her away to begin with.

To her surprise, Jeremy took the place Ollie had vacated. If he’d wanted to continue avoiding her, he easily could have claimed the winged-back chair on the opposite side of the room.

“Ollie says he has a brother. Have you had any luck finding him?”

“Buck. And yes, I have.” Jeremy stared down at his hands and her gaze followed.

Slim and masculine with a few curling tendrils of black hair on his knuckles, she couldn’t help but notice how sinewy muscle flexed and moved beneath his skin. Lydia clutched her hands tightly in her lap, squashing the desire to trail her fingers along his forearm... all the way to where it disappeared beneath the folds of his sleeves.

“Lydia?” He was watching her now.

She sat up straight and pressed her knees together. “I’m sorry. You were saying?”

But he was watching her knowingly. Of course, she could never hide her feelings from anyone.

“You found Buck?” she persisted.

“Ah, yes.” Jeremy frowned. “He’s... trouble. Far more trouble than Ollie ever would have been. If Ollie’s going to stand half a chance at a proper life, the older boy can’t remain a part of his life.”

“Oh...” She hated that Buck had beaten on Ollie, but they couldn’t very well keep Ollie from his brother indefinitely, could they? “But he’s Ollie’s brother.”

Pain showed in Jeremy’s eyes, and Lydia guessed that memories of his own brother had come to mind.

“I miss Lucinda every day,” she confessed. “But I know she is happy and well. I can’t imagine what it’s like to be denied a sibling.”

She’d stood beside him at his brother’s funeral and watched him grieve. But he had survived. He’d not hated her brothers then—two men who might provide some of the companionship he missed now.

Jeremy’s throat pulsed. “Buck will ruin Ollie if he remains in his life.”

Of course, he must be right. “What will you tell Ollie?”

“The truth—that he has a choice.”

It was a very, very hard choice to present to one so young. In fact, it was a nigh impossible one.

“So, he’s going to have to choose between his own well-being—his own chance at living a meaningful and productive life—and staying at his brother’s side. I’m not sure he’ll be able to do that. I know that I couldn’t.”

“That’s why I...” Jeremy shook his head dismissively. “I’ll send for your maid.” He moved to rise but Lydia stopped him,

placing her hand on his thigh.

“That’s why you what?” she asked, sensing he’d nearly told her something very important. “That’s why you what, Jeremy?”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

JEREMY WINCED.

He'd damn near spilled his bleeding heart.

"Please, Jeremy. I need to know." Lydia's hands gripped above his knees. Seeing the lace of her gloves, her delicate hands resting on his thighs, had him... floundering.

A sensation that in anyone else's presence was a foreign one.

If she moved her hands just a few inches higher... He closed his eyes. "I don't want you to have to decide. It would not have been fair."

"Decide what, between my brothers and... myself?" She squeezed hard, her fingers digging into his muscles. "*Tell me, Jeremy. Tell me so that I can understand. Tell me so I can either fix whatever it is that's caused you to hate all of us or move forward without you.*"

"You can't fix it. No one can fix it. Don't you think that if anyone could, I would have done that already?"

But perhaps he could tell her some of it. He could tell her just enough so that she could forget about him—forget about the past.

He drew in a sharp breath. He'd let go of her four months ago, and it had hurt like hell. Watching her find someone else... The sharp breath evolved into a painful ache.

"I never wanted you to have to choose between your family and me." He kept his eyes lowered, unable to look at



her. But that was all he would say. It was all he *could say*.

Because the reason had to do with so much more than just himself. It had to do with the honor of his family, the betrayal of her brothers, and most importantly, his brother's memory.

He'd been livid after hearing Lucas' suspicions. Arthur would never commit treason. *His brother had not been a traitor.*

Shame and guilt attacked him for even considering it.

*Damn Lucas. Damn Blackheart.*

*Damnit, Arthur!*

"But why...?" The bewildered pain in her voice had him staring into her eyes, glistening with confused tears, making them look more emerald than blue.

She was completely separate from all of those reasons and yet they had changed the course of her life.

"It has nothing to do with you." His voice caught.

"But, Jeremy. You are wrong." One of those tears overflowed and trailed down to the corner of her mouth. "*It has everything to do with me—with us.*"

He sat frozen, loyalty to his brother warring with his heart. Because she was right. Their future together had been shattered by Lucas and Blackheart's betrayal. By her brothers' deplorable accusations.

Arthur was his flesh and blood. *His brother would never...*

Shifting his gaze to the window, the desire to kiss away her tears nearly broke him.

"Please, Jeremy?"

"Your brothers..." It was all he could say. "I can't—"

"But it is my brothers you are angry with. It isn't me that you hate."

"God, Lydia, I could never hate you." Quite the opposite.

Was he telling her too much? Was he making this worse than it already was?

“You told me to stay away from you.” A hint of accusation flashed in her gaze. Deserved. Well deserved.

“You need to... allow me to complete the renovations for the orphanage. Allow me to do this for you while you attend balls, garden parties, and river parties. We... Us. Cannot happen. An arrangement between the two of us is impossible.”

He'd said it. So, why didn't he experience any relief?

“Impossible?”

One of her hands slid up to his groin, and he practically burst into flames. She wasn't touching him, but she was close.

“Lydia.” He grasped her wrist.

“I am unconvinced.”

She was more stubborn than she had been last spring. In that short time since he'd sent her away, she had changed from a demure young lady to a headstrong woman.

And God in heaven, she was even more tempting now. More beautiful. More powerful.

Utterly irresistible.

Her fingers uncurled beneath his hand and splayed over the fabric of his trousers, dangerously grazing the stretched material confining his damned unruly cock.

She leaned in. “I'm not a child to be kept locked away, to be protected from the ugliness in the world.” Her voice sounded throaty... sensual.

Her pupils were dilated, diminishing the blue so that the glints in her eyes were like stars in a moonless sky. Her softly rounded cheeks were flushed, heated. And her lips...

Her lips were parted, shining, and inviting him to do things he doubted she even knew possible. He stared past them, into the darker reds and tender textures, imagining other flesh he craved to know.

“You don't hate me,” she insisted, leaning in, her hands resting on his arm, sweet breath fanning his jaw.

“No.” He clenched his fists, willing his heart to slow.

And then she touched her tongue to his earlobe.

“Lydia.”

“Tell me again this is impossible,” she demanded in a whisper. “I dare you to convince me.”

His willpower, which he’d always considered ironclad, chose that moment to shatter most spectacularly. Faster than lightning, Jeremy had her seated across his lap, one arm behind her and the other roving over her arm, the curve of her hip.

“*You* are impossible,” he said. “Damn it, it’s you.”

He’d tried, by God, he’d tried. He claimed her mouth and then deepened their kiss. Her whimper vibrated between them.

“Not impossible,” she countered when he released her mouth to trail kisses down her neck.

But the two of them, together, like this, was in fact, impossible.

A voice of reason raged inside his head, even as his heart sang and his body breathed giant gulps of relief to hold her again.

He’d felt dead inside for so long. He would pay later for giving in to these emotions. He should push her away, run out the door as far as his feet would take him.

Except this was his house.

“Lydia,” he sighed, his hands wandering over her supple curves. How had he imagined he could live without her?

He’d clung to his need to absolve Arthur’s name. But he’d not been living. He’d merely been existing.

Her hands snaked around his neck, and she turned to face him, placing herself in an even more inappropriate position.

Knees bent, bracketing his thighs.

By god, she was straddling him.

This. How long had he needed this?

Needed her?

Memories of when she was a young girl flitted through his mind—and earlier that year, when she'd stood beside him at his brother's funeral, when she'd met him on the bridge that separated his property from her brother's, when she'd hesitantly given him permission to kiss her.

He'd known Lydia for most of his life. And all the while, he'd expected to marry her.

Knowing what awaited the two of them had been akin to living with a wonderful promise—a promise that his future held good things.

Wonderful things.

Without the promise of that future, all color had drained out of his life.

He stroked her silk-clad ankles, hidden in her skirts. Locating the small indents there, he traced his fingertips over them. So fragile. Feminine.

Sensual.

He then ghosted his palms over her calves, rounded her knees, and edged them up the length of her thighs.

All hidden in the billowing fabric of her skirt. Hidden treasure.

“I need you, Jeremy.” She slowly rolled her hips against him.

She could not know what she was saying—what she was doing.

“So badly.” She exhaled.

The heat of her center pressed down on the bulge in his trousers. Trouble. She was steering them headlong into trouble. And rather than drop anchor, he raised the sails, intent on traveling full speed ahead.

He'd deal with the trouble when they got there.

Jeremy tugged at her sleeves and lowered her bodice. How many times had he dreamed of doing this while courting her? Soft, creamy skin captured his gaze. A pink flush appeared, and he groaned.

The reality of Lydia in his arms, of her flesh bared beneath his gaze, surpassed any dream he could concoct on his own.

His prim and proper debutante was rocking against him. As he laved and suckled and nipped with his teeth, he realized that he had indeed been correct in the assumption he'd made before.

Because Lydia Cockfield did, in fact, taste like love.

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LOST in the haze of this... wanting, Lydia knew she should stop. *Ladies do not do this.*

Not in the privacy of an isolated meadow, not in an earl's Mayfair townhouse, and most definitely not with a gentleman who was not her husband.

But... this was Jeremy.

"Oh," she gasped.

His mouth summoned hot jumpy sensations... all over. She wanted closer to him.

She was well aware of how a woman and a man came together—in the dark, in a bedchamber, the lady in her nightdress, the man wearing... Well, she wasn't certain of that, but she knew that he'd eventually be...

Exposed.

Jeremy's body was hard precisely where she needed him to feel hard. Caught up in the pressure building between the two of them, she imagined all manner of scenarios. Some that involved activities that would resemble the marriage act and others that were, well... unimaginable. Only she did imagine them. Even now...

Frantic, she lowered her hands to his falls but before she could begin to unfasten them, he stopped her.

He was right here. She was in his arms and yet...

He was unreachable.

“Not... like this.” His voice came out gravelly, rough.

She lifted her lashes to stare into his eyes, her lids heavy as she struggled to focus.

“But...” Was that her making that whining sound?

His gaze pinned on her, he jerked his hips up and prodded... Precisely where she ached to be prodded.

“Like this.”

She could barely hold her head up.

He pulsed upward again, and then again, building on the friction she'd been chasing.

“Jeremy.” Her head fell back this time, and she would have fallen off his lap if his hands weren't gripping her waist. He'd located her center and felt harder than before. Like wood, like steel, he ignited more heat—more wanting. White light danced over her skin at the same time little bursts of lightning sped through her veins.

“Let go, sweet, like that.”

Let go.

*Let go?*

Wasn't that what she was doing?

The settee was shaking now, knocking against the table behind it. His butler or housekeeper could come along any moment, wanting to know what on earth was happening in here.

She allowed herself a split second to glance toward the closed door and when she swung her gaze back to him, she was surprised to see a bead of perspiration dotting his brow.

“What if someone comes?” she asked.

“Precisely what I’m hoping for.” His eyes flashed teasingly but then closed again, and squeezing her hips tightly, he growled.

The knocking sounds grew louder as his thrusts carried her closer...

Closer to... something.

And then she doubted she’d care if King George himself strode through the door.

Jeremy shuttered, something shattered, and then the most compelling feeling of completion rolled over her. At some point, she’d fallen forward, and they were all but gasping into one another’s mouths.

“Jeremy.”

“Are you all right, sweets?”

“I am, but...”

“What is it?” He stared at her in concern.

“The vase. I think we broke the vase.”

And in that moment, her hope that everything was going to turn out perfectly fine grew even stronger.

Because Jeremy Gilcrest threw back his head and laughed.

## CHAPTER NINE

“LORD TEMPEST, BAXTER.” The younger of the two elderly Ludwig Bros. stepped forward, hand outstretched as Jeremy and Baxter, as well as their men of business, entered the spacious but shabby meeting room housed in the Ludwig Bros. Shipping offices. If everything went as planned, the sale would be finalized by the end of this meeting.

Both Ludwig brothers were well beyond their seventies, and Jeremy knew that neither of them had any family other than one another. Despite the fact that one was considerably plumper than the other, they were nearly identical. Both were balding with white hair, parchment-like complexions, and watery blue eyes.

Seeing the brothers together elicited a painful twisting in Jeremy’s heart. It was a reminder that Arthur would never work beside him in business. They wouldn’t grow old together. His own brother would forever be a young man in his memory.

Jeremy cleared his throat and pushed the thought away before lowering himself into the chair beside Baxter.

“I’m Leo, and this old grump of a fellow is Rudolph,” Leo quipped before taking his seat at the table. Based on the delivery of the joke, as well as Rudolph’s unimpressed grunt, Jeremy had no doubt Leo had been using the same line for most of their adult lives.

At the far end of the table, Rudolph didn’t bother glancing up from what he was reading. Addendums to the contract—a



rather satisfying collection of them. Jeremy flicked his glance over the thick binder of documents that he himself had compiled and then leaned back and crossed one foot over his knee. Was he anxious to get this over with? Yes. Would he show it? Hell, no.

“We can’t all be the charming ones.” Baxter threw a quick glance in Jeremy’s direction, and Leo laughed.

“Makes you and I look even better, eh, Baxter?” Leo agreed. “I’d offer you a smoke, but perhaps we should wait until after the negotiations?”

“Brilliant, Leo, as usual,” Rudolph muttered without looking up from his reading.

A handful of begrudging-looking gentlemen, presumably the Ludwigs’ solicitors, leaned against the wall, almost like soldiers but with their arms folded across their chests. They took their turns nodding as Leo Ludwig made introductions, but all the while Jeremy kept his gaze pinned on the grumpy one. Rudolph Ludwig would be the one to bring up all objections and questions.

Baxter took the seat beside Jeremy and then caught his gaze meaningfully. Although the club owner had, in fact, brought in considerable investment money, Jeremy would be the major shareholder, maintaining ownership of fifty-one percent. For that reason, and because he was the most informed, he would act as principal negotiator.

After waiting nearly half a minute, Rudolph finally raised his head and leveled his watery gaze on Jeremy. “This isn’t the asking price.”

The room fell silent at the gambit, and Jeremy immediately recognized his advantage.

These penny-pinching merchants considered gentlemen of the nobility to be foolish and cavalier where business was concerned. Jeremy was happy to be underestimated.

“It’s twenty percent more than the company’s worth.” Ten percent, but that was beside the point.

Jeremy would rather not bring up the missing ammunition nor the arms that had been tampered with.

But if necessary, he would.

Rudolph grunted, placed an unlit cigar between his teeth, and turned the page. "This ship is undervalued," he said around the cigar.

Jeremy opened his own folder and offered the evaluation he'd had done. "I beg to differ. Unless you have documentation proving otherwise?"

Rudolph only grunted again, and then went on to dispute something else.

Two and a half hours later, having made zero allowances where price was concerned, Jeremy and Baxter stepped onto the docks as the new owners of one of England's oldest shipping companies. Official paperwork in hand, Jeremy stared up at the gray and cloudy sky and waited for relief that didn't come.

Buying Ludwig Bros. was only the first step in clearing Arthur's name. Tomorrow, he'd begin the task of sifting through the company's original accounting records. It would be one of those undertakings where finding nothing would be considered a good thing.

He'd sift out the traitors, bring them to justice, and there would be no mention of his brother.

Would he find relief then? Would it be enough?

Arthur had not been a saint. Arthur had just been... Arthur: the charming brother, the ladies' man. Yes, he had cheated on his wife and then failed to take the necessary steps to provide properly for his daughter, but he wasn't a traitor.

Jeremy was certain of this.

None of this would have been necessary if Lucas and Blackheart had simply left well enough alone. Jeremy wouldn't have had to remain in London over the winter, putting his mother's health at risk; he wouldn't have had to

buy a damn shipping company nor would he have been forced to go to war with an army of dock thieves.

And he'd already be married to Lydia.

Lydia, without whom, he was coming to realize, his life was nothing more than a series of monotonous days.

And endless, frustrating nights.

And having come to that conclusion, he realized he was going to have to change the way he'd been thinking. His gut roiled at the thought of enduring their betrayal, but Lydia was worth it.

She always had been.

He could never esteem her brothers as he once had. Not after all of this. But for her sake, for both their sakes, he would learn to tolerate them as brothers-in-law.

He simply needed proof to convince Lucas to call off the official investigation he'd set into motion through the War Office.

"I'd suggest we go for a drink, but Clarissa will want me home early," Baxter said, smiling in satisfaction. "She tends to get this way every time we host a dinner party. You are coming, aren't you?"

"I said I would, didn't I?"

There were six other investors and, from what the earl told him, his wife had invited them all: Baxter's brother, Devonshire—or Bash as he called him—the Earl of Goldthwaite, the Earl of Westerley, Baron Chaswick, and the Marquess of Greystone. It wouldn't look good for Jeremy to forgo the event, as much as he'd like to.

"It seems you're finally learning, Tempest," Baxter observed as Jeremy's carriage appeared.

Blasted Baxter—his notions regarding amiability were wearing Jeremy down.

And yet, his mouth tipped up in a sly smile. Because Lydia, who he had not seen for three days, was going to be in

attendance.

After denying himself her company for four months with every intention of doing so indefinitely, he could now barely go three days without her.

Without tasting her. Or kissing her. Or participating in other undignified, unmentionable, satisfying, yet unsatisfying exploits with her.

She'd been dismayed over the broken vase. Beyond dismayed when she'd learned that it had been produced in China sometime during the Tang Dynasty. Jeremy had refused to confirm that it had been almost a thousand years old, but she'd nearly collapsed with the vapors anyway.

His mother, on the other hand, might have something else to say about it once she was recovered. He would have to purchase a replica.

Caring for something so mundane gave him pause. Was Lydia dragging him out of the clawing darkness he'd muddled through all year?

Suddenly, everything in his life seemed to revolve around her. And it felt right.

It felt righter than anything had in a very long time.

Seated in the forward-facing bench, Baxter stared out the window, his arms crossed and his legs sprawled between them.

Jeremy would relay the earl to his Mayfair home first, so the man could settle his wife's nerves before her dinner party and then he would have his driver return him to Bond Street. The decision to visit Rundell and Bridge's—the jewelers—was an impulsive one.

He would be prepared when all of this worked out. *If* all of this worked out.

If the original records had not been destroyed.

If his brother's name wasn't listed amongst the other blackguards.

And if the proof was enough to convince Lucas and Blackheart to stand down.

Jeremy inhaled a shaky breath. That was a long list of ifs.

For the first time in over a year, he was beginning to believe his future held something other than grief and hopelessness.

Because when Lydia had stepped into his life again, she'd brought hope along with her.

Hope.

It was a terrifying thing.

---

LYDIA TRAILED her gaze around the elegant but crowded drawing room. Clarissa's dinner party was not the intimate gathering Lydia had assumed it would be. With all of Jeremy's investors present, as well as their respective wives, the evening promised to be more of a grand celebration. Apparently, the purchase of Ludwig Bros. Shipping had gone better than planned.

"This Season promises to be considerably quieter than last spring, what with the Ravensdale brothers married off, as well as... a few other handsome rogues." Lady Greystone's gaze drifted across the room, and she smiled over her glass. Lydia decided that the well dressed and very handsome man she stared at must be her husband, the Marquess of Greystone.

If Lydia realized nothing else that evening, the couples among Clarissa's guests ought to be sufficient to convince her that happy endings were indeed possible. Every single lady here appeared beyond content, and their Lordly husbands seemed quite taken with their wives.

One of them, Lady Westerley, a pretty American with startling red hair who was obviously with child, hardly went more than ten minutes without her husband crossing the room to inquire as to her health. That he was willing to break from society's norms was not only sweet but touching.

Because it was one thing for Lady Westerley to appear in public in her condition but quite another for her husband, who was also an earl, to be living in her pocket.

And yet... Lydia felt quite comfortable amongst them.

All of the ladies were kind and welcoming. And although every gentleman present was titled in one way or another, Lydia quickly gathered that this event was not really a *tonish* one at all.

It was more of a business affair—business among friends—if she were to go by the bits of conversation she'd taken part in so far.

Lydia swallowed a sip of the sherry Lord Baxter had procured for her and glanced toward the door for the hundredth time. *Where is he?*

Clarissa intercepted her gaze and winced.

When the countess had visited, two days before, and Lydia told her she'd seen Jeremy again, Clarissa had guessed as to most of the details of their meeting. Most of the general details, anyhow. Lydia had not relayed that she had sat on Jeremy's lap, nor what she'd done while she'd sat there.

Clarissa had dissolved into a fit of giggles when she told her about the vase.

Lydia had burst off of Jeremy and tried collecting the pieces, hoping there was some way the vase could be patched together, but repairing it had been impossible, and Jeremy had knelt beside her on the floor and halted her efforts.

“What's done is done,” he'd said. “No use hurting yourself trying to glue it back together.” And then he'd drawn her back to sit beside him on the comfortable settee and settled his arm around her shoulders.

Lydia had been certain his butler would interrupt them, especially after hearing the sound of shattering porcelain. But they had been left alone.

Leaving her to contemplate what the two of them had done and what it had meant.

To cover for her nervousness, she'd asked him about Ollie and then described the uniforms to be sewn. He'd grown suspiciously silent, so with nothing else to babble about, she'd leapt up from the settee and made to leave.

And of course, he'd insisted on driving her home. "I don't know what Blackheart was thinking leaving you for so long without protection," he pointed out yet again.

Lydia had not reminded him that if her brother was here, there was no way she'd have been left alone with him that afternoon.

And if they had not been left alone, they would not have done... whatever that was called. It had not been intercourse and most assuredly went far beyond kissing. It had simply been...

Wicked.

"What are you thinking?" he'd asked while they'd waited in the foyer for his carriage to be brought around. She had answered with nothing more than a mysterious smile. When he had not raised the subject of the nature of their relationship, she'd not broached it either.

Three days had passed since that afternoon in his drawing room on Cork Street, and she'd not seen or heard from him even once.

"Is he the Earl of Tempest?" Lady Westerley asked, flicking her gaze toward the door discreetly.

The sound of Jeremy's name summoned Lydia's attention immediately.

She twisted around again, and at last, the evening held promise.

"Yes," Lydia answered. "That's him."

## CHAPTER TEN

LYDIA WATCHED as his gaze scanned the room and the moment it landed on her, he paused, and his eyes warmed to the color of dark chocolate.

He'd told her that the two of them, together, were impossible, but he was wrong. The hint of a smile dancing on his lips sent tingles racing down her spine. Not impossible at all.

When Lord Westerley stepped forward to greet Jeremy, congratulating hand outstretched, the almost unworldly connection between her and Jeremy was broken, leaving Lydia feeling momentarily bereft.

And then she realized that this was something of a special moment for him.

Her disappointment was swept away and replaced with unexpected pleasure.

The other gentlemen guests stepped forward as well to express their appreciation, and he was quickly surrounded. Slaps on the back ensued, and Westerley pressed a glass into his hand.

When Lydia next managed to catch a glimpse of the man of the hour, she almost laughed out loud at his expression of confusion and disbelief. He hadn't expected this. Lydia held herself back, happy to witness his triumph.

She didn't really understand the significance of purchasing a shipping company, or why it had been so important, but it



was obvious he'd met with great success. Watching him absorb the honor of his contemporaries warmed her heart.

Lady Westerley had edged up beside her and Lydia couldn't help but ask, "I realize they are all invested, but they have not profited yet, have they?"

"It's because Lord Tempest intends to not only stop the smugglers who've been operating through Ludwig Bros., but he also intends to bring them to justice. In the past few years, the gang bosses have widened their territory beyond the docks—to the clubs and to legal trade. Westerley says that they'll never contain these types of criminals completely, but Lord Tempest... Well, he's tackled the root of it. I rather believe that this—" she waved her hand toward the doorway where the men were gathered "—isn't only about the investment but signifies their support."

Lydia watched the group of men who appeared ridiculously confident, if not outright cocky, and exhaled a sigh of relief.

He did not have to do everything alone—even if he'd ended his friendship with her brothers. She was happy for him, but she was also a little sad.

What had Lucas and Blackheart done to him? And then another question niggled in her mind. Was it possible that Jeremy's involvement in the docks was connected to Lucas and Blackheart? She had heard them discussing Ludwig Bros. Shipping and wished now that she'd bothered to actually pay attention.

Jeremy's brother, Arthur, had been involved in an ambush where weapons had been stolen. Weapons that might have been shipped to them by Ludwig Brothers, perhaps?

"Do the gang bosses smuggle weapons?" Lydia asked.

"Mostly," Lady Westerley answered. "That and various libations."

Lord and Lady Baxter's manservant chose that moment to announce dinner, and all of her rational thoughts fled when, freed up at last, Jeremy strolled in her direction from across

the room. Lady Westerley offered him her own congratulations and then joined her husband, leaving Lydia and Jeremy alone.

He was quiet as the two of them stood watching the other couples drift out of the drawing room, and Lydia did not feel the need to press, sensing he required a moment to ground himself.

Not until everyone else had exited did Jeremy tuck her arm into his and lead her toward the door.

With two actual dukes in attendance, a room full of countesses, and a baroness, Lydia felt positively outranked for one of the first times in her life.

“You look stunning tonight.” Lydia jumped when his breath caressed the side of her face. “You were born to wear that color of blue”.

She’d chosen the gown intentionally. “I remember it’s your favorite.” She glanced down, feeling warmth flood her cheeks.

“Cobalt. The first time I stared into your eyes, I thought my own were tricking me.”

“No tricks.” She felt like humming beside him. She had missed this! And yet another layer had been added to their relationship; something electric now vibrated beneath their conversation.

She’d not really... flirted with him before. They’d been friends who held deep affection for one another. But also, there had been a certainty to their match. Or so she’d believed.

“You cannot have been more than six.” He chuckled. “And, God, but that makes me feel old.”

“You are not old.” She squeezed his arm. “You were eighteen at the time and just returned from school to visit Blackheart.” Her parents had been gone for two years already. “You took tea with Lucinda and me. But you refused to hold my doll.”

“Your brothers never would have let me hear the end of it. As it was...” He bit off what he’d been going to say, almost as

though he'd forgotten he despised them now. But surely, he could not despise them forever, could he?

They entered the long dining room, and he dropped her hand in order to draw out a chair for her to sit. A single seat that was flanked by chairs occupied by the Duchess of Goldthwaite and Baron Chaswick.

He made a quick bow and then left her to take a seat at the opposite end of the room.

The mention of Blackheart must have reminded him that he had intended to keep away from her.

She lessened her disappointment by telling herself that at least now, he seemed to be torn, and that was far better than his frame of mind four months ago.

And if the heated glances he persistently sent in her direction were anything to go by, it was possible that his feelings for her had a chance at winning the battle in the end.

She hoped, anyhow.

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“WOULD you mind driving Lady Lydia home this evening? Her driver's horse... er... threw a shoe and had to return to Heart Place early?”

“It threw a shoe in your drive?”

The Countess of Baxter shrugged. “I've been telling Baxter that we needed to repair it.”

“Of course.” He chuckled. “I am at your service.”

He'd successfully evaded Lydia for most of the evening. Jeremy had been the one to bring up Blackheart, and he'd caught himself all but reminiscing, speaking of the man fondly.

With his objectives unbalanced, he'd avoided her, which hadn't been fair of him. She deserved better—she always had.

And fool that he was, in the end, he'd suffered for it and wasn't at all certain that he'd actually been successful. Because he couldn't keep from appreciating her even at a distance. Her hair shone like ebony silk, the flush of her cheeks reminded him of pink and white roses, and not only did her gown match the color of her eyes, but it hinted at the lush curves he'd found himself craving late at night.

And craving in the morning.

And craving at other most inopportune moments.

He wasn't the sort of man to vacillate with his intentions. He never had been.

In truth, guessing that Lady Baxter had sent Lydia's coach home herself, doing a bit of matchmaking, Jeremy conceded that he ought to be thanking the clever countess.

No more indecisiveness.

He wanted her in his life regardless of what her brothers had done. He would live with the consequences—for her.

He would come to terms with the knowledge that by giving into his heart, he would sacrifice a piece of his family's honor.

He'd do the one thing he'd sworn he never would: betray his brother.

But Lydia would be in his life again. And he needed her.

He exhaled, shakily.

"Clarissa says my driver had to leave early and that you've offered to provide me with a ride?" The object of his thoughts appeared in the foyer, looking tentative and a little confused. "Mr. Smith is fetching my coat and then I'll be ready to leave."

"Very good." Her scent rose up to tantalize him, the sweetest of flowers. The drive would be a short one, but they would be alone.

"Are you in danger?" Her question had Jeremy glancing at her curiously.

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you’ve taken on these dock criminals. They cannot be happy about your interference.” Her brows lowered in concern. “I knew dealing with them would become necessary eventually, but I had thought it was mostly children... Like Ollie’s brother, and their friends.”

He didn’t want to lie to her, but neither did he want for her to worry.

Baxter’s butler approached, however, successfully preventing Jeremy from having to do either.

“Your carriage awaits in front, My Lord.” The butler turned. “Your coat, My Lady.”

Jeremy intercepted Lydia’s coat and held it up. When her gaze met his, he felt more than a little sheepish, remembering that he’d intentionally refrained from helping her into her coat not too long ago at the Wicked Earls’ Club. Instinctively, he had to have known she was a threat to his objective.

Was this still the case?

His hands lingered on her shoulder before leading her outside.

He’d never find another person like her. Despite everything, she’d not wavered from him in any way—not in her words, her feelings, or her intentions.

Her love for him had persisted, unconditionally.

His heart swelled.

Once the door to the carriage closed behind them, with her seated beside him on the front-facing bench, Jeremy wasn’t quite ready to bid her goodnight yet.

“Is your Aunt Emma expecting you home at any particular time? Or would you be amenable to driving around a while?”

She turned in surprise but nodded. “No. I mean, yes. I mean... No, she isn’t expecting me and yes, I am quite amenable to your suggestion.” She laughed. “It’s a lovely night.”

The air in his chest eased. He was making the right decision.

He lowered his hand between them and when she did the same, he entwined her fingers with his and squeezed gently.

Being with her had always been good for him. How had he managed so long without her?

He pounded on the ceiling using his cane and, after giving his driver new instructions through the small opening, closed the small sliding door and settled in beside her again.

“Quite a banner day.” Lydia was the first to speak.

“My preparation paid off.” Jeremy exhaled loudly, running his free hand through his hair. “It’s why I haven’t been able to take you to see the progress at the warehouse.” It was the truth; he’d spent his every waking hour gathering documents and sorting through reports.

“I wasn’t sure...”

“But I’m a fool. I should have made time for you.” He released her hand and slid his arm behind her shoulders instead, turning at the same time so he could see her better. “How are you?”

Such a simple question, and one that usually had an obvious answer.

“The truth?” The mere fact that she’d ask him this was revealing enough.

“Ah, Lydia.” She was so very precious to him—even more precious than before. “Tell me.”

He felt the small tremor run through her and pulled her closer.

“I’m... hopeful. But also afraid.”

He’d hurt her. But she had reason to hope again.

“Because of what happened between the two of us?”

She nodded slowly.

“Come here.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

JEREMY DIDN'T CARE that he was revisiting trouble when he drew her onto his lap. But having her weight settle atop him felt like the most natural thing in the world.

“Is it because of the vase?” he teased. “Because I’ll have you know I’ve already located a replica that was made right here in London.”

“You did? You are teasing me.” But she was smiling now and sliding her hand up his chest and then onto his shoulder.

“You always give me reason to smile, did you know that?” Jeremy leaned his mouth very close to hers and then, tempted by the uptilt of her lips, closed the distance completely.

She welcomed his kiss with a soft sigh.

“Forgive me?”

“Always,” she breathed in answer.

At first, the kiss was a tender dance of memories, apologies, and forgiveness. But when she wound her other hand around his neck and arched into him, Jeremy’s heart raced, and he unbuttoned her coat with one hand while his other clutched her tightly against him.

“Jeremy.” Her whispered sighs ignited an almost unnatural desire to please her.

With her coat unfastened, Jeremy dipped his hand inside and cupped her breast over the fabric of her gown.

His fingertips located the tops of her stays, and he trailed them along the edge. She was a lady. If he had any honor at all, he would have asked for her hand the day he'd kissed her in the warehouse, and then again at Heart Place.

If he had any honor at all, he would have begged her to be his wife the day she'd come to Galewick Manor after he'd stormed out of his meeting with her brothers.

Honor wasn't the simple concept he'd always believed it to be. Because the loyalty a man felt wasn't limited to one person. And if it was, it could become a trap.

Is that what honoring his brother's memory had become?

Lydia moved to twist around on him, just as she had before, but this time, he held her in check.

"But..."

Jeremy cut off her delicate protest easily enough. "Let me," he whispered against her lips. "I want to touch you."

His hand abandoned her breast so he could gather her skirts in his fist, edging the hem up past her knee to where her stocking ended—stockings held in place by silk ribbons wrapped around each perfect thigh. He was glad the curtains on the window had been left open, allowing enough light from the moon to filter inside so he could fully appreciate those perfect thighs. Plump, pale, and tender. The blood thrumming through his veins felt like fire.

"I want to taste you." *Everywhere*. He plucked at one of the ribbons, and then dipped his hand between her legs, brushing the back of his fingers over skin that was more delicate than a butterfly's wings.

Her gaze, occasionally reflecting flashes of the moonlight, didn't waver from his. It was so very like her, not to shy away from her feelings or to question something that felt so natural and right.

He skimmed up that soft skin to caress the petals at her opening. "You like this?" His own breathing sounded loud in his ears. She was wet and slick and willing.



“Yes.” So straightforward. “I want...”

“What?”

“More.”

Jeremy took only a moment to fondle her seam before extending his finger inside. “Like that?”

She licked her lips and nodded.

He didn’t know what excited him more, touching her like this, or watching her while he did so. As he moved in and out, and then stretched her with a second finger, her breaths turned into gasps, and all the while, she gazed at him trustingly.

It felt more intimate than anything he’d ever done.

He drew lazy circles around velvety flesh and then explored higher.

“Jeremy!” she surrendered, closing her eyes and dropping her head backward.

There was so much wonder about her. Jeremy drank in the graceful length of her neck, her breasts heaving, the tip of her tongue as it reached just beyond the pearls of her teeth.

The carriage was turning, and the light from one of the street lanterns gave him a glimpse of his arm reaching between her legs. The sight amplified the throbbing in his cock, and he closed his eyes, willing her to reach around and—

He never quite finished that thought when the springs on the carriage suddenly sent the two of them flying.

His driver jerked the vehicle but had failed to avoid the large rut hidden by the darkness.

Holding Lydia on his lap, and both hands, er, occupied, Jeremy barely managed to cushion her fall as both of them were thrown to the floor.

The carriage came to a halt, and here they were again, him fully clothed and entirely too aroused for the circumstances. Or perhaps it was understandable.

Because once again she was straddling him, each leg bent at the knee along his hips and her center pressing down in such a way that was certain to lead to far greater improprieties.

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“PARDON MY DRIVING, My Lord! My apologies to the Lady. Is everyone all right back there?” Lydia heard the driver’s voice through the sliding door but when she went to speak, nothing came out.

“I believe so, Phillips. Are you hurt, Lydia?” Jeremy’s voice sounded at the same time his body vibrated beneath her.

“No. No. I’m fine.” At least her voice was functioning again.

“Would you like me to turn for Heart Place now, My Lord?”

Lydia went to move, but Jeremy’s hands held fast to her hips. “Not quite yet. I’ll let you know.”

“Very good, My Lord.” The small door slid closed then, and after a moment, with a gentle lurch, they were on the move again.

With no way to keep her balance, Lydia fell forward, dropping her hands onto Jeremy’s shoulders. “You are my prisoner now,” she teased. Because he could escape if he wanted to.

She knew he did not.

“Do you trust me, Lydia?”

Her eyes were adjusted to the darkness on the floor now, and she could almost make out his features. “Of course, I do,” she answered softly. Despite everything, she would always trust him with her life.

But his next words gave her pause.

“Walk forward on your knees.” He was still holding her hips but was now urging her to move. “Grab the straps by the

window.” She already knew he was aroused by their position, in fact, she was becoming quite educated as to this particular phenomenon. Then why? “And hold onto them tightly.”

He was gathering her skirts again, pushing them up and urging her higher, toward his...

But if she kept inching forward like this...

His hands on her bare thighs kept her moving, and then lifted her.

If the rocking of the carriage hadn't sent her hands suddenly grasping for the straps, the sensation of Jeremy's whiskers along her inner thigh would have done so.

Gripping them, she went to pull herself up.

“Trust me?” His words drifted up from beneath her skirts at the same time the heat of his breath warmed the place between her legs.

Where she knew she was wet from moments before.

“I do but— Ah... ah...” She squeezed the leather straps when intense pleasure shocked her into acquiescence. “You shouldn't! Oh, good heavens! Jeremy!” She nearly melted when she felt his jaw graze over her apex followed by a hot, wet stroke of his tongue.

Except he chose that moment to pause. “Shall I continue?” His voice vibrated her insides intimately.

“Um... Please?” This.

It felt too good.

He couldn't stop now. She would die. She would simply die!

He chuckled beneath her, and Lydia jumped.

“Come back here.”

“I'm not going anywhere.” With the side of her face pressed against the cool glass of the window, she was determined not to fall apart. He'd said he wanted to taste her,

but she'd had no idea he'd meant—she simply had had no idea.

The same feelings she'd had when they broke the vase were building steadily again. And then not so steadily. Because with each stroke and thrust he made below her, she pictured him there. His tongue. The whiskers along his jaw. The image itself was enough—

“Yessssss!” Hot and cold lightning shot through her veins. The leather slipped through her fingers as sharp pleasure took hold and she all but collapsed, trying to move off him while mumbling an incoherent apology.

“I've got you, love,” he answered beneath her skirts, adding something that sounded like, “and I'm never letting you go.” But she couldn't be certain.

When she finally discovered her muscles again, she squirmed, and he assisted her down to lay beside him.

The carriage wasn't all that wide, forcing him to bend his legs up and her to lay half on top of his chest, one leg thrown over his waist.

She wasn't the slightest bit uncomfortable. Not even when he turned to claim her mouth, and she tasted herself in his kiss. Being with him was... It was wonderful.

“That was... unexpected.” She had to say something. They couldn't roll around Mayfair all night, after all.

“I've been imagining that for three days now.”

“You haven't!”

“Planned this very scenario.”

He'd provided her with glimpses of this side of himself before—with a dry joke or a secret grin. And each time, she'd tumbled even deeper into love.

Trouble was, now that she'd experienced him this way, she wasn't at all certain she could ever let go again. And yet she might not have a choice.

He might love her, but would it be enough for him to get over whatever had caused him to push her away to begin with?

“Sleepy?” He held her tucked against him in a way that partially dispelled some of her concerns.

“Hmm...” Lydia hummed in contentment, memorizing his cedary scent so she could summon it when they were apart. “You must be exhausted though.”

He laughed. “It was a good day. But I suppose I ought to take you home.” He shifted both of them off the floor and onto the bench and kissed the top of her head. “Allow me to correct that. Today was much better than good. It was practically perfect.”

Lydia wondered if her maid would think she looked like the cat who ate the canary when she came in. Feeling daring, she reached her hand across to his lap.

“I know precisely what you need.”

When he grasped her wrist and stilled her hand over his straining member, she realized she’d guessed rightly.

“We’ll have time enough in the future to... ahem, address my situation properly. In the meantime—” Jeremy turned and caught her up in an almost desperate embrace just as the carriage pulled to a stop outside of Heart Place. Knowing they had only a few moments before the footman would open the door, he pulled back, breathing heavily.

“I have mountains of work waiting for me tomorrow,” he all but growled. “But I miss you already.”

“It can wait a day, can it not?”

“Minx.” He brushed the side of her mouth with his thumb. “Come with me to visit the warehouse in the afternoon?”

Even shrouded in darkness, there was no missing the light of hope in his eyes.

“Yes.” She didn’t even hesitate.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

LYDIA SAT up and stretched with a giant yawn. It had taken her hours to fall asleep. Not that she'd never had trouble sleeping before, but this time, it had not been worries that kept her awake. It had been the memory of unimaginable intimacy, pleasure, and rightness.

And most of all, the tantalizing words spoken inside a dark carriage. *We'll have time enough in the future...*

Those words alluded to a promise.

Louise drew the curtains back, and a dreary drizzling sky begrudgingly allowed gray light to filter inside. Clucking her tongue, her maid held up a gown and brushed at the skirt. "The periwinkle today or the mauve?"

"The periwinkle," Lydia answered. "But I'm going to the docks later and will need to change into something drab."

Lydia wished she could dress her best for him today, but it would not be wise to show up on the docks looking even more out of place than she already did.

Even though she knew he would like the periwinkle on her.

Lydia lowered herself on to the vanity bench and stared into the mirror. Did she look different today? So much had happened, so much had changed. She leaned closer, touching her cheek.

Her eyes seemed to twinkle more than usual, and her lips looked slightly swollen. Would Clarissa notice any changes the next time she saw her? Lydia bit her lip.

Luckily, Lucas and Blackheart weren't here. Lucas, even more so than Lucinda, had always had an uncanny ability to guess her secrets.

"Has my aunt broken her fast yet this morning?"

"Not yet, My Lady." Louise dragged the brush through Lydia's long wavy lengths. "This hair of yours could use a trim." She then twisted it into a neat chignon, leaving a few tendrils to soften Lydia's face.

"I like this style," Lydia commented. "But I think you're right. Especially when this weather warms up."

"*If* it warms up," Louise said. "I, for one, am ready for some sunshine."

"I will not argue on that point."

What remained of the morning passed slowly. Lydia enjoyed a leisurely breakfast with Aunt Emma, hearing all about the salon she and Lord Beasley had attended the night before and even raising her brows at a few suspected scandals that might be brewing.

Once her aunt was settled into the drawing room with a book and her knitting, Lydia met with her brother's cook, and then the housekeeper, performing a few tasks that Blackheart's Duchess would eventually take on fully. For the most part, the staff functioned autonomously when Blackheart was not in town.

Just as she and Mrs. Duckworth finished locking away the silver, Mr. Hill appeared in the doorway.

"A Mrs. Mumford here to see you, My Lady."

Lydia had to think a moment before she could place the name. What was Ollie's governess doing coming here?

"Why on earth?" And then it dawned on her that something must be wrong. "Where is she?"

"I've asked her to wait in the north drawing room."

Not taking time to untie her apron, Lydia rushed from the dining room toward the front of the house where she found the

governess pacing back and forth and wringing her hands.

“What’s happened?” Lydia didn’t bother wasting time with niceties.

“Master Oliver is missing, My Lady. A short while ago, I found him outside in the garden with two older boys. They were obviously from the docks, and His Lordship has made it very clear the child wasn’t to associate with them. Mrs. Crone, of course, shooed them away. I thought nothing was amiss when Master Oliver returned without argument to the nursery, but I went to check on the nuncheon, and he was gone when I came back. We’ve turned the entire house upside down looking for him, and Lady Tempest says good riddance, but I’m worried. Those boys...” Mrs. Mumford paused long enough to shudder. “They’re trouble. And Oliver was doing so well.”

“Did you send for Lord Tempest?”

“We have, but he isn’t in his offices.”

Lydia refused to panic. “Sit down. We’ll find him. Ollie will be fine.”

Lydia set her mind immediately to contemplating various scenarios. “Lord Tempest must be at the warehouse.” Or perhaps the offices of the new company he’d purchased.

But Lydia wasn’t willing to sit around waiting for a servant to locate him. If these little thieves and thugs knew where Ollie had been living, they might also know that his new guardian was the same man who was making trouble for the gang bosses.

Ollie had hidden in the warehouse once before. It was likely he’d do so again. It was possible that he’d already found Jeremy himself.

Lydia burst to her feet again. “Return to Lord Tempest’s residence and wait there in case Ollie returns on his own.” Perhaps Ollie was just being curious. That was possible but...

“I’ll go to the warehouse myself and send word as soon as I’ve found him.” She ushered the governess out the front door and, at Mr. Hill’s startled expression, relayed the situation. She



needed a carriage right away, and her coat. She wouldn't take time to change.

"A carriage was scheduled for your aunt, but you can take it instead. And Reginald and Trevor are coming along." Mr. Hill didn't ask if she wished to have the manservants go with her, he simply told her this.

Already thinking of all the places Ollie might be hiding, she simply nodded, eager to get to the warehouse.

"Very well, but we must hurry!" She slid her arms into her coat and then pulled on her gloves, moving anxiously toward the door as she did so. So far, luck appeared to be on her side as the carriage pulled up almost immediately after she'd stepped outside.

"The Tuesday warehouse, John!" she shouted up. "And hurry, please!"

Because a small boy's life might be at stake!

She was barely aware of the two footmen hopping onto the back as the carriage pulled into the street and turned toward East London.

If she didn't locate Ollie right away at the warehouse, she'd drive straight to the shipping company's office to alert Jeremy. She wasn't precisely sure where it was located, but surely, John would know? Oh, dear, what would she do if he didn't? The last thing she wanted was to drive around aimlessly in search of him while poor little Ollie...

She halted that train of thought. Dwelling on worst case scenarios had never been something she'd practiced.

*He's fine. He has to be fine.* Ollie was likely hiding somewhere in the warehouse—or better yet, in Jeremy's townhouse.

Not until they turned onto Wapping Street did she stop to remember the promise she'd made to Jeremy about coming there alone. But she did have two manservants with her. And her driver.

And this was an emergency!

When they pulled to a halt, Reginald barely managed to lower the step before she jumped down to the road. “If he’s not inside, we’ll need to go to Ludwig Bros. Shipping. Do you know where that is?”

Her coachman shook his head and looked back questioningly toward the two manservants. Of course, why would two footmen who’d spent most of their time working in Mayfair know where a shipping company’s offices might be?

It wasn’t fair but she couldn’t keep her irritation out of her voice.

“See what you can find out. I’ll be out in a moment.” Hearing the construction inside, she was hopeful she would find Ollie safely chatting with one of the workmen. “Someone around here must know where it is!”

The door swung open easily this time, and she noticed that the lock had been repaired. As she entered, sounds of construction grew louder.

One of the workers approached her almost instantly. “I’m sorry, ma’am, you can’t come in here. A lady like yourself oughtn’t be down here anyway.”

“I’m Lady Lydia Cockfield, and I am one of the directors of this project.” She really did not have time for this. “But I’m looking for a young boy, about so high, dark hair and violet eyes. Have you seen him?”

He turned away from her without answering. “Hey, Nick! Any violet-eyed urchins around here today?” He half-laughed until the other man pointed toward one of the backdoors.

“Went outside!”

“Thank you,” Lydia called.

“Lady, you really don’t want to be walking around out there. Why don’t you go to Lord Tempest’s office?”

“I’ll only be a moment.” Lydia pushed her way past the man acting as a guard, despite his protests behind her. “Ollie?” she shouted over the din just in case he was hiding inside somewhere.

When she arrived at the door that led outside, she was pleased to find it already open. Some of the debris leftover from the days when the warehouse had been in operation had been removed, but an indescribable stench remained.

“Ollie!”

She tiptoed over a few puddles, skirting around mounds of rubbish, and had almost given up when she caught a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye.

“Ollie!” She increased her pace, grimacing when her foot landed in some of the foul-smelling water.

When she rounded the corner, the sight that met her eyes sucked the breath out of her. Robbed of his jacket, Ollie was hunched over, clutching his stomach and moaning while a larger boy had hold of the back of his shirt.

Lydia approached and Ollie glanced up, face bloodied, with pleading eyes. “Go back!” he shouted.

But of course, she couldn’t leave him like this! “What on earth is going on here?”

“Go on!” Panic entered his eyes.

What had they done to him?

“Leave this child alone!” she ordered, rushing forward.

“I wouldn’t if I was you.” Steel-like arms caught her from behind before she’d taken more than a few steps. “This ‘er? This the lady tha’ was wif Tempest?”

The other boy—the one who, with the same violet eyes, couldn’t be anyone other than Ollie’s brother—jerked at Ollie and glanced up.

“It ain’t her!” Ollie answered.

“Shut up, ya little liar,” Buck snarled at Ollie before glancing back to whoever had a hold of Lydia. “Yeah, but why would we wanna mess wif ‘er?”

“Help m-mph!” Lydia barely managed to shout before the villain holding her captive smothered her mouth with his foul-smelling hand. In response, she squirmed and fought with all

her might to twist away. When she tried to bite him, he pinched her lips together with his fingers. He seemed rather experienced at this sort of treachery.

“Hold still, ya bloomin’ wench.” His arm tightened, almost vicelike. Fighting like this wasn’t going to do her any good, and what little she’d done already had left her struggling to draw air in through her nose.

“If this ‘ere is Tempest’s woman, Farley might find her useful in gettin’ back at ‘im.”

“She ain’t though.” Ollie jerked out of Buck’s hold. “She’s jus’ one o’ the birds buildin’ the orphanage. She ain’t gonna be no use to Farley. He’ll just be mad at ya for messing with one o’ the nobs.”

Ollie was trying to protect her. For the first time since she’d been coming to the docks, genuine fear swept through her.

Would one of the workmen come looking for her? She ought to have brought Reginald or Trevor along for protection. She’d been far too confident for her own good.

But she wasn’t ready to give up yet. Even if the workmen failed to come looking for her, her brother’s servants would. But would they come quickly enough?

“Farley needs bait to get to Tempest.” The voice near her ear was almost gleeful.

“Then what are we waitin’ for?”

“Knock ‘er out, will ya? She’s tryin’ to bite me and we can’t exactly carry ‘er through the streets screaming an’ ‘ollerin’, now can we?”

Buck moved forward, flexing his fist, and Lydia realized that, for the first time in her life, she was going to be hit by another person. Terrified, she renewed her squirming and twisting and even managed to land a kick on the blighter behind her, but it was no use.

The last thing she saw was a bloodied wrist flying toward her face. Her last thought was that Reginald and Trevor were

not going to come in time to save her.

And her last feeling was fear, not for herself, but for Ollie and Jeremy.

And then everything turned black.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“THE BASTARD no doubt took for granted these records wouldn’t survive down here.” Baxter grimaced and then let out a low whistle. “How could Rudolph not have realized what his brother was up to?”

“Rudolph never would have sold if he had.”

Jeremy carefully examined a faded record and then tossed it aside. He’d suspected the records might be in Ludwig’s half flooded basements but hadn’t expected this.

Each mildew-ridden box required meticulous care while opening; the first one having practically fallen apart in his hands when he’d moved to carry it to the offices upstairs.

He flicked his gaze around the soggy basement. Considering the waterlines on the walls, as well as the bog-like floor, it was a wonder any records remained intact.

That was why they were opening them in place and documenting items of significance in the shadowy lights of a few lanterns.

He, Baxter, and a few of his clerks had been at it for hours and an alarming pattern was beginning to emerge. With Arthur on the front line, Jeremy had followed the progress of both sides diligently, religiously even, and each cluster of losses Ludwig Bros. incurred, had preceded unprecedented enemy victories. The timeline of events was too uncanny to be a coincidence.

“So they were paid by the government to ship them and then took a second payment after handing supplies over to the

insurgents.” Baxter shook his head. “Here’s more payments from Leo to Farley.” He set the receipt on an increasingly growing pile. Periodically, one of Jeremy’s trusted clerks would climb down the rickety steps to transport them upstairs.

With each receipt found that didn’t list Arthur’s name, Jeremy was that much closer to his goal. He rubbed the back of his neck and carefully extracted another file just as the door at the top of the narrow stairway opened and closed. Rather than his clerk’s etched and tired-looking face, however, Lord Westerley appeared.

He and his countess, as importers of American Whiskey, were very interested in wiping the docks clean of the current gang activity, and last night, the earl had offered up any assistance he could provide.

“Damn, Tempest. I thought you’d be out by now.” Westerley had to bend over in order to avoid the overhead joists as he moved deeper into the dungeon-like room. “Why don’t you just have them brought upstairs?”

In answer, Baxter lifted the corner of one of his rejected receipts, which promptly tore in two. “They might not make the trip that way.”

Jeremy glanced at his time piece. He was going to have to send word to Lydia that he couldn’t escort her to the warehouse today. He could not leave this task unfinished. They were over halfway through the boxes and he’d not yet found any evidence that Arthur had been involved.

All would be settled by tomorrow. And then he could ask her that all important question. She would understand.

Jeremy cast off the receipt in his hand and took up another. It was dated almost two years ago, April 12th, 1828, and listed names that had become quite familiar to him by now. But there was a smudged one that he had not seen on any of the others.

Jeremy lifted it closer to his eyes and squinted. His heart sank.

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COMING AWAKE, Lydia opened her eyes and saw... nothing. Was this a nightmare? She was blindfolded!

And her hands were bound!

Familiar sounds, that of a bell ringing, distant voices, and water splashing against the pier hinted that she was somewhere on the docks. A most pungent scent of tar, fish and filth confirmed her guess.

The memory came rushing back to her of Ollie, and his brother, and the person who'd grabbed her from behind. She licked her lips and was thankful that whoever was keeping her captive had at least removed the gag.

A sensation of motion, of rocking softly, gave away that she must be on one of the abandoned ships. It had to be where the gang bosses were hiding.

How long had she been here? Hours? A day?

Had only one night passed since she'd been sitting down to a lovely dinner with Mayfair's elite?

"Hello?" She tested her voice, even though she was fairly certain she was alone. It came out little more than a croak. "Can I have some water, please?" She waited, half afraid someone would answer her, but also half afraid that no one would.

She was a woman who had been captured by unscrupulous individuals. Never had she been so aware of her own powerlessness. Never had she felt so vulnerable.

A few minutes later, she heard a door open, and light filtered through the fabric covering her eyes.

"Ere." A cup was pressed to her lips, and she had no choice but to tilt her head and swallow, spilling a good deal of the water in the process.

It dribbled down her chin, onto her chest, and then gown. She was no longer wearing her coat. Someone had taken it off



of her while she'd been unconscious.

She shivered, not daring to allow herself to think about that.

“Are you Ollie’s brother, Buck?” She lifted her chin as though she could sense where he was. There had to be some goodness in him if he was Ollie’s brother.

“What’s it to ya?”

“Where’s Ollie, is he all right?” She hadn’t been able to save him. In fact, she’d made matters worse. But she couldn’t focus on that right now.

“He needs to learn ‘is place,” the boy grunted.

“Why are you keeping me here? You should let me go before you end up in even more trouble than you’re already in.”

“Ha,” he scoffed, but then lifted the drink to her mouth again. A breeze landed on her face and Buck turned away before she could attempt another sip.

“She’s the one, ain’t she?” Ollie’s brother asked whoever had entered.

“So pretty. Maybe we won’t have to off her.” Cold, rough hands grabbed ahold of hers. “We need to untie her though, so she can sign the note. Won’t do any good if Tempest doesn’t believe we have her.” The loosening around her wrists brought relief but as she realized their intentions, fear shot through her like a knife.

They were going to ransom her. But for what?

“You gonna kill the Earl o’Tempest, Farley? He right deserves it, for all the trouble he’s makin’.”

And then something hard and cold pressed against her forehead. Not having seen it, nor ever having held one, she knew instinctively that this despicable person was threatening her with a pistol.

“When that meddling nob shows up, Buck, I’m gonna shoot him—” He jammed the barrel into her head with even

more force. “Right.” He pushed harder. “Between. The eyes.” He made a shooting sound with his mouth and then chuckled.

She stopped breathing even though he’d said he wasn’t going to kill her. But he meant to kill Jeremy!

She couldn’t allow that to happen. She’d rather die herself.

She’d been so stupid to go outside alone!

The person named Farley removed the gun from her head. But this only provided temporary relief. Buck was laughing as he moved behind her. He loosened the blindfold and then allowed it to drop.

Light coming through the open door beat onto her pupils almost as though she was staring into the sun. But she blinked and forced herself to stare down at the floor. Light meant freedom couldn’t be too far away.

And with the door open, the dock sounds were louder. With watering eyes, she focused on her hands, unbound now, and flexed them in her lap.

“We’re gonna need you to write a sweet letter begging your lover to save you.” Farley thrust a pencil into her hand.

More laughter from Buck, and she glanced up. Farley wasn’t as young as she’d thought he would be. But perhaps just as living on the docks had caused Ollie to look younger, it had aged Farley prematurely.

She hovered the tip of the pencil over the blank sheet of paper, but as she went to write, Ollie’s brother asked Farley a question that sent various facts clicking around in her brain.

“Is he really Arthur’s brother?”

*Were they talking about Jeremy?*

Arthur Gilcrest had been captured in an ambush. An ambush where a fortune’s worth of ammunition had been stolen. The facts weren’t only clicking, but sparking and shooting now.

“That he is. Got a right long stick up his arse though.”

And Lucas had been Arthur's commanding officer. Since he'd returned from the front, he'd been investigating the ambush and must have found something suspicious.

Sitting and listening to Buck and Farley discussing Jeremy's brother was providing answers to the questions that had taunted her for months.

The day Jeremy came to offer for her, Lucas must have told Jeremy he suspected Arthur was a traitor.

That day, when she'd told him that Ollie shouldn't have to turn his back on his brother, Jeremy had said... *That's why...* But then he'd stopped. He'd told her he'd never wanted her to have to decide, that it wouldn't have been fair. She'd been half-right to guess that Jeremy had not wanted her to have to turn her back on her brothers. But the choice wouldn't have been between her brothers and herself. It would have been between her brothers and *Jeremy*.

Jeremy hadn't wanted her to have to choose between her family and the man she loved. That was why...

Oh Jeremy!

Arthur had always been Jeremy's weak spot. And when faced with something so contemptable as the accusation that Arthur had betrayed his own countrymen, Jeremy hadn't been able to believe it.

Lydia nearly sobbed as she grasped the truth. The purchase of Ludwig Shipping hadn't been about cleaning up the docks at all. It had been all about clearing his brother's name.

And that was not going to happen. Because Arthur had been a traitor.

"What are you waiting for?" Farley nudged her arm, his foul breath nearly making her gag. She shook her head.

Lydia's realization had left her stunned and unable to think about anything else.

"I... I don't know what to write." The sound of her own voice jolted her back to the present.

A plan. She needed a plan and in order to come up with one, she needed to keep her wits about her.

Farley drew up a chair and sat down, crossing his legs and lounging in a manner that ought to be far too relaxed for the situation.

“To my Darling Earl of Tempest,” he dictated and then dropped his foot and leaned forward. “Go on, now. Write it.”

She did just that, in flowery, looping letters. She realized as he watched her that he couldn’t make out her words.

He was uneducated and if he did know how to read, he’d only have comprehension of the most rudimentary of letters.

“Now what?” she asked innocently.

“If you wanna see me alive again, you go to the Tuesday warehouse at sunset tonight. Alone. If ya do anything stupid, they’ll kill me.” And then he sniggered. “If ya ever wan’ another taste o’ me you best do what they want. And sign it, yer loving lady.”

Lydia wrote instead: *I’m being held captive on one of the abandoned ships near the broken pier. Farley and his men will be waiting for you at the warehouse at sunset but that’s a trap. He wants to kill you. Please be careful and if anything happens to me, know that I’ve always loved you. Yours forever, Lydia.*

Feeling hesitant, and a little concerned that Farley could read it after all, she glanced up. “Anything else?”

“Na, just fold it up and seal it with a kiss.” He waved his gun in the air, laughing.

Lydia did precisely that and handed it over.

“Noah!” he shouted out the door and an older version of Buck appeared in the opening. “Make sure this gits to Tempest. An’ don’t ya let no one follow you.”

She breathed a sigh of relief when Noah tucked the note into his shirt and disappeared. And another when Farley handed the gun to Buck.

“Take this.” With his hands free, Farley then grasped her wrists and tied her hands in front of her again. “If she does anything stupid, shoot her. But not in the head or the body. She’s more use to us if she’s alive for now. If anyone else comes, though. Shoot them in the head.”

“Not the heart?” Buck asked.

“Wherever.” Farley sent Buck an annoyed look over his shoulder. “Just be sure they end up swimmin’ with the fishes.”

“Understood, boss.”

Farley strode toward the door and then halted, jerking around to pin his gaze on her. “You nobs should have minded yer own business.”

She wanted nothing more than to scream back at him. Because when the thieves had begun stealing the soldiers’ supplies, they’d put the entire country in danger, making it everyone’s business.

“How did you get Arthur to do it?” she asked instead.

“Bought ‘his vowels, how else? Every man has his weakness. Funny thing is, Tempest’s little brother wasn’t loyal to no one. Fickle as ‘ell, he was.” And with that, Farley stepped outside and closed the door behind him, leaving her alone with Buck again.

With Buck and the gun.

Lydia exhaled a slow breath. If Arthur hadn’t been loyal to Farley, it meant he’d regretted his actions at some point. That had to mean something.

She glanced over at Buck, who was staring down the barrel of the pistol as though trying to comprehend how it worked.

Perhaps knowing Arthur had been coerced into his treachery would help Jeremy reconcile himself to it. She only hoped she’d stay alive long enough to tell him.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I HATE TO INTERRUPT, but I think we might have a problem.” Westerley’s tone was serious enough that it demanded Jeremy’s unfettered attention.

“On the docks?” Jeremy glanced up, feeling the walls of the basement suddenly closing in around him.

Westerly nodded. “Word’s out that you intend to clean house. We knew they’d fight back, but something’s brewing around the old ship we believe to be their headquarters.”

Baxter turned to Jeremy. “We can’t delay the raid, not unless we’re willing to risk the whole lot of them getting away.”

“Agreed. The gang bosses would only set up somewhere else.”

The club owner was already rising from the crate where he’d been seated. “I’ll send word to my men.”

Sounds of more descending footsteps echoed in the room and this time, it was one of Jeremy’s clerks, Smithy, who came into view. But he was not alone.

The very last person Jeremy wanted or expected to see in the dimly lit basement appeared behind him, a man he’d once considered practically a brother. Jeremy narrowed his eyes at Blackheart.

With hawkish features and hair so dark it was almost black, even in a dingy and foul-smelling cellar, the duke managed to exude the arrogance that had been bred into him.

“What the hell are you doing here, Blackheart?” Jeremy stretched to see around this unwanted visitor, but apparently, he’d come alone. “Lucas isn’t with you?”

Lydia’s brother held up both hands, chuckling softly. “I come in peace.” He glanced around with a sardonic lift of his brow. “And felicitations on a most interesting acquisition.”

Jeremy inhaled deeply and then glanced down at his fob watch again. This day, it seemed, wasn’t going at all as planned. When he failed to show at Heart Place to collect her, would she think he was avoiding her again?

“Not necessary,” he answered dismissively. He needed someone to tell Lydia he wasn’t coming. He fisted his hands.

“Ah, but it is.” Blackheart stepped further into the room, his boots making a squishing sound as he did so. “Lucas is backing down. And seeing as you’re in a war of sorts, and we’re all on the same side, I’ve come to offer our support. Whatever you need. If it’s within the realm of my capabilities, I’ll provide it.”

Jeremy paused. As much as he wanted to, he was in no position to refuse Blackheart’s offer of help. This was no longer just about him. It was about protecting not only an orphanage or the docks but England itself.

He glanced down at the incriminating receipt in his hand and swallowed hard, practically choking on his shame.

“You were right.” Jeremy forced himself to look up into Blackheart’s eyes. “Arthur’s betrayal wasn’t limited to his family, or his wife, or his brother.” In that moment it felt as though his heart turned into a void as dark as this basement. It was over. “He betrayed Lucas that day.” Not only Lucas, but every man whose life had been on the line. He’d been the reason five of them had died.

“Arthur was a traitor.” Jeremy said.

*Arthur had betrayed his country.* The truth echoed in his head like a death knell but then completed the puzzle perfectly. *His brother had committed treason.*

Jeremy had not wanted to believe it. But he'd known. Somehow deep in his heart he had known.

His own blood...

"He was." Blackheart didn't blink as he stood there and agreed with him. "I'm sorry, Temp."

Jeremy dragged his gaze around the dank room where he'd so badly wanted to discover evidence that would exculpate Arthur. He had needed that proof.

He'd needed it to silence his own suspicions.

Defeated, he ran a hand through his hair. He'd been a fool—an idiot. Where did he go from here? His family name, the title his sons would one day inherit, would be forever blackened.

"Lucas spoke with the general, and they've decided to keep the records sealed. In fact if word was to get out, he says it could harm the effort."

Jeremy nodded, feeling dead inside. "It's not exactly fair to the families of the soldiers who didn't make it home."

"War isn't fair," Blackheart said.

But footsteps thundering overhead had both men suddenly glancing up, then over to the stairway where another one of Jeremy's clerks appeared with, of all people, Ollie at his side. And Ollie looked to have gotten into trouble again. Even worse this time if the swelling around his eyes was anything to go by.

"M'lord!" Ollie ran heedlessly toward him, knocking one of the boxes into the mud in the process. "They've got her! You 'ave ta save her!"

"They've got who, Ollie?" Jeremy edged the boy closer.

"They've got Lady Liddy."

His blood turned to ice. With Ollie's words, thoughts of Arthur all but vanished.

"This was delivered just moments ago." Smithy handed over a folded note with Jeremy's name written in flowery



writing.

“They said they was gonna use her as insurance. An’ I’m not sure wot that is but it didn’t sound good.”

Jeremy opened the note, and as he read the contents, a roaring sounded in his ears. He looked up from it and met Blackheart’s solemn gaze. “They have Lydia.”

BLACKHEART, Baxter, and Westerley said they needed thirty minutes to round up the men who were prepared to raid the gang bosses’ hideout. While they did that, Jeremy followed Ollie along the wharf to the ship where they were keeping Lydia.

Watching the gang members carrying stolen ammunition onto the abandoned ship, as though they were barrels of fish, Jeremy required every ounce of patience not to rush inside to save her.

He also had to convince Ollie, who knew the layout of the ship and wanted to go inside and check on Lydia, that it was best to wait as well. The sun was nearly set, and they’d have the cloak of darkness in a matter of minutes.

“It’s all my fault,” Ollie whispered, even though the two of them were far enough away not to be overheard. “Buck said he needed my help. But it was a lie. Buck didn’t like that I was staying at yer big fancy ‘ouse. Do you think ‘e could stay with you too? He’s not so bad, really. And he’s my brother.”

Jeremy kept his gaze pinned on the window where Ollie said they were keeping Lydia. Two guards watched the boarding plank and at least a dozen were manning the pier, a few of them carrying lanterns. He could almost imagine himself being successful going in on his own, but there were too damned many of them—all ages too. It sickened him to see boys who looked younger than Ollie milling about on what ought to have been a deserted wreck.

“I don’t know, Ollie. Let’s save Lady Lydia first.” But he wasn’t immune to the turmoil Ollie was feeling—the desire to protect a brother.

Patting the pistol in his jacket, he glanced over his shoulder, sensing Baxter's men moving into place.

If he heard any indication of Lydia's distress, he'd go in guns blazing, alone or not. In her note to him, she'd told him she'd always loved him. That she was his forever.

A pain stabbed his heart, making it difficult to draw in his next breath.

No one else in the world made him feel the way she did. She could make him laugh when the world seemed humorless. She provided hope when his future felt hopeless.

He'd been a damned fool to ever walk away from her. If something happened to her, he could never forgive himself.

Hearing quiet footsteps approaching behind him, Jeremy stiffened. But he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that it was only Blackheart.

It was time.

"Everyone's in place." Blackheart crouched down beside him. He'd known the duke for years, but he didn't think he'd ever seen such a bleak expression in the man's eyes. Lydia's brother must have seen a similar expression on his own face, because he added, "We'll save her."

"We will," Jeremy agreed grimly.

"And then you and I will talk."

Jeremy only nodded at this. A brilliant light flashed off to the left, the predetermined signal giving him the go-ahead to move in.

The men that had been assembled overtook the guards on the dock within less than thirty seconds, the men on the rooftops in even less time.

Jeremy didn't bother with the plank but sprinted past it, to the opposite end of the ship where Ollie said they were keeping her. He then used the momentum provided by his speed to leap across the water to the ship's deck. Blackheart was only a few steps behind him, landing almost silently a split second later.

“She’s in the cabin on the quarterdeck.” Jeremy pointed to the window Ollie had shown him. He and Blackheart no longer bothered with keeping silent since the gang was well aware of their presence by now. With each pistol shot that sounded, his heart skipped a beat.

The door where Lydia was being kept was unguarded now. He tried the handle, but it was locked.

Jeremy glanced toward Blackheart and with a giant rush of adrenaline, kicked the door in, sending it not only flying open but also knocking it partially off its hinges.

His gaze found her immediately, tucked in the back of the shadowed room. Her hands were bound and she was gagged, with blood crusted on her face. An older looking boy was grasping her arm with one hand and holding a gun pointed directly at Jeremy’s head with the other.

But Lydia was alive, and he fully intended she’d stay that way.

“Put the gun down,” Blackheart ordered in a voice that sounded deadly and quiet as he moved to stand beside Jeremy.

“Mmmph!” Lydia stared back at him—not with terror—but with trust and relief.

A deadly calm came on him, ironically at the same time, white anger anchored his purpose. Whoever had made her bleed would die for this.

Jeremy forced his gaze back to Buck—the same boy he’d caught sneaking into his garden more than once.

“Take yourself off, Tempest,” the adolescent growled, waving the gun. “You may ‘ave tricked my kid brother into goin’ soft, but you ain’t about to trick me.”

“So.” Jeremy forced himself to appear relaxed, slumping his shoulders and leaning against the door frame. “You call feeding him, giving him a warm bed, and providing him with an education ‘tricking’ him?” He allowed a disparaging grin to stretch his lips.

“Yer makin’ him soft. So when you throw him back on the streets, he won’t know how to take care of himself. At least Farley teaches everyone how to keep fed... and alive.”

“But I’ve no intention of throwing Ollie out. And if you make the right decision, I’ll give you a better life too.” Jeremy was sincere. He’d told Ollie that Buck was trouble, but the boy could show him otherwise today. “Hot food. A warm bed every night.”

Both he and Blackheart had managed to sidle into the room by now.

“It’s your choice. All you need to do is drop the gun and I’ll take you in, the same as your brother. This is the chance for you to have a meaningful life, Buck.”

“And there’s chocolates, Buck.” Jeremy hadn’t realized Ollie had come up on them, but now he stood in the door, his eyes filled with a sort of sacrificing love Jeremy knew all too well, pleading with his brother to make the right decision. “Mrs. Crump has all kinds and she’s not stingy with ‘em. Just let M’lady go. Please Buck?”

Buck tilted his head. He hadn’t given Ollie an answer, but he relaxed the hand holding up the gun just enough to provide Jeremy and Blackheart with the opportunity they needed.

Jeremy met Lydia’s gaze and as though she understood his silent instructions perfectly, she threw herself onto the floor the instant he and her brother pounced.

Buck was tough and wily though, and he wasn’t about to go down without a fight. He kicked out and tried to throw a punch, but his efforts were in vain. It was two against one—two grown men against one boy.

The blast of the gun going off reverberated in Jeremy’s ears as Buck made his choice. Blood splattered everywhere. Jeremy felt it on his hands, on his face, and he even tasted the coppery liquid in his mouth. He dropped to his knees, cursing, searching for the source and terrified that the blood might be Lydia’s.

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STRONG ARMS PULLED Lydia off the floor and then wrapped around her almost desperately.

“Are you hurt?” Jeremy removed the gag from her mouth and frantically ran his hands down her arms as though searching for the lost bullet. “Love? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” It was all she could think to say. “I’m fine.” She’d been terrified that he’d gone to the warehouse despite her letter, that he had somehow fallen into Farley’s trap. Feeling him whole and solid beside her brought so much relief that she burst into tears.

Eyes closed, face pressed against his chest, she forgot they were not alone until she heard the sound of a flint strike from across the room.

She jerked her head up to make sure she hadn’t imagined him, and sure as she lived, her brother stood staring down at the two of them. With a grimace, he flicked his gaze to the young man lying on the floor.

“It exploded in his hand.” Blackheart lowered to his haunches, untying his cravat while Jeremy freed her wrists. “Bullet never made it out of the gun.”

“Buck!” Ollie sprang across the room and dropped to his brother’s side as well.

“Don’t die, Buck!” Ollie’s voice rose in panic. Lydia had never seen so much blood in her entire life.

Lord Westerley peered inside just then. “Everything under control in here? We’re clear on deck. Farley’s in Baxter’s custody, and most of the others have been rounded up by the runners.” He pointed to Buck. “What about this one?”

“I’ll handle him.” Blackheart glanced over at Jeremy, who nodded, and without another word, lifted Lydia into his arms.

“I’m getting her out now in case there’s any more trouble.”

“Good thinking.” her brother agreed.

“But—” she sputtered. What about Ollie? “Don’t I get a say?” she asked.

“No,” both Jeremy and her brother answered in unison.

Well, then.

“Ollie?” Jeremy moved toward the door, adjusting his grip as he cradled her in his arms. “Are you coming with us?”

But Ollie didn’t move. “What about Buck?” His violet eyes swam with tears.

“This one needs a doctor.” Blackheart answered. “I’ll drop the younger one at your townhouse after.” Her brother didn’t look up as he spoke, all of his attention focused on Buck’s hand—what was left of it.

Jeremy turned to go, but Lydia stopped him by reaching out and catching the side of the door.

“Ollie?”

Her little orphan lifted his gaze to meet hers.

“I’m proud of you,” she said. She needed him to know he wasn’t to blame. *This was the bad people’s fault.*

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I got you caught.”

“But you also helped save me.” Lydia said with as much force as she could muster. “Do you understand?”

Ollie stared at her and then slowly nodded.

“This man—” Lydia pointed a Blackheart “—is my brother. He’ll take care of you and Buck. Do as he says. All right?”

“Yes, M’Lady.”

Lydia nodded and, suddenly too exhausted for any more words, buried her face in Jeremy’s chest again. As he carried her off the ship and onto the wharf, she didn’t look up once as approving voices thanked and congratulated him. He may not have set out to become a hero, but he’d become one, just the same.

And this didn’t surprise Lydia at all.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“ARE you going to carry me all the way to Mayfair?” Lydia asked after they were some distance away from all of the excitement and activity on the ship.

“My carriage is at my office.” He was a little out of breath by now.

Studying his profile in the moonlight, Lydia winced. “Are you angry with me?”

“Livid.”

She wasn’t sure if his short answers were intentional or due to the fact that he had carried her nearly half the length of the docks.

“I’m sorry I broke the contract.” She tightened her arms around his neck, thinking to make his task easier.

“You could have been killed.”

“I know.”

He grunted.

“It was a stupid thing to do,” she added, and then a shiver ran through her.

“You’re cold.” He halted his footsteps. “Let me give you my jacket.” He moved to set her down but Lydia simply clung to him tighter.

“Just hold me. I was so stupid today. I nearly got you killed.”

“No.” Agony sounded in his voice. “You nearly got *you* killed. Don’t ever do that again.” The look on his face was bleak. “I couldn’t live... God, Lydia, I couldn’t live without you.”

His arms tightened and he buried his face in her hair.

“Arthur was a traitor Lydia.” He sounded pained, wounded. “*My brother* was in Farley’s employ. His actions cost the lives of five other men. Possibly more.”

Lydia squeezed him tighter. It was the only thing she could do to hold this proud man together.

“I wanted him to be innocent. I was so sure...”

“You did everything you could. You were the best brother he could have asked for.” And then she pulled away to stare at him. “You brought Blackheart along with you to save me.” Her statement was really a question.

Jeremy resumed walking and she waited patiently for his answer.

“I blamed him and Lucas. I made Lucas the enemy simply because I didn’t want to believe it could be true. But Arthur’s name was among those who’d been paid off.”

“He didn’t want to work for Farley,” Lydia said. “He simply ran out of choices.” She went on to tell him all that she’d learned from Farley and Buck. About how they’d trapped him with his debts and then how, after the ambush, Arthur refused to do their bidding again.

Jeremy didn’t say anything, he simply kept marching along the walk as he listened to her.

“So you know, then.” He finally said.

“There wasn’t anything you could do,” she pressed. He had to know this in his heart.

“I could have helped him with those debts. I could have paid them off myself.”

“And then what? Knowing Arthur, he likely would have racked up new ones quicker than he did the first.”



“I should have been able to help him.” His voice caught, and in the moonlight, Lydia watched as a single tear rolled down his cheek. She caught it with her thumb and pressed a soft kiss against his jaw.

And Jeremy just kept walking. He might have truly been prepared to carry her all the way to Mayfair had his driver not been watching for him. He finally dipped her feet to the ground as the familiar coach slowed to a stop beside them.

“Excellent to see you safe and sound, My Lady.” The driver spoke from his box while a manservant pulled down the step. “To Cork Street, My Lord?”

“Yes,” Jeremy answered.

The last time she and Jeremy had ridden in this carriage had been only one night before. So much had changed in the matter of a single day.

Lydia settled onto the bench and Jeremy climbed in behind her, but then she moved naturally into his arms as the carriage jerked into motion.

“Did you mean it?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

“Of course.” There was no need to question his meaning. He’d received the letter. “I never stopped loving you, and I never will.”

She’d always heard it was foolish to express her feelings so easily, but she was learning that life was too tenuous to play games.

“I don’t deserve you.” He squeezed her against him. “I never stopped loving you either. I just didn’t know how... I couldn’t ask you—”

“You did what you had to, and I love you more now than I did before. I’m only sorry you’ve had to deal with this alone.”

“But I hurt you.”

“You thought you were protecting me.” She now understood why he’d pushed her away. It reminded her of how Ollie had tried to convince her to turn away when she’d found him in the Warehouse yard. “Everything happens for a reason.

Because of you, there's no way of knowing how many lives will be saved. You are a hero."

Jeremy shook his head, making a scoffing sound.

"Oh, no." He needed to see what others saw. "You may have gone into this thinking only to clear Arthur's name but you've come out having accomplished an incredible feat. No one else was willing to take them on until you did."

"You almost have me believing that. I don't deserve you, Lydia."

"Oh, but you do." They were meant for one another in every way. The sooner he accepted this the sooner the two of them could go on with their lives—together.

Jeremy buried his face in her hair. "Marry me?"

The question wasn't at all what she'd been expecting just then, and these were not at all the circumstances in which she'd imagined he would ask but...

This was Jeremy.

"You aren't just asking this because my brother has returned to town?"

He released her and shuffled through his pockets. When he located what he was looking for, he dangled a small velvet pouch in front of her. She'd seen such a pouch recently, when Blackheart had purchased some jewelry for his new duchess.

Lydia held her breath while Jeremy untied the drawstring and reached inside.

"I bought this yesterday. Shortly after the completion of the sale." Lydia gasped when she caught sight of a sparkling diamond set in a circle of gold clutched between his thumb and finger. It reflected every single star that twinkled through the window. "I meant to propose to you today at the warehouse. But then everything went crazy. I know this isn't very romantic or at all proper, but—"

Lydia cut him off by pressing her mouth to his. When their lips parted on a sigh, she opened her eyes and met his gaze. "You're all I've ever wanted. Of course I'll marry you."

## EPILOGUE

JEREMY ENTERED the drawing room where the Duke of Blackheart stood with his back to him, staring out the window. Simon Cockfield had been one of his closest friends for most of his life. They had both been their fathers' heirs—and became the heads of their family at very young ages. But before that, they'd spent summers together pretending to be pirates, running like banshees back and forth between their fathers' lands. They had been confidants. Schoolmates. And then as adults, they'd offered one another support.

As Blackheart had today, showing up in Jeremy's time of need, bringing additional manpower. And he had not poured salt into his wound knowing the truth now, about Arthur.

Jeremy ran a hand through his hair. "I need to thank you."

Blackheart turned his head, meeting Jeremy's gaze. "You'd have done the same for me."

But Jeremy was shaking his head. "Not this year. I've been —"

"He was your brother. You did what you needed to do." The duke's eyes spoke volumes. "I'd have done the same... if the situations had been reversed."

That elephant that had been sitting on Jeremy's chest shifted, giving him some relief. Because Blackheart would not speak platitudes to him.

"How is Lucas?" Jeremy asked. Lucas had been Arthur's commander. It had been men in Arthur's unit who had been killed.

If anyone had a right to be angry, it was Lucas.

“Lucas... is letting go. With Naomi at his side, and baby Amelia, he simply wants to put it behind them. They are in Kent now but would welcome a visit, I’m sure.”

Jeremy would make amends then. But for now...

He cleared his throat. “There is another discussion I need to have with you.”

Upon these words, the corner of Blackheart’s mouth tilted up ever so slightly. “A discussion about my sister.”

“Yes.” Lydia. The promise he’d nearly lost. “I’ve asked her to marry me, and she has agreed.”

“Of course, she has.”

“I want you to know that I love her. And I’ll spend what remains of my life doing all that I can to make her happy.”

Was Blackheart’s exhale an expression of relief?  
“Excellent.”

“I still can’t imagine what you were thinking, allowing her to be in London on her own... starting up orphanages, running about the docks.” Jeremy laughed softly. “Although I suppose I ought to thank you.”

Blackheart lifted one brow. “Do you really think I did not know what my sister was up to?”

“You knew?”

Blackheart stilled. “You needed her. And she was quietly dying inside after you broke things off. One word in Baxter’s ear was all it took.”

“Ah.” Of course, Blackheart had known. And Baxter as well. Jeremy shook his head. “Well.” He could not be angry, even though he thought he ought to be. But having Lydia’s promise to marry him and having thoroughly kissed her less than a quarter of an hour ago, he could only grin. “It worked. Although now I’ve got an orphanage to get up and running.”

“Speaking of my sister...” Blackheart’s brows rose.

“She’ll be down momentarily. I wanted to speak with you first. I take it we have your blessing then?”

His friend shifted him a suspicious glance. “Tell me that a special license is not necessary.”

“No,” Jeremy said. Although... just barely.

“Then you have my blessing.”

“We’ll want to have the banns read starting this Sunday. I’ve already waited too long...” And he meant it. He’d waited his lifetime for Lydia. “But I won’t take her dowry.”

At this, Blackheart laughed. “Good thing, as she’s spent most of it on that damn warehouse.”

Jeremy shook his head.

“But I’ve a portion we’ll put into trust. We’ll discuss contracts later,” Blackheart added, just as the door crept open slowly.

Having bathed, Lydia had changed into an old gown of his mother’s. And she still managed to steal his breath with her beauty.

Lydia peered inside, her eyes flicking between the two of them questioningly. “All is well?”

She met Jeremy’s gaze, and he smiled reassuringly. “I believe so. Simon?”

Blackheart glared at Jeremy at the use of his Christian name, but then turned to Lydia and held out a hand. “Come here, you little fool. You could have been killed.”

Lydia all but flew into her brother’s arms. “I know. I’m so sorry.”

Blackheart was not a man known for showing his emotions, and Jeremy was surprised to see something that resembled both love and pain flicker across the man’s face.

“I’m only grateful you are safe.” Blackheart pressed his jaw against the top of her head and then set her away from him. “But you are never—absolutely never—to go down to the

docks alone again. If you do, I will throttle you. And if I'm not there, Tempest will do the honors. Do you understand?"

A mysterious smile tugged at her lips. "I do," she agreed, far too easily.

"I mean it." Blackheart was almost wholly his ducal self again.

"As do I," Jeremy added.

Lydia squeezed her brother's hand and then moved away from him, crossing to Jeremy, who couldn't help but reach out and draw her close. But he addressed her brother. "I'll send notices of our engagement to the papers first thing tomorrow." Then he stared down into his fiancée's eyes. "And to St. George's."

Lydia beamed up at him.

"We can talk more tomorrow." Blackheart moved to go. "My duchess will be wondering where I've run off to. Do you have a coat?" As was only proper, he'd come to take Lydia home with him.

Lydia, of course, wasn't so easily managed by her brother. Even if he was Blackheart.

"I need to tell Ollie goodnight, and Lady Tempest asked me to tell her goodbye as well. I've no doubt Lord Tempest can bring me home shortly in his carriage." And before Blackheart could object, she asked, "What is going to happen to Buck?"

"Ah." Blackheart rubbed his chin. "I've had the boy taken to Heart Place for now. Lost most of his hand."

"You've taken him to Heart Place?" Lydia looked as shocked by her brother's admission as Jeremy was.

"He risks infection, but if he pulls through..." Blackheart lifted his chin. "He was terrified of dying in Newgate, and as I'm not certain he's as hardened as he pretends to be. If he lives, I'll see what I can do to help him."

Lydia's eyes filled with tears. Jeremy knew those tears. They were the same ones he'd seen in her eyes when he'd

agreed to bring Ollie back to Cork Street.

Even so... "I'd be wary of him."

"I think it's wonderful." Lydia smiled. "But you must be exhausted. Go home to your duchess, brother, and I'll return to Heart Place shortly."

Blackheart glanced over at the clock on the mantel. "Within the hour."

Lydia nodded. She had already pushed him farther than Jeremy would have imagined he'd allow.

Jeremy could hardly wait to have her in his home every night—in his life. He almost wished he'd insisted on that special license after all.

Leaving Lydia in the drawing room, Jeremy walked Blackheart to the door. He reached out. "Thank you again."

Blackheart grasped Jeremy's hand and squeezed it almost painfully. "If you ever hurt her again, I'll kill you."

"If I ever hurt her again, I'll deserve it."

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LYDIA SAT ON THE SETTEE, waiting for Jeremy to return, smiling when she saw a replacement vase sitting on the table behind it.

"My clever girl," he said from the door.

In answer, she lifted her arms, thrilled as he slowly crossed the room, not taking his gaze off her for a moment.

"Ollie is already sleeping," he said, lowering himself beside her.

"I know."

"And my mother is as well." He wound his arms around her.

"I know." Lydia burrowed into him. "I just needed to be alone with you a little longer. It's going to feel like forever

before all the banns have been read.”

Lydia couldn't help but slide her gaze to the vase on the table behind them. “It is only a replica?”

“It is.” But he wasn't looking at the vase. He was staring at her, his eyes looking darker than normal, his pupils dilated. His lashes dropped when his gaze flicked to her mouth.

“Was it expensive?” Lydia asked, licking her lips.

“It's worthless. Almost a disgrace to display it in my home.” He was stroking her lips with his thumb now, and she could see the pulse at the base of his neck racing.

Almost as fast as hers was.

“In that case...”

Lydia turned and straddled him the same as she had before.

“You're dangerous. Do you know that?”

Lydia simply nodded. “I love you Jeremy.”

“I love you, Lydia.”

Not quite ten minutes later, the new vase lay shattered on the floor.

\* The End \*

**BONUS Epilogue here!**

<https://BookHip.com/ZWDMTQ>

Thank you for reading Jeremy and Lydia's story.

If you haven't read *Ruined*,

Lord Lucas and Arthur's widow's story,

you can read it here:



# EARL OF KENDAL

MADELINE MARTIN

# CHAPTER ONE

*LONDON, England*

*March 1822*

ADOLPHUS MERRICK, the third Earl of Kendal, had been accused many times in his life of being unfeeling. It was a claim he did not refute. Why would he when it so often played to his benefit?

He slid a cool glance toward his left where his sister, Lady Marguerite Merrick, stood in men's attire. She had gone without the concealment of the mask she usually wore when overseeing Mercy's Door, the gaming hell they owned together. After all, she was well acquainted with Lord Gullsville. He was one of the few members of the ton who knew her true identity.

It was through his generosity that she had been spared.

But Lord Gullsville didn't regard her with equal fondness at present. He flicked a nervous glance in her direction. "She doesn't have to be here, does she?"

Irritation squeezed at Kendal's gut as he surmised at that moment what the other man wanted.

Money.

Again.

"She's as much of a part of this operation as I am," Kendal replied dryly. "As you well know."

Gullsville ran a hand over his cropped, silver hair.

“You’ve requested an audience with me.” Kendal leaned back in his seat, putting himself at ease when the other man was so clearly in discomfort. “Why?”

“Fox’s Den,” Gullsville muttered the name of Kendal’s rival gaming hell with a fitting level of shame.

“I beg your pardon?” Kendal asked, despite having heard perfectly well the first time.

Gullsville lifted his head in agitation. The tip of his straight nose was threaded with spidery veins, and his eyes were perpetually bloodshot. A habitual drinker. One who had not honored his family properly after his wife had passed.

If he hadn’t saved Marguerite...

“Fox’s Den,” Lord Gullsville repeated with vehemence.

Why was it that sods in trouble became angry at the ones there to help them out?

Marguerite cast Kendal a sympathetic shake of her head. She always did have a soft spot for the older man.

Still, Kendal was loathe to open his safe to the man. Especially after the Earl of Gullsville had burned through his own annual income and an additional two thousand pounds Kendal had graciously loaned him.

“How much do you owe this time?” Kendal drawled out.

In response, Gullsville exhaled heavily. A wash of his sour breath swept over the short distance of the desk.

Kendal kept his face impassive, but his stomach twisted—more with dread than at offense at the odor.

Lord Gullsville had never hesitated to speak a number before. Whatever the man had to say would not be good.

Gullsville pressed his lips shut, opening them as he took a breath in preparation to speak. “Th...three...”

Kendal gritted his teeth. “Three hundred?” He kept his voice intentionally bland to conceal his growing aggravation.

The man winced, evidently aware of how abysmal his situation was due to his vice.

Kendal had a reputation for being unfeeling, yes, but in truth, he was not. In fact, he cared too much.

He could not airily push aside his loyalty to the man who had saved Marguerite when Kendal had nowhere else to turn.

Nor could he nudge away the knowledge that Gullsville had a son who would someday inherit the earldom—however tattered it might be—and a married daughter and a younger unwed daughter who had yet to set her heart on a beau. The latter was a lovely thing, one with enough interest to choose any husband she wanted. And unfortunately, one who appeared to be in no hurry to stop spending her father's dwindling funds and settle down.

No, he couldn't leave the man destitute.

"Three hundred?" Kendal repeated for confirmation as he pushed up to his feet. "This is the last time, Gullsville."

"Three thousand." Lord Gullsville expelled the appalling number from his chest in a puffed exhale.

Kendal froze. Marguerite's eyes shot to his, conveying the same horror that was now crystalizing like ice in his veins.

"You are aware we are not a bank?" Kendal regarded the man.

"It is a considerable sum, yes, I know," Gullsville rushed. "I was down. I didn't want to come to you again and thought I could win. I was so close, but the other man had an ace. *An ace.*" He balled his hand into a fist. "If it had been any other card, any other..." His voice trailed off as he watched Kendal.

Gullsville gave a hard swallow. "You aren't going to help me, are you?"

"You ask too much," Marguerite said.

He swung his attention toward her and his expression crumpled with desperation. "My son must have something left to inherit. And my Sophia is still unwed. You wouldn't have them to suffer the faults of their wretched father, would you?"

Marguerite looked away. A certain indicator her resolve was cracking.

“I saved you.” Gullsville’s words were whispered, but they rang out in the room like a gunshot.

“Don’t.” Kendal was in front of the older man in a flash.

Marguerite turned her head more firmly away. No longer the strong, confident figure she’d become, but once more the damaged girl.

But then, everyone had their Achilles’ heel, didn’t they?

The earl knew both of theirs, and he was digging into those tender wounds with meat hooks.

Gullsville ignored Kendal, his gaze fixed pointedly on Marguerite. “I saved you when you would have otherwise been ruined. You owe this to me.”

Kendal blocked the older man’s view of Marguerite. “Gullsville, I warn you—”

“If it weren’t for me, your sister would be just as tarnished as your mother.” Gullsville curled his lip. “Just another whore.”

Kendal’s fist shot out before he could even think to stop it. Not that he would have.

His knuckles connected with Gullsville’s jaw with an intensity that made the older man’s head jerk upright. His lashes didn’t so much as flutter as he collapsed gracelessly to the floor.

Silence filled the small room. Kendal put his back to the earl and regarded his sister. Her eyes, a deep brown that was nearly black, so like his own—so like their mother’s—were wide with a vulnerability he hadn’t seen in years.

It made the place inside him that needed to protect, that wound that would never fully heal, split open. He wanted to tell her all would be well. And he wanted to say it without lying.

“Are you all right?” he asked tentatively.

Her pointed chin notched, and her eyes flashed with defiance. “Of course, I am.” She withdrew a black mask from her jacket pocket. The thing fit her from forehead to chin and obscured all of the beauty she’d inherited from their mother. Which was exactly what Marguerite wanted.

The disguise had left their patrons talking for years about Marcus, the name Marguerite had adopted, with conjecture and wild assumptions. It was rumored Marcus was really a duke determined to protect his identity. Or he was a victim of a terrible fire that had burned most of his body and left him horribly disfigured.

On and on the speculation went, growing more preposterous as time carried on. Yet no one assumed the most amazing truth of all: Marcus was Marguerite, a woman who shunned society and the ton’s hypocrites. A woman who once resigned herself to life in the country before fighting for a chance to come back and thrive in London the only way she could bear.

She gave a wounded look to where Gullsville lay on the carpet. “I’ll see to it that he’s taken care of. You’ve a ball to attend, do you not?”

Kendal hesitated, hating to leave Marguerite to handle the situation. Not that she wasn’t capable. God knew she was.

But he knew better than to argue. All the protests wouldn’t keep Marguerite from nudging him out the door and to the ball, where he would most likely be in attendance with Gullsville’s son and youngest daughter.

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LADY SOPHIA STOPFORD, the youngest child of the Earl of Gullsville, had always loved a ball. Not only for the gowns, though they were indeed lovely, or even for the eligible men who kept her dancing through the night. No, it was the effervescent energy quivering in the room, as though the air alone was enough to make the bubbles tickle up the sides of delicate glassware.

Tonight, however, even the anticipation could scarcely elevate her spirits.

“I say, Sophia, are you even listening?”

She blinked and regarded Henry, Viscount Southby, her older brother, who strode at her side up the path to Bursbury Manor, where her aunt was hosting a ball for the coming out of her youngest daughter, Lady Eugenia.

Sophia shook her head. “I’m sorry, I—” She stopped herself from making an excuse. “I was woolgathering. Do forgive me, dear brother.”

He tilted his head, a concerned look crossing his handsome face. They had all inherited the same gentle appearance. But while Sophia and their eldest sister, Cecelia, had delicate features, Henry’s were elegantly sculpted, and his eyes were kind.

Those eyes were now scrutinizing her with tender perception. “You’ve been put out since your conversation with Father earlier.”

Sophia looked away to discourage him from reading her like a broadsheet. Her conversation with their father had indeed not gone well. Not only did he feel it was time for her to wed, but he had also found the man she ought to marry.

Mr. Mongerton, the owner of a gaming hell—the Fox Hole—or something equally as crass. An associate, Father had called him. As if actual business transpired between them. Not that she was allowed to argue. She *was* the second daughter, as he so bluntly stated.

And while Sophia could not argue her birth order, she did not agree that it relegated her to a position where she ought to wed a man over twice her own age.

This was not how it was all supposed to go. She hadn’t put off marriage for so long so that she could be wed to an associate of her father’s. She’d done it so she could have the full experience of the joy of youth before being tethered into matrimony. Her vow to live her life to the fullest had not been in vain, even if her father had no appreciation for such matters.



And while she understood Father's impatience, did he really have to select someone as ghastly as Mr. Mongerton?

The gaming hell owner had made his interest in her known on more than one occasion with beady and lascivious glances her way. The very idea of the man made her flesh crawl with distaste.

Sophia rose on her tiptoes with feigned excitement to see who was in the entryway and mask her shudder of revulsion. "Did you see if Lord Heaton has arrived yet?"

"Is Lord Heaton the one to have finally captured your heart, little sister?" Henry kept his voice low. He always was mindful of her feelings. It was one of the many things she adored about him.

"You know he is not," she hissed in a happy whisper. "Though he dances beautifully, don't you think?"

"I was going to say exactly that very thing about him myself," Henry said with a smile and offered Sophia his arm as they approached the bright entryway to the ballroom in preparation of being announced.

Sophia couldn't help but laugh as she accepted his arm.

"Perhaps it might be better if you refrain from dancing as much this evening." Henry offered her an apologetic smile. "In light of our cousin's coming out."

Heat touched Sophia's cheeks, but she understood his implication. It was a rare night when Sophia's dance card had any space on it for another suitor. Tonight, was for Eugenia to shine. Which Sophia had already taken into consideration.

"I'm wearing my slippers without a heel," she admitted. "On account of my *twisted* ankle."

Henry winked at her in appreciation of her feigned injury.

The caller announced them, and Eugenia sailed toward them with a smile beaming on her red lips. Sophia had been at the modiste with her cousin when her coming out gown was designed, and it was stunning. Pale blue fabric with deeper blue rosettes crafted in silk over the full skirt and matching

slippers. Her red hair had been twisted into an elaborate arrangement with silver ribbons and her freshly crimped curls gleamed in the candlelight.

The fashion was more elaborate than Sophia's own light brown tresses, which had been left intentionally simple. A woman's coming out was her crowning achievement, and Sophia would do nothing to take that away from her cousin and dearest friend.

"Isn't it grand?" Eugenia squealed and surveyed the ballroom. Garlands of roses were resplendent in the large room, all matching colors to her attire. The wooden floor had been polished to a high shine, and candles glittered in mirrored sconces, making the room glow with golden light.

Eugenia's elder sister caught Sophia's eye and offered a delicate wave. Penelope, the Countess of Oakhurst, generally did not attend balls now that she was wed to the Earl of Oakhurst, but she was not only in attendance but also appeared to be enjoying herself.

"The grandest." Sophia embraced her cousin. "I'm so very happy for you."

Eugenia grabbed her hand. "Come, let's find eligible men to dance with." She bit her lip, her eyes dancing with mirth. "And perhaps one to marry."

"I find myself in need of some brandy." Henry offered a bow, gave Eugenia a compliment on her ribbons or something of the like, and wandered swiftly away from the conversation of suitors and marriage.

Typical man.

"Ah, Sophia, there you are, dearest." Lady Bursbury swept to Sophia's side. "Might I steal your cousin away for a moment, Eugenia?"

At that moment, Lord Heaton arrived, and a mischievous sparkle lit Eugenia's blue eyes. "Be sure to find me when you're done," she said.

Lady Bursbury watched her walk away, a slight twist to her mouth. "She'll be a tough one to keep from marrying too

quickly.”

“I thought you wanted everyone married off, Aunt Nancy,” Sophia said it playfully.

The little laugh Lady Bursbury gave told her she took Sophia’s words exactly that way. “Yes, but happily, my dear.” She leaned toward Sophia and lowered her voice. “Which is why I’ve come to speak to you.” The concern in her sharp blue eyes was unmistakable.

She knew.

“I take it my father has spoken to you?” Sophia surmised.

Her aunt sighed. “I asked him to give me a chance to find you someone different. Someone more appropriate. He seems rather set on his decision. However...” She lifted one auburn brow triumphantly. “I can be very persuasive.”

Sophia grinned. Lady Bursbury could be very persuasive indeed, especially when it came to matchmaking, of which she was quite adept. Even Cecelia hadn’t been able to avoid their aunt’s schemes.

“I think you’ve met most of the men of the ton already.” Lady Bursbury tapped her fan to her palm repeatedly as her gaze skimmed the room. “I’ve had someone in mind for you for quite a while but have been waiting until just the right moment.”

Excitement lit within Sophia. Hope.

Her aunt gave up searching the room and whispered, “Lord Kendal.”

Sophia held herself upright to keep from wilting at the declaration.

She must not have been very convincing, as Lady Bursbury gave a little pout. “What is it? Have you decided against him already?”

“Well, he’s a far cry better than Mr. Mongerton, but all he ever does is talk amongst the men and he never bothers to dance. He’s so very...” Sophia glanced around them as she spoke to confirm he was not nearby. “Bor—”

She'd been on the tip of saying "boring" when her eyes locked with the dark gaze of a tall, lean man just behind them.

*Lord Kendal.*

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Lady Bursbury said, oblivious of his proximity. "He's hardly boring."

He gave Sophia a small tight smile, which she tried to return as best she could.

"I'll go find him now and speak to him." Lady Bursbury slapped her fan in her palm one final time with determination.

Lord Kendal gave a small bow and backed away from them, disappearing into the crush of people. This time Sophia didn't bother to protest. There was no point when it was obvious there was no discouraging Aunt Nancy.

Not that any of it would do any good, regardless. Sophia knew her father well enough to be keenly aware he would not be swayed into changing his mind.

Short of fleeing England, there would be nothing for it but to marry Mongerton. And while fleeing England did hold great appeal, what was she to do if she did leave? She would require lodging, money, a way to generate an income.

What she needed was a miracle. Or an excellent idea.

## CHAPTER TWO

IN ADDITION TO UNFEELING, Kendal had been called many other things over the years. A rogue. A thief. An ingrate. Mostly by his mother.

But never had he been called “boring”.

A hint of a smile pulled at his lips.

If only Lady Sophia knew...

A bustle of movement caught his attention. Rich blue silk with a set of eyes to match, long red curls and an overly pleased smile. He took a step back from Lady Bursbury’s path, but his back touched the wall behind him. His stomach tugged a little lower with dread.

There was nowhere else to go.

Not with her fixing him with an unwavering focus.

*Bloody hell.*

“Lord Kendal,” she said with obvious delight. “What a joy to see you here.”

“Indeed,” he offered dryly.

A glance around the room revealed several opportunities for escape. There was the Duke of Stedton and Lord Hesterton chatting together. Lord Morrey was standing alone, which was as dangerous a situation as the one Kendal now found himself in. And Lord Oakhurst, who had long since removed his golden “W” pin after his marriage to Lady Bursbury’s eldest

daughter and his voluntary resignation from the Wicked Earls' Club, was with his wife and would offer no reprieve.

There was nothing for it, Kendal would have to allow Lady Bursbury to engage him in whatever scheme was afoot.

"There is no escape," she said pleasantly.

"I'm well aware."

She batted her eyes. "I'm sure you recall our previous conversations about Lady Sophia Stopford, my lovely young niece."

How could he forget when she'd approached him regularly since Lady Sophia's coming out?

"Indeed," he replied coolly.

Nancy studied her fan. "As it were, she is currently in need of a suitor."

His gaze wandered toward a small crowd of men surrounding Lady Sophia. "I believe she is hardly in need."

"Well, 'in need' being that she hasn't found the right one."

"Please don't tell me you still think I am." He narrowed his eyes at her, assessing how much she knew of his involvement with Lord Gullsville. That would explain her persistence on this matter. But would the man truly have confessed his dire financial straits to Lady Bursbury? Though she was his sister-in-law through marriage, surely he wouldn't

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"Yes, of course, you are the man I think would suit her." Lady Bursbury snapped her wrist delicately, and a blue silk fan unfurled. "I'm so glad we're of the same mind after all this time." She waved it before her face, sending her red curls billowing backward.

"We aren't." He squared his shoulders so she would see, as well as hear, his determination. "I have no intention to wed."

Lady Bursbury stopped mid-fan and blinked up at Kendal. "But you're an earl."

“With a reputation that I doubt you want your niece associated with.”

Lady Bursbury gave a playful roll of her eyes. “You’re a better man than all that. You don’t have me fooled, and you know as well as I do that marriage is inevitable for any titled noble.” Her fan snapped closed, and she tapped him lightly on the forearm with it. “Simply keep her in mind is all I ask. You can’t deny she’s beautiful.”

With that, she sailed away, leaving those last words in his mind as she no doubt was off to make some other chap miserable with her matchmaking schemes. Kendal nearly breathed a sigh of relief, except Lady Sophia made her way toward him with the same determined stride as her aunt.

Heaven help him.

Lady Bursbury had not been wrong when she’d said he couldn’t deny her niece’s beauty. With wide blue eyes and a ready smile revealing her straight, white teeth, Sophia was absolutely lovely.

Sophia stopped in front of him, tilted her head and gave a little laugh. “You look as though you fear I might hit you on the head and drag you off to a chapel.”

He offered a tight smile. “That’s how it works, isn’t it?”

She laughed again.

Evidently, he was not that boring if he could elicit not one laugh from her, but two. Not that he cared. Because he didn’t.

“I should like to apologize for my aunt.” Candlelight played off Lady Sophia’s honey-colored hair as she spoke. The style was not as elaborate as she usually wore it. Likewise, her gown appeared equally as simple. Absent such frippery, her own natural beauty was able to shine through.

“It’s hardly the first time she’s approached me.” He slid her an intentional stare. “You needn’t worry that you cause offense when it comes to men who are boring.”

Her cheeks colored with a pretty blush. “I’m terribly sorry. I only meant you don’t dance or flirt.” She grimaced

somewhat, albeit in a delicate, ladylike fashion, looking as though she'd rather be anywhere but there at that moment. "You aren't boring if one listens to gossip."

He bit back a smile at her apparent discomfort. Because he did dance. And he did flirt. He just hadn't cause to do either in some time.

"Gossip?" He lifted a brow. "Pray, tell me what do they say about me."

Her gaze flitted to the gold "W" nestled in the center of his cream-colored cravat. She licked her lips, an innocent and unintentional slow tease of her tongue. "That you're wicked."

He leaned closer, hoping to intimidate her into leaving. "And how do you feel about wicked men?"

Sophia centered the focus of those large blue eyes on him. "Intrigued."

He didn't hide his surprise well enough, and she gave a breathless chuckle.

"I suppose now I am the one being wicked."

Indeed she was, and he couldn't help but be intrigued. Several people had begun to notice their conversation without a chaperone. It didn't surprise him they had caught the attention of others. Lady Sophia was a light that drew moths to her flame. With her charm, her *joie de vivre* and her alluring attraction.

He was no exception.

It would be best to leave before her aunt assumed he was interested in marriage.

Because he was not, nor would he ever be.

"I think I'd like to know more," Lady Sophia said. "They say you own a gaming hell. Is that true?"

He should smirk and walk away. Let her burn with curiosity.

*Boring.*



*Bah!*

Without entirely meaning to, he found himself offering her his arm. “Would you care to take a turn about the room?”

“Please.” She slipped her small hand into the crook of his arm. There was a pleasant smell about her, a bright, citrusy scent that was as fresh as it was appealing.

“Well, do you?” Lady Sophia allowed him to escort her around the perimeter of the ballroom. “Own a gaming hell?”

He scoffed. “I’m a partial owner to one, but it isn’t entirely mine.”

“Oh.” There was a note of disappointment in her voice.

*Boring.*

The word nipped at the back of his mind again. He’d never put much consideration into what others thought of him. Or at least, he’d presumed to be past all that.

But somehow, the idea of being seen as stodgy in Lady Sophia’s eyes made him feel old and tiredly bland, though he was only a couple of years her senior.

It was that foolish thought which led to an even more foolish admission to the young woman. “The rumors about my running whisky from Scotland, however, are not without merit.”

She snapped her head toward him, her eyes going even wider with interest. “Are they?”

There was something about having the attention of the most sought after woman in the room. It was intoxicating and heady. Unlike anything Kendal had ever experienced.

He didn’t let on that he found her company so agreeable and merely tilted his head in confirmation.

“Did you transport it?” she whispered.

“I did.”

“Did you make it?” she asked.

“I did.”

“In Scotland?”

He nodded.

Her fingers curled snugger around his arm. “How?”

They were the focus of every person in the room at that moment. He was with Lady Sophia Stopford. Women’s eyes sharpened with interest, and men’s narrowed with malice. All those years that he had been jabbed with nasty comments, and now he was with the crown jewel of the season. Of many seasons, in fact.

He’d never thought himself the type to crave her company as others had. But then, he had never been graced with her presence before. He’d no idea how intoxicating it could be for her wide sea blue eyes to settle on him, so reactive and expressive, her lips hovering in a ready smile she seemed almost eager to share.

Perhaps that was why he went into such detail on the act of creating and selling whisky, answering each question with a thorough reply, giving way to her fascination about whisky as he indulged his sudden interest in her.

When at last her questions began to dwindle, the lingering spark in her eye told him that perhaps she might have altered her opinion of him.

Not that he should care.

What mattered most was that he steered her curiosity from Mercy’s Door—and Marguerite—and to something far less dangerous.

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SOPHIA FOUND LORD KENDAL SURPRISING. Not only was he not the stodgy earl she had assumed, but their topic of conversation was most enlightening.

And most useful.

“You make it all sound so easy.” She slowed her pace as they neared the end of their walk, not ready for their

discussion to come to an end. Not when it had been so informative.

“Running whisky?” he asked.

She glanced about to ensure no one heard his words. “Yes. Is it difficult?”

“Quite the opposite.” He smirked. “It’s impossibly easy.”

There was an arrogance to the manner with which he said it, the way he’d confessed his nefarious deeds. It shouldn’t appeal to her.

But it did.

Her body was practically humming with interest.

He was different than the other men with whom she had been acquainted since her coming out. Lord Kendal hadn’t spent the time complimenting her appearance or offering strings of memorized poetry or mentioning how their families would be proud to see them wed.

He matched her pace until they were nearly at a crawl and they were finally forced to stop. Lord Kendal turned toward her and bowed. “Thank you for the company, Lady Sophia.”

She curtsied. “I enjoyed our walk.”

“I hope it wasn’t too boring.” If he hadn’t said it with such unamused disinterest, she might have thought he was flirting.

Her cheeks went hot. “Not a single moment.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” He bowed once more. “Good evening, Lady Sophia.”

With that, he left. Not with an offer for a bit of lemonade or asking if he might call on her the following day. As if he wasn’t at all intent on seeing her again.

Perhaps that was for the best.

Aunt Nancy had nudged Sophia toward Lord Kendal to help her out of the situation with Mr. Mongerton. And she had. Though not in the way her aunt had apparently assumed.

Another suitor was not what Sophia had been seeking. No, she had been after information for an opportunity to escape.

And Lord Kendal had presented her with one on a silver platter.

The rest of the ball went by in a blur, with Sophia's mind half fixed on what she was doing and saying. The other half was locked on what would happen if her father still insisted she marry and what she planned to do to get out of such an unwanted situation.

It was exciting, the idea that she might forge her path.

She could be a woman of independent means. It was almost unheard of to think she could possess the ability to support herself. To live a life without society's rules and its ridiculous fixation with marriage.

It was not all that occupied her attention through the night instead of sleep. So too did Lord Kendal. The cool way he'd discussed such disreputable dealings had been titillating. The man who had before seemed so dull was now mysterious.

Dangerous.

Alluring.

She, too, could have such a life. And she would if her father insisted on nuptials with Mr. Mongerton.

The night passed with restless agitation as ideas and plans churned in her head. At long last morning arrived, and her father made a belated entrance into the drawing room.

"Good morning, Father," she said brightly.

He slid her an irritated glance.

Perhaps too brightly, then.

Stubble shadowed his jaw, and the skin under his eyes was bruised with exhaustion. Her stomach slithered to her toes. She knew this look well. She had seen it often.

He had stayed out late again, at a gaming hell, no doubt, imbibing beyond what any man ought to. She didn't anticipate

the conversation would go well. Perhaps that was why she'd managed to lay out all the details of her escape so perfectly.

Her Aunt Bessie, God rest her soul, had spent the last years of her life in widow's weeds after her husband passed. She'd also left several pieces of jewelry to Sophia in thanks for the hours of reading she'd done at her aunt's bedside.

Sophia had done it gladly, of course, but her aunt never stopped thanking her for the devoted attention. Nor had she ceased to celebrate how Sophia refused to settle down as she ought to, and encouraged her to squeeze every last drop life had to offer.

Aunt Bessie would have supported Sophia's decision. So it was that Sophia didn't feel guilty for planning to wear her late aunt's weeds to disguise herself and sell the jewels for money. After all, starting a whisky distillery, while cheap, was not free. Nor was getting to Scotland.

And everything hinged on the answer Sophia knew she would receive. Still, she owed it to her father to give him a final chance.

She waited until he'd poured himself a strong cup of tea before venturing onto the painful topic. "I wondered if you've given much thought to what we discussed yesterday."

He paused with the rim of a gilt-edged teacup pinched between his lips and slowly set it down. "I have."

Sophia folded her hands in the lap of her white muslin gown, lest he see how terribly her fingers shook. "And?"

"You'll marry Mr. Mongerton." His tone was firm, the way he spoke when he didn't want an argument.

How could he possibly expect no argument when this was her future?

As excited as she had been the night before about the prospect of going to Scotland, she now felt a modicum of trepidation. Not only for venturing out without a chaperone or guide, spiriting into a world she knew little about, but that she would be leaving everything familiar behind.

Her friends, her family, her home.

“Please don’t do this,” she whispered.

“If this is about that blasted vow...” Her father slid her a warning glance.

She shook her head weakly.

For it was, in part. If she’d been resigned to doing what was expected of her, to glossing her way through life rather than experiencing it to its fullest, she would already be wed by now. Mr. Mongerton would never be a consideration.

“He has wealth.” Lord Gullsville took a thick slice of toasted bread and spread a generous smear of butter over it. “He’ll see you well taken care of.”

“May I have another month?” She could hear the pleading in her own voice and hated it.

He bit into the toast with an aggressive crunch rather than answer her.

“One more ball,” she begged. “I’ll settle on a suitor. He can court me over a few weeks—”

“This will be done, Sophia.” Her father set the toast on his plate. “I’m sorry, but you cannot continue as you have been.”

“But if there’s still time—”

Her father’s fist slammed to the table with enough force to upset the balance of his teacup on its saucer. Rich, brown liquid splashed out over the small dish and stained the white linen beneath.

Sophia sucked in a breath, startled by the suddenness of his violent outburst. He hadn’t been like that when she was a girl. It wasn’t until after Mother and the twins died. Perhaps that was the hardest thing to accept when it came to her father—those blissful recollections of the man he had been.

Once upon a time, they had been a family. They had been happy.

Sophia pushed up from her chair and rushed from the room, rubbing the tears from her blurred vision with her fists.

She wouldn't let him make her cry. And she wouldn't take the fate he so callously tossed her way.

With the matter settled, she wasted no time putting her plan to action. That evening, once the household slept, she crept from Gullsville Place on St. James's Square in Aunt Bessie's widow's weeds with a black veil covering her face, and the jewels removed from their hiding place between her mattress and carefully tucked in a valise.

And so her journey began. She would make her way to Scotland, with enough of a fortune in hand to open her own distillery. Despite a pinch of fear at the unknown and the realization that she was leaving everything and everyone she had ever known, Sophia was ready to forge her own path.

## CHAPTER THREE

KENDAL ENJOYED his time at the Wicked Earls' Club for its many qualities. A man could be whomever he liked in the walls of the exclusive gentlemen's club. He could set aside his concerns and have a stiff drink or three if he so desired.

There were no debutantes seeking a husband or sisters running gaming hells disguised as men and there were no daughters of acquaintances who needed money captivating him. Or women who intrigued him more than he cared to admit.

It had been several days since he'd spoken with Lady Sophia at the Bursbury ball. And many long damn hours that he'd spent thinking about her since. Their closeness that night had been noted by several scandal sheets and the ton's worst gossips.

Really, he found it all rather amusing, though he ought to have been horrified.

Regardless, none of it mattered in the Wicked Earls' Club. There was politics and comradery to be had in the dark wood-paneled club walls, and a cut crystal glass full of something to numb one from the inside out.

The Earl of Downing, a recent member, approached the table where Kendal sat. "Mind a bit of company?"

Kendal did, but he indicated the chair across from him all the same. If nothing else, the younger man would provide interesting conversation.



While Downing wouldn't fight professionally, given his peerage, he was one of the best boxers Kendal had ever seen. It was a damn shame he refused to join the other pugilists of the streets. He'd win every time.

"Any new matches planned for the week?" Kendal asked.

Downing lifted a shoulder. "I heard there would be one at Mercy's Door."

"You needn't come to me to beg participation." Kendal lifted his glass. "You are always welcome."

Downing nodded his thanks, then leaned back and sipped his own drink.

He didn't look like a boxer if one ignored his slightly crooked nose. He was too tall; his arms and legs too long despite being bulky with muscle.

All Kendal knew was that he harbored no interest in being on the opposite side of the reach of that powerful fist.

One of Downing's feet bounced now with impatience.

Kendal lifted a brow. "I assume there's a reason you sought me out."

"You're well acquainted with Lady Sophia," Downing said it like a statement rather than a question. "What do you know of her cousin?"

There went the hope of interesting conversation. "Cousin?"

"Lady Eugenia." Downing's foot continued to jostle.

Kendal shrugged. "I know nothing of her."

At that moment, the Earl of Morrey approached. His quiet presence was unmistakable, given his height and the mysteriousness surrounding him. "Forgive the intrusion," he said. "Lord Gullsville begged me to seek you out."

Kendal gave a low curse of displeasure. "I take it he's here?"

Morrey tilted his head in agreement.

Kendal heaved a sigh and pushed up from his chair. “We’ll have to continue this chat another time,” he said with feigned regret to Downing.

The younger man gave a single nod and lifted his glass to his lips.

With that, Kendal went downstairs, where Gullsville paced near the door.

“What could possibly be so important that you would track me down?” Kendal did not mask his irritation.

“Speak with me in my carriage.” Gullsville indicated the hackney parked on the street.

If it weren’t for Kendal’s loyalty to Marguerite, he would walk away and leave the man wringing his hands. Instead, Kendal slid the man an icy glare and climbed inside the carriage.

There was a slight odor of sweat in the interior, as always seemed the case with hired hacks.

Gullsville took the seat opposite Kendal and snapped the door shut, sealing them inside along with the stale air. “I need your help.”

“I’m not giving you any more money,” Kendal said with finality.

“It’s not that.” Gullsville glanced down at his hands. When he looked up, his chin quivered with emotion, and his eyes were wet.

Well, this was a new low. “Good God, man, what is it?”

“It’s my Sophia.” Gullsville swiped at his eyes with the flat of his hand. “She’s gone.”

“Gone where?” Kendal asked.

“That’s the thing of it. I’ve no idea.” Gullsville shook his head, his lips pressing together once more as though trying to squelch his tears. “But she left without her maid.”

Kendal winced at that. Wherever she had gone, she’d ruined her reputation.

“Two days ago,” Gullsville added.

Which meant whatever plan she’d put into motion was likely already underway.

“Why have you come to me?” Kendal asked warily.

“I need you to find her for me.” Gullsville shifted in his seat, and his bulk set the carriage swaying. “You’re resourceful. You figure out what others can’t. If anyone could find my Sophia, it would be you.”

“But even *if* I can find her, it’s not just the task of locating her...” Kendal said. And it wouldn’t be. She couldn’t return home with him and no maid.

She would need to return with a husband.

“That’s exactly it,” Gullsville said slowly. “Which is also why I need you.”

“Why don’t you send Mongerton after her?” Kendal demanded, throwing the rumor in Gullsville’s face. News of the gaming hell owner’s boasts that he was marrying a young, pretty daughter of a peer had set the gossip circles on fire. Those rumors had made their way to Kendal, given his attachment to her in the ton’s fascination.

Gullsville didn’t bother to deny it. “She wouldn’t return if I sent him after her.”

Kendal studied the other man’s heavily lined face. “That’s why she left, isn’t it?” He scoffed in disgust. “You were going to sell her into marriage to pay for your gambling debts.”

Gullsville had the decency to look away, shamefaced. “Lady Bursbury said Sophia visited Bursbury Place seeking out Lord Oakhurst, but he and Lady Oakhurst had already left for the country. You know how they are.”

Indeed, Kendal did. Oakhurst had been one of his primary sources when running whisky. It was something they’d both done with the Earl of Benton. Oakhurst had never much cared for society. Neither had Benton for that matter, and they both escaped London every chance they had.

Which meant there was only one reason Kendal could hazard why Sophia was seeking out Lord Oakhurst, and it turned his blood to ice.

Suddenly, Kendal had an idea of exactly where Lady Sophia had gone.

“She took her aunt’s black mourning gowns,” Gullsville was saying. “And her maid said her jewelry is missing as well.”

Any doubt at Lady Sophia’s intentions fled Kendal’s thoughts. He knew exactly where she’d gone. And he’d been the one to put the idea into her head.

Except that, though he’d shared how to set up a distillery, where to go, how to do it, he’d failed to explain the dangers involved. The excisemen, the wilderness of the Scottish Highlands.

Damn it.

“I need you to go,” Gullsville said. “And if you won’t...” His words trailed off, something like a threat.

“And if I won’t?” Kendal pressed as his chest tightened.

“Then you will leave me no choice but to tell the ton about Marguerite.”

An explosion of rage detonated in Kendal’s mind. He sat forward, his entire body tense, ready to grab the bastard by the cravat and slam his fist into the blighter’s round nose. “How dare you?”

Gullsville didn’t so much as flinch. Instead, he glared into Kendal’s face. “To save my daughter’s reputation. The same as I did for Marguerite all those years ago.”

“Something you’ll never let us forget.” Kendal curled his hand into a fist. “And hold it over our heads when you require our compliance.”

Gullsville’s jaw worked, but he didn’t bother to say anything more.

Kendal sat back hard in his seat, his mind working to process the lot of it.

*Marriage.*

He suppressed a shudder at the word. His parents union had been such that he'd never wanted to wed. And his mother...

Marguerite's sweet face came into view in his mind's eye. The way she'd looked when he found her in that rundown inn. She was so defeated, so dejected. He couldn't bear ever seeing her thus again.

"If I do this, our debts are settled," Kendal said. "You never approach Marguerite or me again. You do not tell anyone what you know about her, now or ever, and you do not seek restitution, as this will even our scores."

Gullsville nodded so vigorously, his fleshy jowls jiggled. "You have my word."

"Very well," Kendal ground out. "I'll do it."

"You mean, you'll..."

"Yes," Kendal snapped. "I'll find her. And I'll marry her."

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SOPHIA HAD NEVER BEEN on her own before. Not really. Certainly not like this.

The journey had taken four days of hard riding by carriage and a necklace of her aunt's that she had never particularly cared for as the clasp had always scratched at the back of her neck. But she'd finally arrived in Scotland.

The Highlands were still a ways off, but her arrival at Gretna Green marked a victory. There was irony in the location where she found herself, a place for lovers to flee the bonds of society and wed quickly. For her, it was a place to escape marriage. To discover her own way.

*Alone.*

The word rang out in her mind as she waited in the carriage for the driver to secure a room for her at the inn, and a shudder rippled through her. She had not anticipated how much she would miss the company of friends and family. The bulk of her life, she had been surrounded by people. Her brother and sister, her father, her family at Bursbury Place. And since she'd come out, she had a wealth of friends.

Now, there was no one.

She waited in the stuffy cabin, her patience whittling away to nothing as the endless minutes ticked on. The four walls around her began to press in on her, squeezing the air from her lungs. Sweat prickled on her brow and a panicked flutter took up residence in her heart.

She should wait for him as he had instructed but found she could not.

And anyway, she had been careful through the duration of her journey through England. In the time it had taken her to reach Scotland, never had anyone appeared to be following her or watching her. She had to be far enough away by now to finally relax her vigilance.

No one even knew to follow her. How could they possibly?

She drew the heavy black veil over her face and pushed out of the carriage into a blustery wind that tried its hardest to pull the covering from her face. With a hand clasped over her black bonnet, she rushed into the building.

The tavern keep took one look at her and indicated upstairs. "I directed your driver to the third room on the right a while ago."

*A while ago?* It should have only taken moments for him to deposit her effects in the room and reclaim her.

Something knotted in her stomach. She rushed up the stairs as quickly as decorum would allow and shoved her way into the door the innkeeper had indicated. Her effects were sprawled across the floor, and her trunk splayed open on the bed. More of her items were scattered over the pillowy surface, amid combs and slippers.

She rushed to the mess and frantically searched through her costly belongings. But the finest item of all was missing.

The diamond necklace.

It had belonged to her grandmother and what she planned to use to hire someone to teach her how to run a distillery and share a contact who could help her transport the final product to England. She had other baubles, but none were so fine as that necklace.

Her hand balled into a fist at the duplicity of her driver, who clearly had been biding his time until their arrival into Scotland. It had been his suggestion to distribute her wealth among her bags in case they were held up by a highwayman. She had thought he was being nice when he'd indicated the valise she kept tucked closely at her side. Now she realized how naïve she had been.

That would not happen again.

Thankfully, she'd kept most of her jewelry within the valise. She had only been deprived of the diamond necklace.

And it *was* gone forever. She'd paid her driver handsomely to ensure his silence about having driven her from London to Scotland. He knew she would not approach the authorities.

*Blast.*

There was nothing for it but to make her way downstairs in her widow's veil to request her meal be delivered to her room, as well as making inquiries about a new driver. This time she would not be so foolish to trust so easily.

Doubtless, her journey would not be an easy one, and this was but her first difficulty to encounter. Thus far, the rest had been surprisingly easy. Thank heavens.

She returned to her room and skimmed through the small journal she'd been slowly filling with information gleaned from her conversation with Lord Kendal, putting to paper every memory she could of their conversation about whisky.

Sadly, he'd been careful not to mention any names. That would have indeed been helpful, as she could have sought

someone out in particular for advice.

In all honesty, she thought of Lord Kendal often. Not only what he'd said, but how he'd said it, arrogant almost, as though he were proud of his misdeeds. He'd piqued her interest with his candid admission of wickedness— how it made his eyes flash with something that set her pulse quickening. She found herself often wishing he was there with her. Not only for his expertise but also his confidence.

And he *was* confident.

It was apparent in the set of his broad shoulders, the straightness of his lean back, and the little smirk that lifted the corners of his mouth when he spoke. Perhaps then she wouldn't be so lonely.

Dinner was a sad affair with one candle to light the inn's cramped room, casting long shadows over the stained walls, and only herself for company. If she'd anticipated this pressing solitude, she might have acquired a pet to bring with her. Her father had never been one for dogs, but she would enjoy a small one at the moment. One that would fit perfectly on her lap and follow at her heels, tilting his head this way and that at every little thing she said.

If it weren't for the loneliness, she would be doing spectacularly well.

How different things might have been if her father had given her a few more months, even weeks, to find someone else to marry.

Anyone other than Mr. Mongerton.

She shook her head. The offense still stung. No longer hungry, she pushed away the remnants of her roasted pheasant and vegetables. It was so baffling. The more she considered her father's decision, the more confused she became.

Not that it mattered now.

She was in Scotland. She was safe. Yes, she was missing a very costly necklace, but she had the rest of her jewels she could sell. Yes, she was alone, but she would make new acquaintances. Yes, the unknown of it all rattled her a bit more



than she cared to admit, but she always managed to work her way through whatever was tossed her way.

Now that she had crossed the border, she wouldn't have to run as fast, as hard.

After all, how would her father possibly know where she was going? And if he hadn't caught her thus far, how could he do so now?

## CHAPTER FOUR

IT WAS NOT the first time Kendal was in search of a missing woman. It had taken him nearly six months to track down Marguerite after she ran away.

Of course, the last time, he hadn't had to travel to Scotland. Navigating all of England had been bad enough.

His arrival at Gretna Green had been with good timing, perhaps enough to locate Lady Sophia. After all, Gretna Green was a frequent post for rest within the Scottish border, allowing one to change horses and recuperate from the journey, as she would most likely require.

Based on the conversation he'd had with the innkeeper just that morning, where the man claimed to have seen a widow earlier that day, Kendal knew he was close to Lady Sophia. Rather than rest there as had been his intention, he'd exchanged his horse and pressed on to catch her.

His back ached from prolonged time in the saddle. His skin was gritty from travel, and exhaustion left his limbs with an impossibly heavy sensation. Even now, at his desired location, he didn't want to waste time requesting a room. Not until after he'd gone to several taverns to inquire who might have seen her.

If she were in Gretna Green, he would locate her.

He entered the first tavern he found and strode in on legs that threatened to buckle. Beneath the odor of sweat and ale came the unmistakable aroma of roasting meat. Kendal's stomach snarled with hunger. He couldn't recall the last time

he'd eaten but knew it had been a while if he found the smells of a rustic tavern meal that enticing.

The man nearest the door eyed him. "Getting married or traveling through?"

The scents inside the stuffy room mingled in a noxious blend that threw Kendal into disorienting light-headedness.

He frowned at the man. "I beg your pardon?"

"Everyone comes here to get married." The patron shrugged. "Unless ye're passing through. But if ye just married, Dirk will buy ye an ale." He nodded to the bar before lifting his glass with a wink.

"I'm not wed," Kendal replied smoothly. And he was not. At least not yet.

He shoved the thought of marrying Lady Sophia Stopford from his mind, the same as he'd done for the whole journey. First, he had to catch her. Then he had to convince her to wed. Which, though it would prove difficult, would not be nearly as impossible as rallying his own enthusiasm.

"I'm looking for a wealthy widow," Kendal said.

The man by the door burst into laughter, as did several others within earshot.

The man slapped him on the shoulder and said jovially, "I am too, lad."

Several others piped up that they were also seeking wealthy widows.

Irritation ground at Kendal's nerves like splinters of glass. He was too bloody hungry to deal with such nonsense and was evidently not thinking straight.

He quit the tavern in favor of a nearby inn, where he promptly rented a room, scrubbed down as best he could and made his way to the dining area for food that wouldn't have questionable meat. This time there was no body odor and stale alcohol. Simply the wonderfully enticing aroma of adequately mediocre food.

After a thick slab of venison with rich onion gravy, some roasted asparagus spears and a glass of whisky, he had his senses about him. Enough to notice a nefarious, twitchy chap speaking with a couple at the table beside him.

“Real diamonds, it is,” he said in a roughly accented voice.

“Where did you get it?” The gentleman that the ruffian spoke to regarded him with apparent skepticism.

The lady, however, stared at the necklace with wide, starry eyes.

“How do I know it isn’t paste?” the gentleman asked.

It didn’t look like paste from where Kendal sat. Quite the opposite, in fact. It appeared to be the sort of jewels an aunt might bequeath to her youngest niece. And rather similar to one of the items described to Kendal by Lady Sophia’s maid at Gullsville Place, prior to his departure.

“How much?” the lady asked.

“Five hundred pounds.”

The gentleman sputtered, but the lady shot him a hopeful look regardless.

Kendal had enough of the charade. He pushed to his feet and marched over to the table. “This man is a thief,” he declared.

The gentleman scowled. “I knew something was amiss.”

Before the man with the necklace could protest his innocence, Kendal grabbed him by his collar and dragged him out into the hall. The lady gave a surprised cry, but Kendal ignored it.

He didn’t have a wicked reputation for nothing.

“I recognize this necklace.” Kendal gave the dullard a hard shove against the wall.

The man looked at him with wide eyes, a criminal caught. “I...it’s mine,” he stammered. “It was me mum’s. Just paste. Like the gentleman said.”

Anger burned through Kendal's veins, and he pushed his forearm into the man's neck. "These look like the gems of a woman who recently left London in a hurry."

The wastrel looked away even as his face flushed from his limited air supply.

"A widow." Kendal pushed his elbow harder. The man dropped the velvet-lined box containing the necklace, which Kendal swiftly caught in his free hand. "This wasn't your mother's, was it?"

The man growled. "No." The simple answer exhaled out in a wheeze.

"Do you have any more of her belongings?" Kendal demanded.

The man shook his head.

He most likely spoke the truth. If he'd had more, no doubt he would have offered them in addition to the necklace to the couple.

However, a threat was still in order—nothing like fearing for one's freedom to ensure prolonged compliance.

"If you're lying to me, I'll hunt you down like the dog you are." Kendal released his opponent, who choked in a mouthful of air. "Tell me where she's staying, and I won't notify the authorities of what you've done."

"The Love Nest Inn," he gasped.

Kendal regarded the man coolly. "I suggest you depart the area. If I see you again, I don't believe I'll find it in myself to be as generous a second time."

The thief nodded and took off at a staggering run while clasping his throat.

The Love Nest Inn. Kendal didn't bother to keep from rolling his eyes. He divested his room of his belongings and made his way to the unfortunately named inn.

The innkeeper met him with a smile that grew larger after his eyes skimmed over Kendal's costly attire. "Can I set ye up

with a room?”

“I believe you have a widow in your lodgings.” There was no sense in postponing the discussion, not when Lady Sophia had evidently been robbed.

The innkeeper folded his hands behind his back. “If such a lady were to be within my establishment, she would undoubtedly have paid for my discretion.”

*So this was how it was going to be.*

Kendal suppressed a sigh and reached into his pocket, withdrawing several coins, which he lay upon the counter. “Do you have a widow in your lodging house?” He asked again, this time with measured patience.

The other man discreetly settled his hand over the stack and whisked the small money away. “Indeed, I do, my lord. However, she came in with a veil over her face, so I canna tell ye what she looked like. She took her dinner in her room if that is of any aid to ye.”

Ah, so she was being careful.

It was a wise choice, especially after being robbed.

Kendal put another coin on the counter. “I appreciate the information. As well as anything else that you may be able to share.”

Again, the coin disappeared swiftly. “She is in need of a new driver. Her last one went to her room and was never seen again. When she spoke with me, she appeared somewhat flustered, but wouldna say why.”

So the bastard knew she’d been robbed. “And if you had to speculate? What would you think became of her driver?”

“I dare say he robbed her, but she dinna wish to inform me of whatever reason.”

“And did you notify the authorities?”

“The lady paid extra for discretion.” The innkeeper raised his brows as though Kendal were daft.

While Lady Sophia had bribed the man, apparently it had not been enough, or Kendal wouldn't have been able to loosen the crooked innkeeper's tongue so easily.

No doubt the business of secrets was lucrative.

But, if Lady Sophia went so far as to refrain from reporting a thief who had stolen an expensive necklace, she wouldn't readily agree to return to London. Especially as Kendal's wife.

He would have to be clever.

Marguerite was counting on him.

"Is there anything else I may be of assistance with?" the innkeeper asked with a hopeful grin.

"Yes," Kendal replied. "I shall require a driver's attire."

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SOPHIA WOKE with a nip of unease in her chest. The incident with her driver had been most distressing.

She squeezed her eyes shut and fully acknowledged the hurt of losing her aunt's diamond necklace. It was funny that she had been so willing to sell it only days before, but how poignant its absence was now. For its sentiment more so than for the loss of its value.

What was more, she did not have a driver unless the innkeeper was able to procure one for her the prior evening or early this morning.

And she was alone.

Wholly and completely alone.

Doubt seeped into her thoughts at that moment, pressing through the optimism that had been so resplendent as she rode through England on her way to a great adventure.

It was still great, to be sure. She had to remind herself as much, to bolster her excitement and shove away her fears.

She wasn't acquiescing to the fate laid out for her by others. Instead, she was finding a way still to live a grand life of her own choosing.

Besides, Henry had always said she was lucky. And he wasn't wrong. It seemed as if no matter what fell in Sophia's path, she was always able to navigate around it and come out unscathed. This would be no different.

She sat up in bed, so her feet dangled over the edge of the mattress in the chill of the cool morning air and reminded herself again of the plan. Glasgow was approximately a day and a half away. Once there, she could find a guide to lead her into the Highlands. After that, she had to secure lodging and assemble the materials, which she had written down from memory of the conversation with Kendal at the ball. From there, she could procure a guide to instruct her on the distilling methods and, hopefully, begin the process.

It seemed both simple and complicated all at once.

In all actuality, the whole of it felt impossible

A ripple of misgiving shuddered down her back.

And while it was not too late to turn around and return home to England, doing so would result in her marriage to Mongerton. This time, her shudder was one of revulsion.

Better to face the unknown than the devil she knew.

Bolstered, she pushed herself up from the bed and quickly dressed in her black gown and veil. They were heavy, dark things she ordinarily would have detested, except that they held the slightest scent of cinnamon in the rich fabric and reminded her of her aunt. At least such a wonderful sense of familiarity helped assuage Sophia's devastating loneliness.

Fully dressed, Sophia made her way down the stairs with her jewelry-laden valise clutched in her hands and was promptly greeted by the innkeeper's overly wide grin.

"Good day, Lady Weatherborne."

She'd created a story for the widow she played and used the alias at each inn she visited. Lady Weatherborne, an entire



work of fiction from Sophia's mind, was the third and final wife to the Marquis of Weatherborne. She was a woman of exceptional wealth and privilege who had spent her entire life following every rule. Now she was seeking adventure.

Sophia nodded in response to the innkeeper's greeting, as Lady Weatherborne would most assuredly do.

"I've fine news for ye," he said. "I've managed to locate a driver."

There now. Things truly always did work out for her.

"I'm pleased to hear it," she drawled in a bored, austere tone. One she'd actually borrowed from Lord Kendal.

Though she genuinely was pleased to hear it and smiled at the man, realizing belatedly that her black veil obscured the display of her appreciation. Some habits were not easily cast aside.

Declining his offer to take her valise, she rushed outside, eager to meet her new driver and make haste toward Glasgow. Now that she was once more resolved in her plan, she didn't want anything to slow her down lest her wits became rattled again.

A post chaise sat just outside the stables. Presumably, one attached to the driver Sophia would be hiring. A fair-haired man in a simple jacket was crouched by the wall with his back to her.

No doubt, he was her driver. The only other person in the stable was a boy preparing two horses to be ridden.

Sophia slipped on the role of Lady Weatherborne and strode briskly toward the man.

"You are my driver, are you not?" she asked in her most pretentious tone.

"Are ye Lady Weatherborne?" He didn't even bother to stand or turn to look at her as he asked the question in his rough accent.

She sniffed. "I am. And I should like you to turn around so that I might greet you properly."

He held a broken bridle aloft. “Fixing this, then we’ll be on our way, my lady.”

Sophia hesitated. What *would* Lady Weatherborne do in this situation?

“Very well,” she said snappishly. “I’ll have the innkeeper bring out my effects.”

Halfway back to the inn, she belated realized Lady Weatherborne would have instructed him to notify the innkeeper rather than do it herself. She stopped short and returned to the stable just as he was standing. He was far taller than she had expected, and his attire fit improperly as a result, with the hem of his trousers hovering just above his ankles.

She opened her mouth to tell him he needed to go to the inn for her remaining items when he turned toward her. His dark eyes met hers, and her mind went blank in shock.

She knew those eyes. She knew that man. And now she knew why his clothes were such an inadequate fit.

“Did you require further assistance, Lady Weatherborne?” he drawled in his aristocratic voice, dragging out her name with obvious intent.

A dizzying mix of emotions slammed into her. Not only the horror at having been caught, but the heart-aching awareness of seeing someone she knew. A familiar face in a foreign world where she’d been surrounded by strangers and taken by thieves.

Her pulse stumbled. She wanted to laugh and run toward him even as she knew she ought to turn and run *from* him.

“Lord Kendal.” As she whispered his name, her veil rippled with her exhalation, reminding her that she still wore it.

If she hadn’t been so foolish as to say his name, he might not have recognized her. She had just blown her own disguise.

Or perhaps he knew anyway, or he wouldn’t have said her name as he did.

No doubt her father had sent him to bring her back to England. Back to Mongerton and her unwanted marriage.

She couldn't allow that. Without thinking too much about what she planned to do next, she ran toward the horse the boy had prepared and leapt into the saddle. It had been ages since she had ridden astride—not since she'd had her first lessons. Once she'd been instructed to use a side-saddle, she'd used one ever since.

With her skirts hitched up to her knees, she grabbed the reins in one hand and clutched her valise to her with the other as she bellowed in a most unladylike manner for the horse to go.

## CHAPTER FIVE

KENDAL STARED in shock at the young woman in widow's weeds with her veil fluttering behind her and her white stockinged legs visible from the knees down. Of all the things he'd anticipated of their meeting, this was not even on his list of assumed expectations.

The stable lad had been readying another horse and now watched open-mouthed as the wild widow on a stolen steed galloped away at full tilt.

Kendal grabbed the saddle from the boy's hands and secured it swiftly to the horse. "I'll see to it both horses are returned posthaste."

He didn't wait for the stable lad to respond before leaping onto the beast and tearing off after the woman he would be forced to wed. She rode like the very devil, with her skirts and veil billowing black fury behind her.

This was not how it was supposed to have gone.

It had all been planned out perfectly. He would keep his face hidden while she went to the carriage, which was to be the easiest of the tasks. Only when they were on the road back to London would he confess who he was, followed by his intention shortly thereafter.

It was the latter part that he'd presumed to be the most problematic, convincing a woman he wanted to marry her, when, in fact, he did not.

Rage flared up inside Kendal. It had been his constant companion the entire time he been searching for Lady Sophia.

He would not be here if it weren't for Lord Gullsville's inability to stop gambling.

Damn it. He also would not be here if it weren't for his foolishness in trusting the older man so many years ago.

And now here he was, chasing after a woman who was intentionally running from him. What a brilliant start to their marriage.

How bloody marvelous.

The wind tore at his ill-fitting clothing, which were both too large and too short, and stung his cheeks. He gripped the reins hard in his hands and encouraged the horse faster and faster.

And while his gain was incremental, he was slowly closing the distance between them.

The veiled bonnet ripped from Lady Sophia's head, and her light brown hair spilled out in long, rippling waves. Still, she did not slow.

Every muscle in Kendal's body clenched with the effort of staying low to his horse to ensure he could catch her. The houses they whipped past disappeared after a few minutes and gave way to a forest with a clearing in the distance. The clearing, however, appeared to end in a U-shaped cliff.

Lady Sophia must have realized this as well, for she spun her horse about and charged back toward him. Kendal intentionally placed his steed in her path, so her beast was forced to stop, which she did with a cry of dismay.

Her hair flew about her flushed face, and her eyes shone with desperation. "Please let me go," she panted.

Kendal held his ground, shifting his horse this way and that to head her off. "You know I cannot."

"Lord Kendal." Her gaze turned pleading in a way that piqued his sympathy more than he cared to admit.

But he clenched his jaw and remained resolute.

Without warning, she threw herself from her horse, stumbling upon her landing and staggering into a run.

Kendal issued forth a weary exhale.

*Was this how it was to be?*

He dismounted his horse and gave chase. Where she was burdened by her skirts and the valise she stubbornly refused to relinquish, Kendal was unencumbered and free to sprint as swiftly as he was able. And he was fast. He had been ever since boyhood, a benefit of his leanly muscled frame.

So it was that he was able to get to her rather swiftly. She was within an arm's reach when suddenly she pitched forward with a quick scream, spilling gracelessly to the ground.

For his part, Kendal was too close, his momentum too built up, to immediately cease running.

And while he did try, his feet tangled against one another in the futile effort, and he found himself falling as well. As he descended toward her, he managed to brace his arms, bracing his weight just before landing on top of her and narrowly avoiding crushing her.

It was the first time he'd come face to face with her in such close proximity, their faces a mere inch apart. She had always been lovely, of course, or she would not be sought after with such alacrity by so many suitors.

But up close as Kendal was to her, she was sheer perfection. She wore no powder on her face, and her bare skin was creamy and flawless, her cheeks flushed from the exertions of her intended escape. The sun slanted over them, lighting the depth of her blue eyes to a brilliance that unveiled flecks of green around her pupils. Her unbound hair spilled around her in honey-colored, citrus-scented waves he longed to bury his face in.

She gazed up at him wide-eyed, her lovely lips slightly parted in her surprise. A long, uncertain moment passed with them both frozen where they were—her lying out on the ground and him hovering over hers by the strength of his arms.

Her expression softened, and her lashes lowered as she glanced down at his mouth. Was it only his imagination, or did her breath catch?

His senses had most assuredly been knocked from him in the fall. She did not want to kiss him, and he did not want to lower his head to allow his mouth to glide over hers, to sample and learn if they were as sweet and soft as they looked.

He shouldn't.

Except that he did.

He dipped his face to hers as she tilted her chin up toward him and her eyes closed. His mouth found the supple warmth of her lips in a delicate brush; one meant to be gentle. He kissed her then, with tenderness and care, not wanting to frighten her off once more.

Desire, hot and unexpected, shot through him like a lightning bolt. He was immediately hard, the depth of his need astonishing. Her mouth parted under his, and he swept his tongue against the silkiness of hers.

A little hum in the back of her throat pulled at him, encouraging him. Lust rose in him like a tidal wave, threatening to consume him.

But he would not be its slave.

His fingers closed around the blades of grass as he reined in his lust. She was a lady, one worthy of more respect than being groped about in the dirt.

He pushed off her, careful not to tangle himself in her bombazine skirts, and offered her a hand. "Forgive me, Lady Sophia."

She studied his hand without reaching to accept it, her expression wary as if she were considering the possibility of running once more.

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SOPHIA'S MOUTH was still warm from the press of Lord Kendal's lips upon hers. Likewise, her blood was on fire from what he'd done with his tongue.

She'd kissed two men before. Simple, chaste pecks that had nothing to do with tongues.

Lord Kendal's gaze burned into hers. "Don't run."

"You'd catch me, wouldn't you?" There was a breathlessness to her tone she didn't intend.

The skin around his eyes tensed in silent answer. He would.

This was it, then. She was done.

Her escape had been foiled, and she was now at the mercy of her father's whims. She put her hand to his palm, and his long fingers curled around hers as he helped her easily to her feet.

A glance at the ground revealed two necklaces, four bracelets and pair of ruby earbobs glittering in the grass.

"My jewelry." She dropped to her knees, frantically gathering them, and shoving them in her valise, which had come open upon her fall.

Wild anxiety pulsed through her as she was knocked aimlessly in the direction of a life someone else had chosen. Those gems were the only thing that could save her.

Or they could have.

They wouldn't, anymore. Kendal had arrived to spirit her back to London and toward her dismal fate.

He crouched beside her and helped her replace the jewelry, as well as several other effects that she kept in her valise.

He carefully set a sapphire necklace inside the bag and reached for the set of earbobs. "You needn't worry. We won't leave any of it behind."

Only then did she realize hot tears welled in her eyes, an unfortunate reaction to the desolate hopelessness resonating



through her. “I can’t do it,” she whispered. “I can’t marry Mr. Mongerton.”

“You won’t be marrying him.” Lord Kendal said it as if it was the most commonly known bit of news ever.

Sophia stilled, desperate in her need to believe him, but too frightened to hope. “I beg your pardon?”

“You won’t be marrying Mongerton.” He studied her in a way that reflected no emotion. “You’ll be marrying me.”

“I beg your pardon?” she asked again, even more shocked this time. And certainly far less hopeful.

“I’ve been sent to retrieve you from Scotland and marry you, ensuring your reputation remains intact.”

“Well, this is hardly the most romantic offer of marriage I’ve ever had,” she managed with a croak.

“Mongerton did better?” Kendal lifted a brow. “I would have presumed my prompt journey to Scotland would have at least enhanced my reception somewhat.”

“Very well,” she conceded, being as Mr. Mongerton had never proposed at all. “This is the second worst offer of marriage I’ve ever had.”

“But it’s not the worst.” He gave her a ghost of a smile and stood, offering her his hand.

She allowed him to pull her to her feet.

“Have we recovered everything?” he asked even as his gaze skimmed over the ground once more.

She did a quick inventory of her aunt’s jewels. All were accounted for. Meaning the only thing missing was her wits.

And soon, her freedom.

She tilted her head. “I know this is terribly rude of me to say, but I do not wish to marry you.”

“I wagered as much.”

So he knew? And yet still, he’d come after her. As if she were some prize to be reclaimed.

Heat scorched her cheeks. “Is that why you kissed me? To seduce me into marrying you?”

His brows shot up, and a bemused expression lightened his face. “Lady Sophia.” He let his gaze linger on her before leaning ever so slightly closer. “If I were going to seduce you into marrying me,” his warm breath teased over the sensitive skin just under her ear, “I would do it with more than a simple kiss.”

She suppressed the urge to shiver against the silkiness of his voice, the tease of such words. He smelled of sandalwood and something spicy she found far more enticing than she cared to admit.

He straightened, returning her space to her, and her breath with it. “And if you must know, I don’t wish to marry you either.”

Her mouth fell open.

Before she could say anything, he smirked. “Not every man wants to marry you.”

The scorch at her cheeks burned hotter still. “Then why would you travel all this way for me?”

“I have as little choice in this matter as you.”

She gave a mirthless chuckle and snapped her valise closed. “What a pair we make.”

“Shall we return these horses to their owners?” He offered her his arm, the same as he had done at the ball when they took a turn about the room. Except now, the gesture was so ridiculous it was almost laughable. Him in his oversized, too short servant’s attire, her in her bombazine widow’s gown, both of them covered in flecks of grass and smears of dirt from their fall.

Reluctantly, she accepted his arm and allowed him to lead her back to where the horses had relinquished their freedom in favor of a patch of clover they were happily munching upon. If only she could be so content as them. So free.

She slid a glance to Lord Kendal, the man who intended to wed her, despite a lack of desire to do so. He had a straight nose and sharp cheekbones that lent him an elegant appearance. It was the spark in his eyes that made him look dangerous.

If he noticed her attention fixed on him, he did not acknowledge it.

“Will we do it at Gretna Green?” she asked suddenly.

“Do what?” He reached for the reins of first one horse, then the other. Neither offered protest, nipping the cropped ground as they went.

“Get married, of course.”

“That would be rather clichéd, don’t you agree?”

That brought a smile to her lips despite their dire circumstances. “Indeed, it would.”

The conversation fell away, a blatant reminder of Lord Kendal’s disinclination to marry her. Which hopefully meant he might not give chase if she found another opportunity to run. For certainly, she would seek to escape as many times as it took to secure her freedom.

## CHAPTER SIX

FOR AS MUCH AS Kendal claimed not to want to marry Lady Sophia, he was not so stubborn as to deny that he had enjoyed that kiss. The softness of her lush lips, the way she'd looked up at him with those wide, innocent blue eyes and flushed cheeks.

She'd bound up her hair in a loose knot as best she could, but it didn't stop him from wanting to stroke his fingers through the lovely tresses and test if the texture was as silky as it appeared.

However, this desire was easily brushed aside when they were fortunate enough to happen upon her black veil, which had become stuck in a bush. Once in place, she was a widow like any other, which, as always, brought back unpleasant memories.

They returned the horses to the very grateful stable lad and went back to the inn, where the innkeeper's amused smile was barely masked on his face. "Welcome back, my lord."

Kendal grunted in reply. "It appears we shall require the rooms for another evening." Much as he would prefer to return to London, he was well aware of their state. They both needed to bathe and freshen up, perhaps in clothes that didn't leave his ankles and wrists with a chill. Yes, staying the night would be best, especially with a woman, knowing how long they took to ready themselves. Lady Sophia would probably require a considerable amount of time.

They had both been running too bloody hard for too bloody long. A moment's respite, to become acquainted, or something of the sort, prior to their union, would do them both good.

"Excellent." The innkeeper hesitated. "Both rooms, my lord?"

Lady Sophia stiffened at his side.

"Yes," Kendal said quickly. "Both rooms." He would hardly force the lady to share sleeping quarters with him before they were properly wed. "And a bath will be required as well."

"Also, two of them?" The corner of the innkeeper's lips twitched.

Kendal could have punched the old sod. "Yes," he growled instead.

The innkeeper looked toward her valise, which she had refused to give to Kendal. The man's brows raised, most likely at his presumed assumption of Kendal's lack of manners to aid a woman with her effects.

While he *had* offered, she had declined, given the obvious importance to her. However, the judgment on the innkeeper's face rankled Kendal more than it ought to.

"Please allow me." He held out his hand for the valise.

Lady Sophia hesitated, her expression hidden from Kendal beneath the black lace of her veil. Finally, she held it out to him, relinquishing the damn thing.

Kendal caught the handle in a strong grip, but even that had not prepared him for the considerable weight.

Good God, she might have been smuggling a blacksmith's hammer, based on its heft. In truth, he was rather impressed that her slight frame had managed to hold onto it with such fierce determination.

He closed his hand more firmly around the handle to ensure it did not slip from his grasp and led her to the stairs.

“You are going to give that back, I presume?” she hissed in a whisper.

The temptation to refuse her struck him suddenly. Keeping her valise would ensure she wouldn't run away again. But then, she knew he would catch her. Perhaps that would be threat enough to prevent yet another chase. And anyway, it wouldn't do to begin their proposed union together by holding her wealth hostage.

“I certainly haven't any need for it.” He waited until they were at the top of the stairs, just before the plain wood door that marked the entry to her room and handed her the valise.

“You wouldn't, would you?” Her expression was impossible to make out beneath the black lace veil. The ridiculous frippery was practically opaque it was so thick.

He scoffed. “I am quite wealthy.” It was a pompous response, but it wasn't a lie. If they were to be forced into matrimony, she could at least take comfort in knowing she would be well cared for.

“And you're a man. You can do whatever you like.” There was a sharpness to her tone.

Rather than guess at emotions he couldn't see, he swept the veil back from her face. Even with the irritated look that she threw his way, she was beautiful. Fresh-faced and glowing with good health.

“That's why you dressed as a widow,” he surmised. “You are under the presumption you can do what you like.”

She smiled. “Exactly. No one questions a widow. No one judges her.”

“I assure you, widows are still judged,” he muttered.

Those crystal-blue eyes narrowed slightly, seeing perhaps more than he liked. “You don't like me dressed this way, do you?”

“I don't have fond associations with widows.” He kept his tone bland, but the words bore a torrent of pain, like a cat o' nine tails ripping through the inside of his chest.

“Really?” Lady Sophia asked with incredulity. “I was under the impression most men had especially fond associations with widows.”

It was a brazen implication. But Kendal was not like other men, who found pleasure in women with relaxed freedoms. Regardless, his surprise must have shown on his face, for she gave a short laugh. “Don’t be so shocked, Lord Kendal. I may be innocent, but I hear gossip just the same.”

The topic was one he did not wish to continue. “Order anything you like from the inn,” he said abruptly. “I’ll ensure any debts are settled before our departure tomorrow.”

She nodded and looked at her feet. “Thank you.”

It was polite and demure and absolutely nothing like the Lady Sophia he knew. But it was reminiscent of the gratitude of one who often relied on others for payment. No doubt Lord Gullsville had been operating on credit for some time, and his children also bore the humiliation of its burden.

Kendal offered a small bow and took his leave, allowing her the privacy to enter her room on her own.

Later in the solitude of his small bedchamber, with a rustic wooden tub set before the hearth, he found himself thinking about Lady Sophia, who was doubtless bathing at that exact moment. He pictured her in his mind’s eye, sliding the black bombazine off her body to reveal smooth skin, faultless even before the light of the fire could cast its golden sheen.

Desire stirred low within his groin, and this time, he didn’t bother to fight it. Rather, he encouraged it. Better to have a hard prick now, when he could do something about it, than tomorrow as they planned their impromptu wedding around their return to London.

But he didn’t stop thinking of her. Not through his bath, or the soul-shuddering self-satisfaction that followed, or even through the dinner he’d arranged downstairs that she did not bother to attend. And it continued through the night and into his dreams.

She lit his blood with lust and piqued his interest to know more about the lovely, sought-after woman who had become something of an enigma to him. Not that he blamed her for not wanting to marry Mongerton—that was entirely understandable—but he did admit to being curious as to why she had yet to marry at all.

The following morning, after a fitful sleep, he made his way downstairs and found the innkeeper.

The man flashed a nervous smile. “How are ye this fine morning, my lord?”

“Ready to be on our way.”

The innkeeper’s left eye gave a slight twitch. “Indeed.”

Kendal narrowed his gaze on the man. “I say, are you quite all right?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” The man clasped and unclasped his hands. “Is there something I might help ye with?”

“I’m looking for...” Dash it, what had she said her name was?

The innkeeper was no help and simply lifted his brows in expectation.

“Lady Weatherborne,” Kendal finished, recalling the name with no thanks to the owner of the inn. “Have you seen her this morning?”

The man’s eye twitched once more.

Unease twisted in Kendal’s gut. Something was amiss.

“Lady Weatherborne?” The innkeeper gave an odd, pitched giggle.

Kendal’s patience snapped. “Damn it, man. What are you not telling me?”

“She left. Quite early this morning.”

A sinking sensation tugged at Kendal’s stomach. He had always been an early riser as it was. If she’d already departed,



she would have done so before the sun even rose. “Are you serious?”

The man grimaced. “Perhaps three hours ago.”

Three hours would already have miles between them by now. Confound these people whose loyalty could be so easily bought.

“She clearly paid you more than I did,” Kendal said through gritted teeth. “Can you tell me where she was going? You owe me that at least.”

The inn’s owner at least had the good sense to appear shamefaced. “Glasgow.”

Kendal turned away in preparation to leave.

“My lord?” The innkeeper called. “She said you would settle what was owed.”

Kendal’s shoulders crept up to his ears, but he returned to the desk and threw several coins on the counter to meet the bill’s exact total before stalking off once more. If the man said anything else, Kendal did not hear him, for he was already striding away at a brisk pace.

Lady Sophia would have a head start on him in her carriage, but he would be on horseback and might head her off. If he couldn’t, however, finding her in the large city could prove difficult. He could only hope her inexperience at duplicity, the spectacle of a veiled widow and the wealth of her gems would leave an easy trail for him to follow.

Not only was Lady Sophia’s reputation at stake, so too was Marguerite’s. And Kendal would rather die than let his sister once more endure the ton’s cruelty.

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THERE HAD BEEN little sleep for Sophia in the pre-dawn carriage ride as it bounced over the rough road from Gretna Green to Glasgow, especially when there had been several stops in between to change out the horses. Nor had there been

any the following night while her driver rested in preparation for their second day of hard riding.

All the while, she had anticipated seeing Lord Kendal on the horizon, racing toward her to force her into marriage. Not that marriage to him proved as distasteful as a union with Mr. Mongerton.

Except she didn't know Lord Kendal. She hadn't made the choice to marry him.

She wanted love.

And happiness.

It had been the promise she'd made so many years ago when cholera took her mother and little George and Julia, the twins who had only seen three short years in this world. They'd never even had the opportunity to live their lives.

That was when Sophia had done it, when she'd made the vow to live for all of them. For herself, for the twins. And even for her poor dear mother, who had given everything to her children and who had contracted the disease after insisting on caring for the twins herself.

The carriage rolled to a stop, and the door was snapped open. A strong odor of fish and brine wafted in on the damp air. She ignored the urge to put her glove beneath her nose to dilute the offensive smell and stepped out of the carriage. The buildings that greeted Sophia were reminiscent of those in London, tightly pressed against one another, as narrow as they were tall.

If it really was like London, she could easily lose herself among the faces there. Her driver secured a room for her within the lodging house, saw to it that her belongings were placed within, and then was on his way.

Once more, she was alone with her valise clutched in her hand.

Carriages rushed past on the street with the wharf beyond it. Ships crowded the dingy water, their sails like low-hanging clouds billowing beneath the gray sky. Flecks of rain spat

down upon her, growing heavier and more insistent by the moment and promising a proper deluge.

She found her way to the room where she'd been directed, unlocked the door and stopped short. If she'd thought the accommodations at Gretna Green were lacking, they were a veritable palace compared to what stood before her.

The bed seemed to sag in on itself as though it had given up on life, and the walls were a grayish color that suggested they were once white a very, very long time ago. Though exhaustion begged her for rest, the bed's deplorable state was far too unappealing.

With a sigh, she set her valise on the table by the door. The surface wobbled and tipped precariously. She snatched the valise up before it fell and quit the room, locking it behind her for all the good it might do. Suddenly, finding a guide who could take her to the Highlands and help her coordinate the beginnings of a whisky still had become a very immediate need.

The sooner she could take leave of her newfound accommodations, the better.

Rain began to drizzle from the heavy gray sky as soon as she exited the ancient building. She shifted her bag from one hand to the other, but its burden did not abate. Heavens, but the thing seemed to grow heavier with each passing moment. Pushing aside her discomfort, she set out to find the shop the driver had directed her to that would pay a fine price for gems. Or so he'd said.

Its location was a quick walk two blocks over and still open despite being late afternoon. The weather had continued to worsen and left her quite damp upon her arrival at the shop.

The shopkeeper sat behind a counter, which displayed the various bits and bobbles some poor souls could no longer afford to keep on their person. Pocket watches, earbobs, sparkling combs and gilded sets of brushes with their matching mirrors. The interior was dank and shadowed, as dismal as the decision the owners of those fine pieces must have once faced

in coming to such a shop. People who were as she was now: thoroughly and completely desperate.

A shiver rattled down her back.

“Do ye plan to linger in me doorway?” The man grinned at her, revealing a flash of gold amid his crowded teeth.

Unease welled within her. Dread.

“I...I was told you buy things.” She hated the lack of confidence in her voice. Especially around the sort of person who could likely smell fear as certainly as any predator.

“I do,” the man replied smoothly. “And I give a good price. Ask anyone. They’ll tell ye to trust ol’ Jeb.” His gaze descended on her valise. “Do ye have something to sell me?”

She wanted to shake her head and back toward the door. But she wasn’t here to cower away from the unknown. She was here to secure the means of creating a future for herself. One she chose.

*A life of happiness and joy. For the twins.*

Her shoulders squared, she approached the counter and set the valise’s weight on the hardwood with a thunk. Jeb’s eyes went bright.

“I have a bracelet I’d like to sell.” She had set the pearl and ruby bracelet in a pocket she could reach easily for exactly this purpose and withdrew it.

“Just a bracelet?” His fingers were like spider’s legs, long and spindly as they curled around the piece and drew it toward him. The nonchalant glance he skimmed over the jewelry was anything but. There was a sharpness to his gaze that told Sophia he was practiced and knowledgeable in this industry.

“I’ll give ye thirty pounds.” He set the bracelet on the counter with disinterest. “And I want to see what else ye have in that heavy sack of yers.”

*Thirty pounds?*

Slapping her in the face would have been a lesser insult. The bracelet was worth at least three hundred pounds, if not

more. Bitter unfairness and resentment tightened like a ball of fire inside her chest.

She had run away from home to avoid a fate she had no control over. But that hadn't been enough. Every step of the way, obstacle after obstacle had stood before her, blocking her path, taking advantage of her for being the fairer sex. She was a woman swimming upstream in a man's world.

And she was tired of it.

"I'll take two hundred pounds," she said with finality. "And you do not get to see a single thing in my valise." She emphasized the proper name for her "sack."

He tilted his head, considering her. "One hundred pounds."

"It's worth far more, and you know it. I'm well aware that as soon as I leave, you will apply a heavy price on it to charge your next victim."

Jeb leaned back, noticeably affronted. "Me next victim? Me lady, I—"

Sophia slapped her hand on the counter the way her aunt might have once done, playing the full role of Lady Weatherborne. "I am not done."

The spidery hand unfolded in a welcoming gesture. "By all means..."

"I refuse to be spoken down to as if I am an imbecile." She bit out her words. "That piece was fashioned by the king's own jeweler. Every gem and pearl are of the highest quality, which a man of your caliber should swiftly be able to identify within a single glance. A fact you have obviously gleaned."

"I do favor a feisty lass." His mouth curled into a lascivious smile as he tried to peer through the veil covering her face. "There is some wear to the bracelet. Even if there were not, no one in Glasgow would pay its true worth."

"One hundred and seventy-five pounds, then."

He removed a lockbox from under the counter and counted out a stack of notes. "Verra well."

Her heart hammered as she recounted the total amount.

In her pursuit to live her life for her family, she had only thought of enjoyment and pleasure. Never once had she considered that standing up for herself so thoroughly would make her blood rush with such force, leaving her giddy with victory.

Jeb slid a glance to her valise once more, but she pulled it from the counter.

“Thank you.” She nodded politely. “And good day.”

He inclined his head respectfully, but ruined the effect with an impertinent wink. “Ye know where I am should ye need me again.”

She ignored his wink and tucked the wad of notes into the pocket of the valise before leaving the shop. Now that she had money, she needed to procure a guide to take her to the Highlands, to identify where best to set up a whisky still.

And she knew the perfect location to find one.

Stepping around puddles of mud, she dashed across the street to the White Stag, a public house that promised not only a strong mug of ale but also the best whisky to be had in all of Scotland.

It seemed as fitting a place as any to start.

She gathered her wits about her and plunged through the door into a place that ladies ought never to venture. The air inside was thick with foul odors she couldn't begin to name. Still, she pressed on, crossing the scarred wooden floor, her gaze searching for someone sitting alone whom she might query.

Midway through her perusal, she caught sight of a single man sitting at a table with his long legs stretched luxuriously in front of him, his stare fixed on her. Her heart caught mid-beat as she recognized the very handsome, very unmistakable visage of Lord bloody Kendal.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

DESPITE KENDAL'S RELAXED POSE, he was entirely prepared to leap up and give chase in an instant. A moment passed between himself and Lady Sophia. It was so long that he wondered if she would run at all.

She stepped back, her movements jerky at first before she spun on her heel and darted from the pub. Kendal was out of the hardback chair like lightning.

After nearly a decade of going to the White Stag, no one bothered to stop him from chasing down the widow. He had taken a chance to wait for her there and see if she had the audacity to enter the pub. He'd seen her go into Jeb's shop. Exactly as he'd expected.

Anyone unfamiliar with Glasgow and looking to exchange wares for coin was sent to Jeb. He was notoriously dishonest, but he paid his referrals handsomely.

Outside the pub, the rain had begun to come down in earnest. Lady Sophia's black-clad form tore off in the opposite direction of Jeb's shop, toward the wharf. The cobblestones were slippery underfoot, but Kendal's Hessians gripped the wet stone without issue.

Unfortunately for her, she appeared to be having difficulty maintaining her balance and nearly fell at least twice.

Good God, the woman was going to hurt herself.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than she skidded hard to the right. A large man caught her before she could fall, setting her steadily on her feet before glaring

toward Kendal. "I trust ye're no' chasing this lass," he growled.

The man was a sailor whom Kendal had employed on more than one occasion to move stock. Recognition flashed in the man's hazel eyes. He straightened at once. "Lord Kendal. Forgive me. It's only..." He cast a helpless look at Lady Sophia.

Her veil had tangled behind her, revealing her chin and the majority of her bottom lip, and rain dripped from her heavy, black clothing. She did indeed appear rather miserable.

"I assure you, I mean the lady no harm, Wes." Kendal inclined his head toward the man.

Wes nodded once and backed away, leaving them alone as he returned to his duties.

Lady Sophia gasped raggedly from her mad dash. This caused the wet lace veil to suck into her mouth with each exaggerated inhale. With a cry of annoyance, she ripped the cumbersome bonnet from her face.

The sweet honey-brown hue of her hair had darkened with the rain and plastered curls around her face and neck. Her eyes blazed hot blue in anger beneath her sable lashes.

"How is it you know this man?" she demanded. "How did you know where I would be? How did you possibly catch me so quickly?"

While she was panting from her exertions, Kendal wasn't out of breath in the least.

"Anyone who isn't from here is referred to Jeb." He scoffed. "It's such a prevalent occurrence that it's become something of a lark."

"A lark?" She backed away from him.

He reached out and caught her arm, gentle but firm.

She tried to pull her arm free. "Is that what this is to you? A jest?"

"Hardly," he replied dryly.



Rain lashed down at them with such force that she had to blink rapidly to look up at him. And look up at him, she did, with a hatred he'd had no idea she could muster.

She was wet and miserable, her full lips drawn in a hard line with rage. He was possessed quite suddenly by the urge to kiss her mouth soft once more, to let the chill of the rain melt against the heat between them.

“You would need money,” he explained. “Swift travel is not cheap. Nor is discretion, which you've obviously paid handsomely for. Let us go somewhere we can be out of the rain and discuss this like civilized people.”

She gave a little growl of aggravation and tried to pull free once more. “Discuss this? You have no idea what I'm giving up if I have to marry you.”

“And you have no idea what I'm giving up.” He took a chance and released her arm.

She put a step between them and regarded him warily. “Then why are you doing it?”

The truth was a heavy burden in his chest and gave him pause in replying.

“You won't even do me the courtesy of telling me why.” She took another step from him.

The rain was coming down harder now. It dripped from Kendal's hair and the tip of his nose. “The reason isn't one I care to share with you.”

“That isn't an answer.” Another step.

Was she planning to run again?

His eyes found hers through the driving rain in an effort to convey the extent of his honesty. “I don't want to hurt you.”

“Tell me.” She closed the distance between them, going to him rather than from him, her eyes flashing with a challenge. “Tell me everything, without sparing any detail. Why did you agree to marry me?”

He sighed, and his breath fogged in the icy rain. “Extortion.”

She blinked. “I beg your pardon.”

“My sister, Lady Marguerite, had a bit of trouble some years ago.”

The flick of Lady Sophia’s eyes from his was enough to let him know she remembered exactly the rumor to which he referred. A spark of anger flashed to life inside him. Would no one ever forget?

“She has made a new life for herself,” Kendal continued. “Which is now being threatened. Unless I wed you.”

“In saving my reputation, you will then save hers.” Incredulity puckered her brow. “But who would ever—” The crinkle along her forehead smoothed with the realization. “My father.”

Rainwater dripped down her face and left her lashes spiked with wetness. Worry filled her eyes. “What...what did he do?”

A raw ache filled Kendal’s chest. He was no fool. He knew what the truth would do to her. “We should find shelter. Let us go somewhere dry and warm. And preferably more private.”

She shook her head. “I asked you to tell me without sparing any detail.” She nudged her stubborn little chin in the air, and it made him want to kiss her even more.

Kendal sighed, entirely not wanting to do this. “Your father has extensive gambling debts.”

Her chest rose and fell with the force of her hard breathing. “Go on.”

“He asked me to pay them as I have in the past. However, this time, they were far too great. I fear the rest doesn’t bode well for his character...”

“Nothing you’ve told me thus far has.” She pinched the words out between her clenched teeth, perhaps bracing herself. “What could possibly be so bad about whatever else you have to say? Please go on.”

“Lady Sophia.” Kendal had to steel his own spine to continue. “Your father traded your hand in marriage to Mongerton to cover those gambling debts.”

There. He’d said it.

But the wide-eyed look of horror on Sophia’s face made him realize that perhaps he should not have.

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THE VALISE, which had been so precious to Sophia only moments before, was suddenly too heavy. The water-logged leather had become slippery, her burden too great and her fingers too numb.

It slipped from her once careful hold and splashed into a puddle at her feet.

Sophia shook her head in disbelief at Kendal’s words. Had her father sold her into marriage with Mr. Mongerton to pay off his gambling debt?

“He would never do that.” She shook her head more vehemently. Her wet hair slapped at her face, but she didn’t care.

The fierce determination Kendal had regarded her with faded into a look of tenderness. “Wouldn’t he?”

Pain punctured her heart.

How many times had she wondered why her father had chosen Mongerton, of all people, as her intended? It was not the first time she knew her father to be in a scrape due to debts to gaming hells.

Over the years, she had watched their possessions go missing, presumably sold off to support his vice. A pair of fine candlesticks no longer upon the mantle, a silver tea service the servants could not locate, even hair combs that had disappeared from her vanity. Wasn’t that the reason she had hidden away all the jewels her aunt had left her?

If she had not, they probably would have gone missing long before she was forced to sell them.

Her father had sunk low enough to steal her hair combs, but selling her into marriage...?

He was better than that, wasn't he?

And yet, her stomach dropped with the acknowledgement that no, he was not. At least, not the man he was now.

The discomfort of the rain, which had been so easy for Sophia to ignore previously, had suddenly become quite unbearable. Chilled water seeped down her back in rivulets, and her toes squished in the puddles that had formed inside her boots.

"He wasn't always like that." She said it so softly, even she barely registered the meek protest.

Why was she defending him? Especially since he was the one who had destroyed their family with his inability to control his drinking and gambling?

But it was true. He hadn't always been like that.

Lord Gullsville had been a good father once. A man who opened his arms with a hearty laugh as Sophia ran to him when she was a girl. He'd been the sort of father who planned afternoons in the country, complete with picnics of tart lemonade and sticky toffee puddings. When Mother and the twins were alive, he'd never gambled, and drank only the occasional brandy in his library. They had been happy.

Truly happy.

Emotion gathered as a cloying ache in her throat.

"You don't have to explain." Kendal picked up her valise. "May we please go to the inn before it grows dark?"

Sophia nodded, not trusting herself to speak. There was no perceivable sunset on such an evening, but the dimming light from the gray, overcast clouds told her night was soon upon them.

Offering her his sodden arm, Kendal hailed a hackney to deliver them the short distance back to the lodging house. Once there, he regarded the tired old building with a grimace. “I know you were saving your wealth for swift travel and bribery, but did you have to put yourself in such an abysmal lodging house?”

Her cheeks went hot with embarrassment, seeing it now through his eyes. But before she could explain it had been on her driver’s recommendation, Kendal was climbing from the carriage into the rain and bidding her to stay in place.

Moments later, he returned with a man carrying her two travel trunks and settled across from her once more. “We will be staying in more suitable accommodations. I trust you won’t mind.”

Rain slicked his dark hair to his head, but he didn’t resemble a drowned rat as she felt. Somehow, it made him appear somewhat debonaire. A little dangerous.

There was that word again. *Dangerous.*

How had she ever thought him boring?

All at once, the memory of that kiss near Gretna Green came roaring back to her thoughts. He had been so careful with how he’d hovered over her, his lips tender on hers. That brush of his tongue...

Chills prickled over her skin.

“You’re cold.” Kendal shrugged out of his coat, then paused with a slight shake of his head. “It is as wet as you are. This bloody weather.”

Sophia averted her gaze, lest he see what had actually caused her to shiver. “It’s fine.”

But no matter how hard she tried to put the moment with Kendal from her mind, it rushed back again on a wave of sensual heat.

*If I were going to seduce you into marrying me, I would do it with more than a simple kiss.*

Her pulse quickened, as it always did when she recalled those words. How *would* he seduce her?

“I should have you know before we arrive that we will be sharing lodging.” He said it airily and without concern as if he were merely mentioning that it was still raining.

And it *was* still raining.

“I beg your pardon?” Sophia squeaked.

A muscle worked in his jaw, and his gaze settled on her. “I have chased you and caught you twice. I would prefer not to have to do it a third time.”

“And if I promise not to run?”

He gave her a wearied look. “I won’t believe you.”

Well, that was fair.

The carriage ran over a pothole in the road and set the cabin rocking.

“It isn’t seemly,” she tried again.

He lifted a brow. “Care to explain how running off to Scotland on your own, to pursue whisky smuggling no less, is seemly?”

Her mouth fell open. “How did you know that’s what I intended?”

“Because some fool gave you an extraordinary amount of information on the topic and no doubt put the idea in your head.”

*Some fool?*

She tilted her head. “And why would some fool do that?”

Kendal glanced away from her, but his cheeks reddened somewhat. “Perhaps through a bit of hubris, he succumbed to his pride and did not wish to be perceived as dull, which made him all the more an oaf.”

The carriage drew to a stop in front of a white building covering the entire corner of a row of neat townhomes. While it was a far cry better than the dilapidated room she’d rented

near Jeb's, it was not as opulent as she had anticipated. No doubt Kendal intended to maintain their anonymity with a place that wouldn't ask why a well-dressed man and a widow were rooming together.

The rain continued to patter at a steady pace as they rushed into the lobby, and Kendal secured their room. He offered her one arm and held her valise with the other. It didn't matter that he had it now. Leaving would be impossible.

They didn't speak as they climbed the stairs, but the thoughts in Sophia's mind were buzzing like a hive of angry bees. She'd never been in a carriage alone with a man, save Henry. And now...

Her stomach clenched.

Now, she would be sharing a room with a man. One she'd only met on a handful of occasions.

One with the reputation of a rogue.

Her steps slowed without her commanding them to do so. Kendal matched his pace to hers. "I don't intend to debauch you, Lady Sophia," he whispered. "I am a gentleman."

*Debauch.*

The word was so small for the enormity of what it held.

She shivered.

"Come, I've ordered a hot bath to be prepared for you." He encouraged her up the stairs with a slight nod of his head. "Once we are both in dry clothes, I'm certain our dinner will have been delivered to our room."

A hot bath. Dry clothes. Fine food.

After traveling hard for the last week and being soaked through with frigid rain, it did all sound quite heavenly.

She allowed him to lead her to a door, which he opened and indicated she step through first. Heart pounding in her ears, she did exactly that, putting on an air of nonchalance when, in reality, her nerves were practically vibrating. But not with fear.

With curiosity and undeniable excitement.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ROOM WAS warm despite the damp chill that seemed to permeate the rest of the inn. Or perhaps it was merely that Kendal's blood was suddenly running hot.

He closed the door with a quiet click. They were alone. Completely. Indecently.

A moment of uncomfortable silence hung in the air as the need for a conversation to fill it came with such insistence that his mind went entirely blank.

"I ought to give you some privacy," he said at the same time she spoke.

"You needn't go downstairs while I bathe."

He froze at those words.

She must have seen the force of his reaction, for her damp cheeks went pink. "There's a screen."

He followed her gaze to where a silk screen was partially unfolded near a vanity table whose mirror was speckled with age. The screen was wide enough to cover a bathing tub, yes, and its fabric opaque, but it would do nothing to block out the sounds of water sluicing over slick, naked skin.

He opened his mouth to protest its insufficiencies when a knock came from the door. The maids had arrived to prepare the bath. They made quick work of the tub, which Sophia asked to be set before the fire. This, of course, meant the screen would serve even less as a barrier.

Kendal knew at that moment that he ought to either inform her of the immodest, albeit enticing, shadows the firelight would cast or insist on taking his leave. Yet he did neither.

After all, he was to marry the woman. What did it matter if he witnessed her silhouette behind a screen?

The temperature of the room had nearly doubled from the hot, scented water, which filled the air with a steamy, sensual orange-water perfume.

As if to entirely steal his resolve, Sophia turned to him when the women had finished. "Please stay. You're as cold and wet as I am. You'll catch a chill down there."

He hesitated.

She put a hand on her hip, slender and white against the heavy bombazine. "Lord Kendal, don't be daft."

Well, who could counter such a request?

"Very well," he conceded without disappointment. "But only as you are so insistent."

She beamed a smile at him as though his decision had pleased her as much as it pleased him. With that, she whisked herself behind the screen.

As Kendal had expected, the flickering firelight cast her shadow over the stretched silk screen. Indeed, it was so transparent that he could make out the curling steam rising from the heated water.

She reached behind her and arched her back as she struggled with the fastenings on the back of her gown. So, that was how she had been dressing and undressing without the aid of an abigail.

There was a wet rustle of silk before her sodden gown slapped to the ground, leaving her slender form adorned in a petticoat. The sharp peaks at the tips of her breasts indicated her nipples were fully erect. Kendal's mouth went dry.

Where the devil were her stays?

Perhaps he ought to be changing out of his own wet clothes, but he'd be mad to leave now and miss the glorious show.

She plucked at the ties at her waist and the petticoat fell to the floor with a plop.

Her shadow bent slightly at the waist as she caught the thin fabric of her chemise and drew it up over her head, revealing her entire naked shape to him. Long, slender legs with a high, round bottom, a flat stomach and the delicious curve of her breasts and those tight nipples. They were probably cold, chilled from the rain.

What would it feel like to have them in his mouth, warming them with his lips, with the flat of his eager tongue?

His cock surged with lust. The suddenness of it was so powerful that he had to swallow down a groan.

Oblivious to how very inappropriately he had watched her undress, she turned to enter the bath and his knees almost buckled. Her curves were sheer feminine perfection. A slim waist, generous hips and a narrow triangle of light where her thighs stopped just before her sex.

*Good God.*

Kendal swallowed. His arousal was nearly painful now against the cold, unyielding fall of his breeches.

Graceful as a dancer, she lifted one shapely leg and lowered it into the bath, then followed suit with the other. She descended into the water, setting ripples lapping against the linen-covered wood.

As if that were not enough to procure the most erotic images in his mind of her glossy, naked body, she leaned her head back and gave a soft, sighing moan.

Kendal put the knuckle of his forefinger between his teeth and bit down. Not that it did a lick of good. The mere shadow of this woman had him to the point of nearly bursting.

“That does feel wonderful,” she said in a languid voice.

Kendal shifted the stiffness of his prick inside his breeches but found no mercy. “Indeed,” he replied in a gruff voice.

She moved in the bath, sending more water splashing at the sides. “I’m sure you’re quite relieved to be out of your rain-drenched clothes.”

He looked down at his disheveled attire. His cravat had wilted like a white rose in the sun, and a puddle had formed beneath him from the rain that dripped from his jacket.

“Indeed,” he replied again.

“You’re evidently distracted.” She gave a throaty chuckle and the water sloshed about as her shadow ran a bit of soap over her shoulder. “I’m well aware I have a proclivity to prattle on. I’ll leave you be.”

She swept the soap over the back of her neck and trailed it down to her breasts.

Kendal turned away from the scene so quickly, his feet caught on the damp carpet and he was forced to stumble to remain upright.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes.” The reply came out in something of a squawk. Kendal cleared his throat and repeated the word with more dignity the second time.

Rather than look toward the hearth once more, he focused on the buttons of his jacket, working them through the stiff, sodden fabric. Though he tried to focus on peeling off his own wet clothing, the subtle splashes of scented bathwater were impossible to ignore.

He could no sooner pretend he did not hear them than he could stop imagining the oiled, perfumed water glistening over her skin, rolling down the sensual curves of her body. By some miracle and a considerable amount of will, he managed to keep his back to the screen long enough to don the clean, dry set of clothing from his travel bag.

Fortunately, the other jacket he’d brought happened to be long enough to hide his fully erect cock when buttoned. Yes, it

was a bit formal for the intimacy of their shared quarters, but perhaps that was for the best.

A loud splash drew his attention before he could stop himself from turning back to Sophia. She stood in the tub, water cascading down her body as if she were a water nymph or a selkie of the old Scottish legends. Droplets fell like diamonds from her body as she wrapped a length of linen around her nakedness, shielding her from his view.

Thank God for small mercies.

There was a shuffle, followed by the sliding of clothing over skin. He had turned away swiftly, refusing to watch her anymore. If he was ever going to have his prick soften, he needed to allow his blood to cool.

And there would be nothing but undeniable heat when it came to Sophia.

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WHAT WAS one to wear when occupying a room with a member of the opposite sex and no chaperone?

Or with a man who intended to wed her, for that matter?

Sophia considered the two piles of clothes she'd removed from her trunks. One was another somber set of widow's weeds that belonged to her aunt. The other was a lovely powder-blue silk gown.

She chewed her lip as she considered the blue gown. It would be more appropriate for dining, even if they were taking the meal in their room. And Kendal had made it a point to note he didn't much care for widows.

She ought not to care for his preferences, but despite what she'd said about not wishing to marry him, she could not deny her attraction. It was ever-present, a constant companion to her thoughts—the bemused smirk on his lips, the way his dark eyes seemed to carry a dangerous glint. The memory of that kiss.

There had been a moment when she was bathing that she knew he was likely taking off his wet clothing and changing into dry attire. She had not been able to stop the wicked thought that they were naked in the same room together. The realization had left a warm pulse between her legs and her skin oversensitive. Just like his kiss had.

And anyway, the blue gown fastened at the front, which made for easier dressing. The latter reason was why she'd finally reached for the neat pile of powder-blue silk.

Or so she told herself.

She pulled the chemise from the pile first, letting it fall over her. The soft linen was cool against her now warm skin. It felt glorious to be clean, truly scrubbed clean, after so many days of being in the carriage. While getting caught did not solve her problem of facing an unwanted marriage, not having to run anymore did assuage the urgency of constantly looking behind her back.

She didn't bother with stays as she could not properly tie them on her own. Instead, she drew on her petticoats and finally the silk gown, working at the buttons along her bosom. It was a bit of a snug fit without her stays, but it would do.

No sooner had she secured the final button than a soft rap came at the door, followed by the murmur of voices and the savory scent of hot food.

Her mouth watered and her stomach issued forth an angry growl. It had been hours since she'd eaten.

"Either you've got a small dog with a foul disposition back there with you," Kendal said in that slow, smooth way he spoke, "or you're nearly starving. Are you quite done?"

She hastily combed her wet hair and hesitated, unsure what to do with the heavy mass. Even if she were to braid it, her tresses would never be dry by morning. Too hungry to worry about it, she left it unbound.

"It was a small dog with a foul disposition," she said airily as she emerged from behind the screen. "A lady would never make such noises, no matter how hungry she was."

Kendal sat elegantly dressed in fresh attire with his jacket buttoned formally. Before him was a table laden with food. Fillets of fish, a venison roast, steamed asparagus, some sort of white soup, and an assortment of tea cakes and breads.

Her mouth watered.

He glanced at her, then did a double-take, and stared at her with obvious appreciation. Heat burned in her cheeks, making her suddenly shy.

“I can’t put my hair up until it’s dry.” She pushed the heaviness of it behind her shoulders and immediately regretted the action as the silk at her back grew damp.

“No weeds.” He shifted in his seat, looking to be in a bit of discomfort.

A strange thing when the chairs appeared to be thickly padded.

“It seemed foolish to wear them when we both know I’m no widow, and I know you don’t—” She almost said that she knew he didn’t care for them but stopped herself. What good would come of Kendal thinking she had considered his preferences?

Not that it mattered. His eyes narrowed in that perceptible way they did. He knew.

“That I don’t like widows.” His mouth twitched into a slight smile, perhaps the biggest she’d seen thus far. “How thoughtful of you.”

She sank into the chair and found it was indeed comfortable. “I see you’ve ordered quite the feast.”

“You aren’t the only one who is nearly starving.” He shifted the soup in front of himself and lifted a spoon.

Sophia did likewise, taking the first delicate sip from her spoon. The taste exploded with the most exquisite creaminess. Exactly the way white soup ought to be. After the soup had been finished, Kendal cut a slice of venison and put it on a small plate for her.

“I confess, I’m rather curious how you thought you might pull off setting up a whisky distillery?” He arched a brow at her as he went about slicing a bit of meat for himself.

“I was going to pay someone to teach me.” It wasn’t much of a plan, and she knew it.

“With your jewelry.”

She nodded. “I had a necklace in particular...” Her voice trailed off. There was no sense in going into it. He would perhaps just think her a naïve ninny.

He tilted his head for her explain, but when she did not, he continued, “And what of the excisemen?”

“Excisemen?” She slid a forkful of venison in her mouth and practically sighed with pleasure as she had accidentally done in the bath. The meat was tender, but the crust on it was crisp and salty.

Lord Kendal held his fork perched in his hand with a bemused expression. “Excisemen are the ones who locate whisky runners and punish them.”

Sophia swallowed the mouthful of venison. “Punish them?”

“Of course.” He shrugged. “It is smuggling whisky, after all.”

She frowned. He hadn’t explained any of this previously.

“How would one be punished for smuggling whisky?” she asked in a voice she wished could be more confident.

“Any number of ways.” He took a bite of meat and thoughtfully chewed before answering, “You could get lucky and pay him off with one of your fine bracelets or necklaces. You could be arrested and heavily fined. Or you could be hanged.”

“Hanged?” Her fork clattered to the plate.

“You’re stealing from the crown by smuggling whisky and not paying the heavy taxes, which is stealing from the king.



It's treason." He scooped a bit of trout and held it out to her. "Fish?"

She shook her head absently, no longer hungry.

Her options now were marriage or the prospect of being hanged.

Lovely.

How had she found herself in such a predicament?

"And there is one more thing." He pushed to his feet and strode across the room to the small table near the wall. When he returned, he had a crystal decanter in his hands filled with amber liquid.

He set it on the table with an audible thunk. "Have you ever even tried whisky?"

## CHAPTER NINE

THE DECANTER of whisky sat between Kendal and Sophia like a barrier. And, in a manner of ways, it was.

She looked from the bottle to Kendal, her blue eyes wide.

“Have you ever tried whisky?” he repeated.

A flush colored her cheeks. “Of course, I have not. I’m a lady.”

He chuckled. “Do not sound so indignant, Lady Sophia, lest I remind you that you’ve been without the benefit of a chaperone for nearly a sennight and are currently sharing quarters with a man who is not your husband.” He lifted the stopper off the cut crystal with a soft clink. “Yet.”

The pale blue silk she wore strained at the buttons over her bosom, and the telltale pebbling of her nipples informed him she was without her stays once more. His thumb yearned to brush over the glossy fabric, teasing those little peaks into pleasure.

But no, they were not wed and he would not win her by pawing at her like some overzealous lout.

They paused a moment in their conversation while the maid returned to clear away the rest of their meal and take their clothing to be laundered for the next day. Once she had departed, Kendal turned to Sophia once more.

“You intended to create and sell an item you had not yet even tried.” He placed an empty glass on the table before her and dispensed a finger of whisky into it.

She straightened. “What are you doing?”

“Teaching you about whisky.” He poured a glass for himself, this one with two fingers. “You were willing to risk everything, including your reputation, to set up a distillery when you haven’t even tasted whisky.”

Her lashes lowered as she gazed down at the drink.

“Unless, of course, you’re afraid to drink a man’s drink.”

She scoffed and curled her fingers around the glass.

“Whisky will pick up the flavors from its surroundings.” He swirled his whisky in his glass, so the amber liquid splashed gracefully against the sides. “Heather, peat, oak...”

Kendal closed his eyes and breathed in the familiar scents, letting them carry him back to another time. One of brotherhood and camaraderie with his fellow runners, yes, but a tumultuous point in his life, rife with disappointment and resentment.

A choking cough interrupted his reminiscence. His eyes snapped open and he found Sophia gagging.

“Are you quite all right?”

“I don’t smell those things.” She dabbed at her watering eyes.

“You will taste them though.” He lifted his glass in a silent toast. “Once you sip it.”

She did the same, albeit with a touch of trepidation, and brought the rim of the glass to her lips. The tip of her tongue stretched over the rim and a scowl puckered her face. “That was cruel.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“This isn’t whisky.” She set the glass down with enough force to make it slosh about.

“Isn’t it?” He lifted her glass and took a sip. The familiar fire of good whisky burned down his throat. “I assure you, my lady, it is.”

She stared at him, aghast. Her incredulity was so comical, the beginnings of a smile tugged at his mouth.

He covered it with a droll tone. “Do you not like it, then? Even if you were planning to sell it?”

That spark of defiance lit her gaze, the one that made others long to draw near. The one that had begun to lure him as well.

“Try it again.” He placed the glass in front of her so lightly that it made no sound. “But concentrate.”

She pursed her lips and stared down into her glass.

“Whisky takes on the notes of its surroundings,” he repeated. “In the Highlands, the mountains are shaded purple with clusters of heather. The scent is mild but pleasant, an earthy, herbal, floral perfume. See if you can taste it.”

She peeked up at him, her face partially scrunched with skepticism.

He chuckled. “Go on.”

She brought the glass to her lips, taking the smallest of sips. She shuddered.

He laughed. He couldn't help it. The way her face screwed up in displeasure and how her whole body wracked with distaste was far too entertaining.

A smile touched her lips. “You have a pleasant laugh.”

The compliment warmed him. “Keep concentrating,” he encouraged.

Her gaze settled back on the amber liquid.

“Snow from the mountains melts and trickles down into streams,” he went on, “creating water so pure and clear, there's nothing else like it. That's used for malting and mashing the barley.”

He studied her face as he spoke. There was trust there, evident in her relaxed mouth, the way her eyes remained fixed on her drink. Her lashes were long and black where they lowered across her pale cheeks as she looked down.

It suddenly occurred to him that he could lean in and kiss her, let them taste the whisky from one another's tongues.

Desire stirred to life once more in his groin.

"Try it again," he said in a gravelly voice.

She put the glass to her lips and drank a little more. An apologetic smile flicked over her mouth. "I still don't taste it."

He moved closer without realizing he did so until his chair was directly beside her. "Then there's the peat that warms the bellies of the kiln and gives off a hearty, smoky scent."

She sipped again and slowly swallowed, her nostrils flaring ever so gently as if she were trying to find the scent of the drink. Whisky glistened on her mouth like sinful temptation.

A soft gasp pulled between her lips. "I taste it."

"And oak." His voice was a whisper now. "From the barrels where the final batch is stored."

"I taste that too." She looked up at him in wonder and pulled her bottom lip into her mouth, as though sucking it clean of whisky.

His cock pulsed with desire. He put his hand on the cool glass decanter to distract himself. "Do you fancy a bit more then?"

Her attention flew to her empty glass and she gave a shocked laugh.

"Or are the spirits too strong for you?" He winked. It was a flirtatious gesture, one he hadn't bothered to waste time with in the past. And he knew exactly why he was doing it now.

Something changed in her expression, a subtle, coy shift of her mouth, a slight lowering of her eyes, so her sable lashes shaded the lovely blue. Her sweetness faded away and she radiated sensuality.

The impact was like a punch. The most welcome punch he'd ever received.

“They’re nothing I can’t handle.” She cradled the glass delicately in her fingertips and held it aloft. “I’ll have another.”

---

SOPHIA HAD OFTEN BEEN TOLD she was too stubborn for her own good. Her mother usually said it with laughter when she was a girl who found herself often in trouble. Henry had made mention in his light fraternal teasing and her father had groused over the characteristic with far less amusement than the other two.

But it was that obdurate disposition that led her to deviate from what was *en mode*, which, ironically, was one of the primary reasons people were drawn to her. Certainly, it was not simply her smiles when so many women went out of their way to be pleasing. Nor was it her appearance when there were ladies far lovelier.

Her obstinacy set her apart from others. It emboldened her to choose gowns others advised her against or would say things she felt rather than bowing to what the ton dictated was proper. It was the very razor’s edge of daring, just enough to tantalize the ton, but not enough to be cut.

Until now.

Kendal sat close enough that she could make out the subtle spice of his scent, the sandalwood and cedar notes of his costly cologne.

He sat far too close to be acceptable by society.

But not nearly close enough for her.

The splashing of whisky in her glass was the sound of rules breaking, of new territory being forged. Of a life being lived to the fullest.

She kept her gaze locked on Kendal’s decadently dark eyes and sipped from her glass. The smokiness of the whisky was apparent first, underlying beneath the burn of alcohol, exactly

as he'd described. He could coax her to enjoy anything with such a velvety, mesmerizing voice.

“Do you actually enjoy it?” He indicated her drink with a nod of his head as he lifted his own glass to his lips. They were full and soft now that he wasn't smirking, a hint of pink against the black whiskers of his unshaven jaw.

“It has a sharp finish,” she admitted, pulling her attention to the whisky rather than Kendal's mouth. “But I find myself warming to it.”

For it was genuinely warming her from the inside out. So much so, she almost forgot the damp silk at her back where her hair had soaked the fine fabric.

The skin around his eyes tightened and he regarded her as if he meant to study her.

Heat effused her cheeks at being observed so keenly. “Why are you staring at me?”

“I'm attempting to figure you out, Lady Sophia.” He took another sip of his whisky.

It wasn't the first time she'd heard a man say that. Regardless, she gave her usual response, “How so?”

“You pretended to be a widow to escape to the wilds of Scotland—where you've never been—to create an alcohol you've never even tasted and live off its earnings like a common merchant.” His brow furrowed. “All to avoid marriage.”

She scoffed. “Have you met Mr. Mongerton?”

“I have indeed had the displeasure of an introduction.” He cringed.

The older man's image welled in her mind like a nightmare. Gray and white hair slicked back from his fleshy face. That scowl he always wore. The disconcerting way his eyes glided over her body.

She didn't bother to suppress her shudder. “Then you can understand why I ran.”

“Partially.” He drank from his glass and held the liquor in his mouth for a long moment before swallowing.

Suddenly, it occurred to her he was referring to himself. After all, she had run from him as well. Twice, in fact. Nearly three times.

A hot blush stole down her cheeks to her chest. “It’s not always the man. Sometimes it’s the circumstance.”

“Meaning marriage.”

She nodded. “I’m far too stubborn. Whatever poor man I end up wedded to would doubtless be driven mad. I’ve never been one for conforming to the rules, you see. I’m surprised my father honestly thought that I would abide by his wishes to marry Mr. Mongerton.” She tried to feign innocence. “Really, he ought to have known what I was planning.”

“Yes, I’m sure he ought to have readily deduced your plans.” Mirth danced in Kendal’s eyes.

She chuckled at the ridiculousness of her father even fathoming that she would set up a whisky distillery and sipped from her glass. It still burned as it went down. Perhaps it always would. Perhaps that was why men liked it, for the heat that scorched her throat, then bled throughout her body and left all of her languid with gentle, pleasant comfort.

“Why don’t you like rules?” Kendal put his chin on his fist, staring at her openly now. “Why be so stubborn?” He cocked a brow. “Why run?”

She had the sudden temptation to trail her fingertips over the whiskers prickling over his jaw, letting them rasp against the sensitivity of her skin as she came to the cleft at the point of his chin. His brows were thick and gave him a brooding, sullen look that could easily change into a shrewd expression, which made her feel as though he saw straight into her soul.

He really was handsome.

“You may think my reasoning is ridiculous,” she admitted.

“I can’t decide until I know.” He smirked.



“My mother...” Her voice caught on the last word. It had been ages since she’d even said it. She cleared her throat and tried again. “You know she perished some years ago.”

The mirth immediately fled his eyes, leaving his face solemn as he nodded.

“It was cholera.” Grief squeezed its way into her chest, occupying the entire space of her heart. “My younger twin siblings died with her, George and Julia. They were only three.”

It was too easy even now to recall how they’d smile up at her with matching green eyes when she pushed their blond curls from their sweet, smiling faces. Sophia and all her siblings had been close when they were young, but the twins had always loved her best, running toward her on stout legs, their dimpled fingers stretching for her amid squeals of delight.

But those weren’t the only memories to surface. Their small bodies in matching coffins tore forefront in her thoughts; the two so still for children who had never stopped moving in life.

A tear spilled over Sophia’s cheek before she even knew it was there. She wiped at her face and took a drink of her whisky. “Forgive me.”

“You don’t need to apologize for such things,” Kendal said softly.

“They were too young.” Sophia sniffed, not caring if it was ladylike or not. “I was only nine, but I made a promise to them that day, my precious brother and sister whose lives were cut far too short. I swore to live my life to the fullest, not only for myself but also for them.” She dabbed at her eye with her handkerchief and regarded Kendal. “That’s what I’ve done and I won’t regret even one moment.”

His expressive brows furrowed. “That’s the best reason for anything I’ve ever heard.” He frowned slightly. “You think marriage will be more rules, don’t you?”

She chuckled, grateful to be done with such a painful admission. “Won’t it?”

“I think it depends on who you wed,” he replied thoughtfully.

“Oh?”

“Mmmmm,” he hummed.

“Would you be a good husband?” Her voice sounded strange to her ears. Too thick, the words blending into one another.

“I wouldn’t force you to do anything you didn’t wish to.” His eyes locked on her with sincerity.

Or was it determination?

She reached out before she could stop herself and let her palm skim over the coarse hair at his jaw. “Even marrying you?”

Without giving him the chance to reply, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

## CHAPTER TEN

KENDAL WANTED nothing more than to scoop Sophia into his lap and kiss her until they were both panting for breath. Her hands cupped his face, holding him closer to her as her mouth moved over his.

The sensual, citrusy scent of her bath oil surrounded him like an embrace, making him linger over the kiss longer than he should have.

For as much as he yearned to draw her against him and show her what a true kiss could be, he could not—in good conscience—continue to do so. Not when only moments before, she had begun slightly slurring her words.

He drew back, heart pounding, cock aching.

She leaned toward him, reaching for him, but he shook his head.

“Then dance with me.” She stood up and held out her hand to him.

He lifted a brow. “I’m not one for dancing. Remember, I’m quite boring.”

“But you’re not.” She smiled coquettishly at him. “You’re wonderfully fascinating.” Her hand waved in the air, encouraging him to stand. “Come, twirl with me. Live your life to its fullest.”

He regarded her from where he sat. “I assure you, I am.”

“I assure you, you are not.” She pulled him to his feet.

He didn't struggle, lest she tip over, but nor did he bother to unbutton his jacket. Not when his desire was entirely evident. He held out his hands, palms up in demonstration. "Are you pleased?"

She laughed, a happy, tinkling sound with a giddiness that could only be produced by alcohol consumed in great quantities. At least until the aftereffects took hold. It was merely a matter of time before she learned that lesson about whisky.

He did not envy her impending discovery.

But for now, she was overly joyous, locked in the throes of good spirits. She spun about once, sending the fabric of her skirt belling out around her neat ankles and her still damp locks splaying around her.

In all honesty, he felt rather foolish, standing there with the expectation that he might, of all things, twirl. There wasn't even any music.

"Your turn." Her blue eyes sparkled up at him with brilliant happiness. How long had it been since he'd allowed himself to feel such unrestrained delight as that?

So long that even considering the stretch of time set an ache deep in his chest.

Not that twirling would fix that.

"Half a turn, then?" She held his hands, so their fingers were interlaced. "Together."

How could he resist? Propelled by her exuberance, they spun together in a rather ridiculous and somewhat awkward twirl. She laughed again, and this time he felt tempted to follow suit.

How he wished he could push aside all those years of hurt, to live his life with unfettered pleasure as Sophia did.

She pushed her body against his suddenly, far too abruptly for him to pull his hips back. Their pelvises met, his unmistakably hard prick nudged against her stomach and her eyes went wide.

*Damn.*

Her breath caught. A brazen little smile blossomed over her lips and she arched into him. He had been so taken by surprise, his balance was not prepared for her weight, and he stumbled slightly backward before falling into his chair.

“Forgive me.” She bent over him, her unbound breasts pushing round and soft over the top of her bodice. “Are you quite all right?”

“Of course.” His eyes met hers and held.

Her lashes lowered and she tilted her head. He knew well what she wanted this time and it wasn't a childish twirl together.

“Lady Sophia.” He wanted to tell her it wasn't appropriate but stopped short. To say as much would be perfectly pedantic and utterly boring.

He gritted his teeth. Damn morals and their intolerable high grounds.

She pressed her plush lips together, moistening them as she did so—raw, delicious temptation.

Desire became most women, but most especially Sophia. Her honey hair fell in damp waves around her flushed face, her lips red and lush, ripe for kissing.

“Kiss me as you did before.” She eased into his lap.

Her bottom settled snugly against his raging cock and a groan rasped free from his chest.

“You want this, don't you?” She leaned over him and kissed his neck, her mouth hot and sweet.

Kendal closed his eyes and released a pained exhale.

It seemed terribly unfair that such an enticing woman should fall—quite literally—into his lap.

“I am afraid you are rather unfortunately in your cups, my lady,” he said at last.

Her breath was warm against his ear. “You smell heavenly.” She leaned back and regarded him. “Once you told me if you meant to seduce me, you would do so with more than a kiss...” Her blue gaze burned into his. “What would you do?”

His imagination set to work, answering her question in his mind’s eye. He would kiss her from her slender toes up her legs until his kisses became licks and her cries became pitched with her release. Tease the clothes from her body, one slow maddening inch at a time. Play his fingers over her sex until she squirmed with need. Bury his hands in her silken hair and show her how to pleasure him.

All those things and so, so much more.

“You don’t need to be seduced.” He braced her back as he tried to remove her from his lap.

She squared her shoulders, staying put, grinding against his rock-hard cock.

The buttons along her bodice strained against the force of her full bosom, the gown plainly made to be worn with the aid of stays. At the center of each firm, round breast, a nipple peaked against the shimmering fabric. So close to his thumb. Just a quick swipe, to see the delight play over her pretty face, to elicit a little moan.

*No.*

“If not seduction, what do you think I need?” She bit her bottom lip.

Now she was doing it on purpose, the minx. “I think you need to agree to marriage to salvage your reputation and that you need to be put to bed. And perhaps avoid not only the selling of whisky but the drinking as well.”

She wavered slightly on his lap, her brow creasing with apparent dizziness.

Ah, yes, there she went.

Her weight shifted in his lap as she began to slide off. He caught her as she slumped and easily lifted her into his arms.

“Are you going to seduce me now?” she mumbled against his chest.

It was almost laughable she would consider herself capable of being enticed toward intimacies in such a state.

“You don’t want that,” Kendal said.

“I do.”

“Perhaps then, when you are in your right mind.” And when he had better control of his own desire.

He lay her on the bed where she remained, unmoving, her face relaxed in slumber. Rather than disturb her by upsetting the coverlet beneath her sleeping form, he lifted the small blanket at the foot of the bed and covered her.

Her hair fell over her shoulders and spread across the pillow, so glossy that he could not resist touching it. Her tresses were cool silk against his fingers. He imagined all of her would be various forms of silk. Her skin, her mouth...

He drew his hand back and turned away from the bed. It would be so easy to settle onto the mattress at her side, to draw her into his arms.

A fire crackled in the hearth before the sofa. Enough warmth for him to get through the night. He took off his jacket, reclined on the firm cushions, then draped the garment over his chest with his arms tucked beneath.

Sleep, however, did not come easy.

Not when his body burned with unquenched lust. Not when the source of that lust slept just a mere several steps away. And not when he had promised her that he wouldn’t force her to do anything she didn’t want to. For obviously, she did not want to wed, and he had no choice in the matter if he was going to save Marguerite.

But if it was seduction Sophia wanted—if that would draw her into marriage—then so be it. His decision, however, did not bring on restful slumber. Rather the opposite as his mind worked over all the ways he might seduce Lady Sophia Stopford.

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SOPHIA DID NOT KNOW how long she slept for, but the sun was well up and slanting golden light through the windows when she finally did rouse. A subtle pounding in her head made her want to close her eyes and yield to sleep just a little longer.

There had been too many days on the road in her attempt to arrive in Scotland with haste, then to flee from Lord Kendal. She hadn't realized how exhausted she had become in her flight. How was it that sitting in a carriage could be so terribly taxing?

She rolled over to the cooler side of the bedsheets, but the headache followed her, its throbbing more insistent. The mattress depressed somewhat and a smooth, familiar voice entered her realm of awareness.

"I take it you're plagued with a mild headache?"

She opened her eyes to find Kendal sitting on the edge of the bed, near enough for her to touch. He unmistakably had been up for some time and was freshly shaved, his hair combed and falling elegantly over to the side, his clothes neat and orderly.

Handsome.

He was impossibly handsome.

"A mild headache?" she croaked.

"And to think, you had only two glasses," he spoke quietly, the sound gentle on her pulsing temples. "My darling, you are not cut out for the whisky business."

She wanted to protest that she could have made it work, but at that moment, he reached down and ran his fingers through her hair, lightly running over her scalp. Prickles of pleasure danced over her skin.

Whatever he was doing, it was heavenly and she didn't want him to stop. She closed her eyes and gave in to his



ministrations, quiet sounds of pleasure humming in the back of her throat with each stroking pass.

Just as she was being lured to sleep once more, he removed his hand. She blinked her eyes open and found him holding a glass filled with a thick, green liquid.

“If this doesn’t clear away the aches of too much whisky, then a solid breakfast certainly will.” He extended the putrid drink toward her.

The green concoction carried a terrible odor. Something that smelled of grass with brackish undertones.

Sophia recoiled. “Thank you, but no.”

He pushed it closer toward her. “This and a bit of tea will have you put back to rights. I swear it. Trust me.” He gave her a little smile then, one possessing a surprising amount of genuine tenderness.

It was that smile that finally convinced her—certainly not the horrendous potion itself—and made her finally accept the glass.

“Plug your nose.” He winked. “It helps.”

With one hand pinched over her nostrils, which admittedly already offered a marked improvement, she put the foul concoction to her lips and drank. It was thick and vile, tasting of plants she didn’t care to name, a brininess and something sweet that was most likely there to mask its foulness and failing miserably. But, by some miracle, she choked it down and through sheer willpower, she kept it from churning back up.

He took the empty glass from her. “Better?”

She gritted her teeth as though clamping her mouth shut would keep her tender stomach from upending its awful contents.

Whatever face she made in response made him laugh, the second time in as many days. She enjoyed hearing that sound, a rich timbre that made him seem less polished and more... real.

Her own lips tugged up in reply.

“Come, you’ve tea and a full breakfast awaiting you.” He offered her his hand, and she readily took it.

Only when she was upright did she consider how she must look, her gown likely ruffled, her hair in wild disarray from having fallen asleep with it still damp.

What a sight she must be!

The sudden flash of self-consciousness had her reaching for her tresses to smooth them or twist them back in a simple knot. Something more presentable, less intimate.

His hands caught hers gently and drew her touch from her hair. “You look beautiful.”

*Beautiful.*

Heat crept up her face. Had he ever called her beautiful before? His attention had indicated how he felt, but he’d never truly said it aloud.

“I feel quite unkempt,” she confessed as she glanced back toward the bed. The covers were still drawn up, and only the thin blanket she’d used appeared disturbed. Had he slept alongside her? Had they been... intimate?

“You needn’t concern yourself.” He guided her toward the table. It was once more laden with food, though this time with sliced ham, toast points, eggs, pastries, and at its center, a teapot. “I didn’t sleep with you.” His voice was velvet in her ear, his breath warm where it stirred the hairs against her neck.

Before she could react, he pulled out a chair for her. She sank onto the cushion seat as indecision warred within her. A prim, ladylike part of her was grateful he had been prudent. But there was another side to her, one that was drawn to him, one that harbored a curiosity begging to be sated—it was this part of her that wished he had slept with her.

What would it have been like to be cradled against the solid strength of his body? To be held in his arms and breathe in his comforting, familiar scent?

He poured her a cup of tea, as attentive to her as any servant. “How is your headache?”

Only when he mentioned it did she notice the absence of the thundering pain in her skull. She blinked in surprise. “Why, it’s gone.”

He gave an arrogant little smirk. “I told you. It may be vile, but that concoction works wonders.”

“Admittedly, it does,” she agreed, reaching for a toast point.

“Still, it would do you a world of good to take some time to recover.” He sat back and lifted his cup of tea, drinking it leisurely.

“I confess, the idea of getting back into a carriage to endure several hours of being jostled about, is wholly unappealing.” She grimaced at the thought and took a sip of her own tea.

“Our return to London need not be rushed.” He lifted a shoulder. “Indeed, it might serve our purpose to make an unhurried return.”

The tea was the ideal temperature, hot enough to sip without scalding, and brewed to perfection. “How so?”

“It will allow more time for us to get to know one another.” He casually crossed his ankle over his knee. “To convince others it was why we ran off.”

Ah, yes. There was that. She set her teacup down and tried to ignore the twist in her stomach. “You are still determined to marry me? Even after what I told you about how stubborn I can be?” A strange discomfort settled over her.

Regret.

A sudden longing to go back in time and snatch those words of warning away from their conversation.

He lifted his brows as he drank from his teacup. Somehow his refusal to answer the question rankled her nerves and made her desperate for a reply that did not come.

It shouldn't matter. They both were being forced into this marriage. Him for his sister's reputation and her for her own. Except that it did matter.

To Sophia, it mattered a great deal.

She didn't want a man forced into marrying her any more than she wanted to be forced into it. A memory tugged at her from the prior evening. Well, several memories, really.

Her coercing the poor man to dance with her, begging for a kiss, sitting on his lap, the column of his arousal digging into her. How terribly wanton she had behaved.

He'd turned her away.

Her cheeks went hot. She blamed him, of course. And he'd declined to seduce her when she'd asked.

She pushed through the mortification burning through her as she made a vow to never, *ever*, drink whisky again.

But she also remembered one very important thing that was said: Kendal swore never to force her into anything.

And that would no doubt include marriage.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

KENDAL HAD NEVER TAKEN the time to enjoy Glasgow for all it had to offer. There were quaint shops to explore, a nearby park offering a sprawling oasis of spring grass amid the city's towering buildings, which provided a considerable amount of amusement throughout the day.

During their exploration of the city, he had enjoyed not only Sophia's company but also his subtle attempts to seduce her. A trinket here, a bouquet of flowers from a vendor there, a compliment he was sure would set her blushing beneath that hideous black widow's veil and the occasional touch.

Those brushes of the hand were light and discreet, but they were titillating, nonetheless.

After a day of leisure and enjoyment, the sun had begun to set and cast an assortment of vivid colors across the sky.

"Shall we return to the inn?" he asked.

Sophia tilted her head in consideration beneath her veil as they walked down a street of shops with glass-front windows displaying their wares within. "I'm not quite ready to yet. This day has been so delightful."

It honestly had been. And yet, he was eager to return to the inn with her, where they could be alone, where his touches did not have to be so discreet. Where he could see her expression without that bloody veil.

Where his true seduction of her could begin.

He had attempted to be cavalier that morning, masking his urgency to return to London with feigned ease. In truth, every passing moment that they delayed their departure weighed on his thoughts.

Mongerton was notoriously impatient and with just a bit of pressure, he might very well force Gullsville to start sharing secrets with the ton that could never be retracted. Secrets about Marguerite.

Kendal's chest tightened. He need only convince Sophia to marry him, to propose an arrangement that offered them both the freedom from a union neither ever wanted. While he was not one to fall back on the skill of seduction, he knew himself more than capable.

It was in his blood.

He cast Sophia a charming look through the corner of his eye, knowing she could see him through the veil that blocked her from him. "Let us watch the sunset, then take a hack back to the inn afterward." Intentionally avoiding areas he knew fishermen congregated, he guided her toward the River Clyde. It certainly would not suit his purposes for a lover's sunset to be interrupted by odiferous reminders of the daily catch.

"That sounds delightful." Her forefinger delicately stroked the inside of his elbow where she held onto him.

Ah, yes, his tactics were working quite well. He led her across the road to where the sun's descent had streaked the sky with red and orange in a glorious display. A soft breeze played over them, rippling her veil and caressing Kendal's face with the chilly sea air. It carried with it the sweet orange-water scent that made him recall too keenly the shadows that had played out over the backlit silk screen when she'd bathed with him in the room the day before.

His cock twitched in appreciation of the memory.

*Damn.*

"It's stunning," Sophia whispered. "How the sun is glowing red-orange and the sea is reflecting it like a million gems."

But he couldn't concentrate on the view or see any of those things she mentioned. Not when his mind was locked entirely on the most beautiful image he had ever beheld in his life. The night before. Those silhouettes.

He let his finger skim the dip of her waist where his body blocked the action from the view of others. "Shall we return?" There was an intimate note to his voice, put there by the force of his lust.

Her straight back quivered lightly, and he bit back a smile at her reaction. "Yes."

The seeds had been sown. He need only encourage her to want him, to agree to the marriage.

They turned from the colorful sky and hailed a hackney for the journey back to the inn. He sat across from her as manners dictated, but that was as far he took decorum.

His hands folded around hers. "Are you chilled?"

"Just slightly," she replied.

He curled his fingers over hers, embracing them in his warmth. "I enjoyed my time with you today."

Her thumb ran over his knuckles, a reciprocal caress. Blood thundered through his veins, making all of him too hot. Too damn hard.

"I'm looking forward to being alone with you," he replied. "To enjoy our time together."

She drew in a soft, shaky breath.

There, in that innocent, breathy inhale, he knew he had her.

The carriage stopped and the door snapped open, revealing the inn before them. Kendal led Sophia into the building and up the stairs. This time, she did not hesitate as she climbed upward alongside him.

This time, his heartbeat was pounding as erratically as hers.

He'd spent too bloody long running from his desires. Why *not* give into the lust hammering through him?

His hand nearly shook with need as he unlocked the door to their room and opened it. Sophia went in and spun about to face him as soon as they entered, her breath coming fast.

“Kendal,” she said in a low voice that stoked his arousal further.

“Sophia,” he groaned tightly.

She pulled her veil off as he closed the distance between them in one short stride, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her thoroughly, more deeply than intended.

After all, he needed to pace himself.

This was only the beginning.

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SOPHIA’S BODY hummed with longing, its flame simmering throughout the day with every touch, every look Kendal passed her way. She melted into his embrace now, the feeling as natural as breathing, and parted her mouth to accept his hungry kisses as his tongue tangled with hers.

If he thought he was fooling her with his charming display, he was quite mistaken. She was well aware of what he was attempting to do: seduce her into marriage.

It wasn’t a disagreeable plan. In fact, it was a far better alternative to being offered to Mongerton to settle gambling debts. Certainly, it soothed her ruffled feathers from the prior evening’s rejection.

Kendal caught her waist and gave a possessive growl that sent delight rippling through her. His thumbs skimmed up her ribs, close to her breasts. They crept higher as his thorough kisses made her head spin with delight.

Need coursed through her veins like fire. She’d harbored this curiosity of what transpired between a man and a woman for so long. And now...

His touch brushed the underside of her bosom, then swept against her nipples.



A jolt of pleasure shot through her. She sucked in a breath, and his lips smiled against hers.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that,” he murmured. His thumb repeated the action once more, sending another thrill racketing over her senses. “You don’t wear stays, you naughty minx.”

Lust crowded her mind so thoroughly that she could scarcely think. And yet, she was not in such a haze as to not question his knowledge. She had assumed the thick bombazine would have masked the absence of boning in her stays.

She drew back and regarded him. “How would you know I’m not wearing stays?”

He narrowed his eyes in a sly way that was far from unappealing. “Your silk gown last night was far too tight across your bosom. Stays would have likely made it fit properly. That and...” His mouth lifted in a little smile.

“And?” she exaggerated the word, needing to know.

The shrewdness left his eyes and was replaced with an intimate softness. “That and I could detect your nipples through your gown last night. Every time they became hard...”

Sophia exclaimed in horrified humiliation and fought the urge to cover her breasts. “And in my bombazine?” she gasped.

God help her if she’d gone about all over England and Scotland with her nipples jutting out through her clothing.

He scowled. “That veil covers everything.”

“You seem disappointed.”

He lifted a brow in that stately “I’m an earl” affectation he had about him. “You know how I feel about those weeds.”

“And why is that?” She put a hand to his chest, the act familiar in a way that set her pulse spiking. “Did a widow break your heart?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

She ran her palm up his hard torso. “Tell me.”

A small line appeared between his brows. “It isn’t what you think.”

“Then tell me.”

His lips pursed to the side and he gave what appeared to be a sheepish smile and shook his head. “I’m not one who enjoys talking about myself. In fact, I scarcely do so.”

“You do with me.” A surge of pride swelled in her chest.

He appeared chagrined at the revelation. “It appears I do, prattling on like a debutante at her coming out.”

“What if I’m one who enjoys listening to you expound upon your past?” She volleyed his eyebrow quirk with one of her own. “I should like to know more about you.” Her hand moved over his chest again, intentionally sensual. “If we are indeed to be wed...”

He dragged a hand through his hair and sighed. “Widows remind me of my mother.”

“Oh.” She blinked up at him. “All this time I’ve been reminding you of your *mother*?”

No wonder the man was upset.

“Good God, not like that.” He frowned in disgust. “My mother left my father when we were children. We managed well enough without her. Through God’s mercy and several carefully crafted lies, we were able to cover her disappearance, citing an indefinite stay in the country rather than her dalliances in India or wherever her travels took her indiscretions.”

His heartbeat thudded harder under her touch. While his words were without feeling, their impact on him was not.

“When my father died some years later and my mother returned.” His jaw tensed. “She wore all black as though his death had been devastating to her, but it was all a facade for her to gain access to his wealth and assume a widow’s freedom among the ton. There wasn’t a schoolmate of mine who didn’t

know of her exploits—several of whom had the pleasure of enjoying them firsthand.”

There was anger in his eyes. And hurt.

People could be so unkind. Especially those of the aristocratic sort.

An ache blossomed in her chest for him.

“Kendal,” Sophia whispered softly.

He shook his head, clearly not wanting her sympathy. “My mother wore her weeds for a year. It was the only appropriate act she performed in her widowhood. Once that year had passed, she took full advantage of her newfound freedom. And our fortune. So, if you ever had any curiosity as to how I was drawn into whisky smuggling...”

“That’s awful.” Sophia stared up at him, seeing this man in an entirely new light, which cast him with considerably more depth. “I did wonder...”

“My mother always threatened to spend my fortune. I didn’t receive much, as happens when one’s trustee is in your mother’s pocket—so to speak. What little I had, I gave for the care of Marguerite, who was too young to fight for herself at the time.” He drew in a slow breath and pulled Sophia’s hand from his chest.

She immediately felt the loss of his warmth, of the strong thrum of his heartbeat.

“It was how Marguerite’s reputation was ruined,” he said.

“How?” Sophia asked. She knew only that Lady Marguerite had a tattered reputation but had never been told exactly what her “ruin” entailed. That was the way of it often when it came to ladies. A single act could see them ruined forever. Then they were cast aside like rubbish.

“When Mother had Marguerite’s come out at sixteen, I was away at university and not invited.” He gave a bitter smile. “Marguerite did not even get to enjoy the night. Our mother conspired to wed her off to a former lover and succeeded in locking them in Marguerite’s room together. But the man was

in love with our mother and refused to marry Marguerite, leaving her ruined before she even could enjoy her season as a debutante. When I found out about it, your father happened to be at university to see to some affairs regarding your brother..." A frown creased Kendal's brow. "I had nowhere else to go. Not when all the men I knew were under my mother's salacious thumb."

They weren't anymore, of course. When he'd come of age to inherit the full extent of his wealth, he had paid his mother to leave England with a purse full enough to keep her occupied for a good long while. Between that and her propensity for wealthy lovers, he doubted he would ever see her again.

Or at least he hoped to God it would be so.

"My father helped you save your sister," Sophia surmised, grateful he had done some good to someone. At least until he'd apparently called in this favor.

Kendal nodded. "He provided coin and a carriage for me to use in locating Marguerite after she ran away and offered excuses for my prolonged absence to keep me from the ton's blazing gossip."

"And now you're being forced to wed me because of it."

"I don't believe it was ever his intention to use his favor against me. He is a desperate man." There was a sadness in his eyes. Pity.

"Desperate enough to either eradicate his good deed by means of extortion or selling off his daughter to his debtors." It was her turn to be bitter.

Her father might have tried to do good, but he was the worst sort of man, one whose vices dictated his actions. And all those around him suffered for it. Even after all the years she had loved him, looked up to him and tried to make him a better man, in the end, he had chosen his gambling debts over her.

Angry tears burned in her eyes. She lowered her head lest Kendal see them, to avoid his sympathy. Especially after what her father had done to him.

Kendal's fingers lightly touched the underside of her chin and lifted her face. "Sophia, look at me."

She raised her eyes to find him gazing down at her with a squared jaw. "You're better than all of this," he said vehemently. "You're better than a father who is too blinded by the distraction of his grief to see you for who you are. And you're damn well better than me, who has never deserved a woman like you, beautiful, innocent, kind..." His hard stare gentled. "But God help me, I can't stop myself from wanting you."

He cradled her jaw in one large hand as though she were a fragile bit of spun glass.

Desire hung in the air between them, along with the weight of their shared burden: their impending marriage, the predicament they were both in and how it would irrevocably alter each of their futures.

The bulk of it was too great to expand on after what had already been discussed that night.

"And I..." Sophia inhaled deeply before her admission. "I want you." Suddenly feeling sheepish, she lightly bit her bottom lip.

"You tempt me as no other ever has," Kendal growled. His thumb tugged her lip free from the light pinch between her teeth and he lowered his head to hers.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

DESIRE HAD ALWAYS BEEN something Kendal feared. That he might someday become its slave as his mother had. After all, her blood ran through his veins.

He'd always regarded lust as a weakness. Something he could fight.

But now, cradling Sophia's lovely face in his hands, her lips parting under his with trust and true affection, what had blossomed between them did not seem derogatory.

She had listened to his ugliest secrets with kindness and affection, without judgment or pity. Her hand laying over his heart as he spoke, as if she sought to heal him. And indeed, she had been a balm to a deep, angry wound.

He drew her toward him, carefully cradling her body to his. She exhaled a soft moan against his mouth. His cock jerked to attention at the sound as lust hammered in his ears. He wanted this. He wanted her.

This woman who was to become his wife.

Who had not yet agreed to such.

He had meant to seduce her, to bring them both to the brink where their bodies were near an explosion of pleasure, and then ask her. Except now, he didn't want to coerce her into anything. He wanted to be honest with her from the start.

He parted his lips to speak when her tongue tentatively swept into his mouth, rendering him mute.

God, she was sweet. And bold. Absolute perfection.

His hand eased back to cradle her head, to deepen their kiss further while his other hand skimmed down her ribs. With a little whimper of excitement, she pushed her bosom forward, the points of her nipples evident through the fabric.

A groan escaped his chest as he circled his thumb over the nub. She gasped, her knees buckling, so she leaned more fully against him. His body acted without thought as his pelvis fitted to hers, the force of his arousal straining against her softness.

Her head fell back with an audible exhale, and then she was kissing him once more. The light pressing of lips quickly gave way to hungry possession of one another's mouths, the intensity building.

This couldn't go any further. Not without knowing she would wed him.

"Marry me." He said between kisses.

She hesitated and leaned back to regard him, her lips reddened from the frenzy of their passion. "To save your sister."

Kendal blinked as his thoughts took half a moment to readjust. He'd forgotten his predicament, the need to save Marguerite. In those intimate kisses between himself and Sophia, he had thought only of her reputation and his own refusal to take her without the promise they would wed.

"For you," he replied.

"To save my reputation." A look of hurt flashed in her eyes.

"To have you." He pulled her more closely to him once more, his gaze fixed on hers with earnestness. "I didn't want to wed before because I feared..." Anxiety nipped at him. Was he really going to share this?

She watched him with her wide blue eyes, her cheeks flushed with desire.

Yes.

Yes, he was.

“I feared what type of woman I might marry.” He lifted a hand to her impossibly soft face to trail down her cheek. “I didn’t want a woman who masked who they were, who pretended to like me, who would end up...”

*Well, in for a penny, in for a pound and all that.*

“Who would end up like my mother.” His touch whispered over her jawline. “But I realize that you are completely different in the most wonderfully unexpected ways.”

A shy smile touched her lips. “Then you *want* to marry me for me?”

He nodded. “That’s it exactly.”

“Even though I am stubborn?” She grinned up at him, apparently already knowing his answer.

“Dare I say in spite of it?”

She laughed, a sound of pure delight that touched his soul in a place he’d previously thought to be unreachable.

“Then, yes.” She beamed at him with the brilliance of a thousand suns. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

Kendal had never really considered marriage. Nor would he ever have expected the elation coursing through him at Sophia’s agreement to wed him would be so fulfilling.

“And here I thought you meant to seduce me into it.” She gave him a coy smile.

“I planned to,” he admitted, ignoring her mock huff of indignation. “But there has been enough duplicity.”

She reached for him, taking his face in both her hands and pressing a chaste kiss onto his lips, one of tenderness rather than lust. “Thank you.”

“And I...” Kendal hedged.

“And you...?” She asked with his face still in her slender hands.

“I never have...” Good God. Did this have to be so wholly uncomfortable?



Her brows lifted.

“I have never been intimate with a woman.” He cleared his throat as though it might eliminate the awkwardness that threatened to choke him. “Not completely. Like I mean to be with you.”

He braced himself for the reaction that she might have to his admission, considering his age and reputation.

But there was no laughter or mirth of any kind.

Her fingers stroked down his face delicately. “You’re not like her,” she said softly.

In that one moment, he realized she understood exactly. Without him having to explain how much he feared succumbing to the same pull of desire that had dragged his mother’s life into one of reprehensible debauchery.

Sophia knew him, and she accepted him.

“Love me, Kendal.” She rose on her tiptoes and closed her eyes as her lips neared his. “Love me.”

He drew her toward him with the intention of doing just that and making her entirely his.

---

*THIS.*

Over the course of several years, Sophia had put off agreeing to be courted by men because she’d been waiting for exactly this. An alluring man, one with an edge of danger, but whose heart was gold. A real person. Not someone on their best behavior to win her affections.

Sophia melted against Kendal’s strong body as his mouth closed over hers. Her heart pounded in her chest, her pulse racing.

Finally, she would sate her curiosity about the mystery of what went on between a man and a woman. Perhaps it might

even allay that throbbing need that had developed between her thighs in recent days.

Anticipation left her fingers trembling with nervousness and excitement.

His tongue grazed hers, and her nipples drew tight against her chemise. As if sensing her reaction to him, his hand skimmed up her torso and caught one breast in the heat of his palm, his finger once more finding the taut tip.

She moaned into his mouth. "I like that."

He eased back long enough to wink at her in a roguish sort of way that made her pulse stutter before lowering his head toward her once more. His mouth trailed down her neck and whispered over the black neckline of her gown where it stopped primly at her throat.

His finger tugged lightly, pulling it down as he ran his tongue over the exposed hollow of her throat. A wild, delicious thrill shivered through her. He smoothed his hands down her back and caught her bottom as his lips continued to roam over her neck, this time up, toward the base of her ear.

Their hips met, and again, the thick column of his excitement pressed against her. Without thinking, she arched toward him, anchoring him more firmly against her.

He groaned near her ear in a pleasant wash of warm breath on her skin. His touch slid up her back, a sensual trail to the buttons at the nape of her neck.

One by one, he popped them free, those dastardly little black thread Dorset buttons had been an ordeal to contend with over the duration of her travels without a maid. He worked through them with ease as his kisses moved in a restless trail over the column of her throat. Soft lips, sucking kisses, the rasping scrape of his whiskers over her sensitive skin.

She scarcely noticed when her gown gaped open at the back and began to slide down her shoulders. Until his lips wandered to where the austere black collar fell away to reveal her white chemise.

The pink of her nipples showed through the thin, fine fabric, tightening with the waves of decadent chills he sent rippling through her. Never had she noticed exactly how transparent her chemise was or at least if she had, she'd paid it little mind. But now, with Kendal pulling her black gown low and revealing that private area, Sophia's face blazed.

His gaze locked on her partially exposed breasts and his brow furrowed with an expression that suggested appreciation. His large hand moved over her right breast, cupping its weight. Gazing up at her, he parted his fingers to reveal her nipple beneath and closed his mouth over it.

With the delicate layer of linen between his tongue and the little bud, he licked and suckled her. Exquisite pleasure. It needled through her and had her holding the back of his head in her hands as he loved first one breast, then the other.

The linen over her bosom was left damp, her breath panting, her sex throbbing. Lower and lower, he nudged her gown until the ties of her petticoat came into view. Those were easily handled with a swift tug and down they went with her widow's weeds.

Leaving her in only her chemise.

"Pull the pins from your hair," he said in a throaty voice that plucked a primal chord somewhere deep inside her.

She did as he commanded without objection. First the black comb, then the small pins that tinkled onto the floor. Her hair spilled around her shoulders and unfurled in orange-water scented waves.

He groaned where he stood, watching her with a longing that made her blood race. Before the heat in her cheeks could scald further still, he reached for her and enveloped her against him with a hungry kiss. One she answered in kind.

His hands shifted up the nape of her neck and gently fisted in her locks. Another groan hummed between them as his hands roved over her linen-clad body. She explored his torso in turn as well, skimming her hands over his chest, across his

broad back, down his abdomen, toward his falls, where the edge of his hardness protruded.

A breath hissed from him. But before she could begin to delve lower, his hand at her thigh shifted upward, and the hem of her chemise raised higher. Inch by inch, the scant fabric lifted until his fingers rested on bare skin. He stroked her thigh with a whisper-light touch, trailing over the outside of her knee, midway up before shifting course to her inner thigh, then gliding to where—

Oh heavens!

His fingers grazed her sex and her legs threatened to give way. He held her more firmly around the waist with one hand while the other one teased over her center again, this time slower, with more purpose.

He uttered a low curse in her ear, the sound so raw and desperate, she did not have to ask if something was wrong. Even with her limited experience, she knew whatever dredged that reaction from him was, in fact, very, very right.

Back and forth, he teased over her several times, from the sensitive area at the front to the entrance of her sex, where he began to probe gently. Too gently.

She arched against his hand in frustration, wanting... something.

It was an infuriating thing for one's body to be so wound up for an experience one could scarcely begin to understand. He eased his finger in deeper, curling it inside her in a way that made her breath come fast.

Still holding her upright, for she would surely have dissolved into a puddle on the ground otherwise, his skillful touch played over her as expertly as a musician coaxing his instrument on the crescendo of his masterpiece. The heel of his hand settled at the apex of her sex, grinding against her while his finger pumped inside her.

Everything in her wound tighter and tighter as if squeezing in on itself.

“Let me hear you come, Sophia,” he gritted in her ear.

His voice was as hungry as she felt, wild with desire, and it was that which finally nudged her over the edge to a place she could no longer control. Everything inside her exploded with a pleasure so intense that she didn't know if she gasped or cried. All she knew were the waves of it, hot and cold at once, tingling, radiating everywhere, drowning her in euphoric sensations she'd never known her body was capable of experiencing.

When at last she blinked her eyes open, she found Kendal watching her with a little smile teasing the corner of his lip.

"I..." Thoughts were scarcely forming into words in Sophia's mind. She blinked, still somewhat dazed. "I thought you never..."

"Oh, I haven't." He put his middle finger to his mouth, glistening with her desire, and licked it. "But I never claimed to be a saint."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

OH, indeed, Kendal was no saint. And certainly, the sensations building in his bollocks were not pious in origin.

No, it was the most basic need one could have outside of sustenance or shelter: lust.

Though Sophia's soft cries of release had subsided, they still played out in his mind, feminine and alluring. This was the point where he usually took his leave, his cock stiff with unspent passion and his determination as resolute as the force of his self-castigation.

Desire had always been a loathsome weakness.

But now...

Sophia's innocent blue gaze was fixed on him with sensual fascination, her nipples pert beneath the loose-fitting chemise. She was lovely. And she was his.

Just as he was hers.

As if understanding his thoughts, she stepped toward him and unbuttoned his jacket, her gaze locked on his as she peeled it from his shoulders. Next came his cravat and his dove gray waistcoat. She hesitated at his shirt, her nerves evident in the way her breath quickened.

Kendal put his hands over hers and helped her lift the fine muslin over his head, revealing his torso to her. She audibly inhaled as she studied him. Her hand reached for him, trembling somewhat.

His body was on fire with anticipation for her touch.

It was light at first, a whispering graze of her fingertips over his skin.

“Kendal.” She said his name as though it had been brought up from the base of her soul, her voice husky with need.

He drew her toward him and let his palms skim down her narrow waist before gliding out over her hips. She moaned against his mouth, as eager for him as he was for her.

There would be only them for one another. That knowledge leached the rebuke from his conscience and let his longing flow like the most intoxicating ambrosia.

It was that connection, that liberation from his personal retribution, which sparked the flame between them that could not be extinguished. Their kisses became desperate, their caresses without restraint. He burned with a fiery longing that he had fought far too long and now he ran headlong into it, eager to experience delights he once saw as forbidden and now knew to be beautiful.

He captured the delicate linen of her chemise in his fists and lifted it from her body even as her fingers fumbled over the buttons of his placket. She didn't bother to cover herself as she stood naked before him, more glorious than any other sight he'd witnessed in his seven-and-twenty years.

Her skin was flawless where it was cast golden by the firelight with her honey-colored waves tumbling over her shoulders. He followed the length of her body with his eyes, taking in her full breasts, pink-tipped where he'd suckled them. There was a slight dip to her navel that begged a flick of his tongue and even lower...well, that too would eventually experience a flick of his tongue.

Still watching her, his fingers took over the task of unbuttoning his falls with familiar ease, undoing his trousers the rest of the way. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip as her eyes fixed on the unveiling of his arousal.

She gasped.

He pulled his clothing away and dragged her toward him once more. The smoothness of her skin met his body and the

desire pulsing between them grew.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said tenderly.

Or at least he would try not to, having heard how it was with virgins. Likewise, he hoped his own inexperience would not cause him to be too eager.

She smiled up at him. “I know.”

He ran his hands over her body, up her waist, toward those lovely breasts, cupping their silky weight in his palms. A moan escaped her lips and she undulated against him. The action pressed her nakedness firmly to his swollen prick, which strained against her taut stomach.

She arched away from him slightly, only for a scant moment as her fingers tentatively explored the length of his cock.

Her touch sent a streak of lightning firing through him and wrenched free a low groan.

Emboldened by his reaction or so he suspected, that dainty hand of hers wrapped around his shaft. His bollocks drew tight, and his knees nearly buckled.

Women had touched him, of course, but he never allowed them to—

Her fingers moved over his arousal, exploring, teasing. Sweat prickled on his brow.

Turnabout was fair play. His caresses explored lower on her as well, past the triangle of hair at the apex of her thighs. He swept a finger against her, where she was slick with desire.

So damn wet.

Whatever tethered his restraint at that moment snapped. He encouraged her back toward the bed. It was only a few steps away, but it might well have been in another country. He wanted her now.

When at last they reached the mattress, he guided her toward its pillowed surface, easing over her as she lay down.



Kendal's heart hammered in his chest. Excitement. Overwhelming desire. Fear.

If he had this sample of lust, would he go out of his mind with it as his mother had?

No sooner had the thought entered his mind than Sophia reached up to him with both hands and lifted her face to kiss him. Her mouth was hot and sweet.

His soon-to-be wife.

"Kendal," she murmured against his lips. There was an innocent breathiness to how she said his name. It was pure and enticing.

Nothing he could ever refuse.

He growled her name and shifted his torso over hers, so their hips were poised atop one another. She lifted her knees to cradle him between her thighs. To open herself to him.

The rush of his thundering blood whooshed in his ears and his pulse hammered in erratic thuds. He took his cock in one hand as he braced himself with the other and guided it toward her center.

They locked eyes as he gently eased into her. First, just the tip nudging against the promise of heaven. She arched in frustration, as though trying to push herself onto him.

He flexed forward slightly more so the swollen head slid into her sheath. She gripped him there with tight temptation that promised euphoria he could never bring with his own hand.

Their bodies were moving in slow undulations toward the other. Each arch brought them closer together and pushed him ever so much deeper. More and more until the squeeze was almost overwhelming.

The breath panted from his chest; his body was aflame. He released the tight hold he had on himself and grasped her hand with his as he thrust inside her.

She sucked in a hard breath as he froze at the impossibly hard grip locked on his cock.

He'd always feared lust would make him mindless with need, wild and out of control. Now, as he hovered poised over her with his prick lodged within her, he had nothing but control.

“Are you quite all right?” he asked in a ragged voice.

She blinked up at him. “Yes.”

He eased his hips back, pulling from her before sliding carefully into her center once more. Tingles of pleasure raked over him with even the slightest of moves.

Tight.

Wet.

Perfect.

A low groan sounded in his chest. God, she felt exquisite.

Still, he continued to exercise great caution as their bodies came together again and again until finally, her lashes fluttered, and she began to move under him once more.

It was subtle at first, a slight roll of her hips toward him that made her sheath flex around him in the most blissful way. Then came a shaky exhale and her pelvis rose to meet his cautious thrust.

Her legs widened, as though wanting to take him deeper.

His pumps into her increased in pace, giving her what she silently asked for. She tossed her head back with a moan and arched to match the new rhythm.

And that was when the pleasure began in earnest.

---

SOPHIA HAD NEVER IMAGINED what happened during coupling could be so...agreeable.

No, agreeable was far too dull a word for the sheer brilliance of what shone between them as their bodies came together most deliciously.

The hardness of him. The softness of her. And all the delights that existed between.

His thrusts came harder, faster, and unleashed a sensual heat coursing through her veins that made her body tense as it had before when he had touched her in such an extraordinary way.

Her nipples prickled with anticipation where they brushed against the fine dusting of hair over Kendal's strong chest with each joining of their bodies.

The pleasure was evident on his handsome face. It was intoxicating watching the enjoyment play out on his expression. The furrows of his brows in indulgent concentration, the softness of his eyes as he watched her, the tension in his jaw.

Their rhythm increased in pace once more and she was no longer looking at his face. Her eyes closed as the most indescribable euphoria took her, greater and more overwhelming than before. It made flashes of light bloom behind her lids and had her entire self seeming to explode with incredible sensation.

Kendal's hips jerked against her twice and a savage groan tore from him as his arousal pulsed deep within her.

He gasped and dropped to his elbows over her, blinking as though in surprise. His gaze found hers, wide with disbelief. "My God, Sophia," he murmured.

She laughed at that. "We shall have to do that again."

His mouth tipped up at the corners in a genuine smile. "And again and again."

She brought her legs around his hips, locking her to him with their bodies still joined. "I would enjoy that very much."

"As would I." He smoothed a lock of hair from her brow and kissed first the place he'd just touched, then her mouth with a tenderness that caught at her heart. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

There had been some pain, but he had been so considerate in his gentle care of her that the pleasure had far, far outweighed any discomfort.

“Nothing you need ever worry about.” She stroked his face, taken with the need to touch him, to continue to be as close as possible. “I’ve never felt such pleasure.”

He lifted his brows in exaggeration. “Nor have I.”

“I love that we had this together,” she said, feeling almost shy. “This first experience.”

“You were worth waiting for.” He gazed deep into her eyes as if he were of the same mind in longing to hold onto the bond of their shared intimacy.

Without warning, he rolled over to the side and brought her with him, making her laugh at the suddenness of it. He grinned at her—an actual grin, boyish and endearing. It warmed a place within her chest.

Her heart.

Its beat stuttered.

This handsome, dashing man, who was equal parts wicked and sweet, would be hers. Her husband.

Lord and Lady Kendal.

She reached up to his face with her other hand, caressing his prickly jaw with her fingertips, and smiled with the sheer joy brimming within her.

He stroked her cheek in a tender manner she couldn’t help but turn toward. “I should like to wed you tomorrow.”

“So we can consummate the marriage?” she teased.

He hummed in agreement. “And so I can make you mine. Properly.”

“Oh?” She gazed at him coyly. “I thought you didn’t want a wife.”

“That was before I met you, my love.”

*My love.*

The words stole her breath. But not her heart, for she'd already lost that to him.

“We'll find a small kirk tomorrow.” He pulled her against his chest and wrapped his strong arms around her.

She melted against him. “Not cliché like Gretna Green?”

His laugh rumbled in his chest against her cheek. “It would be terribly expected if we did that, wouldn't it?” His hand skimmed up her arm as if he were savoring the very feel of her. “I have a few chaps who can be witnesses here. Then you will be my wife.” A fingertip traced invisible circles at her shoulder. “My Lady Kendal.”

She couldn't stop the smile from stretching over her face, even if she'd wanted to. Which, she did not. She wanted it adorning her features, glowing from her like the sensations overflowing within her.

It was impossible not to think of the reactions they would encounter when they returned from Scotland, married. Her cousins would be aflutter at the news, brimming with questions as all unmarried women did with ladies recently introduced to the intimacies of the marriage bed. The ton would be practically buzzing with the speed of gossip flowing from their tongues. And Aunt Nancy...

Sophia giggled.

“Mmmm?” Kendal's languid question hummed against her.

“I was imagining what my Aunt Nancy will think of all this.”

He chuckled, the sound languid and rich. “Do you know she's been trying to push you off to me since you first came out?”

“Has she?” Sophia laughed, able to easily imagine her aunt doing exactly such a thing. “And here I thought the night of Lady Eugenia's coming out was the first time she'd mentioned it to you.”

“She said I would adore you if I just gave myself half a chance.” His fingertips grazed a sensual path down her back. “It certainly looks as though she knew what she was talking about...”

Sophia leaned back to consider him. “But we can never let her know that or she’ll become insufferable.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you in that evaluation.” He drew Sophia to him once more. His lips pressed to the top of her head in a way that made her feel cherished. Their bodies fitted perfectly, with her tucked against his naked, warm chest and their legs entwined with the others.

What would it be like to become his wife?

*Lady Kendal.*

She’d spent so much time being focused on avoiding marriage and running from it that she had scarcely offered any consideration to how it would be. Although now, it did not seem as if she were losing the possibility of an enjoyable life but gaining a companion to celebrate with.

Yes, marriage did seem agreeable, an adventure even. And tomorrow’s union would be the first of many days in their adventure together.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SOPHIA SLEPT in the cradle of Kendal's arms through the night. When she awoke the following morning, a smile was already on her lips. His body was warm against her back, but what was pressed to her bottom was hot and hard. And incredibly tempting.

She arched into him and was rewarded with a tense groan. His hands glided down her waist and rested on her hips, easing her toward him once more.

If she'd thought her desire would have been sated the night before, she was wrong. What they'd done had only whet her appetite. And she now found herself craving more.

The fullness of him within her, the intimate scent of their joining, the husky cries and groans...

The area between her thighs pulsed to life with longing.

His wicked hand eased to that exact spot, making her part her legs as he touched her. "Are you not sore?" he asked in a voice gravelly with sleep.

"A bit," she confessed. "But my desire for you exceeds my discomfort."

He gave a small growl of acknowledgment and his ministrations escalated to stroking caresses that had her slick with need. Just as she felt she was near release, he withdrew his hand and entered her from behind, his length plunging into her, stretching her deliciously once more. She was slightly sore, yes, but the pleasure was greater than any pain caused by the loss of her maidenhead.

After another soul-shattering climax, they washed one another, exploring each other's naked body with the cloth and teasing touches that led to a third coupling.

"If we continue with this," Kendal panted afterward, "We might never make it to the kirk to be wed."

"Would that be so bad?" She lifted her head to regard him beside her.

"I want you to be my wife." Kendal propped himself up on his elbow, his muscles flexing with each move. "In name as well as in body. Although, admittedly, 'body' has been considerably enjoyable."

Appreciation lit his gaze as it trailed first down, then up, her nakedness.

"In that case, we must dress quickly." She pressed a kiss to his mouth and fought the urge to deliver another and yet another still.

He didn't bother to move as she pushed to her feet and took the linen from the basin to wipe down her body. In fact, he tucked his palms behind his head, elbows outstretched, and watched her run the cloth over her skin until desire left him jutting outward.

When she finished, he tried to grab her toward him, but she spun away.

"You wicked man," she laughed. "Don't you wish to wed?"

Seriousness settled in his stare. "More than I ever realized I could want to. Come, I'll help you with your stays."

She lifted her brows. "You'll help me with my stays?"

"I want those hard, little nipples to be mine and mine alone." In demonstration, he cupped her breast and circled his thumb over the taut bud.

She moaned and leaned into him.

"Now who is being wicked?" he asked.

"To the kirk," she said huskily. "And then to bed."



Never had Sophia's stays been tied with more haste and were quickly followed by the rest of her garments. As the mourning attire was inappropriate for a wedding and given Kendal's distaste for it, Sophia settled on the light blue gown she'd worn the night after they'd been drenched in the rain.

Once they were both dressed, Kendal scanned her appearance and tilted his head in contemplation.

"What is it?" She glanced down at her attire, fearful something dreadful had become of her one good gown.

"You're missing something." He frowned slightly.

Nothing appeared amiss. She shook her head and elevated her gaze to him as he withdrew something from his pocket.

Something that sparkled.

Her diamond necklace. The one that had been stolen.

Sophia sucked in a gasp. "Wherever did you find that?"

"I retrieved it from a rather nefarious chap."

"And he simply gave it to you?" she asked incredulously.

"He required a bit of persuasion that I was more than willing to deliver." Kendal smirked.

And there it was, just like that, the edge of danger to this handsome, sensual man who was tearing her walls down, one brick at a time.

"Aren't you afraid I'll leave you now that I have this necklace to trade for help with a distillery?" She cocked a brow as she teased him.

"Not when you harbor such distaste for whisky." He winked at her and attached the necklace to her throat. "And certainly not when you're so obviously enamored with me."

The weight of the diamonds was considerable and the back was cold against her skin. She turned in the mirror and set the gems sparkling.

"Oh, am I?" She met his eyes in the reflection.

He feigned innocence with a shrug. “You cannot seem to keep your hands off me.”

“It’s true. I cannot.” She looked over her shoulder to give him a coy look.

“Well, perhaps it is a good thing I’m of the same mind.” He touched the gems and let his fingers dip lower to caress the tops of her breasts where they were visible just over the edge of her bodice.

It would be so easy to lean against him and let him kiss her until she couldn’t think properly.

But that would come later.

Again and again and again.

Instead, she fingered the jewelry. “You do know diamonds are in poor taste for breakfast.” And they were. But it didn’t stop her from admiring the precious jewels.

He kissed her neck, just above the necklace, and chuckled in her ear. “You ladies and your rules.” He nuzzled her earlobe. “Then later, I should like to request that you wear this necklace.” His fingertip ran down her spine. “And nothing else.”

She shivered. “If you wish it to be so.”

“That almost sounded biddable, Lady Kendal.” He gently made her face him once more. “I thought you said you were stubborn.”

*Lady Kendal.*

How she loved the sound of her new name. It carried with it the ring of hope for love and true happiness. A life well-lived.

“I am.” She unclasped the necklace. “When it’s something I don’t want to do. But when it’s something I do want...”

“Shall we take breakfast, then?” he asked.

The idea of food made her mouth water. She slipped her diamond necklace back into her valise with the other jewelry,

grateful to see it among her aunt's jewelry once more. "That would be divine."

He offered his arm to her and together they made their way downstairs to the inn's dining area. But he didn't take a seat with her once she was at the table.

"Order anything you like. I'll be about seeing to a few things."

"I don't want to eat without you," she protested.

"But you do wish to eat." He lifted her hand and gave the back of it a delicate kiss. "As you said. And I knew you wouldn't take breakfast without me." He smiled at her frown. "If you are to be stubborn, I believe I shall have to be clever."

"You've won this battle." Her chin notched a little higher, her tone playful. "But do not expect to do so every time."

"My dear, I would be disappointed if I did." With a wink, he was gone.

The scent of rich tea and sizzling ham drifted into her awareness. It wasn't until then she realized how absolutely ravenous that she was. By the time she was given the toast points and soft-boiled egg, she was nearly weak with hunger.

She had only just finished her breakfast and was considering ordering a second when the proprietor of the inn approached her with a slight bow. "Do forgive me, my lady, but there appears to be someone requesting your presence in the stables."

Her heart nearly tripped over itself. She knew exactly who that someone was and why he wanted her in the stables. No doubt Kendal had something exciting planned for their union. Perhaps they would ride horses to a kirk on the outskirts of Glasgow to be married by a priest. Maybe even one who had helped him smuggle whisky in the past.

If there was anyone who knew a whisky running priest, it would certainly be Kendal. And what a thrilling start to their marriage.

She thanked the innkeeper and pushed up from the table. Her pulse raced with anticipation as she left the inn, following the man's instructions back toward the stables, and pulled open the door. The shadowed interior smelled of a mix of horses and sweet hay. Nervousness edged into her excitement.

Something wasn't right.

"Kendal?" She asked.

A noise sounded behind her, near the door she'd entered. She spun around, her eyes now adjusted to the light, and gasped.

An older man, with thin lips and a brutish nose that sat crooked on his face, leered at her. She knew him immediately and it made her blood go ice cold.

Mr. Mongerton stepped closer to her and held out his hand. "Lady Sophia. I believe I am owed a debt." He grinned, revealing his startlingly perfect teeth. "And I'm here to collect my payment."

---

PUTTING ALL the affairs in order had taken slightly longer than Kendal had anticipated. Finally, a priest had been secured, and he had two reliable men who would stand witness to his union with Sophia.

Yes, this was Scotland, and they could well be pronounced man and wife by simply announcing they were wed in a public setting. But that wasn't enough. If he came all this way to save Sophia, he would ensure their union was handled properly.

The very thought of her brought a fresh smile to his lips. He'd been grinning like a bloody idiot since he'd woken up with her in his arms and through all their time together since.

And all the couplings. His blood heated with a desire that had been insatiable, as though making up for the years he'd put his lust aside. Difficult though it may have been, he was glad he had waited for Sophia, so that they might share the specialness of it together.

While the physical connection was indeed satisfying, so too was the wondrous sensation inside his chest, which seemed to make him feel as though he was glowing.

He'd never been so happy.

Hell, he never thought of himself as even being capable of happiness.

Not like this. Not with Sophia.

Being with her banished all his reservations and fears about marriage. There was a light inside her that promised never to dim and a loyalty that could never be tarnished.

It made him feel almost foolish for having waited so long to allow himself the luxury of believing in her, especially when Lady Bursbury had been whispering it in his ear for several years now.

But there was an inexplicable beauty that came with the maturity Sophia had demonstrated in standing up for her own future. When he'd met her previously, she'd just been a debutante like all the rest. Now, she was a woman with a backbone and opinions she didn't allow to be shoved aside.

His thoughts pulled his mouth up into a grin.

What a lady.

He strode past the main dining area of the inn, noting she was no longer at breakfast. Not that he expected she would still be there. After all, some time had passed since he'd left her.

Excitement quickened his steps as he jogged up the stairs, eager to see her, to hold her. He opened the door and drew to a stop.

Her trunks, which had been there before his departure, were gone. As was her valise.

Which meant her jewels were gone with it.

Kendal stepped back as though reeling from a physical blow.

Had she resumed her ridiculous plan to flee to the Highlands and open a distillery?

Had she...

He swallowed, unable to even bring himself to think the words. After all, she wasn't his mother. She wouldn't do to him what his mother had done to Father.

Why then was his heart thundering in his chest?

He raced down the stairs and found the innkeeper behind his desk going through a ledger of sorts.

"Have you seen Lady Sophia?" Kendal asked.

The innkeeper slowly looked up. "My lord, do you mean the companion you traveled with? The widow?"

*Damn it.*

"Lady..." His mind drew a blank on the assumed name she'd borrowed for her journey. "Where is she?" Kendal demanded.

"She left some time ago, I'm afraid." The man looked back to his ledger, licked his pencil and scribbled something down.

"Alone?"

The innkeeper lifted a shoulder. "Presumably, my lord."

Kendal cursed.

Then she had gone. And he would need to catch her.

Only this time, there would be no promises of marriage. If, after everything they'd shared, she genuinely didn't want to be with him, he would travel with her to the Highlands and help her set up her damn distillery.

He would find some other way to keep Marguerite safe. He always had, hadn't he?

But he would not force a woman to wed him. Still, he couldn't quell the bitterness rising like bile inside him. He returned to the stable, where the lad there had only just removed the saddle.

“I’ll need a horse again,” Kendal said tiredly. He’d half a mind to let Sophia go off on her own and figure out the whisky brewing process by herself. And yet, he knew it would not be as easy as she presumed. Especially not when Highlanders were so wary of strangers. Particularly English ones.

And if he was being honest with himself, as pathetic as it might be, he hoped in the time it took her to learn, she might reconsider a marriage to him. Not that he would allow his hopes to elevate to such heights. This was, after all, the third time she’d run from him.

Something in his chest constricted.

The stable lad lifted the saddle back onto the horse, but Kendal stopped him. “A new one. I’ll need to ride fast.” He sighed. “I have someone to catch.”

“The lady?” The boy asked.

Kendal narrowed his eyes at the lad. “Why would you suspect I’d go after her?”

The stable hand set to work saddling a new horse, one that did indeed look fast with long, high legs and a slender frame. The kind of beast that would fly over the Scottish countryside like the wind.

The lad didn’t look at him but instead focused on his task. “Her father seemed angry when he came to collect her.”

Kendal regarded the boy with wariness. “Her...father?”

“Aye. A big man, tall.” The lad waved a hand over his head to indicate considerable height. “And no’ an attractive bloke if I may say. Methinks yer lady inherited her mum’s looks.”

While Lord Gullsville wasn’t what Kendal would call an attractive chap, nor were his looks so abhorrent that they would be notable by a child.

Unease edged a chill down his spine. “What did the man look like?”

“White hair.”

Lord Gullsville's close-cropped hair was silver.

"Crooked nose."

Lord Gullsville's was as straight and aristocratic as they came.

"Verra nice teeth, all straight and fine."

Waterloo teeth, no doubt. Only the finest, harvested from the bounty of slain soldiers after the battle. The sets of teeth were far too common these days by those crass enough to elevate their appearance with the dead's leavings.

Men like Mongerton.

Kendal gave the boy a coin and took over, fastening the saddle into place with skilled hands that could move with more haste than the lad's could. "Which way did they go?"

The boy pointed in the opposite direction Kendal had planned to travel. "That way."

"In a carriage?" Kendal tugged the strap to ensure it was locked in place. It offered no give.

"Aye. A plain black hired chaise with four horses." The boy's brown eyes slid away.

"What is it?"

He scuffed at a bit of hay with the toe of his shoe. "I was outside, so I couldna hear what they said, but at one point, the lady screamed. It was quick and cut short."

Kendal's blood chilled and he swung up onto the steed, fueled with determination.

They would be traveling fast, but he could go faster.

"I tried to get to her," the boy continued, "but the carriage came racing out of the yard..." His small mouth twisted to the side, his averted gaze indicative of tears.

"You are to be commended for your bravery." Kendal tossed another coin to the boy and bolted from the stables, steering the horse in the direction the stable lad said the carriage had gone.



Whether by Mongerton or some other wretch, Sophia had been taken by force. Kendal *would* find her. And he would make them pay.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SOPHIA HAD a rock curled in the palm of her hand. It was the only thing she could grab at the last minute as Mongerton's men had dragged her to the coach, kicking and screaming.

The cloth they'd knotted around her face had a musty odor and tasted of sweat and dust. The coarseness of the fabric dug into the corners of her mouth, so she was scarcely able to swallow. She had tried turning her head from side to side at the beginning like a horse with blinders but finally resigned herself to her fate.

Instead, she now glared at Mongerton. Her wrists were bound in front of her with rough rope. By some miracle, his men had been so consumed with binding her that they hadn't thought to pry open her fist.

The rock was a small bit of a thing. Nothing that could dash a man's brains or anything even close. Not that she was knowledgeable on such matters.

But perhaps if angled correctly, it might cause enough injury that she could attempt to flee. Or perhaps if propelled toward a tender area of the body or face?

She knew nothing of fighting or battle. But she knew she would not yield easily.

Mongerton's heavy breath echoed in the small cabin. He wore elegant clothes like a peer, but the hard life he'd lived remained etched on his homely face. "I see Lord Kendal found you."

Sophia continued to scowl at him.

He shifted in his seat, and his jacket opened slightly, revealing a dagger at one side of his paunch and a gun at the other. “Did he touch you?”

*Kendal.*

Oh, he had touched her. In the most wonderful ways.

She said nothing, though her heart raced as she recalled what they had shared. At the very thought of Kendal. Surely, he would come for her. As soon as he realized Mongerton had taken her, he would no doubt come after her.

But when?

The carriage had already traveled significantly farther than she’d anticipated they would. She had expected Kendal to be there from the first, chasing them down.

As one hour passed into two, worry set in. What if...?

What if he thought she had left him? The way his mother had left his father?

Regardless of Kendal’s unflinching demeanor, there was a sensitivity to him that ran heart deep. It was one of the endearing qualities about him that she was particularly drawn to.

If he’d thought she’d hurt him, however...

Mongerton suddenly slammed his meaty fist on the padded bench. The entire cabin shuddered. Despite Sophia’s resolve to not show any fear, she started with a little jump.

“Did he touch you?” he snarled.

She raised her brows at his foolishness and pointed to the linen tied against her mouth.

He huffed in irritation and sat forward, reaching behind her head to untie the binding. Relief from the pressure around her mouth was immediate. She worked her jaw to encourage the feeling and swallowed, wishing for something to wash away the taste that sat musty and foul on her tongue.

Mongerton leveled a gaze at her, his eyes slightly rheumy with age. “Did he touch you?”

“You never will.” She narrowed her eyes. “And that’s what really matters.”

Quick as lightning, he reached out, grabbing her by the front of her gown, just under the sash where the pale blue silk belled out around her frame. A harsh rending sounded as the delicate fabric gave against his violent grip.

“You’re mine.” His breath was sour as it washed against her face. “You are my prize.”

She kept her eyes locked on his watery gaze, refusing to be intimidated. “I’m already wed to Kendal.”

“Whatever has been done in this heathen country can be undone in London.” He leaned toward her, so his face was nearly touching hers. “You will be my wife.”

“Never.”

His hand drew back and flew across her face. Pain exploded at the side of her cheek, and her head snapped hard to the right. She gasped at the offense.

All the time they had been in the carriage, she had thought he would never strike her. She understood now what a naïve thought that had been.

For the first time, there was a very real element of danger.

“Rider,” a voice outside the carriage announced.

Sophia straightened in her seat, invigorated with hope. Kendal had found her.

Mongerton grimaced and looked out the window. She tried to follow suit, but he shoved her back to block her view, making her sit down hard in her seat.

But she didn’t need to see the man riding toward them to confirm it was Kendal. The curse Mongerton issued was proof enough.

He rapped on the cabin ceiling. “You know what to do.”

His words made Sophia’s blood go cold. As did the way that he curled his lips into a malicious grin. “If you were so

easily able to marry in this wild land, so too can you be easily widowed. Men accidentally die all the time, even earls.”

“No,” she whispered.

A rider flew by the window, going in the opposite direction. Toward Kendal.

“So if you did indeed already marry him as you claim...” Mongerton turned from the window and pulled the curtain shut. “It appears you are about to become a widow.”

No sooner had he said the words than the deafening bang sounded—the report of a gun being fired.

---

THAT HAD BEEN BLOODY CLOSE.

Kendal rode hard toward the man who had aimed the pistol at him. Thank God the things were notoriously inaccurate shots, especially on horseback. But it did confirm exactly what he suspected: Sophia was in that carriage.

Determination burned through him like fire.

He *would* save her. No matter what it took.

The blighter who’d fired on him rounded again, his gun now useless after its discharge. Still, his empty pistol could still be used as a weapon, its weight perfect for bludgeoning.

All Kendal was armed with was his wits. He’d left with such haste that he hadn’t thought to gather any weapons beforehand. However, after years of running whisky, he was quite resourceful.

The man came at him with the pistol cocked back in his hand to strike at Kendal.

Which was why Kendal ran directly into it.

His heart slammed in his chest, not with fear, but with the importance of succeeding. As the cur brought down the weapon, Kendal ducked to the side and reached out, grabbing

and savagely tugging the weapon from the bastard's hand. It fell into the grass with a thunk.

The man jerked in surprise.

Which was why the tactic worked so well. No one expected their victim to charge into the attack.

Kendal dropped to the ground and hastily scooped up the heavy gun.

Mongerton's lackey turned back toward him again, still on his horse. And no doubt assuming he had the advantage.

The assailant rode at full tilt toward Kendal. The earth thundered with the hoofbeats coming directly at him. The rider was moving, and Kendal was not, meaning Kendal would have the advantage of good aim.

He waited until his attacker was nearly upon him, then took careful aim. The horse was almost in front of him now, its chest filling his vision.

It was in that last, critical moment that Kendal released the gun, sending it sailing toward the man's head. Quick as lightning, Kendal dashed from the horse's path and tucked his legs toward his torso as he fell to clear himself from those hooves that could cause so much damage. He watched, his body tense, as his assailant fell from the horse like a sack of barley.

Kendal scrambled to his feet and raced over to where the man lay still. After retrieving the empty pistol, Kendal checked the unconscious man, confirming he was still alive. There were no additional weapons on him, save a few bullets and some gunpowder to reload the pistol.

The seconds it took to ready the gun were precious but necessary. Kendal couldn't go up against Mongerton unarmed again. He swatted the horse on the rump, sending it running in the opposite direction, away from the man who would use it to chase Kendal, and mounted his own steed.

Distant billows of dust kicked up on the open road indicated that the carriage was still close enough to reach.

Kendal leaned low on his horse and encouraged the beast into a hard gallop.

The carriage came into view quickly, and yet another man on horseback charged toward Kendal. Except this time, he was ready. He aimed the gun toward his opponent and fired without hesitation. They were close enough that his aim was true, striking the bastard in the shoulder.

It wouldn't kill him, but it would hurt like the very devil, and keep him from climbing back on his horse.

Wild desperation raged in Kendal. Sophia was in that carriage, only a stone's throw away. And yet still in danger.

Galloping once more, he focused his efforts this time toward the driver. He aimed his pistol, which the man did not know wasn't loaded. What he did most likely know was that his comrade had just been shot, and Kendal was the victor.

As Kendal hoped, the driver jerked the horses to a stop and put his hands up.

"I have no need for you." Kendal indicated the open road behind them with his pistol.

The man needed no further encouragement and leapt from his seat and sprinted in the opposite direction in one simultaneous move. Leaving only Mongerton to contend with.

Kendal wished he had more gunpowder to refill his pistol. No doubt, the other man was armed.

All at once, the carriage jostled violently, and a distinctly feminine voice cried out.

His heart stopped mid-beat as everything in him went cold.

*Sophia.*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MONGERTON CRUSHED his weight against Sophia in an attempt to block her blows. She shoved at him with enough effort that her breath grunted out between her clenched teeth.

Kendal was out there. Alive.

She'd heard his voice.

The rock was still locked in her fist. The one pressed against his soft stomach.

She tried to pull back to free it, but he grabbed onto her wrist with one hand and held her into place.

“If he thinks to have you, he’s a damn fool.” Mongerton’s other hand locked around the back of the neck, his squeeze painful. “I’ll never let you go.”

If nothing else, his new hold on her eased his stomach, liberating her hand. She unfurled her fist and drew the rock down hard on his head.

Mongerton lifted his palm to his scalp with a pained grunt. That was when she did it—when she slid her hand against his fleshy body and freed the dagger from his possession.

The door flew open, and there was Kendal, his face a mask of rage. He punched an arm into the cabin and yanked Mongerton by the cravat, dragging him from the carriage. But not before Mongerton caught her hair, yanking her along with them.

They tumbled out of the small door in a heap that sent Sophia sprawling. She tightened her hold on the dagger as she



fell, determined to ensure it didn't slip from her grasp.

She straightened as Kendal launched himself at Mongerton with the butt of a pistol.

“Run, Sophia,” Kendal ground out as her captor leapt out of the way. “Take my horse and go.”

Go?

Was he mad?

She wouldn't leave him. Mongerton didn't fight fair. She would never leave Kendal at his mercy.

Especially not when she was armed and could help.

The two wrestled in the dirt, flipping and grunting with such fervor that it was almost impossible to tell one from the other. Abruptly they stopped with Mongerton on Kendal's chest and the pistol pointed at his face.

“No!” The word screamed from her mouth as everything seemed to freeze.

That gun aimed at Kendal, ready to snuff out his life forever. Him, lying unmoving beneath its threat.

And her. With a dagger in her hand.

She had no idea what she was doing, but she ran at Mongerton with the weapon, plunging it into his back. The blade sank through flesh and bone with surprising ease.

He stiffened with a cry of pain, and the heavy pistol landed on the grass with a thunk.

Hot blood welled up from the wound, soaking his shirt and her hand. She jerked back in horror.

The knife came out with a sickeningly wet, sucking sound.

Her fingers released their grip on the handle, and the blade dropped to the ground, glistening with blood. She had done that. To another person.

To save Kendal.

She looked up to find him rolling Mongerton onto his side. The man was groaning in agony, his face a deep, purple red.

“W...will he die?” she stammered.

“No.” Kendal handed her the gun he’d scooped from where it fell. In one smooth move, he uncurled the cravat from Mr. Mongerton’s neck and pressed the wad of lengthy fabric to the wound at his back.

The older man grimaced.

“He will require a physician,” Kendal said. “How are you?”

She recalled how the blade had passed into his body, any catch giving way easily with the pressure. What had she sliced into?

She shuddered. “I’m fine.”

Kendal helped heft Mongerton’s bulk upright. The man shot Sophia a hateful stare. “You stabbed me,” he grated out through clenched teeth.

Sophia’s disgust dissipated, replaced instead with ire. He had meant to kill Kendal, to force her to marry him. “I would do it again,” she said vehemently.

“I demand restitution.” Mongerton jerked back from Kendal with a wince and staggered. “And all the money your father owes me.”

“You’ll receive the care of a physician and a meeting with a magistrate,” Kendal said dryly as he reached out to steady him. “If I were you, I’d save my strength for the bumpy ride ahead.”

The other man paled slightly. Kendal guided him toward the carriage, this time without being subjected to complaining and only a weak, unbalanced resistance as he forced Mongerton inside.

Once the other man was closed within the cabin, Kendal rushed to Sophia and gently cupped her face in his hands. “Did he hurt you?” His gaze lowered to her torn skirt. “It isn’t too late to kill him.”

She turned her head slightly so he wouldn’t see the splotch of red where he’d struck her. After all, it was such a minor

thing by comparison of what could have happened. “He didn’t hurt me. You arrived, and...” Tears welled in her eyes. The weight of the gun remained in her hand and the dagger was still at her feet, shimmering with blood.

Kendal wrapped his arms around her, enveloping her in the familiar spicy scent of him and offering comfort that settled deep into her soul.

“You did well, my love.” He leaned back and tilted her face up toward his. “I should have known you would be so brave.” He grinned. “I don’t even think you needed me.”

She gave a weak chuckle. “It was good to see you, regardless.”

He winked and picked up the dagger, pausing to clean it before tucking it into his jacket pocket, then led her to the driver’s seat. “To think I doubted you could actually start distilling whisky on your own in Scotland.”

She allowed him to help her climb onto the hard bench. “And now?”

“Now I think I’d feel bad for the excisemen.” He sat down beside her, lifted the reins and encouraged the horses to turn around. “I daresay, I never thought I’d imagine such a thing.”

Sophia braced herself as the carriage lurched forward, taking them back to Glasgow. “Perhaps it’s quite fortunate for them that I’ve altered my course.”

“Have you?”

“You know I have.” She slid a glance at him and found him grinning at her.

“Perhaps I want to hear you say it.”

“That I wish to marry you instead of engaging in illicit dealings?”

“Precisely.” He curled his free arm around her, drawing her closer to him. Perhaps it was the wind playing tricks on her, but she almost thought she heard him say, “And that we can find love.”

It was most likely the wind.

But she sincerely hoped it was not.

---

KENDAL HAD two purposes for seeking out a physician in Glasgow. The first was to ensure Mongerton would live, not only to pay the price of his crime but also so that Sophia wouldn't be burdened with his miserable death on her conscience. The second was for Kendal to assure himself that she was indeed fine.

She was. Thanks be to God. Or Kendal would have needed to finish the job with Mongerton that Sophia had started.

Once assurances were in place that Mongerton would live and be seen to by the authorities, Kendal and Sophia escaped to their room where they were finally, blessedly, alone.

Only then did he allow himself to realize the severity of what could have happened. If Kendal had not caught them in time, Mongerton would most certainly have forced Sophia into marriage. No doubt with the use of her own father as bait. Or perhaps her siblings in some way.

Regardless, Kendal could scarcely stand the idea of her suffering in such a fashion any more than he could the idea of her belonging to another man. Especially one she did not want.

He pulled her into his arms and held her there for a long moment before kissing her deeply, claiming her. She returned his kiss with a fire that matched his own as if needing to confirm for herself that they were both safe.

Desperate with need, they stumbled toward the wall, where he lifted her skirts as her thighs came up around his waist. While their couplings before had been slow and sensual, this was hard and fast, both needing comfort, reassurance.

Their cries rose up in unison until they slid down together, languid with the aftereffects of their passion.

Kendal brushed a loose tendril of honey-colored hair from Sophia's face.

She smiled up at him with flushed cheeks. "Are we still to be wed today?"

"If so, I must say we've gone about it in quite the opposite fashion once more." He let his fingertip drift lazily over her collarbone.

"The consummation can still follow." She grinned. "Again."

His blood immediately went hot. "You wicked woman."

"So says the wicked earl."

Ah yes, there was that. Obviously, his membership would need to be forfeited now. Not that he had any complaints. He liked the men well enough, of course, seeing most of them as brothers.

But Lady Sophia Stopford, soon-to-be Sophia Merrick, Lady Kendal—oh yes, she was entirely worth it.

"Shall we go marry, my love?" he asked.

"Yes." She beamed up at him.

He straightened and pulled her to her feet. "The priest said he'd be at the kirk all day."

"Then let us go sooner rather than later."

And after a quick freshening up and straightening their rumpled clothes—Sophia's requiring several stitches to be right and tight once more—they did exactly that. They arrived at the kirk as presentable as was possible after traveling and nearly dying, all in one day.

The ceremony was swift as they made their vows to one another, each speaking from the depth of their soul as they were joined together forever in spirit as they already were in body. Once they were pronounced married as attested to by the two witnesses who had once helped Kendal sneak whisky from Scotland to England, Kendal drew Sophia toward him and kissed his lovely wife.

He grinned down at her. “You have made me want everything I never thought to need, Lady Kendal.”

Sophia beamed with delight. “As you have done with me, Adolphus.”

He grimaced at the use of his Christian name and led her from the cool, quiet kirk. “Is that entirely necessary?”

“Oh, it most certainly is.” She put her hand on her hip. “In fact, how could you not tell me your name was Adolphus?”

“You never asked,” he said dryly.

“Well, I think it is a fine name.” Her hand slid into his. “For a fine man.” She repeated his name again, saying it slow and sweet, “Adolphus.”

Never had he thought of his name as being anything other than dastardly. But never had he heard it on her lips. Never had he considered himself a fine man, either.

His heart thrummed for this woman who had so set his preconceived notions on its ear and made him want to be the man she saw him as.

“What is it?” she asked, evidently sensing the change in him. “Do you honestly hate your name that much?”

He shook his head. It wasn’t his name, though he would still never forgive his mother for it any more than he would her other transgressions.

The words he wanted to say to Sophia were on the tip of his tongue, near the edge of a vulnerability that should scare him.

*Live your life.*

They stopped before the carriage that would take them back to the hotel. Not the dismal one where the innkeeper had allowed Sophia to be snatched from him after a few glittered coins were tossed his way. But to a finer establishment, one befitting an earl and his new countess.

“I love you, Sophia,” he said.

She blinked up at him, her blue eyes widening. “You do?”

He reached up and stroked his hand down her soft cheek. “I know I did not come after you of my own volition but doing so has altered my life in the most wonderfully unexpected way. You’ve shown this boring, stodgy earl how to enjoy life. To open my heart.”

“Boring, indeed.” Her eyes sparkled, and she put her hand over his chest, directly over his heart, which belonged entirely to her. “I love you too.”

Her gaze met his. “You’ve shown me that I’m not losing my life by marrying but am enhancing it in ways I never thought possible. I love you...” She gave him a coy look, “Adolphus.”

And while he relished those words on her lips, he wasn’t quite certain he could grow used to, or even like, his Christian name. Even coming from her delectable lips.

Until later, that was, when their bodies were locked in the throes of passion, joined with love. She had moaned his name as she found her release and made “Adolphus” sound like the most beautiful thing in all the world.

They left for London the next day to face their families and the shock of the ton. But beyond that, there was something unexpected and wonderful that neither had anticipated looking forward to during their chaotic cat-and-mouse game through England and into Scotland: truly being together, not only as husband and wife but as a man and woman in love.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AS EXCITING a journey as Sophia had on the way to Scotland, she had a far better experience on the way back. Which, ironically, afforded her about as little sleep.

Their days were spent in the carriage, sharing stories from their youth and about their families. Their nights, however, were spent in a different form of learning, through exploration and sated curiosity.

In the end, it took three days longer to return to London than it had been to finally travel to Glasgow, yet neither of them offered a single complaint. When they finally arrived at Gullsville House on Harley Street, Sophia found herself wishing they had delayed a few more days.

Kendal put his hand over hers. “Please allow me to speak on our behalf to your father.”

It was a tempting offer. But one she knew she couldn’t accept.

She folded her fingers over his and shook her head. “I can’t but am so grateful for the consideration.” She drew in a fortifying breath. “I must do this.”

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.” The way he said it—the way he looked at her—not only now, but always, spoke of the truth behind his words.

The door to the carriage swung open to reveal a drizzly day. A perfect setting for reuniting with her father if ever there was one. Kendal offered her his arm and led her to the door,



where they discovered they weren't the only ones to have just arrived.

Aunt Nancy filled the doorway with a shriek of delight when she saw Sophia and raced toward her. "Lord Kendal, you found her."

Her gaze swept between them, on the closeness of their proximity and how Sophia held onto his arm. Aunt Nancy put her hands to her chest. "And you married her." She gave a wistful sigh. "I knew you would be just perfect—"

"Is that my Sophia?" The familiar baritone of Father's voice broke through Aunt Nancy's excitement.

All at once, the stoic resolve Sophia was determined to maintain in the face of the man who had sold her off for a gambling debt began to crumble.

It rushed at her in a wave of pain—this man who she'd once held in such great esteem thought so little of her as to offer her in lieu of his losses at a gaming hell.

Kendal squeezed his hand around hers. "She is *my* Sophia now," he replied with a regal aristocracy.

Aunt Nancy's brow flinched with confusion as she glanced between him and Sophia's father, apparently unaware of what had driven a wedge between them.

Father stepped closer, his eyes bright with clarity for the first time in months. Perhaps years. They glittered with unshed tears and his lower jaw worked without sound for the span of a moment, as though seeking the right words.

"I don't deserve it," he said eventually. "But I should like the opportunity to speak with her alone."

"If you hurt her..." The threat in Kendal's tone was unmistakable.

"I will not," Father's tone was as hard as Kendal's.

Sophia slipped her hand from the warmth of her husband's elbow. While she took comfort in his strength, she did not need it. Going to Scotland to forge her path had made her

stronger than she realized. And Kendal had helped her fortitude.

Her father held out his arms as though to embrace her. The child in her longed to fall against him; the woman she had become lifted her chin in defiance. “I’m not that girl anymore, Father.”

“No,” he whispered softly. “You’re not.”

As he led her to his study, Sophia caught sight of Aunt Nancy turning toward Kendal. “What’s happened?”

Her father closed the door to the study, sealing out any further conversation. He looked at the floor first, as though gathering his thoughts, before pinching at his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and giving a hard sniff.

When he finally regarded her, she could see the redness of his eyes—the unmistakable effects of tears.

She pushed away the stab of pity.

“You tried to sell me into marriage.” Her voice shook with anger. “And when that didn’t work, you sent another man after me. Also to marry me. Am I so expendable?”

“I couldn’t afford to keep up with your seasons.” Father shook his head as soon as he spoke, clearly realizing it was the wrong thing to say.

“And so marrying me off to pay your gambling debts was the ideal solution?” Even saying it aloud needled at a fragile place inside her heart.

“I had no choice. Mr. Mongerton said he would come after our estate. We would be destitute.”

“Because of you.”

Her father lowered his head again in silent acknowledgment of her accusation.

“You used to be such a good man, one that I admired.” Her voice trembled with emotion she could no longer dam.

“I lost everything when your mother and the twins died.”

“No, not everything,” Sophia whispered. “But you didn’t seem to care. Cecelia was mother and father to both me and Henry. You used your vices as a crutch and you pushed us away. Now, this.”

“What can I do?” He dropped to his knees and gazed up at her. “To make it right?” There was desperation in his clear stare. “To prove to you and your siblings that I still love you?”

“Stop drinking.”

“I have.”

A glance toward the hutch confirmed the crystal decanters had been removed, as well as their matching glasses.

“Stop gambling,” she said.

“I have.”

“Tell me.” Sophia swallowed. “Tell me that you love me.”

His chin quivered as he got up to his feet. “My girl. My Sophia, with your bright smile and your happy energy. I’ve put you in the dark for far too long, and yet you were brilliant enough to keep on shining. I’m proud of the woman you are—accomplished and lovely, but also strong and intelligent.” He gave a little self-deprecating smirk. “More so than your father.” His mouth lifted at the corners. “I love you, my darling girl.”

This time when he opened his arms, Sophia did go to him. His embrace enfolded her, surrounding her in the familiar scent of the cologne he always wore and absent the previous ever-present odor of brandy.

“Ludlow,” Aunt Nancy said Father’s given name sharply from outside the door.

It would appear she knew. At least enough to be appalled.

Father released Sophia and she did not mistake the flash of fear in his eyes. After all, Aunt Nancy could be a force to be reckoned with.

There would be a good deal of explanations that evening, especially once Aunt Nancy spoke to Henry. But through it all,

Sophia would have Kendal, her Adolphus, a man equal parts dangerous and boring in the most perfect ways. A man who would always be at her side and always, always love her.

---

KENDAL NEVER THOUGHT he would be the man doing this sort of thing. He strode into the Wicked Earls' Club with the understanding it would be his last time.

In years past, Kendal had seen men come and go. Some so swift, he'd almost pitied them. Others with an obdurate insistence to never be wed—much like himself—who finally lost themselves to a lady's allure.

Kendal had once thought them all fools. Hopeless romantics who were caught up in the enchantment of a lady's affection. And here he was, gold pin secured in its small silk-lined box, ready to return it to the club with a gladness he'd never once considered of those men he so oft regarded as "poor chaps."

Morrey was the first to see him, his gaze immediately settling on the pin box. His brows rose and he nodded his head once in acknowledgement. Kendal grinned in reply, absent any regret.

His cohorts at the club would always be about. It wasn't uncommon to remain friends with those they'd brushed shoulders with for so many years. But his membership forfeiture was well worth a lifetime with Sophia and their future happiness.

It was the kind of life he hoped someday for Marguerite, though such a future for his sister seemed to be growing less and less possible with each passing year that she played the role of Marcus and sank deeper into the running of Mercy's Door.

The Earl of Downing sat at a table by himself and quickly rose when he caught sight of Kendal. "I heard you've been wed." He clapped a strong hand on Kendal's shoulder. "Felicitations. You seem happy."

“That I am.”

Downing nodded and shifted his weight. “Lady Kendal is a cousin to Lady Eugenia, is she not?”

Ah, the topic of Lady Eugenia again. The repeated mention was most definitely not a coincidence.

“I can introduce you if you like,” Kendal offered.

A touch of color showed on the man’s face. As fierce as he was in the ring, he was now almost bashful. “If we happen upon one another at an event and she is not otherwise engaged.”

“I’ll see that it happens.” Kendal patted the younger man on his broad back.

With that, Kendal made his way to the second floor where the Earl of Baxter kept his office. On his ascent, each earl Kendal passed caught his gaze with a nod, understanding what he was about to do. He paused before the polished wood door and rapped on its smooth surface, fully prepared to turn in his pin.

And despite the folly of his resolve to forever remain single in his youth, he now regretted not one iota of his decision. It was indeed a worthy trade, a life of wickedness for the bounty of love.

# EPILOGUE

*AUGUST 1823*

*Lochslin Castle, Scotland*

SCOTLAND WAS AN ENTIRELY different place when one knew where they were going and their purpose wasn't aimed at escaping a dismal fate.

Sophia stepped out of the stone corridor onto the expansive green lawn and glanced behind her toward the majestic castle. Though rustic in appearance on the outside, the lodgings within were luxurious and comfortable. A testament to the efforts of Lady Benton, no doubt, despite her hands being full with two rambunctious boys.

The babe in Sophia's arms shifted and gave a delicate coo.

"Are you awake, Lizzie?" Sophia bounced her daughter lightly.

Wide blue eyes blinked up at her, a perfect complement to the thick, dark hair Sophia swept gently to the side.

"Is she rousing already?" Kendal appeared next to Sophia and reached for their little girl.

Lizzie's small hand locked on his pinky, making it look massive by comparison.

"It would appear so," Sophia said with a laugh.

Kendal turned to her with a glint in his eye. "Thankfully now and not half an hour ago."

Her cheeks blazed with the knowledge of exactly what they were doing a half-hour before while their little Elizabeth slept in the nursery and they had found themselves alone in their bedchamber with more than a few moments to spare.

“Sophia,” Penelope called out, waving them over to the pond where she and her husband, Lord Oakhurst, lounged alongside Lord and Lady Benton and Lord Benton’s mother, Madge. “The refreshments have been served.”

“I’ve rather worked up a bit of an appetite.” Kendal gave Sophia a delicious little grin and guided her toward the others.

A platter of various sandwiches and fruits awaited them, artfully arranged on a wrought iron table, along with a fresh pot of tea. Three small boys played at the water’s edge, Lady Benton’s two with their light brown hair glinting in the sun as they poked into the water with a stick, and Penelope’s son, Arcas, who watched them with large, green pensive eyes.

“You eat first, my love.” Kendal reached for Lizzie. “I’ll hold this little one.”

“I’m sure your altruistic offer has nothing to do with how sweet she is when she first wakes.” Despite her teasing, Sophia allowed him to pull their daughter into his arms.

Lizzie gazed up into her father’s face and gave a broad smile, revealing two small teeth along her bottom gums. Warmth effused Sophia’s heart, the way it always did when she observed how enamored father and daughter were with one another.

“Colin, leave the stick be,” Lady Benton admonished one of her sons.

Her other son, the taller of the two, sighed. “I’m Colin. He’s Connell.”

“You know very well who I meant.” Lady Benton rolled her eyes heavenward. “Why on Earth did we give them such similar names?”

“You thought it would be endearing.” Lord Benton winked at his wife.

“Well, it’s entertaining for certs.” Madge stood up, her frame wiry but strong as she gave a little bark of laughter and ran off to play with the two boys. They squealed with delight and darted toward her open arms as Arcas gingerly lifted the stick they’d been playing with.

Penelope smiled as she observed her son. “Who would have thought that running whisky so many years ago would lead us all here now?” She reached out for Lord Oakhurst’s hand. “Happy and with the most beautiful children.”

“Though thankfully some of us did not become involved in the whisky distilling venture.” Kendal slid Sophia a meaningful look.

“I regret nothing.” She held a strawberry to his lips, which he promptly bit into. “It led me to you.”

“I’m indeed grateful for that.”

“And here I thought you’d vowed to never wed,” Oakhurst said with a lift of his brow.

Kendal scoffed. “Follies of youth, my friend. I had not yet met the right woman.”

“As it is with all of us, I believe.” Lord Benton lifted his wife’s hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. This was followed immediately by the disgusted cries of the two little boys close enough to see their parents’ affection.

The adults all laughed as their children played with one another under Madge’s watchful eye, with the sweet scent of heather in the warm, afternoon air.

While some vows were meant to be broken, others were made with the need to see realized. When Sophia had promised her mother and sweet little George and Julia that she would live a rich life for them all, never had she dreamed fulfilling it would be so beautiful or so perfect.

What was more, she was grateful to have done so with Kendal, for surely there was no man as caring or loving in all of Britain as her husband. And while not at all boring, he was just the right amount of wicked.



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Thank you for falling into our world of Wicked Earls!

I'VE WRITTEN several books with matches Lady Bursbury has made (The Matchmaker of Mayfair) as well as other Wicked Earls - you can find them here:

EARL OF BENTON - learn more about Alistair and Emma's story when a whisky smuggling earl does one last run while trying to save an heiress whose uncle is determined to see her dead.

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# EARL OF DARLING

ALSO PUBLISHED AS: THE EARL'S RUNAWAY  
BRIDE

MAGGIE DALLEN AND  
KATHERINE ANN MADISON

# CHAPTER ONE

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A NOTE TO READERS.... This book is currently published under the title, *The Earl's Runaway Bride*. It is book 6 in the *Wallflower's Wish* series. Thank you!

EVERYONE in fashionable society would agree that Miss Evelyn Rathmore was every inch the lady. Which was to say, she had no experience with climbing out of windows.

“Are you certain you know what you’re doing, miss?” Cora asked.

Evelyn drew back from where she’d been leaning out over the sill, a cold gust of winter wind following her in.

She turned to face the new maid with her rosy cheeks and furrowed brow. “Of course!” Evelyn said with perhaps a bit more enthusiasm than was necessary. Her smile also felt far too bright. “Remember what I told you. If anyone asks, you have not seen me all evening.”

Cora nodded, but concern still clouded her eyes. “Yes, miss.”

Evelyn gave a sharp nod, clutching her reticule tightly—it was all she would be able to bring with her, but it contained enough money that she ought to be able to reach her aunt’s home, and from there...

Well, that was as far as she'd gotten with her plan. She had not seen her aunt in several years, but she'd always been kind to Evelyn, and she hoped that with her help they might figure out where she could go next.

Once her reputation was thoroughly ruined.

She squeezed her eyes tight against the pain, the frustration, the overwhelming anger at the injustice of it all.

Cora misunderstood. "If ye're having a change of heart, miss, it's not too late to reconsider—"

"I am not having a change of heart." Her eyes snapped open with a glare.

Cora eyed the second-floor window warily. "That's an awfully big drop—"

"It's not that far." Evelyn's tone lacked the right amount of conviction as that last glance outside the window had indeed shaken her nerve.

The drop to the ground had not seemed so very great two days ago when she'd first hatched this plan. She moved toward the window now and stuck her head out, eyeing the garden beneath. Her head spun at the distance to the ground, but she turned back to Cora with a determined grin. "See that? There's snow on the ground. Surely that will help to cushion the fall, no?"

Cora's wince was far from heartening. She wrung her hands together before her as she glanced from the window to the bedroom door. "Are you certain you cannot slip out through the kitchen, miss?"

Evelyn just barely held back a sigh. "I cannot do that, Cora, and you know the reason why." She attempted to soften her tone with a smile. "You are the only servant I trust."

And to be honest, she didn't trust her all that much. Cora was a new addition to the household staff, and it was only her newness that made her Evelyn's best option for an ally. The rest of her father's staff had been here since before she'd been born and were loyal to him to a fault.

But Evelyn would need someone to close the window after she was gone, not to mention a messenger who could explain her decision to leave to her brother when he returned from his travels.

“Remember, Cora,” she said. “When my brother returns, you must tell him that I was of a clear mind when I ran away, and that it was of my own free will.”

Cora nodded, her brow still furrowed and her fingers fidgeting with the lace of her apron.

Evelyn held back another sigh of impatience. She was glad to have found one servant who she was fairly certain would not run to her father the moment she was out of sight. But it would have been slightly more reassuring if her ally were not quite so nervous all the time.

She squared her shoulders and straightened her spine, hoping some of her own resolve might rub off on the older woman. “Tell Jacob that I will send word just as soon as I am able. And that...” She bit her lip, not sure how many intimate details she wished to entrust with Cora, who could very well cave the moment Evelyn’s father fixed her with one of his cold, hard stares. She wet her lips. “Just tell him that I know he has done all that he could. That...that this is not his fault.”

Cora’s eyes crinkled at the corners with emotion. “Yes, miss,” she murmured gently.

She supposed even a new maid had heard enough gossip in this house to have at least some idea of why she was leaving.

Of whom she was fleeing.

Cora nibbled on her lip as her gaze flickered toward the open window, where sounds from the party below were drifting in.

Tonight’s dinner party marked the perfect opportunity for her escape. With this winter weather, none of the guests would venture outside, and her father and his loyal servants would be too distracted with entertaining to notice that she had slipped away. Plus, there was the fact that this was the one and only occasion since their return to England that her fiancé was

unable to attend, holding her hostage at his side as she introduced him to her family and friends.

She doubted any of them truly believed his tale of love at first sight when they'd come across each other during her tour of the continent with Jacob, but no one was rude enough to say so aloud.

And besides, it hardly mattered if anyone believed the ludicrous fairy tale that Mr. Stallworth wove about their first meeting. All that truly mattered was the story he'd told her father.

The tall tale about how she'd been compromised.

Her brother had believed her, but when it was her word versus Mr. Stallworth's, her father had chosen the family's good reputation over her future happiness.

Perhaps she shouldn't have been so shocked at her father's opinion on the matter. He'd raised her and Jacob to believe that appearances were what mattered most.

Evelyn had just never understood that her father had meant appearances mattered more than anything...including her.

She swallowed down another wave of emotions. These days she was hard-pressed to say whether the choking sensation in her throat was caused by tears of hurt or anger. They were so closely intertwined it was impossible to separate them.

"Perhaps if you were to wait until Mr. Jacob returns," Cora started.

"I cannot wait, Cora," she said. Perhaps it was the resignation in her voice that had the maid clamping her lips shut to cut off any further protest.

Evelyn was glad for the silence. If she were being honest, she desperately wished that there was some other way out of this mess that was her engagement. Running away wasn't exactly her favorite option. But Jacob had tried for weeks to change her father's mind, to no avail. Even their new acquaintance the Earl of Everly and his friends had attempted



to reason with him, but it seemed the harder they tried, the more obstinate he became.

She turned back to the window.

And so it had come to this. Running away. Her reputation would be ruined, but at least she would have her life back. She would not have to face a future beside a cruel, power-hungry knave like Stallworth.

No, she would just be alone.

Her eyes grew alarmingly wet and she blinked away the tears of self-pity as she turned her back on Cora. She leaned over the windowsill just as shrill female laughter pierced the air. She'd left the ladies in the drawing room when the men had gone off with her father to his smoking room.

A smile tugged at Evelyn's lips. This was the moment she'd been waiting for.

The women were entertaining themselves, no doubt they'd already forgotten that she'd excused herself to use the washroom. They were likely relishing this opportunity to talk about her and her scandal-ridden engagement. Or no...

Her smile grew rueful. Perhaps for once she would not be the subject of gossip this evening. Not when the new Earl of Darling was in attendance with his sister.

Men's laughter came from another section of the house, closer to her room, joined by the foul scent of cigars. Darling would be there with her father and his cronies if he hadn't fled yet after all the backhanded comments and whispers that had transpired over dinner.

She said a silent thank you to the newcomer for having taken some of the attention off of her for one night, at least. Though it wasn't as though he'd set out to help her. On the contrary, she couldn't imagine any man would actually wish to have words like *beast* and *murderer* whispered along with his name.

A pang of sympathy gave her pause as she reached the windowsill. It seemed almost churlish for a hostess to leave

her own dinner party when newcomers were there and most likely in need of a welcoming smile and a polite word.

It wasn't as though her father would extend that kindness. Her father had been horrified to discover that the earldom had been inherited by an "uncouth boor" like Darius Haven, the new Earl of Darling.

*What is this country coming to if a military brute like him can become an earl?*

From the way her father had spoken of the man, she'd half expected a fur-covered beast with claws to enter their dining room this evening, but that was not the case.

Darling was not beastly in appearance, just...broad. Broad shoulders, broad chest...even broad features, with a square jaw and a flat nose that looked as though it had been broken more than once in this lifetime. His sandy-colored hair was shorn neatly, and his clothes were clearly fitted by the best tailor. His eyes were the only feature that made her think perhaps there was some credit to those rumors about his cruel nature. Not that he was unkind to her, but his eyes did seem rather cold. They held flecks of ice in their startlingly blue depths.

The moment those icy eyes had connected with hers... That was the unsettling moment as she'd greeted him and his pretty blonde sister. The sister had responded cordially, while Darling's responses were more like grunts than words.

But aside from his lack of elocution, he was hardly the terrifying creature he'd been made out to be. True, those whispers of "murderer" and "monster" were unsettling, but if her mother had taught her anything it was that even the most scandal-ridden guests deserved a young lady's hospitality.

*Charity begins at home*, her mother would say.

She sighed heavily as she realized that if her mother were watching her from heaven, she would have been disappointed in the way she'd left Darling and his sister to fend for themselves.

Evelyn smothered a nervous laugh as she risked another peek over the edge of the window. No, there were many things her mother would not have approved of this evening. Leaving a new earl and his sister to fend for themselves among the snide gossips of the *ton* was hardly her worst fault.

She bit her lip. Her mother would have been horrified to find she'd run away.

She shook off the thought. But her mother was no longer here, she'd died years ago, and her mother wouldn't have wanted to marry a cruel manipulative monster like Stallworth either so...needs must, and all that.

Besides... She braced herself against the edge of the window as she sat on the sill. She'd already made up her mind. She'd spent days racking her brain for any other option and had decided that this was the best course forward. There was no use dithering over the decision now.

It was a good plan, she told herself as she braced herself against the cold night air.

Well, it was *a* plan.

In truth, it was the only plan she could think of now that her wedding was looming mere weeks away.

She straightened the edges of her cloak and pulled up her hood, as she flashed Cora one last brave smile and lifted a leg to straddle the windowsill.

She might not have much left to her, but she had her pride and a lifetime of decorum and good breeding ingrained in her. As such she managed to keep her ankles covered as Cora assisted her out the window and onto the ledge.

“Don't forget to shut the window, Cora, so my father does not know how I slipped away.”

She nodded. “Good luck to you, Miss Evelyn.”

Evelyn smiled. “And you, Cora.”

She kept her spine straight and her chin lifted high as she navigated the awkward and unfamiliar task of lowering herself over the edge.

After all. She might not have much left to her name...but she was still every inch the lady.

## CHAPTER TWO

DARIUS RUTLAND, Earl of Darling, gave a grunt of annoyance as he shoved the thick red curtain away from his face so he could take a swig of his drink. The curtain seemed to have a mind of its own as it clung to his arm and partially hid him from view from the rest of the room.

It wasn't as though he were intentionally hiding when he'd found this spot where he could bide his time before he made excuses for himself and his sister and got them far away from this pit of vipers as quickly as his coach could carry them.

True men did not hide. Former lieutenants in the king's army? They wouldn't dream of it. And as for newly named earls...?

Well, Darius supposed it was an earl's prerogative to study his peers from the sidelines.

*Peers.* He just barely held back a scoff at the thought as he eyed the roomful of titled dandies who were smoking their cigars and drinking their brandies, and talking about people he did not know and politics he cared little about.

Soft. That's how he'd describe them. In their bodies, their practices, and in their minds. No discipline and even less honor.

He still couldn't grasp what he was doing here amongst this crowd. Him. An earl. It felt like some cruel trick.

*A dream come true,* his sister Tabetha had said.

He eyed the men around him who'd been snubbing him all night long.

More like a nightmare come to life.

A small handful of gentlemen grouped together to his left burst out in a laugh that made him tense. A few of these men had been tossing back drinks like his youngest sister devoured the sweets he brought home for her.

Which was to say, with zero restraint.

When the group to his right shifted, their smoke swirling in their wake, he moved away to avoid the noxious odor that was making his head throb. As he shifted, the blasted curtain tried to swallow him whole again and he batted it away when it brushed his nose.

“But honestly,” one of the men to his left was saying. His voice rose and carried over the sound of the others. “Where did he come from?”

Darius tensed, the muscles in his neck and shoulders tightening as something dark and dangerous coiled inside him, always at the ready for a fight.

*Beast. Monster.* Those whispers weren't wrong.

“What of those rumors that he's a murderer?” One of the other men asked, his voice was a stage whisper. The sort one might hear all the way at the back of a music hall.

Murderer. Now there was one name that wasn't accurate.

A muscle in his jaw twitched at the familiar surge of pain. Regret.

Not entirely accurate, at least.

That first man, the one who didn't even pretend to whisper, laughed too loudly, forgetting entirely, no doubt, that the man they were discussing was here with them tonight. Even if he was hidden.

“All I want to know is, how on earth did a man like him inherit an earldom?” The man's tone was filled with mockery

as his friends laughed. “Honestly. How many men had to die for that man to become earl?”

Darius’s knuckles whitened as he gripped his glass of brandy and tried for control. “Keep your mouth shut and everything will be just fine,” Tabettha had said with a pat on his shoulder when they’d first arrived.

Mouth shut.

He arched his neck to the side to ease the tension as the men beside him brayed like donkeys, their laughter jabbing like a sharp, glowing fire iron to his temper.

He should keep his mouth shut. Mouth shut. Keep your mouth shut—

“Six.” His voice boomed louder than intended and he watched with some amusement as the men to his left who’d been laughing at his expense stiffened and paled as he strode out from where he’d been...biding his time.

Not hiding.

In two long strides he was standing before the fool who’d opened his big, loud mouth, his friends scattering like weeds as they stammered excuses and apologies. The toad before him was so pale he looked like he might faint.

The thought made Darius smile and, in turn, the man before him turned a ghostly shade of white.

“I-I b-beg your pardon?” the man said.

“Six.” Darius cracked his knuckles, enjoying himself now, probably more than he ought. Tabettha would definitely not approve.

“We’re trying to fit in,” she’d say when she gave him an inevitable lecture on the way home.

Fitting in. That was all Tabettha had ever wanted. As for him...?

Well, he had no illusions about the type of man he was. The type of man they thought him to be. But it was the thought of Tabettha—of all three of his sisters—that had him taking a

deep, calming breath, and stopping short before he could make the other man cry from fear.

“S-six what, my lord?” the man asked.

Darius relaxed his posture, forcing his muscles to unclench as he let his cruel smile fade to something far more civilized. “You asked how many men had to die for someone like me to become earl,” he reminded him. “The answer is six.”

It was the truth and it sounded no less ludicrous saying it aloud now than it had the first time he’d done the math. All six heirs had died in rapid succession, leading to Darius inheriting the title. Now he spelled it out for the nameless coward who was all but sniveling before him. He started with the very natural and expected death of the penultimate earl, who’d been wrinkled, and grey, and hovering at death’s door for years. More tragically, his grown son followed suit not two months later in a hunting accident. Then there was the very sad tragedy of the sickness that had killed off another two in rapid succession, brothers, followed by a shipwreck that no one could have foreseen.

And then, of course, there was Thomas. Darius’s second cousin, dear friend, military mate, and the fifth in line for the title. Until he, too, had died.

He braced for the onslaught of emotions, no less painful today than it had been six months prior when Thomas had died in his arms in India.

*Murderer.*

He drew back from the gentleman who still cowered before him, already kicking himself for having lost control of his temper.

At least he hadn’t struck anyone.

*Well done, you.*

He could already hear Tabetha’s sarcasm if he tried to use that as his defense.

*Not striking anyone at a viscount’s dinner party is hardly some brag-worthy feat, she’d point out.*



She wouldn't be wrong. But he'd take the small victories where he could get them. He'd learned that in battle.

He turned to find that every man in the room was watching him. The laughter and chatter had been replaced by silence as everyone seemed to be waiting with bated breath to see what he'd do next.

He took a step back, toward the door. The cloying smoke was making his stomach turn and he needed air.

What he needed was to leave, but he couldn't take off without Tabetha.

Tabetha.

"That is most unfortunate, my lord. My condolences." The man tried to make amends, his voice shaking with fear. Darius tried to relax the features of face, aware of how he must look.

He drew in a deep breath, avoiding the curious stares of the men around him. He owed it to Tabetha to stay. To make nice. The rest of his younger sisters would be arriving at the start of the season next month and Tabetha was determined to smooth the way for them.

The least he could do was stay out of her way and not make her job more difficult.

"If you'll excuse me, gentlemen," he muttered just as he reached the door.

Once out in the hallway, he darted off like he was being hunted by predators. Air. He needed air before this stuffy, stodgy dinner party suffocated the life right out of him.

He slipped through a darkened room and through the glass doors on the far side.

Only when he was outside and breathing in the cold night air could he quiet this pounding in his veins. The dark moonlit sky was a soothing balm on this claustrophobic feeling that had been grating on his nerves from the moment they'd arrived in London.

He moved until he was out of sight of the glass doors before collapsing back against the brick exterior wall of the

viscount's home. His breath clouded the air before him as he breathed out in relief.

It was too cold to stay out here for long, but for just one moment he could relax. He stuck his hands into his pockets, the fingers of his left hand brushing against the bizarrely cryptic invitation he'd received earlier today.

With his thumb he could just make out the embossed W on the seal.

Some sort of secret club, he gathered.

He rested his head back against the brick behind him. Another club where he would stick out like a sore thumb, no doubt.

For one blissful moment, he stood there and breathed in the silence of the night. The cold, quiet stillness. But then he felt it. It felt like...like fabric brushing against the top of his ear.

For a second there he thought perhaps that blasted curtain had found a way to follow him out here to ensnare him once more.

A brush of something again and he swatted at the vine or dried leaves or whatever it was. His fingers brushed against it now and he shifted for a better look just as a squeaking noise had his heart hammering in his chest.

What the...

His gaze found skirts, then slippers sticking out beneath, and then...

He dragged his gaze up and up until he caught sight of a pretty brunette who was smiling down at him and clinging onto a windowsill for dear life. "I beg your pardon," she said sweetly. "Would you be so kind as to lend me a hand?"

## CHAPTER THREE

AS FAR AS PLANS WENT, this one was officially a disaster. Evelyn hadn't even left the grounds before she'd been stopped. And by Darling, no less.

To his credit, he did not pepper her with questions. Not at first, at least. He leapt into action instead, reaching up until his large hands wrapped around her waist and lowering her to the ground with alarming ease.

Once her feet were on the ground, he let her go and took a step back. She avoided eye contact as she brushed at her skirts and did her best to gather her wits. Now was not the time to lose her senses altogether, even if the man standing before her was gaping as though... She peeked up to see his expression. Well, he was gaping as though she'd just fallen out of a window.

"Good evening, Lord Darling," she said, her smile growing as it always did in the face of company. Her mother had taught her well. *Never let a guest see you stumble*, her mother used to say.

What would her mother say to do now, in this particular scenario? That was less clear. But whatever Evelyn did, she would do it with a smile and the utmost decorum.

With that thought, she straightened to her full height, keenly aware that Lord Darling had yet to respond at all. His gaping had turned to glowering, and all those whispers about his murderous past suddenly seemed far more understandable. He was a rather intimidating person, was he not?

Her mouth went dry. Heavens, had he always been so tall?

Broad, yes, but he towered over her now, and his size combined with his glare had her stumbling back a step and then another until her feet found the familiar paved stones of the back veranda.

“Are you enjoying your evening, Lord Darling?”

He gave a grunt of acknowledgement as he followed her onto the veranda. She went to backpedal once more and nearly slipped on the ice. “What are you doing out here?” he asked.

She widened her eyes with feigned innocence. “I might ask you the same. Was it too warm inside? Shall I ask the servants to open a window?” She made a move as if to head into the house, which of course she would not do.

If she went in now she would merely have to find another way out again.

And also explain why she’d climbed out a window.

She paused with her hand hovering over the doorknob, her heart racing in her chest. Oh drat. Now what was she supposed to do?

“Miss Rathmore.” His voice close behind her made her jump. His voice was low. Rumbly, even.

She whirled around with a breathless, “Yes?”

His scowl was no longer so intimidating. It was concern that clouded his features and had his icy blue eyes fixed on her so intently.

She waited for him to continue with a smile still firmly planted on her face and her brows arched ever so slightly in anticipation.

He took a step closer. “Why were you climbing out the window?”

“Oh that?” She laughed breezily. It sounded just as false as it felt. “Nothing for you to worry about, I’m sure. I merely needed some air.”

He gave another little grunt, but she was hard-pressed to say if he was amused or angered by her obvious lie.

Either way, a flicker of irritation had her straightening her spine, her chin tilting up in defiance. This was her house, after all. She could climb anywhere she pleased. And besides, her affairs were none of his concern. “Lord Darling, I assure you, there is no need to concern yourself—”

“Normally, you would be correct. It would not be my place to concern myself in your affairs.” That growl of a voice had her blinking rapidly.

*Beast.* That was what one of the ladies had whispered about him earlier tonight. *A monster,* someone else had said. And she supposed he was right. The circumstances were far from normal.

With that voice and his intimidating size, she understood those names completely. But what they hadn’t seen—what she was startled to see now—was *this*. He moved closer to her and the ice in his gaze seemed to thaw right in front of her eyes. The concern there was more than her heart could bear. It was almost like he truly cared.

Which was nonsense, obviously. She was no one to him.

“Tell me why you were running away,” he said. Actually, it was more like a command.

“I wasn’t...” Her denial trailed off in the face of this new man before her. Still large, still intimidating, but his broad size and stern demeanor made him seem...capable. Like he could handle anything life threw his way. This was not a man who would run away from his problems.

She shifted uncomfortably. She wasn’t typically the sort to run from her problems, either. It was just that she had no idea what else to do.

“Miss Rathmore,” he said again.

“Yes?”

“Do you recall the lady I came here with this evening?”

She nodded, thrown by this sudden change in topic. “You sister? Yes, of course. She seems lovely.”

He gave one of those grunts again. “Tabetha is my eldest sister and she came with me to London to help prepare the house I’ve inherited for the others who are to follow.”

Evelyn shifted from foot to foot with impatience. She ought to be fleeing right now. The longer she stood here, the more at risk she was of being caught. And yet, his slow, even way of talking was calming her. And she found that she wished to know what he was trying to tell her. “The others?” she asked.

He nodded. “I have two younger sisters, as well, who will be joining us here for the season.”

“Heavens,” she murmured. The new earl had three sisters? And they were all descending on London at once to be launched into society.

Oh, the gossips of the *ton* would be in heaven.

She winced in sympathy with these girls she did not even know. But she did know what it was like to have one’s every move scrutinized. To have scandal nipping at one’s heels. To have all of society waiting to see if one will trip and fall.

“So you see, Miss Rathmore...”

She blinked up at him. See? What was she supposed to see?

“If one of my sisters tried to run away, I’d be heartbroken. I’d do anything in my power to solve whatever problem she thought was too great to face head-on—”

She winced at the kind words that seemed to slap her across the face. She wasn’t facing her problems head-on. She wasn’t facing them at all.

He leaned in closer. “And I’d hope that any gentleman would do the same.”

Her heart did a little twist in her chest at the surprisingly affectionate words. His meaning, however, was starting to dawn and she took a step back.

The earl thought it was his duty to stop her.

She stiffened again, her defenses rising as she realized how close she'd come to spilling all her secrets to a stranger. She narrowed her eyes. This overbearing man, he was luring her in with his concern and that low, mesmerizing voice. "I assure you, Lord Darling. I already have an older brother, and he has already done everything he can to...help."

She cut herself off before she could say any more. Already, she'd said too much. She'd all but confirmed that she'd been attempting to run away, and now he would go back inside and tell her father and the whiff of scandal that had followed her home from Paris would turn into all-out ruin. Then again, ruin was right around the corner anyhow, but if she successfully made it to her aunts, she'd be ruined without a deplorable husband at her side.

Her gaze darted toward the door as she backed away toward the street. "Please, Lord Darling, I implore you..." She swallowed as he followed her, stalking toward her with every backward step. "Please, my lord, just let me go—"

Her next words turned to a squeak of surprise as she took one more step back and lost her footing on the ice. Her feet flew out from beneath her and she braced herself for—

Arms.

Arms caught her. Darling's arms, to be precise. He was cradling her in an odd sort of embrace as though they'd been dancing.

She blinked up at him in surprise and found his face far too close to her own. His breath mingled with hers and she could see the five o'clock shadow on his jaw.

Then she was straightened, planted on her own two feet, as he took a step back to put some distance between them.

They stood in awkward silence for a long moment, until nerves got the best of her. "You are going to tell my father, aren't you?"

She hated that she sounded like a petulant child, but she hated even more than this man was ruining her one chance to

escape a life she dreaded.

“I will not tell your father anything you don’t want me to.” He said it so seriously that she believed him.

She swallowed thickly. “Thank you.”

She went to turn away and his hand caught her arm, making her still. Of course it wouldn’t be so easy.

“I won’t tell him, so long as you give me a chance to help you.”

*Oh.* The air left her lungs in a rush as she lifted her gaze and felt it clash with his. The understanding there was what really rattled her.

Her brother had been angry on her behalf, and he’d worked tirelessly to make her father believe her word. Her new friends were horrified by her circumstances, and they too had tried their best to intervene. But no one in her life had ever looked at her like *this*.

Like she was truly important. Like whatever she said next mattered more than anything in the world. He wasn’t just talking to her...he was listening.

He wanted to listen, at least.

She licked dry lips and caught the hem of her cloak, fidgeting with the buttons as she debated how much to tell him.

The fact that she was considering telling him anything at all was lunacy. But, then again, it was either risk telling him the truth, or chance his telling her father that she’d run away.

“Very well,” she said with a huff. “My father is forcing me to marry a man I do not care for and I see no other way out.”

‘Do not care for’ was quite possibly the biggest understatement she’d ever uttered, but she had never been one for melodrama and calling out her fiancé as the worst cad she’d ever had the misfortune to lay eyes on seemed far too histrionic.



He stared at her long and hard, and if she hadn't been staring back just as intensely, she might have missed the flicker of fiery rage that raced through his gaze before he tamped it down. "Who is the man?"

"I doubt you know him."

His stare was impossible to ignore.

"Mr. Stallworth," she said. "A merchant."

He frowned, no doubt seeing all the missing pieces of that story. "Your father, the viscount, is forcing you to marry a merchant."

The fact that he did not outright question her made her shift uncomfortably, her cheeks heating under his watchful stare. Oh, curse it. Surely it would be better for him to know her side of the story, even though he'd likely never believe her.

How could he when her own father didn't even believe it?

"It was a misunderstanding, you see," she started.

He harrumphed. Like a grunt but with less emphasis. She wondered if his sisters could decode his sounds. The thought made her lips twitch upward in her first real smile since...well, since this whole debacle began.

His gaze dropped to her lips and stayed there. Silly as it sounded, she felt as though she could feel the weight of his stare and her lips parted with a gasp. Only then did his gaze move back up to meet hers, still fiery, still intense.

"What was the misunderstanding?" he demanded.

She swallowed down nerves. "There was a cat, you see—"

"A cat."

"Yes, a cat." She bristled at his tone of disbelief. There had been a cat. A silly, dratted, scruffy cat.

A cat she wished she'd never spotted.

With a sigh, she continued the now well-worn story of how she'd seen the cat stranded in a tree from where she'd been standing at the party thrown by some of her father's friends in

Paris. She'd slipped outside to fetch it, and Mr. Stallworth had followed.

In hindsight, she realized how foolish she had been to go outside without a chaperone. How thoughtlessly she'd disregarded Stallworth's attempts to talk to her and flirt with her and dance with her...

But he hadn't *seen* her. That was why she'd never so much as smiled in response.

She'd had enough gentlemen callers in the last two years to know the difference between men who were truly interested in her and men who were intrigued by her father's wealth and title.

Mr. Stallworth had been the latter.

In short, quick sentences she hashed out how he had followed her outside. How, when she went to reach for the cat, he'd reached for her. How one of his cohorts had come outside just at that moment and called attention to them, making it seem as though he'd interrupted a passionate embrace.

"But you see, it wasn't an embrace," she said, forgetting for a moment all lessons in decorum as she all but pleaded with this near stranger to believe her. "It was all staged. Mr. Stallworth could have easily brushed aside the gossip and told the truth, but he lied."

She paused for breath and when she glanced up into Darling's eyes she froze. There was that ice again, and it was...terrifying. She'd seen fiery rage, and she'd seen his cold apathy, but this...

This was an icy rage that made her veins feel frozen.

"He set you up." It wasn't a question.

She swallowed, and for one second she almost feared for Mr. Stallworth.

"I will help you." Again, not a question.

"W-what? But how—?"

“Leave it with me. I will make this right for you, I swear it.”

“But why? You don’t even know me.”

“Don’t I?”

She blinked at the odd question. No. No, of course he didn’t. They’d only just met this evening.

“You went outside to save a cat,” he said. “That tells me what I need to know.”

Her brows drew together in confusion. “But how could you help? My brother has been trying for weeks now, and to no avail.”

His lips quirked up ever so slightly at the corners, but it was enough to soften his harsh features and make her breath hitch in her throat. “Your brother does not possess the same... skills that I do.”

The way he said the word “skills” had her blinking in surprise. He’d somehow managed to make that one harmless word sound horrifying and laden with threat.

Once again she almost pitied Mr. Stallworth.

Almost.

“Lord Darling, I could not possibly ask you to get involved \_\_\_”

“You are not asking,” he said. “I’m insisting.”

She huffed. He was impossible. Unreasonable.

No wonder he was having trouble fitting in with the *ton*.

“I can handle this on my own,” she said.

“How?” He arched one brow and the effect was positively devilish. “By running away?”

Heat surged into her cheeks as she glared up at him. “I had a plan,” she said. “It was a good plan.”

He continued to stare at her, clearly unimpressed.

“Well, it was *a* plan,” she muttered. Her only plan, and her only option...

Until now.

She swallowed down her pride as she forced herself to use reason. This powerful, titled, terrifying man was offering to help her. “I...I’m not certain I can allow a stranger to come to my aid, no matter how kind the offer.”

His gaze softened and her heart gave an uncomfortable thud in response. “Then let us not be strangers.” He stuck a hand out, and she stared at it in alarm. “Please, call me Darius.”

She swallowed back a completely inappropriate and utterly girlish giggle as she slipped her hand into his and watched his large hand swallow hers whole. “Then I suppose you ought to call me Evelyn.”

“Evelyn.” He murmured her name in that low rumbly voice of his and her belly did a backflip that stole her breath.

She tugged her hand back, ignoring the racing in her chest as she kept her gaze locked on his cravat.

A cravat couldn’t make her head spin.

She cleared her throat. “I would only ask...”

He waited patiently as she gathered her thoughts. When a new plan came to her, she looked up with a small smile of satisfaction. “I would only ask that you allow me to help you in return.”

His brows arched up in surprise. Clearly he had not been expecting that. “How would you help me?”

She darted a meaningful gaze toward the party that was going on without them. “I do have some useful qualities, my lord. And it would be an honor to help you and your sisters make a good impression on your new peers.”

A true smile curved his lips as he leaned in close. “Consider it a deal.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

DARIUS STOOD on the steps of the club he'd just exited, a frown marking his brow.

By all accounts, he should have considered that visit a success.

The members of the club were all earls. Men of power, position, and wealth intent upon helping one another gain more of all three.

And they were willing to welcome him with open arms.

It seemed the trait they cared the least about was reputation. In fact, several of them took delight in being downright wicked. Hence the name, *Wicked Earls' Club*. The *W* was emblazoned on the door behind him. Which meant they didn't give a whit about the names whispered behind his back... In fact, several of them hinted with his acceptance into their ranks, they'd quell those rumors soon enough.

Which had pushed him to accept the invitation into the club without further delay. If not for himself, then for his sisters, he'd need that help navigating the waters of the elite.

Egads, the upper crust of society was a pit of vipers. He'd rather face the French army again. At least on the battlefield he understood the rules of engagement. Here, he was far less certain.

Like last night when he'd nearly called that man out.

Not his finest moment, though it had felt good in the moment.

He preferred to deal with conflict head on and here in London that was next to impossible.

He couldn't very well stand up and declare the rumors false. Though they were...mostly. Guilt rippled through him as it did nearly every time he remembered the past.

His carriage pulled around and he climbed in, letting out a breath of frustration. His cousin, Thomas, had been the fifth in line for the earldom, a direct nephew of the former earl, and his uncle had graciously bought Thomas a commission in the military.

Thomas had finagled Darius's placement directly under his cousin's command. Despite being third cousins, they'd been inseparable as children, the best of friends. Not being able to afford a commission of his own, serving under Thomas had been the next best thing. And those years had been some of the happiest in his life.

Until it had all come crashing down.

First had come the letter that Thomas was being called home. He'd become Earl of Darling and he was needed back on English soil to take over the earldom.

Thomas had been elated. What was more, as the earl, he'd declared that he would buy a commission for Darius. Both of them would be getting a major bump in rank and they'd gone out to celebrate before Thomas's return.

And that's the moment where everything had gone wrong.

It had started as a simple disagreement at the bar. A gentleman's discussion of tactics had turned ugly because of too much pride and too much ale.

A major called Thomas out, and Thomas, as the man being challenged, had the wherewithal to not choose pistols or even knives but had declared the weapon of choice their fists.

As the second, it had been Darius's job to make certain the fight was fair, the rules followed. He hadn't been worried. It was no more than a pugilistic encounter and the two men had stripped to the waist, removing all rings. The rules were clear, once one man bled, the other was the winner.

His lackadaisical attitude was one he regretted still and one he was likely to remember for the rest of his life.

Because Major Ainsworth had a knife tucked into the top of his boot. Darius should have found it before the fight even started but he'd been lax in his search. When it was clear the man would lose, he'd buried that knife in Thomas's stomach.

Ainsworth had been court-martialed, of course. And Darius had had to watch his cousin, best friend, and compatriot in arms die a slow and painful death. And then, he'd had to return to England in Thomas's stead where he'd taken on the title of Earl of Darling.

It hadn't taken long for the rumors to follow.

The gossips started with words like, *Look to see who'd profit the most and you'll find your murderer*. Never mind that Thomas's murderer was rotting in prison.

But Darius hadn't corrected them then. And he didn't now. Sometimes, like last night, he wished to. He was the beast they accused him of being and he'd wanted to bury his rather large fist in that man's face. He'd held back, not just because of Tabetha, but because a part of him *was* to blame. He should have protected Thomas better. It had been his job as Thomas's second and closest friend.

The carriage arrived back at the town house they now called home and he entered the house with a tired sigh.

He should have been elated. He'd made valuable connections today. But memories of Thomas still weighed him down.

He'd failed Thomas then and he hadn't done much better for Miss Rathmore today either.

He'd accepted that invitation to see if a possible groom might present himself.

His only viable plan to help her was to find another man who'd take Miss Rathmore's hand.

She was the daughter of a viscount and by all accounts had an excellent dowry. Her family's reputation was spotless.

Miss Rathmore was also, and he could personally attest to this, absolutely lovely by moonlight. Her skin glowed in its cool tones, her features a perfect mix of beautiful, sweet, and charming.

And even under the odd circumstances of their meeting, she'd been poised beyond compare. Any man would be proud to call a woman like that wife.

But the men at that club...

None of them deserved her. Crass, rude, deviant—he'd sooner throw himself in front of a firing pistol than subject her to one of them.

He could just imagine what this Stallworth was like that she'd felt the need to run away.

“Darius,” Tabetha called with her usual enthusiasm, lifting her skirts and racing down the stairs to greet him. “Do not take off your hat or gloves. We've had the best invitation.”

“What now?” he grumbled low and deep. It was the sort of sound that scared many but didn't bother his sisters a bit. They were used to his gruff manner and knew he meant little by it.

“Shush,” Tabetha entered the foyer fully dressed for fashionable walking and waving her hand to dismiss his words the way one might push away a bug. “Miss Rathmore has invited us to join her on a walk in Hyde Park. Isn't that lovely?”

Miss Rathmore? Was she making good on their bargain already? A bit of warmth seeped into his dark mood and pleasure rippled through him. Without another word, he held out his elbow to Tabetha. “Let's be off then.”

He led her out the door and handed her back into the carriage that hadn't had the opportunity to return to the stable. As they settled in their seats, his sister gave him an assessing look, her chin notched to the side. “You're in one of those moods again.”

He looked out the window, pretending not to have heard. Talking would help little.



“Darius...” His sister tapped his knee, refusing to be ignored. “Don’t pretend you cannot hear me. What’s wrong with you?”

Darius sighed. Everyone who knew his family was well aware that he rarely denied his sisters a thing. He loved them. It was as simple as that and their happiness was one of the few things that brought him joy these days. “If you must know, I was thinking of Thomas.”

Tabetha pressed her lips together, sitting straighter. “You must stop blaming yourself. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Do you think society will cease blaming me at some point?” His jaw hardened. He’d like to leave London and go home. Run his lands and live his life in peace. But Tabetha, Clarissa, and Mariah needed to be here. It was important for their futures. His hand clenched into a fist. He’d endure far worse to secure their happiness.

“They don’t blame you...” She trailed off wincing.

“You hear them too. I know you do.” His jaw hardened. It was unbecoming as a man and an earl to whine to his little sister about being teased. What had gotten into him? “It doesn’t matter. You’re right. I must enjoy this unseasonably warm day and the fine company of Miss Rathmore.”

Tabetha’s eyebrows rose, but she only nodded as the carriage slowed to a stop.

Fifteen minutes later, they found Miss Rathmore standing with another woman, who surely must be her maid.

She gave a polite wave as Tabetha enthusiastically waved back. Darius cringed. His sisters hadn’t been raised in this world and the difference in the two women’s behavior couldn’t have been more obvious.

But Miss Rathmore didn’t seem to notice as she linked arms with Tabetha. The maid fell back a respectable distance and he trailed just behind the two women as they began to talk. “That is the Marchioness of Hastings,” Miss Rathmore’s voice dropped. “She is very particular about who she associates

with. You must be careful not to approach her unless specifically invited.”

Tabetha nodded as Miss Rathmore continued to educate his sister on who to seek out in society and who to avoid. She was a veritable fountain of information as she explained several relationships and customs when navigating society.

“Normally, I would not have reached out to you for this walk. You are the sister of an earl whilst I am only the daughter of a viscount.”

“Only.” Tabetha rolled her eyes.

Miss Rathmore smiled. “But your brother expressly requested that I make your acquaintance and so...”

Tabetha gave him a long look over her shoulder before she returned her gaze back to Miss Rathmore. “I am so glad you did.”

“As am I,” she answered, giving Tabetha a wide smile that honestly tugged on his heartstrings and some of his worry for his sisters eased.

“Look,” Tabetha pointed. “They are selling biscuits and tea. It’s getting colder as the sun dips. Let’s get some.”

Darius sighed, a grumbling loud complaint that was his custom. “It’s halfway across the park, Tabetha. Must we?”

“I’ll go myself then,” Tabetha huffed as she looked back at Miss Rathmore. “Would your maid attend me?”

“Of course.” Miss Rathmore smiled as Tabetha set off with the other woman in tow.

“Say it,” he grumbled. “She’s a miscreant.”

“She’s darling,” Miss Rathmore gushed and then gave a musical laugh. “I did not intend that to be a play on your title. I meant I find her very charming indeed. Her zest and enthusiasm are infectious.”

“You’re just saying that.” He grimaced again but the words pleased him a great deal. “And you’re the only one not

intentionally poking at the obvious irony of a man such as myself being given the name Darling.”

“I don’t know.” She shifted, looking down at her feet. She looked so vulnerable. It had been the same last night. Something inside him swelled inside, longing to protect her. “You agreed to help me without even knowing me. To me, that makes you very...” She paused, looking up at him with a small, sweet smile. “Darling indeed.”

Warmth spread through him. For the first time since he’d arrived back in England, he didn’t feel so out of place.

“I find you very charming as well.”

A pale pink stained her cheeks, the delicate color stealing the air from his lungs. “Thank you, my lord.”

*MY LORD.* Inwardly, he cringed at the reminder of his new position.

He cleared his throat. A change of topic was in order. “I think I’ve come up with a solution to your problem.”

Her eyes widened as she looked at him again. “You have?”

He nodded. “I think the best solution is for you to make a better match.”

Her mouth formed into a small *O* of surprise as her hands folded over her stomach. “It is very difficult to court when one is already engaged.”

He nodded in acknowledgement. “I thought the same. I went to a gentlemen’s club to see if I could find a possible candidate, but none of the men I met suited you.”

Her face paled. “You didn’t tell them your plan, did you?”

“Of course not,” he grunted. “I’m not a complete fool.”

“I didn’t mean...” She drew in a breath. “My apologies. I did not intend to offend. I have to confess that I am rather invested in your offer of help as I have very few other options.”

He gave a single nod. Tabetha moved farther away and he offered his arm to Miss Rathmore to follow. They shouldn't allow too much distance between her and her companion. But the moment her hand slipped into his arm, his stomach dropped.

It had been the same last night when he'd caught her when she'd slipped on the ice. Sensation skittered along his skin causing his head to grow dizzy and light.

It was part of what made him offer for help then and it was absolutely what prompted him now to go completely mad and begin spewing a stream of nonsense. "It occurred to me that we could deepen our bargain to help one another." His heart began to pound heavily as the idea took hold and refused to let go. The words tumbled out before he could stop them. "I have two more sisters like Tabetha that will need to launch and you have a fiancé you do not want. Perhaps the best solution would be for us to marry."

Her fingers clenched his arm even as she stumbled to a stop. The gaffe was nearly imperceptible, except that he felt it. She turned to him, her voice no more than a breathy whisper. "My lord, I must refuse."

## CHAPTER FIVE

EVELYN STARED up at the ceiling and stewed. It was all she seemed to be capable of anymore. Stewing and waiting.

Three long days had passed and still her last interaction with Darius was no less vivid in her mind.

*My lord, I must refuse.*

Blank stare. Brutal silence.

*Very well, then.*

She frowned up at the ceiling. Very well, then.

*Very well, then?*

As if he'd just asked her if she'd like a cup of tea and she'd declined. She took a deep breath to slow her breathing. It would not do to get all flushed and bothered when she was supposed to be getting ready for tonight's dinner party at the Havelands' townhouse.

Darius would be there. The youngest Haveland daughter was a friend of Evelyn's and when Evelyn had asked Harriet to ensure that Darling and his sister were invited, she had promptly agreed without even asking why.

So, yes. She knew without a doubt that she would see him again tonight. That was likely why she couldn't stop replaying his shocking proposal. Darius would be there—Tabetha, too, of course—and she would have to face him.

She would have to look him in the eye and make small talk, all the while knowing that the man had asked her to spend

the rest of her life by his side...

And she'd said no.

She growled up at the ceiling, a noise that would have made the intimidating Earl of Darling rather proud, she imagined.

*Very well, then.*

She pounded her fists against the mattress in frustration. Of all the responses. And then he'd just led them over to join Tabetha and Evelyn's maid, and they'd all resumed their silly outing in the cold as if nothing at all had occurred.

She huffed loudly as her eyes narrowed into slits. Anger was the easiest emotion to identify these past few days and she clung to it fiercely. It was easier than picking apart the other sensations.

Regret. Embarrassment. Longing.

The thought of marrying Darling certainly hadn't been distasteful. Her mind called up the memory of his towering strength, his low voice, which was oddly soothing, really. Then there was the way he looked at her, listened to her, touched her hand like she was some sort of precious, breakable treasure...

She swallowed thickly. No, the thought of marrying Darling was not distasteful at all.

*My lord, I must refuse.*

*Very well, then.*

She picked at a loose thread on her duvet as she continued her fierce standoff with the ceiling above.

Yes, anger was the easiest to define and the least depressing to consider. The only problem with anger was that she wasn't entirely sure who she was most angry with. The earl for spitting out a proposal so haphazardly or herself for rejecting him so promptly.

*Perhaps. Maybe. Let me think on that for a while.* Here, now, when she wasn't so shocked by his proposal, she could

easily come up with at least three answers that would have prolonged the conversation rather than cut it short.

There was a soft knock at the door and then Cora appeared in the doorway. “Can I get you anything, miss?”

She forced a smile and sat upright with a sigh. “No, thank you, Cora.”

She waited for the other woman to leave so she might once again return to her stewing.

Cora did not leave. “I thought you might like to know that your brother has arrived—”

“Jacob has returned?” She was already off the bed and halfway to the door before Cora could reply.

At last! It seemed as though Jacob had been gone for ages, though it had merely been a fortnight. Close in age, they had always been the best of friends, but ever since her debacle with Mr. Stallworth, he had also become her best ally. Her *only* ally—

Until Darius.

She stumbled in her race toward the steps. Darius was merely her friend... assuming she hadn't ruined things between them with her rejection. But no, of course she hadn't. He hadn't so much as blinked in the face of her refusal.

“Very well, then.” She muttered his words in an admittedly childish tone as she tried and failed to mimic his low bass.

“What was that, Evelyn?” Her brother's voice reached her from the bottom of the steps and her gaze found him there, smiling up at her.

“Jacob, you're home!” She threw herself into his arms when she reached the bottom of the staircase as though she were still a child.

She wished for one heartbeat that she could turn back the clock to a time when her world was less complicated, before Stallworth's cruel trick...

Before she'd refused her very own knight in shining armor.

“What have I missed?” Jacob asked.

At the same time, she said, “Tell me about your travels.”

They both laughed, before Jacob gestured for her to lead the way to the sitting room where they might chat without fear of their father coming upon them.

Their father rarely left the confines of his study during the day, and when he did it was to eat in the dining room. He was a creature of habit, which made staying out of his way decidedly easy.

Once they were seated, she launched into her tale, though she amended her story about the night she ran away. Making it seem, instead, as though she had simply slipped outside for some air.

After all, if Darius’s plans to help her failed, she might still be forced to run away and it would not do to have Jacob aware of the scheme she’d hatched. At best he would lecture her, at worst he would try and stop her.

Neither was ideal. And so she told one tiny untruth, but held nothing back with the rest of the story.

Jacob was staring at her with wide eyes and a slack jaw by the time she finished.

“Do you mean to say...” He stopped to scrub a hand over his face. “The Earl of Darling asked for your hand?”

She nodded.

“And you said no,” he confirmed.

She winced. “Indeed.”

He misread her look of regret, it seemed, for he reached a hand out for hers. “You did the right thing, Evelyn.”

She nibbled on her lower lip. To be honest, that was what she’d hoped he would tell her. But now that he’d said it...it did not sit well. “Do you think so?”

He frowned. “Of course. Have you heard the rumors about that man? They say he’s a veritable beast.” He arched his



brows and lowered his voice. “I’ve even heard the word ‘murderer’ bandied about.”

She scoffed. “Jacob, you know better than anyone that gossip is more often than not just idle nonsense and dramatic exaggerations.”

He gave a short laugh. “Even so, the man hardly has a decent reputation.” The look he gave her was sympathetic, bordering horribly on pitying. “Even if he is a better option than Stallworth—”

“He is.” The words tumbled out before she could stop them. But really, there was no comparison in her mind.

“Even so,” he said again. “Father would never approve of you tossing over your current fiancé for a man with such a ghastly reputation.”

“It wouldn’t look good,” she agreed hesitantly. And with their father, appearances mattered more than anything.

Jacob nodded, his gaze searching. “That was why you refused him, I take it.”

She couldn’t quite meet his gaze. Mainly because she couldn’t quite answer the question that laced his comment.

Why *had* she refused?

She looked down at the ground with pursed lips.

“Evelyn,” Jacob said slowly, his tone the sort one would typically use with a stubborn child. “You know you did right, do you not? However decent this Darling fellow might have been while I was away, a close acquaintance with him and his family would only add to the scandalous gossip—”

“I know all that,” she snapped. Her tone was rather like that of a stubborn child. She shot him a sidelong look. “Sorry.”

He gave her a small smile in return. “Then why do I get the sense that you are not quite confident in your refusal?”

She looked at her brother for a long moment. For the first time ever, she wished that he didn’t know her as well as he

did. For that was the question she'd been successfully avoiding these past few days.

Logically, she knew her father would not approve. But if she were being truly honest with herself, her father and his opinion hadn't even entered her thoughts. At least, not in that moment when his words had hit her with the full force of a blow to the chest.

Or rather...a blow to her pride.

She swallowed thickly now under Jacob's scrutiny. Sitting here, with her truest friend, it was impossible to lie. To him or to herself. "I said no because...because..." She looked up to meet his gaze. "Because he'd only asked me out of charity."

Her brother's brows hitched up in surprise. "Pardon me?"

She shrugged, feeling utterly ridiculous now that she'd said it aloud. Who was she to be so choosy? Yes, perhaps it would have been nicer if Darling had used pretty words in his quickly uttered speech, but she wasn't exactly in a position to demand them.

"You said no because you felt he only offered out of pity, is that it?" her brother asked.

To his credit, Jacob's tone didn't chide her nor mock her, as he no doubt should. She kicked at the carpet with her slippered feet. She'd acted no better than a spoiled child. Wanting a different fiancé but then being picky about how he asked and why.

She let out a huff of disgust at her ridiculous pride. "I suppose I thought..." She bit her lip. "It was just that Darling made it sound so...reasonable." She uttered the word "reasonable" as though it were an insult. Which, in this case, it was. "He acted like it was a business proposition. And that..." She sighed, unable to finish because she knew just how ridiculous it would sound.

That had made her heart feel like it was breaking in her chest.

Jacob's eyes were on her, his gaze intent. She fidgeted uncomfortably as she strove for a more casual demeanor. "I

suppose even a business proposition would be better than this sham of an engagement with Stallworth.”

Jacob didn't respond. They both knew she was right. Just about any man of their acquaintance would make a better husband than the knave who'd soiled her good name and tarnished her reputation. And all for her dowry.

But even knowing all this, the way Darius had asked for her hand had smarted. As if it was a duty, a favor. A charitable act.

The thought of going from an engagement that she did not want and into another engagement that *he* did not want...

She'd said no before she could truly think about her alternatives. Of which there were none. She turned her attention back to her brother. “What must he think?”

Jacob sighed. “Darling likely assumes that you'd heard the rumors. If he has any sense at all, he must understand why you wouldn't wish to attach yourself to his tainted name.”

She winced at the thought. Guilt now far outweighed all those other emotions. She couldn't let him believe that she thought he was not good enough. No woman in her right mind would believe those awful rumors if she were to share a moment alone with Darius.

He'd been the picture of brotherly love with Tabetha. In fact, their relationship, well, it closely mirrored the one she had with her brother. And with herself?

No beast or murderer could ever show such kindness and consideration. She shivered at the memory of his eyes, so cold with rage on her behalf but so warm and tender when he was talking to her.

*I find you very charming as well.*

She dipped her head as warmth spread into her cheeks at the memory of those words. For a moment there she'd thought...she'd dreamt...

Oh, what did it matter? What was done was done.

All that mattered now was making sure she had not hurt his feelings. For, notorious beast or no, she knew that he was kind. Not at all unfeeling or untouched by words or gossip.

She would apologize. After days of agonizing over what she would say or do when she next saw Darius, the answer was clear, and she could hardly wait to speak with him. She couldn't let another moment go by in which he thought the worst of her.

She got up from the settee so quickly that Jacob blinked up at her in surprise. "Don't you want to hear about what I've been up to on my travels?"

She was already rushing toward the door as she answered. "Of course! But it will have to wait, I'm afraid." She turned back to him with the first real smile in days. "We must get ready. Darling will be at the dinner party tonight, and I must speak with him."

Jacob opened his mouth as if he might protest. He stopped short, his gaze taking in her face, her hand hovering over the doorknob as she practically vibrated with excitement.

Because she would get closure, that was all. Because she would have a chance to make amends. Not because she was due to see Darling in a matter of hours.

Certainly not.

## CHAPTER SIX

DARIUS STOOD by the wall near a potted fern as Tabetha chatted with two other ladies she'd met recently. He was happy for her and this was why they'd come, but he'd retreated the moment the subject had turned to ribbons. Most currently, the exact shade of white one might choose to match a lady's gown at her first ball of the season.

The conversation was dratted awful, but with no one else to converse with, he'd backed himself against the wall like a wallflower.

Was he attempting to hide behind a potted plant? Yes.

Given his sheer size was that notion ridiculous? Also yes.

But he didn't want a repeat of what had happened four nights prior at the Rathmores' home. He didn't wish to hear the rumors about himself the other guests were surely whispering, he certainly didn't want to storm out, and he most definitely didn't fancy another run-in with Miss Evelyn Rathmore.

His gut clenched at the thought of the stunning brunette. Her kindness with his sister, the way she looked so lost and vulnerable whenever she mentioned Stallworth, and of course, the stricken look on her face when she'd turned down his proposal all flitted through his mind.

He didn't blame her.

He was a beastly murderer, according to anyone who was anyone. Why would a woman wish to tie herself to that?

But he'd hoped...

Well, foolishly, he'd hoped she'd see past that.

In her defense, she'd only met him on two occasions and, if he were honest, even he wasn't certain the whispers weren't true.

He knew that he wasn't the man to bury the knife into his cousin. But that didn't exonerate him from guilt. Just as he understood that he wasn't built for this world. His temper, his need to charge in and right the wrongs, that wasn't how London operated. More often than not, he appeared to be the angry oaf they claimed.

He sighed, scrubbing his neck.

He couldn't very well end his relationship with Evelyn either. Because she'd been good for Tabetha. He let out another growl of frustration. And she needed help. Hurt as he was, he wasn't the sort of man who left a woman to face such a future alone.

A noise on the other side of the plant caught his notice. It was somewhere between a gasp and a giggle. Apparently the fern hid his position far better than he'd assumed.

Carefully parting the green foliage, he spied a couple locked in an embrace that was completely scandalous for any event, but especially for such an intimate gathering, it was downright folly.

"I've missed you, my sweet," the man murmured, his lips on the woman's neck.

Darius let the branch go, distaste filling his mouth. "Where have you been?" Came her simpering reply. "My husband's been gone for over a fortnight and you've yet to pay me a visit."

Darius had all he could do not to snort with derision as he made to move away.

"I'm sorry, love. I had a short trip to France and then my fiancée..."

The woman clucked her tongue just as Darius slipped from his place and back into the crowd, his hands clenched into fists, but their words still found his ear.

“The mousy little Evelyn,” she replied, her voice dripping with snide disdain.

He froze. It couldn't be *his* Evelyn they were discussing. Then he winced. When had he begun to think of her as his Evelyn?

He hadn't the right.

She'd rejected his proposal. Clearly and emphatically.

The man hidden in the corner let out a groan of disgust. “I know. But we must all bear the matches that provide the most advantage, no matter how distasteful they are. Trust me, love. I would never feel about Evelyn Rathmore the way I feel about you...”

Darius stopped listening as red-hot rage coursed through him. This was Stallworth. Not only was he acting in a completely tawdry manner, but he dared to insult Evelyn as he did so. The man deserved to be beaten into a pulp. His hands clenched into tight fists, his nails digging into his palms.

Normally in these situations, he'd consider what Tabetha would want him to do. But his sister's voice was the furthest thing from his thoughts.

For a moment he considered hauling the man from behind the plant and calling him out right here at that party.

*Beast...murderer.* His fist thumped against the side of his leg. He'd prove every rumor true if he acted in such a way.

And the insidious masses would be fed with more tinder to place on the fire that was his reputation.

Then a slight grin parted his lips. Well, it was more of a scheming leer, really. Because with startling clarity he knew exactly how a member of the peerage would handle such a situation.

Like everything about him, his feet were large, perfectly made if a man wanted to, say...knock over a potted fern.

He took a graceful step back, trying his best to make it look gangly and awkward, and then kicked the pot with his left boot.

It was heavy, far heavier than one might imagine, but he was built like an ox and the plant swayed back and forth and then back again until it came crashing down. Stallworth and the woman, whoever she was, covered in fern branches.

He heard her shriek of surprise and Stallworth's cry of protest as the entire party turned to see what had caused such a disruption. But he'd already taken two giant steps away from the plant and whistled as he looked on with mock surprise.

Perhaps he'd learn the ways of society after all.

Stallworth and the woman untangled themselves from the plant in the most awkward and comical display he'd seen in a long time. They even beat *him* in social dysfunction, and it was all he could not to roar with satisfaction.

Everyone in the room would surely know what Stallworth had been up to behind that plant.

Absolutely everyone. And that included Miss Evelyn Rathmore.

Evelyn, who stood on the other side of the room next to a man who could only assume to be her brother. They looked startlingly alike. Her eyes were wide as saucers and her mouth pressed into a thin line that even from this distance, he could see was trembling.

He closed his eyes for a second, regret lancing through him. He hadn't meant to hurt her. Despite her rejection, he cared deeply and...

Blast. When had he begun to care deeply?

But he didn't bother to watch the rest of the scene as he charged across the room to join Evelyn. The look on her face told him everything he needed to know.

Their gazes locked and he watched her draw in a deep breath, saw her lip cease to tremble. She straightened her spine



and her chin notched up. *Good job*, he thought inwardly as outwardly he gave her a smile of encouragement.

He stepped up to her other side, his brows drawing together in concern. “Miss Rathmore,” he said quietly as most of the guests continued to stare at the scene still unfolding across the room. “Are you all right?”

But before he could answer, her brother spoke. “My lord, a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

He looked at her brother, a question in his mind and surely on his face, but the other man rewarded him with a large smile.

“And you as well,” he answered. Thanks to Evelyn’s lesson yesterday, he knew he held the higher rank, and it was the baron’s job to greet him and not the other way around.

“My sister is in dire need of a turn about the terrace. Air is in order, I believe.”

Darius’s brows rose but he wordlessly held out his elbow to Evelyn as her fingers slipped into the crook. A sliver of pleasure danced up his arm at her touch. “Of course,” he answered.

He led Evelyn over to the doors as they slipped out into the night. The cool air hit their skin and Evelyn drew in a deep breath.

“Are you all right?” he asked again as they stood just on the other side of the glass doors, in plain view. He’d not take her any further. She needed a moment of repose, but he’d not risk her reputation.

She gave a stiff nod. “Fine.” She took another gulp of air and then, to his complete amazement...she laughed. It was soft and sweet and rang like a bell in the night. “I wonder what my father will do when he catches wind of this tale.”

Darius smiled too. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“He hates scandal. Our family will go to great lengths to avoid it.”

He gave a single nod. “I must confess that I didn’t plan that out at all. I just—”

“You were perfect,” she answered, and he felt her drift closer, felt the light brush of her hip against his outer leg. “Thank you.”

A bit of relief and a great deal of satisfaction tightened his chest as he stared down at her.

Her chin was pointed up, her gaze steady on him as a sliver of moonlight broke through the clouds and illuminated her features again.

She stole his breath. “You’re very welcome.”

“Tonight feels like some battle has been won. I suppose it’s only one victory in the war—” And then she stopped. “I should not be using such a metaphor with you.”

He dipped his head lower as if being closer would punctuate his point all the more. “Not at all. In fact, I think it is the perfect comparison. And just to be clear, I still intend to help you fight these battles.”

Her brow knitted together. “Really?” And then she shook her head. “Not that it is surprising. You helped me tonight and you are a man of great compassion, kindness, and strength.”

He pulled back in surprise. Of all the words he’d expected her to say, those were not it. “You’re not concerned about my reputation as a—” He didn’t finish. Those were not the sort of names he’d use in front of a lady.

“I’m not. Not even a little.”

He didn’t know quite what to say to that and silence fell between them as he dragged his gaze away from hers and stared out into the night. On the surface, those words were the ones he longed to hear. Someone had looked past the rumors and seen the man he actually was. Yes, he had a temper, and certainly he bore some blame in his cousin’s demise, but he wasn’t a murderer and the accusation cut every time he heard it. And up until now, he hadn’t known how to retaliate.

On the battlefield, counter-attacks were so easy, so straightforward, and clear cut. But here...he'd been fighting in a shroud of cobwebs, curtains, and ferns.

Her ability to see past the rumor was like light piercing into the darkness.

And yet, her understanding of who he was and what he was capable of also cut deeply. Because it meant she hadn't rejected his proposal because she thought he was a terrible person, but more likely, she just found him unsuitable as a husband.

And that hurt. Far more than he'd ever thought possible.

He straightened. He was a man. And he'd take the rejection like a good hit to the chin. Sure, it would knock him back. But he'd return for more. "I should return you to your brother, but I hope you will still continue a relationship with my sister. Your guidance proved invaluable." He turned back toward the doors.

"Wait." Her single word, uttered with just a touch of breathy vulnerability, stopped him in his tracks.

He looked down at her again. "What's wrong?"

She drew in a slow, deep gulp of air. "I still need to explain something to you. To apologize for—"

"Apologize?" He swallowed down a lump, his Adam's apple bobbing as he tried to push down the rising anticipation in his stomach.

"When I answered your proposal, I didn't mean..." She stopped, shifting on her feet in a display of uncharacteristic nervousness.

"Yes?" he softly encouraged. He needed her next words like he needed water and air.

"It's just that I..." Her hand tightened on his arm. "I entered one engagement where there was no affection between myself and the man I was to marry." Her gaze was far off, staring into the night. "I had no say on that account. I was

forced into the match without any regard to my feelings or wishes.”

He placed a hand over hers and then her free hand lay on top of his. “I understand.”

She shook her head. “My pride simply wouldn’t allow me to enter another arrangement where I was once again not the object of affection, but simply the recipient of your goodwill.”

His mouth dropped open before he clamped it shut again. Is that what she thought? That he’d asked her out of charity?

Without thought or reason he reached for her chin and gently placed his forefinger under the gentle curve, lifting her face higher and turning her head so that she was looking into his eyes. “Evelyn,” he started, trying to find the exact right words. He wanted her to know in what high regard he held her. How beautiful and wonderful...but instead, his voice failed him. And rather than say anything at all, his lips drifted closer to hers.

She searched his face for a moment, her eyes flitting back and forth from his to his mouth. And then her lashes fluttered closed and her mouth parted in an invitation that stole his reason. He forgot they were in the clear pool of light cast by the party, forgot they’d come out for a brief stroll for Evelyn to gain her composure, forgot that she’d already rejected his offer of marriage.

Instead, only one thought remained. Evelyn Rathmore was the most lovely of women and he’d give his life to have this kiss.

But just as he was about to press his lips to hers, the sound of the door opening interrupted the moment.

He moved back with a speed that would have made his commanding officer proud as Evelyn blinked up at him in confusion. “What just—”

But she never got the chance to finish.

“Beast,” a man snarled.

Darius turned his head to find Stallworth charging the short distance from the doors to where they stood.

Instinctively, he tucked Evelyn behind him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR ONE HEARTBEAT, all Evelyn could do was gape as Darius moved in front of her and Stallworth came toward them with murderous intent written all over his features.

“You,” he hissed as he reached Darius.

Evelyn he ignored completely.

She straightened, her mouth pressing into a firm line. That, somehow, rankled more than anything this horrible cad had said or done to her in the past. He didn't even notice that she was out here after he'd publicly humiliated her by sharing an intimate moment with another woman.

He jabbed a finger in Darius's direction, not seeming to realize that he was roughly half the earl's size in height and width. Standing there before Darling, with his features all scrunched up in disgust and his clothes covered in dirt and foliage, he looked like nothing so much as an irritating rodent.

“I know what you did in there,” Stallworth said. “Everyone saw the way you attacked me.”

“He *attacked* you?” Evelyn's brows arched in surprise.

Stallworth's gaze shot to her, finally spotting her there, clearly under Darius's protection. His frown made her smirk. It was rather delightful to see Stallworth so thrown. In fact, she was rather enjoying herself as she stepped out from behind Darius. “From where I was standing, it looked as though you were accosted by a fern.”

She did her best to feign concern...and failed, no doubt. Truly, for the first time since she'd had the misfortune of meeting Stallworth, she was finally not afraid of him.

Perhaps it was having Darius at her side, or maybe it was because the weight of scandal had fallen on Stallworth for once, but either way she found herself facing her fiancé with a straight back and squared shoulders. "We all saw what was going on, Stallworth. It was hardly Darling's fault that you were caught with another woman."

Stallworth's eyes narrowed but his voice kept that syrupy sweet quality that irritated her ears. "We were merely talking, love. Nothing for you to fret about."

Her lips thinned as she bit back a decidedly unladylike oath. Making it sound as though she were jealous. She huffed. *Really?* "Everyone saw you with the countess, Stallworth. You cannot lie your way out of this one."

Stallworth moved back a step, and everything in his demeanor shifted as well. Gone was the furious knave and in his place was the sweet-talking manipulative charlatan she knew far too well. "Is that what everyone saw, Evie, my dear? Because I made it quite clear that she and I were merely having a private word about the party she was planning for her husband. She required my help to obtain champagne, you see." His smirk made her stomach turn. "The party was meant to be a secret, of course. She'd intended to surprise him." He threw his hands up in a gesture that seemed to say, *such is life*.

"Liar." Darius's growl beside her made her shiver with all the cold hard edge it held. She glanced up and gasped at the granite mask that transformed his kind, handsome features into something...well, something terrifyingly fantastic.

Her belly fluttered with feelings she could not name as she realized that he was on her side. This strong, courageous man was in her corner. For once, she was not alone in this battle with Stallworth.

For once, she was a force to be reckoned with.

She turned back to face the man who'd been strong-arming and manipulating her for more than a month now. This man who'd seen her as vulnerable and likely weak and had used that against her.

A smile of triumph tugged at her lips when she took in his expression now.

Even Stallworth paled in the face of Darius's fury. But that didn't stop him from confronting Darius again.

*Fool.*

"Who do you think you are to intervene in my life?" Stallworth snapped. He nodded toward Evelyn and spoke of her as if she weren't even there. "She's mine. Do you understand?"

A muscle in Darius's jaw twitched and his hands curled into fists at his side.

Her belly did another flip, but this time in apprehension. He was going to lose his temper. Here and now, in front of this entire crowd which was completely unacceptable. Men called each other out...of course. But not in front of mixed company and not at parties. Once again, Darius had lost sight of the rules that governed their set and they'd make him pay for the gaffe.

He'd confirm all the whispers and suspicions that were spreading about him like wildfire amongst the *ton*.

Which was why she spoke up, shifting forward so this time it was her protecting him. "It did not seem that way a moment ago, Stallworth."

Stallworth tore his gaze away from Darius and blinked at her with a scowl as if only now remembering she was here.

*Oh yes, don't mind me. Just the fiancée you've tricked into marrying you. Just the woman you thoroughly humiliated only moments ago.*

She clenched her hands as Darius had. His large frame towered behind her and she knew that her attempt to act as a shield was ludicrous. To any onlooker it would look just as



silly as he had earlier when he'd tried to disappear behind a fern.

She swallowed down a wave of horror. How would he ever launch his sisters if he didn't quell the rumors? "You don't honestly think that, do you?" Stallworth said.

She looked back to him, realizing he'd still been talking. Judging by the low growl behind her and the way Darius shifted as though trying to get her out of the way again...

Whatever Stallworth had been saying, it was nothing good.

"I mean, honestly, Evelyn. Even you must admit that I am remarkably clever. Hardly one to risk his golden goose."

"His golden—" She cut herself off, her jaw dropping at his audacity.

Stallworth was fool enough to smirk. "Not so good as a marquess's sister, perhaps, but I'll make do."

She gasped at his cavalier reference to her friend Sarah who'd just narrowly avoided the noose that now choked Evelyn.

Stallworth leaned in close. "No, pet. I would never do anything to threaten our arrangement."

"Our arrangement?" she echoed.

"You don't deserve her." The growl behind her made her start, and Darius took advantage of her surprise by gently moving her out of the way so he was once more looming over Stallworth, his neck muscles bulging and his hands clenched tight.

*Oh dear.* He no longer looked angry. He looked... murderous. She glanced from Darius, so tightly coiled with rage beside her, to the veranda doors where anyone might see.

"Deserve her? Maybe not," Stallworth agreed with smug satisfaction. "But she's mine all the same, now isn't she?"

The air crackled with tension and in a heartbeat she saw what would happen. Her heart seized with fear at what Darius

would do. He drew his arm back, his face tight with anger, and she...

She acted first.

Stepping between them, she reached out a hand and struck Stallworth clear across the face. A crack sounded in the cold silence around them and for a moment Evelyn forgot how to breathe. The force of the blow reverberated through her as stinging pain lanced through her fingers and palm.

Stallworth was bent to the side, a hand to his cheek, and Darius's hands were on her shoulder. "Evelyn, are you all right?"

But his words were drowned out by Stallworth's cursing, and the wild fury in his eyes as he straightened and turned to her with eyes wide with shock. "You *hit* me, you little—"

"Evelyn!" Her brother's voice rang out as he strode out onto the veranda and entered the fray. His gaze took it all in, and from the tight lines around his mouth and eyes, she had no doubt he'd seen.

"Where have you been?" Stallworth shouted. "Your sister is a little minx. You ought to teach her manners. Or better yet, I'll teach her—"

"Watch your tongue." Darius's voice sounded like a thunderous boom, and both men drew back from him.

Evelyn moved closer.

"You will hold your tongue," Darius continued, his glare fixed on Stallworth, his body still taut with tension. "Unless you wish to face me at dawn, you will never speak ill of Miss Rathmore, you will never embarrass her, and you will certainly never talk to her as you have today." He moved in closer and her brother stepped between them.

A peacekeeper.

Her hand throbbed from striking Stallworth, but she ignored the pain as she waited with bated breath to see what would happen next. Surely her brother would defend her honor.

Jacob placed a hand on Stallworth's shoulder and she blinked at the sight of it. It looked almost as if...

Almost as if her brother were taking his side.

Her brows drew together in question as her gaze met Jacob's. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"I was smoothing things over in there." His grip on Stallworth's shoulder grew tighter as he addressed the man whose cheek was a bright shade of red. "If you hope to maintain any connection with my family, you will do the same."

Evelyn's lips parted with a gasp. Surely, Jacob couldn't mean...

But this was their chance to get her out of the dreaded engagement. Surely they should exploit his bad behavior.

Jacob turned to her and his gaze was dark and filled with meaning...but she had no idea what he was trying to say. Confusion and hurt warred inside her as she met his gaze with questions that she could not ask. Not until they were in private.

Stallworth looked properly cowed by her brother, and he did not risk glancing up at Darius, who still glowered down at him.

It seemed Stallworth had finally found some sense, at least, that he did not push Darius any further.

Darius, she noted, looked one ill word away from reenacting the battle of Waterloo.

She placed a calming hand on his forearm but drew it back quickly. Mostly because her hand still smarted, but also because her brother and Stallworth both watched the gesture with too much interest.

Her brother stepped forward and took command. "I shall walk Stallworth out. He and I will tell everyone how there was just a minor misunderstanding between the engaged couple and hopefully cut off any scandalous gossip before it can begin." Her brother glanced down at the hand she was cradling against her belly. "For all our sakes."

She flinched at the censure in his voice, hating it even more when Stallworth used that moment to give her a smug smirk, as though her brother were lecturing her on his behalf.

Her brother seemed to be waiting for an answer and so she swallowed down her anger and forced a calm tone. “Very well. What would you have me do?”

“Stay here.” Her brother’s gaze darted from her to Darius and back again, and whatever was going on in his mind, she could not fathom. “Do your best to appear as though nothing untoward has happened.” He met her gaze evenly. “You are merely getting some air with a new acquaintance. Understand?”

She nodded, holding her tongue until Jacob and Stallworth were once more inside. Eyes were still on them, that much she knew. But at least she was free to speak. Tilting her face up, her breath caught at the myriad of emotions she saw in his eyes.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded, ignoring once more the ache in her hand. “I am fine, and...you?”

She bit her lip. How silly that sounded. Here was a man who’d fought in wars. Of course he could withstand a minor mishap with a pathetic merchant.

He gave her a small smile as if he could read her thoughts, and she let out a long breath.

“I apologize—”

“I am sorry—”

They both spoke at once and after a stunned silence they shared a grin and short laugh.

“Ladies first,” he said.

“I wished to apologize,” she said. “It seems I have drawn you into a scandal.” She tried for a smile but it felt weak and rueful. The irony of it all was undeniable. She was a lady who had been raised to avoid scandal at all cost. And now, she seemed to find it at every turn.

Another small smile softened his features and warmed his eyes as they fell to the hand that had struck Stallworth. “One might argue that you saved me from another kind of scandal, one far worse, considering the rumors about me.”

Her breathing grew shallow, and she knew not if the tightness in her lungs was caused by the pain in her hand or the affection in his eyes as he looked at her.

“It should have been me knocking him senseless,” he said. “Lord knows I would love to make him pay for all he’s done to you.” He moved closer and her lungs hitched again. At this rate she would swoon right here in front of all these prying eyes. “Still, Evelyn, you should not have had to do such a thing for me. I forget the rules of this place.”

He gently touched her hand which was now throbbing.

“Yes, well...” She tried again for a smile to ease his concern, but his soft touch had made her pain intensify and she winced instead, a hiss escaping.

He cringed. “You regret it,” he muttered. “Of course you do. You should not have done such a thing just to protect me \_\_\_”

“No, no,” she interrupted. “I have no regrets.”

She blinked as she realized just how true that statement was. It might hurt like the dickens, but she could not regret standing up to Stallworth, nor sparing Darius more gossip.

“Then what is it?”

She held her hand out gingerly. “It’s just...I had no idea hitting someone would hurt so much.”

His eyes widened in surprise and then he was murmuring curses that made her blush. “Idiot,” he muttered to himself as he looked around them with panic in his eyes. “I should have realized. You’re hurt.”

“It’s not so bad,” she lied.

Apparently realizing that there was no doctor hovering in the shadows, he took her hand oh-so-gently between his and

unbuttoned her gloves. “It’s likely just bruised, but we need to be sure nothing is broken.”

She held her breath as he removed the glove.

People were watching. She knew she ought to protest. But she could not.

She did not wish to.

Having a large brute of a man like Darius tend to her so gently, it...well, it touched something in her heart.

How could anyone call this man those names? She’d never met anyone less deserving of those cruel monikers.

He glanced up, worry coloring his voice and his expression. “It doesn’t appear as though anything is broken, but still...” He moved quickly, scooping up some snow and resting it gently against the spot where her hand was red and swollen. “We ought to keep it cold so it does not swell further.”

She nodded, utterly unable to form words. Even with ice-cold snow against her skin, his touch warmed her all the way through. She was trembling with the effort to keep from leaning in, resting against him, letting his strong arms wrap around her.

When the silence stretched too long, felt too intimate, she lifted her gaze to meet his. “People must be watching,” she murmured. She glanced down quickly at their joined hands. “This will look...They will think...”

He nodded, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed, and moved closer still. “Would that be such a bad thing? If they were to think that?”

His words made her pulse race and her heart swell. All she could do was answer with the truth. “No,” she breathed. “That would not be so bad at all.”

He moved closer, pulling her in gently toward his warmth. “Evelyn, I—”

“There you are.” Jacob’s voice in the doorway had her jumping back with alarm.

“Come, Evelyn,” he said, his voice stiff, his tone cold. “We ought to be heading home.”

She glanced up at Darius, her heart aching. There was so much they had not said.

He gave her a small smile. “Would it be too much to ask...”

She arched her brows, ready to say yes. Whatever he asked. *Yes.*

“I should like to continue this conversation. Say, tomorrow. At the park like before...” He glanced at her brother and his voice grew louder. “My sister and I would love to see you there.”

She nodded, a smile growing as she backed away. “I will be there.”

Her brother wrapped an arm around her, his gaze on her hand as they headed back inside. “Are you hurt?”

“Only a little.” She could not seem to stop her smile as she discreetly tucked her ungloved hand into the folds of her skirt.

“You shouldn’t have struck him,” he said quietly as they made their way through the crowded drawing room to the front door.

She grinned. She could not bring herself to agree. Her hand hurt, yes...but hitting Stallworth?

Nothing had ever felt so good.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

DARIUS STUDIOUSLY IGNORED the various groups also strolling in Hyde Park. The snaps of their fans as they whispered behind them were near as loud as cannon fire to his ears.

The weather was much colder than it had been on their last visit and he said a silent prayer of thanks. It meant there were far less gossips about than there might have been had the weather been warmer.

He grimaced as one group obviously eyed him, talking behind their hands. There were still enough. Enough whispers to let him know he'd made yet another major social gaffe. At this rate, he'd never fit into this world.

Not that he cared. But his sisters...

He glanced down at Tabetha where she rested lightly on his arm. "Oh my," she said, her chin straining toward the gossips. "Even out of doors, the tension in the air could be cut with a knife."

Inwardly, Darius winced. A lecture was coming. A well-deserved one at that. But Tabetha slipped her hand from his arm. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"What?" He looked at his sister, apprehension sliding down his back. "How?"

"Don't worry," she murmured, removing her hand from his arm. Her words did little to quell his fear. In fact, they heightened it. Considerably. But she crept away, oblivious to his concern, and crept behind a hedge as she slipped over to the group of ladies currently clucking behind their fans.



As far as plans went, it wasn't a bad one. She might have done all right as a spy if it weren't for one obvious flaw. Her movements had been deft enough except for that she wore several feathers in her fashionably plumed hat and they were currently bobbing behind the hedge, easily seen above the bushes, as she made her way down the row of evergreens.

He closed his eyes, letting out a long breath of frustration. This was exactly why he'd determined to pursue Evelyn's hand with more...vigor.

Truth be told, they needed her guidance.

They were failing as a family to fit into this world. His father had been a cousin to the earl. They'd grown up in the country, sure that the title would never fall into their hands. They'd spent their lives as landed gentry, working their land far away from the sparkling world of high society. His parents had raised them to laugh, love, work, and fight among the working class. They weren't prepared for this, hadn't spent a lifetime learning how to operate in this world.

He looked at his sister again. Well, her feathers, anyhow. Tabetha was making a spectacle of herself almost as grand as he'd done last night. Except that the women she meant to eavesdrop on were so engrossed in the scandal that was him, they didn't seem to notice the feathers bobbing behind them.

"Why is Tabetha hiding behind that hedge?" Evelyn asked next to him.

Evelyn.

He turned to her, warmth spreading through his chest.

She looked stunning in a dark green velvet riding habit that seemed to accentuate the flush of her cheeks and the sparkle in her brown eyes. Her lips parted in an easy smile as their gazes met.

There was another reason he'd pursue her hand again. And that was...genuine affection.

A lump formed in the pit of his stomach as his heartbeat quickened. Perhaps it was more than just affection.

He shook his head, determined to keep that bit to himself. A woman as gracious as Evelyn would never want a social misfit like himself under normal circumstances. She needed his offer now and... He winced.

Was he taking advantage of her just as Stallworth had done?

But he shook his head. He wasn't. Unlike Stallworth, what Darius was about to propose was a mutually beneficial arrangement. That's what made him different from that snake.

"You came," he said, realizing how simple and silly those words were. Of course she'd come. She was standing next to him. But he hadn't been able to think of any other words as he'd stared at her.

"I did." She raised her brows. "And so did you." Then she gave a pointed look at the hedge. "And so did Tabetha."

He clenched his teeth. "She is conducting a covert operation."

Evelyn looked over at the hedge again, the tiniest gasp escaping her lips. "Oh dear."

Darius sighed. "That about sums it up."

"And with Lady Abigail in attendance, no less," Evelyn murmured.

"Lady Abigail?" He followed her stare to see a striking young brunette in the center of the crowd of ladies his sister was currently eavesdropping upon. "Should I know her?"

Evelyn winced. "You likely would not wish to. She's not the most...welcoming member of society. She's also a duke's daughter and holds sway among the other ladies." She cut a look in his direction. "One would do well not to earn her ire nor..." She glanced over at Tabetha. "Draw her attention for the wrong reasons."

"I see." He winced as well as they watched those feathers bounce within view of the formidable young lady.

Evelyn bit her lip as she looked back at him. "Should I retrieve her?"

He assessed the situation as he would a battle formation. It was a risk either way. To go over now and pull Tabetha from the foliage could bring even more unwanted attention. But to stay here and watch, hoping that Tabetha wasn't caught...well, it set his nerves on edge. But they had yet to notice her, and there was every chance they wouldn't spot her if they did nothing to call their attention in that direction.

He shook his head. "No. Don't. It gives us a moment to talk and—who knows, perhaps she'll learn something useful."

"Perhaps." Evelyn gave him a small smile. "Or perhaps she'll start a new rumor about the odd birds currently inhabiting Hyde Park."

He groaned again, rubbing the spot between his brows. "We just can't seem to help ourselves. Rutlands weren't meant for society."

"Rutland?" She gave him a strange smile. "Of course I knew that was Tabetha's surname, but I'd forgotten that until recently it was yours. I think of you as only Darling."

He quirked his brows. "Strange. I have a difficult time thinking of myself as Darling. I wasn't meant to be earl."

She shook her head and then notched her chin, giving him a long look. "That isn't true. You were meant to be Darling. It wouldn't have happened if you weren't."

That notion set him back on his heels. In battle he believed this notion all the time. That to a certain extent the future was in God's hands rather than his own. It was easier to believe so when facing death rather than...well...life. "But I'm the sixth in line. I—"

"Darius," her gentle voice soothed his thoughts, clearing them. "You *are* the line. It's now about what you intend to do with the legacy that is rightfully yours."

*What did he intend to do with the legacy...*

He blinked several times. Why had this angle not occurred to him? He'd been so busy lamenting how he'd gotten here, he'd failed to consider where he was going.

It didn't matter that Thomas should be in London, rubbing elbows with the elite. In fact, it shouldn't have been Thomas either. Why hadn't that thought entered his mind before now? It should have been Edward, or William, or Henry. All the cousins that had perished to bring them to this moment.

His future...

Then he realized he *had* given what he'd do with the earldom some measure of consideration. One path for the future was clear.

He'd picked a countess.

A woman who would bring grace and decorum to his life. To his sisters. To his children. To the Darling legacy.

A woman who made his heart race and melt all in the same breath.

He reached for her gloved hand, holding her delicate fingers in his. "In many ways, I am ill prepared for how to move my earldom forward. How to create that legacy you mentioned."

She gave him the sort of encouraging look that made his pulse jump in his veins. "I have every confidence you will find your way. You are a good man, Darius. Honorable, kind, and straightforward."

They were all nice words. From one of his sisters, they would surely have been a compliment.

But from her...

They sounded practical and stiff compared with the way she tied his stomach into knots. "Thank you," he managed to say.

"You're welcome," she returned as she shifted closer. "And thank you for last night. I couldn't have advocated for myself like that without your strength behind me."

That eased his concerns. Surely a woman who drew from a man's strength would learn to appreciate that man? "In that regard you are very welcome, though I'm a bit concerned that we Rutlands have been a terrible influence on you."

She shook her head. “I couldn’t disagree more. For the first time, I feel...” She paused, her gaze shifting up to the clouds above as though they held the words she searched for. “I feel more like myself than ever before.”

The words tugged at his heart and made his chest tighten. “And you have helped me realize a valuable lesson.” His other hand covered hers. “I need to learn how to don a public facade. Hide my feelings and fight, not with open hostility, but veiled threats. I have a new kind of power now, and I need to learn how to wield it.”

She gave a small laugh, high and clear and beautiful. “See. You’re deciphering the *ton* perfectly.” Then the smile slipped and she frowned. “And I’m fairly certain I need to learn to care less what they think and act in my best interest rather than doing as everyone wishes for me to do.”

“Now, now,” he answered, his head bending closer to hers. “Is this the woman I met as she dangled out a window? I think you’re learning that lesson just fine.”

Color filled her cheeks as she smiled again. “I am growing braver. Aren’t I?”

“Very,” he answered. “But I wouldn’t suggest that you attempt another escape out the window.”

“No?” Her chin dropped to her chest. “Do you have any other suggestions, then? Because I’m fairly certain my brother, in a misguided attempt to protect my reputation, smoothed over the entire fern scandal last night.”

His heart had begun to race again. And he said another thanks for the cold weather that allowed him to wear leather gloves because they hid the fact his palms had grown a bit damp. “I do have one.”

“What’s that?” Her chin lifted as her gaze met his.

He drew in a deep breath. She’d rejected his proposal once. But if he could council her on bravery, then surely he could ask one more time. “As I said before, you are in need of another offer of marriage.”

Her lips twitched as her fingers squeezed his arm. “I agree.”

“And I believe I know a man who might benefit from your superior skills as a lady of society.”

“Do you really?” The twitch had turned into a grin. “I’d very much like to know who this man is.”

His smile surely matched hers as it spread into a grin so wide it nearly hurt. Perhaps he’d not smiled enough of late. Not that it mattered. He was fit to burst. “Evelyn, would you do the honor of becoming my wife?”

She didn’t answer immediately, as she looked up at him, her hand still on his arm. For a moment, he held his breath, afraid to even breath as she gave a small nod of assent. “Yes.”

And then the air rushed from his lungs. “Yes?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I accept your offer.”

Relief flooded him. Deep inside he knew he’d done something right for his earldom. Finally.

If only he could get rid of that voice in the back of his thoughts that lamented their very orderly deal that was mutually beneficial. Because deep in his heart, he wanted to sweep her into his arms and kiss her senseless.

But again...that wasn’t how things were done. Not here. Not with an earldom hanging in the balance. “Excellent.”

But inside he wished to say, *No. Wrong. I’m in love with you Evelyn. That is why you should marry me. Not because it makes sense but because I love you.*

He opened his mouth. Perhaps he should say those things. He wanted to fit into society but also...he wanted her. Her affection and love.

“Oh my goodness gracious,” Tabetha cut in and he realized he’d completely and totally lost track of his sister.

He blinked as his head snapped up. “What?”

She rushed toward them, her features drawn in tight lines as her hands pressed to her stomach. “You will not believe

what I've overheard.”

## CHAPTER NINE

EVELYN HAD NEVER ACTUALLY SEEN a tornado, but she felt fairly confident that she now knew what it felt to be within one.

“...and Lady Abigail most definitely used the word ‘nefarious’ at one point.” Tabetha’s verbal assault came to a sudden end as she drew in a long overdue gulp of air.

“Oh my,” Evelyn murmured, for lack of anything better to say. The intelligence Tabetha had gathered, it seemed, had been quite scattered. She’d heard bits and pieces, and as she’d relayed these tidbits to Darius and Evelyn, the result was a bit...convoluted.

“So, then...they were not talking about me?” Evelyn asked.

“Oh no.” Tabetha’s eyes widened. “At least, I did not hear your name mentioned.”

Evelyn nodded, trying her best to return Tabetha’s beaming smile. What Tabetha might have lacked in decorum, she more than made up for in enthusiasm.

But truly, Evelyn wasn’t sure whether to burst out laughing or run away screaming at all that Tabetha had told them...and all she had not. Knowing some of the gossip was more frustrating than knowing none at all. Mentions of duels, and affairs, and Stallworth, and... really, it was all quite a lot to take in.

Especially considering the large gaps that needed to be filled.



Such as, who, precisely, was meant to be dueling? And what, exactly, did this mean for her engagement? Not that it mattered, precisely. She'd already agreed to marry Darius rather than Stallworth but she wished to know what scandal swirled about them.

She glanced up to see Darius rubbing the spot between his brows as if warding off a headache. She was sorry to see that his smile was gone. She'd never seen anything more handsome in her life than a smiling Darius. Oh, he was dreadfully attractive when he was in earnest, and he was intimidatingly appealing when he wore that mask of determination.

But when he'd smiled...

He glanced over at her and she clamped her mouth shut as if that could erase the silly little sigh that had escaped.

When he'd smiled, it had made her feel warm from her head down to her toes.

"Tabetha, perhaps it would be best if you started at the beginning," Darius said with surprising patience. No doubt, he had vast experience with Tabetha's particular brand of enthusiasm and Evelyn was happy to let him navigate this confusing conversation.

His sister drew in another deep breath as if preparing herself for another long-winded rant, and Evelyn reached out a hand to touch her friend's arm. "Perhaps, let us start with the more pertinent details. The precise shade of Lady Adeline's new gown, for example, could likely wait until later."

Tabetha flashed her an impish grin at the teasing. "Very well. I shall merely tell you the news as it pertains to you and your, er..." She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Your fiancé."

Darius shot Evelyn a sidelong look and she just narrowly managed to smother a ridiculous, giddy grin. If all went well, by the end of the day Darius would be her new fiancé.

Oh, her father might not relish the fact that his name was tied to scandal, but now Mr. Stallworth's was as well. Surely,

her father would see that a notorious earl was a better option than a notorious merchant.

Or perhaps he wouldn't.

She shook off the doubts and focused on Tabetha's tale once more.

"Are you sure she used the word 'duel?'" she asked with a frown. Jacob had smoothed over the worst of it last night, surely talk of a duel was rather drastic

Tabetha nodded eagerly and her feathers bobbed wildly. "Yes. I'm sure I heard Stallworth's name mentioned at around the same time as I heard the word duel."

Darius was oddly quiet beside her, and even without looking Evelyn could feel his tension. "Tabetha, are you certain...?" He cleared his throat and cast Evelyn a quick sidelong look she could not quite interpret. "Are you certain they were not discussing...me?"

Tabetha blinked and then her eyes widened with understanding.

Evelyn frowned, glancing between the two of them. Clearly she was missing something.

Tabetha nibbled on her lower lip as her brows drew together in concentration. "Possibly," she said slowly. "There was one other name I heard mentioned." She glanced up at Darius and Evelyn tensed at the concern in the other girl's eyes.

What was she missing?

"The name Ainsworth was mentioned," Tabetha said slowly. "Does that mean anything to you?"

Darius didn't immediately reply. He didn't have to. The way he tensed, the way his jaw clenched and that implacable mask shuttered his features....

Evelyn reached out a hand and touched his arm. "Darius, what is it? Do you know this Ainsworth fellow?" She was racking her brain to place the name. She knew plenty of

Ainsworths, they were a prominent family in society, but no particular one who would cause Darius such distress.

He glanced between her and his sister, and Evelyn could have sworn something passed between the siblings. Some sort of silent communication.

She tried not to feel hurt that she was left out of the loop. She really did. But when it became clear that Darius was not about to take her into his confidence, she forced a pleasant smile. “Well, I suppose I had best be heading—”

“No, wait.” Darius turned to her. “Considering what we have just discussed...” He arched his brows meaningfully. “It is only right that you should hear the full story from me. Especially if...” He cleared his throat. “Particularly as my reputation may very well be yours in the near future.”

Tabetha gasped and her eyes grew impossibly wide, but she did not ask what he meant by that. Evelyn suspected that Tabetha knew just as well as Evelyn did that Darius was struggling to tell her whatever it was he meant to tell her, and that now was not the time to question him about their recent plan to marry.

Evelyn reached for his hands. “Tell me, please. Let there be no secrets between us.”

He nodded, and in slow, halting phrases he told her of the duel that transpired between his cousin and another officer. Major Ainsworth.

“Now Ainsworth is in prison,” he said. “But the whispers still follow. I was next in line after Thomas, after all. I suppose it is right that people question—”

“Nonsense.” Evelyn cut him off rudely, but it was all she could do not to reach out to Darius and hold him close. The guilt in his eyes as he’d talked about his cousin’s death, the way he so clearly was still haunted with regrets...

If they weren’t in the middle of Hyde Park in broad daylight she would have wrapped her arms around him and held him tight.

As it were, she met his look of surprise evenly. “No one should be questioning your involvement, and they likely wouldn’t if they were to hear the full story.” She took a step closer and lowered her voice so no one could overhear. “There was one person, and one person only, responsible for Thomas’s death. And you do your deceased cousin honor by taking on the title that would have been his, and doing right by the earldom.”

He stared at her for a long moment and she couldn’t begin to name all the emotions that flickered in his gaze.

All she knew was that she felt each and every one as if his pain were her own. As if his relief at her response could be felt in her own heart.

When the silence grew awkward, he cleared his throat and tore his gaze away with a murmured, “Thank you.” To Tabetha he added. “So you see, all that talk...it was likely about me.”

Tabetha winced before turning to Evelyn with a wan smile. “Well, at least the gossip wasn’t about *you*.”

That eased the tension and both Darius and Evelyn let out a little huff of laughter at Tabetha’s decidedly optimistic take on the matter.

“Tabetha is right,” Darius said. “I am used to being the subject of whispers, but I am grateful that your reputation was not harmed by the events of last night.”

Evelyn nodded. She was glad too, of course, although it hardly seemed fair that Darius was being spoken of as some sort of brute while Stallworth escaped last night’s escapades without a single slight to his reputation.

She might have been more put out about it all if Darius’s next words did not remind her of just how she would escape a marriage to Stallworth.

“Evelyn, if it is acceptable to you, I’d prefer to talk to your father as soon as possible.”

They both ignored Tabetha, who was clapping her hands together lightly and bouncing on her toes with barely

concealed excitement. “So it is to happen then? You are to marry Evelyn?”

Darius flashed Evelyn a quick smile that stole her breath. “As long as Evelyn has not had a change of heart.”

The heart in question melted. That was the only way she could explain the unbearable happiness that flooded her, making her chest ache and her body feel as though she might fly away. She shook her head. “There is no chance of that.”

His proposal still seemed like a miracle. How could her future go from being so bleak to so very bright in such a short period of time?

She only hoped she wasn’t dreaming.

But his next words confirmed that they were still living in reality. “Then I suppose we just have to hope that your father shares your confidence in this new arrangement.”

Her smile faltered and nerves replaced that sweet, fluttery sensation. Her father. Surely he would approve of an earl.

He would...wouldn’t he?

---

A LITTLE WHILE later she paced the hallway outside her father’s study. After bringing Tabetha home, Darius had followed her back to her house.

She’d watched him walk into her father’s study nearly twenty minutes ago.

What on earth could be taking so long?

Her father would say yes, though. He had to. No one would refuse an earl, and certainly not her father, who revered titles above all else. And wealth. Certainly, it would take some explaining to ensure her reputation did not suffer too terribly, but after Stallworth’s bad behavior at the dinner party, and once Darius explained the circumstances surrounding his cousin’s death...

She nodded at her own reflection in the hallway. Of course her father would agree.

She clasped her hands together and jumped when a door clicked shut. She spun around and...Jacob. Her tension faded slightly at the sight of her brother walking toward her, his brows arched in expectation. "Have you heard the news?"

She blinked in surprise and he gestured for her to join him in the drawing room. He was practically vibrating with excitement and his expression spoke of smug self-satisfaction as they entered the comfortable room, the fire burning merrily.

"What is this news?" she asked.

He eyed her from head to toe, as if just now seeing her fully. "Why do you look so pale? Is everything all right?"

She opened her mouth to tell him of her latest doings, but thought better of it. "You first, Jacob. What has you so pleased with yourself?"

He grinned. "It worked."

She arched a brow. "What worked?"

He poured himself a drink. "Do you recall how I was out of town for a fortnight?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course."

He turned back with a wicked gleam in his eye. "I will confess, I went out of town for reasons I did not share with you. You see, I knew about Stallworth's dalliance with the countess—"

"You what?"

He held up a hand for patience. "I'd heard rumors about his affair, but I also knew he would deny it if confronted. I had one last hope of getting you out of this repulsive arrangement and I took it."

She blinked, her lips parting. "Jacob...what did you do?"

He grinned. "I went to fetch her husband. He returned last night."

She blinked rapidly, temporarily at a loss for words. “Did he hear...that is...does he know...?”

Jacob nodded. “That was why I wished to cover up that incident with the fern at the party. I needed Stallworth to be caught in the act. By the countess’s husband.”

Shock had her clasping a hand to her chest. “And did he? Catch them, that is?”

Jacob nodded effusively. “Stallworth thought he’d gotten away with it.” Jacob scowled suddenly. “The nefarious knave. Can you believe he had the nerve to make arrangements to meet his mistress right there in front of his fiancée?” He sneered. “The cad deserves whatever comes his way.”

“And what did come his way?” She took a few steps forward, her heart racing, but from excitement or fear or something else, she had no idea.

“The earl came home and caught them together,” Jacob said. “He called Stallworth out, from what the gossips said.”

“The gossips,” she repeated. She blinked as it became clear. So Tabetha had heard about Stallworth being challenged, after all. But that meant...

“Ainsworth,” she murmured.

“What about Ainsworth?” he asked. Jacob’s satisfaction seemed to fade as he eyed her warily.

“What is the gossip about Ainsworth?” she asked.

He winced. “It seems the Ainsworths have launched a formal inquisition into the murder of the heir to the Darling earldom. Thomas Rutland.”

“What?” It came out as a gasp and she did not even try to hide her horror.

Jacob moved toward her. “There have been rumors about Darling’s part in his murder from the beginning and now the family of the accused—”

“But Darius had nothing to do with it,” she protested. Her heart was fluttering wildly now, and it was fear that had the

blood rushing from her head.

Jacob tilted his head to the side as he studied her. “If that is the case, then we must assume that the inquisition will prove him innocent.”

She tried to swallow but choked on this horrible sensation. Just when her life was looking so bright...now this. The thought of Darling being accused, of how that would hurt the man who already suffered such guilt...

Jacob’s hands came to her arms and he pulled her close. “Now, now. There is nothing to fear. Don’t you see, Evelyn? This was why I didn’t want you to rush into any sort of alliance with Darling. You’d be going from one scandal to another—”

She pulled back abruptly. “No, I wouldn’t. Because Darius is innocent, Jacob.”

He nodded, making a soothing sound as though she were a child. “That is all fine and good. And if it means that much to you, we will show our support for Darling in every possible way.”

“Thank you,” she managed, her breathing ragged as her mind raced to catch up with these latest developments. “But then, if Stallworth was called out—”

“You are free.” Jacob grinned at her, his satisfaction back in spades. “I spoke to Father earlier today, Evelyn. That was what I wanted to tell you. As soon as Father heard about Stallworth’s own scandal, he used that as an excuse to call off the engagement.” He leaned in closer, his tone filled with happiness. “You are free. There is no need to rush into another engagement or to compromise in your next arrangement.”

*No need.*

*Compromise.*

The words seemed to swirl around her and all she could hear was her own breathing as her legs gave out and she sank down onto the settee beside her.

“Evelyn, what is it?”



She gave her head a shake. Poor Darius was in there even now, asking her father for her hand.

But it wasn't necessary.

And he would be saddled, not only with his own rumors and scandals, but with her tainted reputation as well.

She dropped her head into her hands as her heart seemed to split into two.

"Evelyn?" Jacob sat beside her, and his voice was filled with concern. "What is it? What is wrong?"

"Nothing," she whispered.

*Everything.*

For, if there was no need to marry her, if she was no longer in dire need of a replacement fiancé....

She ought to let him go.

Tears welled in her eyes at the thought. She'd told herself all last night and all this morning that if he were to ask again she would say yes. Because it made sense. It was basically a business proposal. He would save her, and she would help him. But now...

Now she would only be a burden, and she had no need of a savior.

A door opened and closed in the distance. His meeting with her father was over.

"Evelyn, I'm worried about you," her brother said.

"Don't be." She lifted her head with a smile that she did not feel. But appearances... If there was one thing she'd learned from living in her father's home, it was how to keep up appearances.

"Is there something wrong?" Jacob's brow was creased with concern. "Has something happened?"

Her smile felt brittle. "Nothing that cannot be undone."

"Evelyn—" He reached for her but she pulled back.

There would be time for tears later, but for now...

For now, she needed to do the right thing. For Darling. For his sisters. He could find a woman with a spotless reputation, not a viscount's daughter who'd been tarnished by a knave like Stallworth.

She stood and straightened her shoulders, her chin coming up as well. "Will you give me a moment, Jacob? There is someone I must see."

He didn't respond, and as she walked away, off to tell Darling that he no longer needed to marry her—she realized it. The truth came and slapped her in the face.

She hadn't said yes to Darling because he was a solution to a problem.

Like a fool, she'd gone and fallen in love.

## CHAPTER TEN

DARIUS STOPPED JUST outside the door of the Viscount of Abberforth's study and drew in a deep breath, his hands clenching at his sides.

That had been...a disaster.

Wretched.

Awful.

Terrible.

He stopped, realizing he sounded like his sister Tabetha. Which was to say, overly dramatic. But truly, the meeting had gone about as poorly as a meeting of that nature might go.

First, the viscount had soundly rejected his offer of marriage to Evelyn.

The older man had actually used the words, *I'll see her a spinster before I allow her to be matched to you.*

He'd also muttered something about never releasing her dowry to the likes of a man like Darling and, if Darius remembered correctly, he'd ended with... *even Stallworth was a better choice than you.*

Darius had attempted to argue his side, politely and calmly, of course. If he'd learned one thing from his short time in society, it was that direct fits of temper rarely got a man his way. He'd pointed out he was well-titled, well-funded, and as a countess, his daughter would have an excellent position in life.

But Viscount Abberforth had sneered at Darius's words. "Excellent position? As the wife of a convict?"

That had set Darius back. He'd stared at Abberforth, unable to utter a word. And his silence had spoken volumes.

The viscount had half risen from his chair. "So it's true then? You'll be convicted in the inquisition?"

"Inquisition?" he'd replied, his voice barely above a whisper. But part of him already knew. The Ainsworth family had retaliated. They'd believed their son over the British Army.

His gaze focused on the empty hall before him, his mind returning to the present rather than reliving the conversation he'd finished moments before. He ran a hand through his hair. He'd been combatting public opinion ever since he'd returned from the war. At least with an inquisition he could fight the charges directly.

Relief coursed through him. Evelyn was correct, he hadn't done anything wrong on that day. At least, not in the eyes of the law.

An inquisition would clear his name. And for that, he was grateful.

But the Ainsworth family had still done their damage.

Because they'd given the viscount grounds to refuse his suit.

The entire point of marrying Evelyn was to save her reputation and her future. Not ruin her life with further scandal.

If this match wasn't going to be beneficial for her...

He ought to let her go.

Pain lanced through his chest. The problem was that he loved her.

He'd gone and fallen in love when they'd agreed to marry for a mutually beneficial arrangement.

And that agreement was no longer beneficial...for her.

He'd still get a lovely bride who'd help him with his sisters.

And she'd get... a potential convict.

All right. He was acting like Tabettha again. But she'd get a man who was tainted by an even larger scandal than Stallworth. That much was clear.

Voices from the drawing room next to the study caught his ear.

Evelyn.

He'd know the sound of her sweet clear voice anywhere, and he grimaced to hear it now.

He'd miss the sound of her. His eyes closed as he tried to etch the particular tone, so like a bell, onto his mind.

He'd have to tell her that her father had refused the match and then...

Then he'd have to end their engagement not because he wished to but because it was best for her. Evelyn deserved a man who could give her a beautiful life, not one who was tainted by a past scandal.

When he opened his eyes, he nearly started in surprise. She stood before him, a look of concern marking her brow. "Darius?" she reached up and gently touched his biceps. "Are you all right?"

"The meeting," he said, his head shaking back and forth. "It did not go particularly well."

She nodded and he knew that she knew. Then he rubbed his head. When had this entire affair gotten so convoluted and confusing? She wrapped her fingers about his upper arm, or she tried, and then gave him the slightest tug into the drawing room. "Follow me. We need to talk."

"We do," he replied, clearing his throat. As awful as the conversation he'd just had had been. This one would be far worse. He hated to let her go. Everything inside him screamed to pull her close and keep her at his side... forever.

But he'd do what was best for her. Come hell or high water. He was a man who valued duty and honor above all other traits, no matter how much it hurt him personally.

Evelyn's brother stood in the room, his brows going up at the sight of them. "Jacob," Evelyn softly murmured. "Would you give us a moment, please?"

Jacob frowned. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Evelyn straightened, drawing up to her full height. "The door will be open. You can wait in the hallway."

He hesitated and then gave a quick jerk of his chin to acknowledge consent. "I'll be just outside the room," he cautioned as he gave Darius a hard stare.

Darius flinched. He didn't blame Evelyn's family for their dislike, but it made this all the more difficult.

The moment they were alone, Evelyn rushed into his arms. "Was my father dreadful?" she whispered. "I am so sorry."

He gave a small smile at her concern and he brushed a finger down her cheek. "Nothing more than I likely deserved."

She nibbled at her lip. "I doubt that. He's not a warm and fuzzy man."

Her skin felt like velvet under the pad of his finger. "Then how did you come about your wealth of tenderness?"

She blinked, a sad smile gracing her lips. "My mother."

Gently he cupped her cheek in his palm. "He refused our match."

"I should have known he would." She pursed her lips.

Darius frowned. "And you know why?"

"The inquisition."

"Yes," he muttered, the dull ache inside throbbing.

"And because I am no longer beholden to Stallworth."

He drew in a quick sharp breath as those words sunk in. Now that he considered it, the termination of Evelyn's first

engagement had been implied in her father's words. "You're free of him?"

She gave a tentative nod.

If Darius had had any doubt, he had to let her go, it had evaporated with those words. She truly was able to find a better man than himself.

"Which is why I have to end our arrangement," she said.

Those words, spoken so softly and sweetly were like bullets, each piercing his torso in pain. "I understand."

"It just isn't fair..."

"It isn't." He swallowed a lump, his Adam's apple bobbing as he dropped his hand from her cheek. This might be the hardest thing he'd ever done. "It wouldn't be right."

She continued talking but Darius hardly heard her as his chin tucked closer to his chest. Was it wrong that he wished to wrap her up in his arms and carry her off right this very minute?

He'd held her like that on their first meeting, when she'd been dangling out the window. Her body pressed to his, her arms about his neck. He should have offered to help her escape rather than urging her to stay. Then he could ignore the inquisition, her father, the fact that this was the right choice... letting her go.

"That's why we can't marry. It just isn't fair to you," she finished.

He blinked several times, focusing back in on her face. He'd missed something critical. That was for certain. "Come again?"

She paled and he realized he was scowling.

He intentionally softened his features and once again touched her cheek. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

That made her soften under his touch. "You could never frighten me. It's just those words were some of the most difficult to say and to repeat them..."

“Difficult?” He really had missed something important. “It shouldn’t be difficult for you to say that my past is too scandalous for you to tie yourself to it. I completely understand.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a small O. “That isn’t what I said at all.”

He shook his head. Why had he chosen now, off all times, not to listen carefully? “What did you say?”

“That I am a poor choice for you. That I am surrounded by scandal. That you need a bride who will lift your family up and add to your standing—”

“No woman would do a better job of that than you,” he cut in and then wrapped an arm about her waist, pulling her closer.

She fit against him like she belonged there, and he nearly groaned to know that soon enough he’d have to let her go. But he’d comfort her now because even worse than his heart breaking was her hurt.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “But you’ve three sisters to launch. My scandal can’t tarnish their chances. I’d never forgive myself.”

He stilled against her. “Just so that we are clear. You are ending our engagement not because of my scandal but because of yours?”

She looked up at him with her warm brown eyes, her cheeks flushed with color, her lips soft and tempting. “The truth is...” She swallowed. “The truth is that I care far too much about you to allow you to ruin—”

He interrupted again but he couldn’t hold back his tongue as his pulse jumped and his heart raced. “You care?”

“I...” Her tongue darted out to wet her lips before she spoke. “Darius, I could never do anything that might hurt you. Even if it hurts me. I want the best for you. Always.”

Those words, which so reflected his own feelings, tore through him. He ached with pleasure, with love, and quite



without meaning to, he leaned down and captured her lips with his own.

For a moment, she held still underneath him and then she kissed back, pressing her lips to his as her hands came to his shoulders.

If he'd quickly swooped in, he slowly drew back and he watched her eyes flutter open, his lip parting in a satisfied smile. She looked...stunned. In the best way possible.

“So then...you are not ending our engagement because of the inquisition?” he asked.

“No.” Her answer was so quick and so vehement that his smile only grew wider. “You will be exonerated of all charges, I am certain of that.”

“You’re ending our arrangement because it is no longer in my best interest?”

She flushed. “I am tainted by scandal.”

“Of which you are also completely innocent.”

She shook her head. “But you will suffer for it and I can’t have that.”

He dropped his forehead to hers. “I don’t give a flying fig about Stallworth or what he’s done or what others think of you. To me, you are the most gracious and beautiful woman I’ve ever met and I would be honored to marry you, Evelyn.” He pulled her tighter to his chest. “It is my scandal that worries me. I do you an injustice if I make you my wife.”

He felt her gasp even before he heard it. “So you are more concerned for me?”

He couldn’t hold back the words any longer. “Of course I am. I am in love with you.”

She stiffened in his arms. “But...but we had an arrangement based on mutually beneficial...” Her words tapered off.

He grimaced, his forehead wrinkling against hers. “I know. And I’ve gone and complicated everything with a scandal and

feelings.”

“No,” she shook her head, her skin sliding against his. “You haven’t complicated anything. In fact, I do believe you’ve made this much easier.”

“Easier?” he asked, pulling away to better look into her eyes. “Easier how?”

“I thought you only wanted to marry me because I was good for your sisters. But if you feel the way I feel...”

His heart skipped a beat. She loved him too? “The way you feel?”

“I love you too, Darius.” Her voice was breathy and achingly gentle as her warm breath blew across his cheek. “I love you so much.”

He couldn’t help it. He lifted her up and spun her about, kissing her again. Because if they loved each other. That changed everything.

Or nothing.

“Your father has refused my suit.”

Her face was just above his and her eyes sparkled down at him. “I think I might have an idea.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

EVELYN TOOK one last look around her bedroom, making sure she had all she needed and that everything was in order.

Cora wrung her hands together in the doorway. “Are you sure there is no other way, miss?”

Evelyn smiled. “I am certain. But remember, Cora. All you must do is close the window behind me and tell anyone who asks that you haven’t seen me. Can you do that?”

“Oh, yes, miss.” Cora nibbled on her bottom lip. “But your father—”

“Is no one to fear,” Evelyn finished. “My brother knows what I’m up to and he approves. He will ensure that you are not blamed in any way, if the truth should come out.”

Cora nodded. They’d been over this several times already, but this evening Evelyn was in such good spirits, she did not mind reassuring the kindhearted servant one last time.

Because for once, there truly was no need to fear her father. Jacob was on her side. All he’d ever wanted was her happiness—of that she had no doubt. And soon enough she would be married to Darius, and when she was by his side... well, she had nothing and no one to fear.

Certainly not her father.

“Besides,” she said to Cora as she moved toward the window and opened it. “My father will come around soon enough. Once I am wed and Darius is exonerated he will be gloating to his friends about how his daughter is a countess.”

And, knowing her father, he would not tell a soul that she had gone against his wishes. Because...how would that look? For her poor father, appearances were everything. These days all she could do was pity him for it. What a sad way to live one's life.

She shook her head as she bent over the sill to take a look at the drop below.

This time, she grinned at the sight beneath her.

Darius was standing just below, looking dashing and handsome as he waited for her to fall into his arms.

She'd already fallen head over heels for the man, what was one more leap?

Her dreamy sigh had him looking up and the grin that split his features made her heart clench with more joy than she'd ever thought possible.

"Are you ready, my love?" he asked quietly. Her father and the servants were likely all asleep by now, but they'd take every caution just to be safe.

She nodded. She was more than ready to marry this man, to be his wife, and to support him and his family through whatever came next. His inquisition. His sisters' debut into society. She could hardly wait for this next chapter to begin.

Cora fretted behind her. "Oh miss, it is such a distance to the ground. Are you sure you cannot go out through the back entrance?"

Sarah laughed softly. "First of all, Cora, there is nothing to fear because my darling fiancé is standing right below and will catch me. And second..." She flashed the servant a wicked grin that she'd learned from Darius. "Where would be the fun in that?"

And fun was one thing she meant to have. Fun, and laughter, and warmth, and kisses, and...perhaps even a family of her own one day, if they were so blessed. If there was anything her time with Darius had taught her it was that there was so much more to life than appearance...and she meant to explore every bit of it.

“I’ll be right down,” she whispered to Darius.

“I’ll be waiting,” he said.

With a little help from Cora she finagled herself over the edge and let her feet drop down. She’d no sooner started to lower herself than she felt large, strong hands wrapping around her waist, plucking her easily from the ledge and setting her on her feet.

She was still in the circle of his arms when she tilted her head back to see him smiling down at her.

“At last,” he murmured in that lovely low, rumbly voice of his. “I was beginning to think this day would never come.”

She laughed. “It’s only been three days since we came up with this plan of elopement.”

He gave a little growl that made her shiver. “And that was three days too many.”

He dipped his head and claimed her lips, the kiss a searing reminder of the formal vows that were to come and the oaths and declarations they’d already made to one another. When he pulled back, his eyes were filled with a tender affection that made her feel as though all was right in the world. Or that all *would be* right, at least, just so long as he was by her side.

“No second thoughts?” he asked.

She grinned. He was teasing, and she knew it. She’d never been more certain of any decision in her life. “You are the one who ought to have second thoughts. You could have an enormous dowry, a proper young lady with a spotless reputat—”

He cut her off with another kiss that stole her breath along with her words. “Nonsense,” he said when he finally came up for air. “You are the only lady for me. There could never be anyone else.”

She sighed with pleasure, leaning into his broad chest and reveling in the feel of his arms about her. “And for me, Darius, there could never be another—”

“Are you two just about done?” Her brother’s hiss from the garden’s edge made her start.

They both glanced over to see Jacob holding back a branch so they might slip out to the back alley where her brother had promised to have a coach waiting to take them to Gretna Green.

Darius reached for her hand, guiding her before him as they slipped through the opening to the street beyond.

“Could you not wait to manhandle my sister until you are married?” Jacob asked as Darius joined him and Evelyn beside the coach, which had indeed been waiting as he’d promised.

Evelyn winced. She hadn’t lied to Cora. Her brother had agreed to this plan...reluctantly. While he did not share her father’s same concerns about Darius, he did not relish the fact that his sister was to elope, either. He’d felt certain that he could bring their father around given enough time, but Evelyn was out of patience. And besides, Darius and his sisters needed her support now. Not after he was exonerated.

Once Jacob had realized she could not be swayed, he’d agreed to help, but it was clear he was still not quite pleased with Darius for going along with her plan of running away.

Darius did not seem to mind. A smirk tugged at his lips as he eyed her brother, who’d gotten carried away with his part in this endeavor, it seemed, by dressing entirely in black as though he were some sort of thief in the night and not the eldest son standing on his own property.

Darius gave Jacob a look that swept from his head to his toes. “I realize I’m new to society but...is it common for barons to assist couples meaning to elope?”

Jacob scowled. “Just as common, I imagine, as earls opting to elope rather than wait for approval.”

Darius chuckled and reached a hand out to help Evelyn into the carriage. “Come, my love. We have a long journey ahead of us.”

Evelyn paused and turned back to her brother, throwing her arms around his neck in an impulsive hug. “Thank you,

Jacob,” she whispered.

He squeezed her tightly in return. “I’ll tell Father you’re staying with friends for the time being.”

She shut her eyes, overcome for a moment with gratitude. When her father learned that he’d been lying, Jacob would surely pay the price. “Thank you,” she said again. For she couldn’t think of any other words to say to express her gratitude.

He patted her back awkwardly. Neither of them had been raised to be terribly affectionate and emotional moments like these were unfamiliar in the extreme. “I just hope you know what you’re doing,” he muttered.

She pulled back and smiled up at him. “I promise you that I have never been more certain of any decision in my life.”

His frown seemed to say he did not share in her certitude but he kept his mouth shut.

She squeezed his arm. “I hope that someday you find true love of your own, and then I know you will understand.”

He gave a little huff, a sound somewhere between amusement and disdain.

She turned to take Darius’s proffered hand and let him help her in. He paused before following her inside and she heard him mutter, “I promise you, I will take good care of her.”

She pressed her lips together, tears stinging the back of her eyes as emotions got the best of her. Her brother told the driver they were ready and Darius sank into the seat beside her as the coach set off, leaving London and her family behind.

“Still no regrets, my love?” Darius asked as he took her hand in his, no doubt noticing the shine of unshed tears in her eyes.

“Of course not,” she said with a watery laugh. “Are you going to ask me that throughout the entire journey?”

He laughed softly as he pulled her toward him and tucked her against his side, where she was warm and safe. “Probably.

I'll likely keep asking you that even after we return and you are my countess."

She grinned, placing a hand on his chest, right over his heart. "And the answer will always be the same. No matter what happens." She tilted her head back so she could look into his eyes. "Has there been any news?"

She was referring to the inquisition, and he knew it. Aside from planning their elopement, the upcoming investigation into Thomas Rutland's death had been consuming their thoughts. His smile faded and a line formed between his brows as his gaze grew thoughtful. "I spoke to the other gentlemen in that secret society I'd told you about..."

She nodded. He hadn't told her much, but enough to know that there were powerful gentlemen in this group he'd been invited into. "And?"

"They told me not to worry about it." He arched his brows as if still surprised himself. "They said they would handle the matter."

"Really?" She pursed her lips and sank against him as his arm wrapped around her tighter. "Well, that is good news. These gentlemen must be quite powerful, indeed."

He gave a little grunt of acknowledgement. "It would seem so." With his free hand he tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and ran a finger over her cheek, making her shiver with delight. "By the time we return to London, these gentlemen should have the inquisition handled, my two remaining sisters will be here to stay with us, and all just in time for the season to get underway."

She smiled up at them. "I cannot wait to meet your sisters. If Clarissa and Mariah are anything like Tabetha, I am certain I shall love them."

He grinned and his expression softened. "They are nothing at all like Tabetha. Each of my sisters is utterly unique..." His laughter was rueful. "And for that we should all be thankful."

She wrapped her arm around his middle. "Do you think they will like me?"



“Of course,” he said, so quickly it warmed her heart. “They will love you, almost as much as I do. And how could they not?” He cupped her chin and lifted her face so he could meet her gaze. “You are perfect.”

She laughed. “I assure you, I am not perfect.”

His answering smile was slow and sweet. “Let me amend that. You are perfect...for me.”

She leaned into his hand. “There I can only agree with you.”

“I love you, Evelyn,” he whispered as he leaned down toward her.

“And I love you, Darius.” She’d no more gotten the words out, when he was kissing her gently. As the carriage rocked beneath them and the sound of horse hooves on the cobblestones filled the air, she leaned into his embrace. The first kiss of many, no doubt, on the long road to their runaway wedding.

And she couldn’t imagine a better way to pass the time.

## EPILOGUE

DARIUS STOOD on the edge of a sea of dancers in the Earl of Havercrest's ballroom, attempting not to dive behind the nearest fern. He still hated these infernal social events, marriage hadn't changed that.

Though to be fair, they were far more tolerable these days.

First because the whispers had largely ceased. He still hadn't a clue how the Wicked Earls' Club had managed such a task, but his reputation had been restored and his name exonerated.

He supposed men such as those had to be skilled in scrubbing a man's bad deeds, real or imagined, and he was grateful for their help.

And he'd learned a valuable lesson. One of the most useful tools in surviving society was...friends.

The Ainsworth family was still furious and they took every opportunity to cut him publicly, but without all the whispers, he could stand tall in the face of their ire.

Evelyn came toward him then, looking divine in a gown of pale pink, her brown hair glistening in the candlelight. She was the other reason society had become more bearable. When he saw her approaching him in her finery, he fell in love all over again.

She slipped next to him, her arm sliding into the crook of his.

“Everything all right?” she asked with an appraising tilt of her chin.

“Fine,” he answered, drawing her just a touch closer. “Now that you’re here.”

She gave him a glowing smile. “Forgive my absence. I had to do the rounds with Father so that he might receive all the glowing praise on the fantastic match he made for his daughter.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

But his heart throbbed in his chest. “Evelyn. You are beyond kind to allow him to take credit like that.”

Her smile softened as she pressed a bit closer. “It isn’t kindness that motivates me. I am so fortunate to have found you and I’ve learned so much about what truly makes a person happy.”

All thoughts of retreating behind potted plants vanished in the glow of her smile. “I understand completely,” he answered. The past month had been the most wonderful of his life. Evelyn’s presence had illuminated his world in the most wonderful way.

She pressed her cheek to his shoulder. “I actually feel sorry for my father.”

He shook his head. How could one woman be this lovely? Darius glanced over at his two younger sisters.

Clarissa stood just behind Mariah, despite being older. She had the pale blonde hair of their mother and clear blue eyes that looked like the sky on a sunny day, though she kept them firmly pointed toward the ground.

She’d never been very effusive and here, in society, she’d been vying with Darius for the spots behind the plants.

In contrast, Mariah stood just in front, her skin and hair darker than either Tabetha or Clarissa, though still blonde. Her chin held an almost defiant angle as she watched society as though daring them to find fault with her presence here.

He shook his head. Both had grown under Evelyn’s gentle tutelage. Clarissa was brave enough to attend this first ball of

the season, and Mariah was learning to hold her tongue in check.

“They both look beautiful tonight,” Evelyn whispered as she looked up at him, clearly noticing where his gaze had travelled.

“I still worry about them.” He looked around the ballroom. “We weren’t raised for this.”

Her other hand pressed to his biceps. “They’ll find their way just as you did.”

“Are you certain?” he asked, his chest tightening in his worry. He was a strong man, a soldier, and society had nearly been his undoing.

As if to belabor his point, Tabettha rushed over and, if he wasn’t mistaken, tears glistened in her eyes. Was that the trick of the candles?

“Evelyn!” His wife’s name rushed from his sister’s lips. “Oh, Evelyn.” Her voice broke as she grabbed Evelyn’s arm.

“What’s wrong?” Evelyn asked, letting him go and reaching for his sister. Concern knitted his brow even as gratitude filled him. How would he do any of this without his Evelyn by his side?

“The most awful thing has just happened.” Tabettha’s voice was rising and several other attendees turned to stare.

Evelyn noticed and gently began to guide Tabettha toward a cluster of...plants. It seemed his entire family had a preference for hiding in ferns.

He followed, certain he should hear whatever had upset Tabettha so much.

Once tucked behind them, Evelyn turned to the eldest Darling sister again. “Tabetha. Take a breath and tell me what happened.”

Tears glistened on Tabettha’s cheek. “I’m not sure I can. It’s just too awful. What she said is just...”

“Who?” Evelyn asked, her brow drawing tight together.

“Lady Ainsworth,” Tabetha said in a cry of agony.

Sick dread weighted his stomach.

Apparently the Ainsworth scandal was far from over...



WANT to learn what happened to Tabetha? Her story is coming soon in *The Duke's Darling Debutante*! Keep reading for a free sample of the next book by Maggie Dallen & Katherine Ann Madison from their *Wallflower's Wish* series, *A Hero for Lady Abigail*.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## **About the Authors**

Maggie Dallen writes adult and young adult romantic comedies in a range of genres. An unapologetic addict of all things romance, she loves to connect with fellow avid readers on Facebook, Twitter or at [www.maggiedallen.com](http://www.maggiedallen.com). For a FREE sweet regency romance, sign up for her monthly newsletter at <http://eepurl.com/bFEVsL>

Katherine Ann Madison is the sweet side of USA Today Bestselling Author, Tammy Andresen. An English major and longtime lover of romance novels, writing historical romance feels like her Cinderella fairytale come true.

# EARL OF PERSUASION

AMANDA MARIEL



## FOREWORD

Lord Brian Kennington, Fifth Earl of Connlee, is a master at persuasion. When he crosses paths with the not too proper Lady Minerva Fox, he determines that she needs a bit of excitement in her life, and he knows just how to deliver. He will live up to his moniker, the Earl of Persuasion, as he sweeps her along a path of adventure and romance.

The only problem with his plan: Love was not a part of the equation.

## CHAPTER ONE

*LONDON ENGLAND, 1817*

LADY MINERVA FOX sat impatiently in the carriage as she awaited her sister-in-law Carstine. The pair had been shopping along Bond Street all afternoon, and Minerva has grown weary. She sank back against her seat and fiddled with the edge of her pelisse. Whatever was taking Carstine so long?

Another minute and Minerva would have to fetch her. Heaven's Carstine had been in the drapers for at least thirty minutes. It should take no one that much time to purchase lace. Leastwise not when they knew what they wanted on the way in.

Just as Minerva determined to go after Carstine, the carriage door opened. "Whatever too—" Her words ceased as she got an eye full of the man who climbed in. A tall, dark, and incredibly handsome man. She should scream. Summon her driver for assistance at once.

And yet, she only stared. She unabashedly ogled the man taking in every inch of him from his dark mahogany hair and patrician nose to his wide shoulders and muscular thighs. Most of which a well bred young lady should pay no mind to. But how could one ignore such a prime specimen?

Before she could gather her wits, he pulled the carriage door shut and settled on the seat across from her.

“Good day, Ma’am,” he said, a boyish smile pulling at his lips.

It was the sort of smile meant to disarm those who gazed upon it, and Minerva could not deny how well it worked, for she grinned back. “I believe you are in the wrong carriage,” she said.

He placed his hands on his knees and leaned forward. “On the contrary, I am exactly where I mean to be.”

Was the man addle-brained? Perhaps he was drunk? She could not say for sure. Regardless, something was amiss. She met his gaze, stared directly into his deep brown eyes, and notched her chin. “That cannot be, for this is my carriage, and I do not know you.”

His smile broadened, taking on a rake’s quality. “Ah, yes, but you should.”

“I should what?” She asked, caution in her tone.

“You should know me.”

The man dripped confidence and masculinity. Both qualities intrigued her, but one could scarcely ignore the impropriety of the situation. Not to mention the danger she might be in. Minerva slid closer to the carriage door, her gaze remaining on him. “I must insist you take your leave. My companion will return at any moment and this, sir, is most improper.”

“Indeed,” he drawled as he too slid closer to the carriage door. “I would not wish to cause you scandal. All the same, I could not pass up the opportunity to spend a moment in such a beautiful woman’s company.”

Minerva felt heat crawl across her cheeks. He was good. Very good, for at that moment she craved to know him better, almost more than she wished for him to depart. She swallowed and forced a small grin. “I thank you for the compliment, and now I must insist you leave. If you do not, I will call for my driver to remove you.”

The man held up a staying hand. A large hand with long fingers and a signage ring. She’d supposed by his well-made

clothing that he had money, but she had not suspected him of being a lord. It made his behavior that much stranger.

Perhaps he was bored and looking for a little sport. A young buck out for a good time or engaging in a bet. The idea only made her situation more precarious. What if others saw him enter or leave her carriage?

And who the devil was he?

“There is no need for theatrics,” he said as he opened the carriage door.

The nerve of him. “Theatrics! You cannot be serious. You entered my carriage uninvited and did not so much as give me your name. Now you accuse me of theatrics?”

“Do not get your corset in a twist. I said I was leaving, and so I am.” He paused, giving her another rake’s grin. “Though I would much prefer to stay.”

Minerva pointed at the door. “Out.”

The man jumped down before looking back at her, mischief in his eyes, and said, “Until we meet again, beauty.” He closed the door before she processed his words.

Minerva blew out a deep breath as she settled back against the carriage seat. ‘Until we meet again.’ They had never met before. What on earth made him think they would meet again? Where had he gone? And what the devil was his name?

She had to know.

Minerva pushed open the carriage door. “Wait,” she called as she glanced around.

Too late. He had disappeared.

And now she had caused a spectacle. Passers-by looked in her direction while a trio of ladies turned to face her. Abashed, Minerva closed her eyes and drew in a steadying breath. Had any of them seen the man? She prayed not, but then they must all think her mad. How would she explain herself?

She opened her eyes and gave a dismissive wave of her hand. “Forgive me. I’m afraid I was quite overcome.” She

shrank back into the carriage and buried her face in her hands.

Perhaps she was mad.

Minerva jumped when the carriage door opened to admit Carstine. She could scarcely help feeling on edge and more than a bit embarrassed to boot. Still, she attempted to act as if nothing were amiss. Perhaps her sister-in-law had not witnessed her brief scene.

Carstine took the seat across from Minerva, then angled her head, appraising. “Whatever was that about?”

Minerva gave a nonchalant smile. “I am not sure what you are referring to.”

Carstine’s gaze narrowed. “Ye were leanin out of tae carriage when I came out of the drapers, and ye yelled for someone tae wait.”

“Oh, that.” Minerva gave a dismissive shrug. “It was nothing.”

“Nothin’ my foot,” Carstine moved to sit beside Minerva as the carriage jerked into motion. “Ladies donna lean out of carriages and yell. I’d imagine yer mother would have much to say on the subject. Blake as well, I sure ye.”

Minerva straightened her back and lifted her chin to meet Carstine’s gaze. “You wouldn’t.”

“Of course not.” Carstine looked abashed, but only for a moment. “Because ye are goin ta tell me what happened.”

“Very well. I thought I saw someone I have not spoken to in quite some time... a school friend, and wished to have a word with her.”

Carstine nodded. “Then I will only say, should such an occasion arise in the future, I caution ye tae handle it in a more ladylike fashion. And I pray ye donna grace the scandal sheets come mornin.”

“Indeed,” Minerva said as she winced with guilt. She rarely ever lied—certainly not to Carstine. But she could not tell the truth. Not without telling her all of it, and Minerva was not ready to share her stranger.

In fact, she never meant to tell a soul. She'd rather think of the mysterious and all too handsome man as an adventure. Yes, that was what he was. Her very own secret adventure. And if she should ever meet him again...

Excitement filled her at the prospect.

She leaned back and let her imagination run amok with possibilities as the carriage bounced and jostled along London's roads. Minerva had long craved adventure, and perhaps this was the start of her journey.

Or her ruination.

## CHAPTER TWO

*THREE MONTHS later*

MINERVA STOPPED MID SENTENCE, her breath caught at the sight of him. A tall, broad shouldered gentleman with mahogany hair and piercing dark eyes strode across the ball room. It was him. Her adventure. She'd dreamed of him often, looked for him always, and after three long months determined that she had indeed gone mad.

And now, he was here.

She swallowed hard before finding her tongue. Without taking her eyes from the man, she said, "Please excuse me."

"Is something amiss?" Mother asked.

"Not at all." Minerva searched for an excuse to leave Mother's side. "I see Carstine, and wish to have a word is all."

"Very well, dear." Mother nodded her approval.

Minerva started toward the refreshment table where her adventure now stood. She would not allow him to escape this time. Leastwise not until she knew his name. She weaved around clusters of chatting ladies and promenading couples, before passing between two ferns and making her way around a marble statue.

Upon reaching the refreshment table, she lifted a glass of ratafia, then moved to stand near the end of the table—near her adventure. Minerva took a sip of the sweet beverage, then turned her gaze to him.

She fought the urge to smile when her plan to beckon him near worked. Instead, she simply tipped the glass to her lips as she held his gaze. Something about their game made her bold. He excited her and she reveled in the feeling—the danger.

He held out one hand as he gave a bow. “May I have this dance?”

Yes, her mind screamed, but her mouth had other ideas, and she said, “I am afraid we have not been properly introduced.”

He narrowed his dark gaze on her, studying. “And you would allow such a thing to stand in your way?” He made a tsk-tsk sound. “I scarcely credit it. Not after the way you came to me just now.”

She turned as her cheeks heated, took another drink of her ratafia, then set the glass down.

“Dance with me, beauty,” he said, his words velvety and all too close to her ear.

A shiver of anticipation slipped through Minerva as she silently took his arm. He led her onto the dance floor as the quartet struck up a waltz. Every nerve in Minerva’s body tingled as the gentleman took her in his arms.

For long minutes she simply enjoyed the dance. Revelled in the feel of his muscular arms around her and the masculine scent of him surrounding her. Her heart raced as she meet his gaze. “I have come to think of you as my adventure.”

He gave a rakish grin. “I rather like being an adventure.”

Her lips curved upward as he spun her around the dance floor. “Who are you?” She asked, her voice breathy.

“My name is Brian Kennington.” He brought his face closer to hers. “And what is yours, beauty?”

“I rather like beauty,” Heat crawled across her chest at the admission, “But my name is Minerva Fox.”

Something flashed in his dark eyes, a moment of hesitation, or indecision. She could not be sure other than that the playfulness left him. Did he know her? Perhaps he knew



her family? Regardless, she had questions and was enjoying him far too much to have her adventure end just yet.

She stared into his eyes and asked, “Why did you invade my carriage?”

“I fear I would ruin your adventure if I were to give an answer.” He twirled her again before leading her back across the dance floor. “You seem to crave adventure.”

“I do...” Her words trailed off as her cheeks warmed. She could scarcely believe she had spoken the words. Minerva had long craved adventure. It was that very desire that led to most of her outrageous ideas and meddling. And yet, she had never actually had an adventure.

Until now.

She beamed up at him, her embarrassment vanquished by her desire to live in the moment. “I want to ride astride, dance in a fountain, shoot a pistol...” she cast her gaze away, “I want to frolic barefoot in the grass, dance in the rain, and kiss a stranger.” Her pulse sped at the admissions, and for the first time she felt free. “You must think me the worst sort.”

“I think you the best sort,” he said, his voice silken and low. He took her hand and led her from the dance floor.

Minerva slanted a curious glance at him when he led her toward the terrace doors instead of her Mother. “What are you doing?”

“Starting your next adventure.”

A moment of panic gripped her. It was one thing to voice her desires, but this... Actually engaging in any of them—with him. “I cannot.”

His step did not falter as he meet her gaze. “Of course you can.”

“I’ll be ruined,” she protested with her words but made no move to stop her steps.

He gave a wicked, boyish grin. The sort a mischievous child would use to persuade his friends to go along with his

antics. Minerva thrilled at the challenge written all over his face. She could stay with him. She could indulge her whims.

But what of the consequences? Was she willing to risk the possible fall out? Could her reputation withstand a bit of scandal?

She pulled in a breath and stilled her feet. In this she could not be selfish. “I am sorry, but I cannot. Women are not easily forgiven our transgressions and I have more than myself to consider.” It pained her to refuse. Still, she knew the rightness of it. “The ball room is full of our peers. If anyone should take note of us fleeing together... My family would suffer nearly as much as I.”

He stared into her eyes, his dark gaze softening. “Your eyes belie your words.”

“They do not.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “If we are discovered, I will marry you. Now hurry.” He propelled them back into motion.

Minerva’s heart thrilled and her feet moved of their own accord.

Heaven help her! This man—this adventure—excited her beyond anything she had experienced before. How could she refuse?

## CHAPTER THREE

BRIAN KENNINGTON, fifth Earl of Connlee, had most certainly lost his mind! He was a confirmed bachelor, a proud member of the Wicked Earls' Club, and sworn never to marry. Yet he had just vowed to marry this lady should it become necessary.

What the devil was he thinking?

One glance at her made everything clear. She stole his breath, warmed his blood, inspired, and intrigued him. He could not help but be in her presence. And when she spoke, he found himself enthralled. He wanted to give her the adventure she craved.

It was the very reason he had entered her carriage all those months past. She had captivated him at first sight. Brian had seen her exit a shop and could not fight the urge to meet her. Then, her response when he entered her carriage only entranced him further.

She had not screamed as most ladies would. Not that she did not exhibit a modicum of fear—she was cautious, but she did not allow it to show blatantly. Not his beauty. She held her head high and confronted him with steel in her bones.

It made her even more appealing, and he knew that day he would have to see her again. His only problem—he did not know who she was. Compounding the matter evermore was that he avoided social functions and his beauty was undoubtedly a lady.

Brian knew if he were to see her again, he would have to show himself at balls and the such. And he had been right, for

here she was.

And now that he had found her, he had no need of the ball and every desire to escape it. With her at his side, of course. With a decided spring in his step, he led her through the open French doors and out onto the marble terrace.

The night air exhilarated him further as he led her through the torch-lit patch of the garden. A veil of darkness concealed them when he brought them to a stop. "Take off your slippers," he said.

"I cannot," Minerva protested, though a wide smile tugged at her full lips.

Brian arched a brow. "You cannot, or you will not?"

She held one foot out, her slipper peeking from beneath the hem of her light blue gown. "I cannot."

He crouched down and captured her foot in his hand. "Then allow me."

She laughed as he removed her slipper, then lifted her opposite foot so he could repeat the action. Once Brian removed both slippers, he met her captivating blue gaze. "If we are to do this right, I must also remove your stockings."

"You are mad," she said with a giggle.

"Mad?" He teased. "How can one dance barefoot in the grass if they do not remove their stockings?" He questioned, his tone light and carefree.

"Humm," she drawled, her lips pursing. "I do see your point." She angled her chin, looking up at the sky bursting with stars. "However, I would be forever scandalized if I allowed you such liberties."

"Very well," he said as he stood. "I will remove mine as you ponder the dilemma." Brian kicked off his shoes before removing his stockings. With the job done, he rubbed his barefoot across the lush grass. "It has a decidedly wild feel to it."

Her smile brightened as longing filled her eyes. Minerva strolled a few paces to a marble bench, then sat. "Turn your

back, and I will remove mine.”

He did as she asked, his pulse speeding at the image of her skirts hiked up and hands on her thighs. He imagined she had silky, warm skin, and he longed to touch it himself. Still, he had not brought her out here to ruin her. He’d done so with the desire to give her the experience she craved.

He would behave. He must, for he did not intend to marry.

“There,” she said.

He turned toward her and extended a hand. “May I have this dance?”

She schooled her expression into one of seriousness and placed her hand in his. “It would be my honor.”

He brought her close, and for a moment, his breath caught. She was stunning, and a wildness lay beneath her surface begging for indulgence. Recovering his senses, he began to hum a simple melody. Brian led her through the first figures of their dance, twirling her out then bringing her close again.

“How does it feel? The grass on your feet?”

Minerva looked down at the ground between them, then back at him. “It is marvelous. Soft, chilly, and a bit ticklish.” She drew in a breath. “I feel free.”

“You look wild. Beautiful, but wild,” he said. “Like a child escaped from her nurse. I dare say; it is a good look for you.”

She laughed, the sound of her merriment surrounded them before fading into the night. “Do you know, I don’t believe I have ever had so much fun.”

“That is a pity, to be sure, and we must rectify the situation,” he said, his mouth close to her ear. “Meet me tomorrow.”

“Where?” She asked without a hint of reservation in her tone.

He thought for a moment, then said, “Hyde Park. Near the Serpentine.”

When she did not respond, he dipped her. His gaze bore into hers. “Will you come?”

Her lips twitched as though she were hiding a smile, but she did not speak.

“Say you will. I promise you will not regret it.” He twirled her out, then brought her against him. Looking deep into her eyes, he said, “Don’t let our adventure end here.”

She lost the battle, a bright smile lighting her face. “Very well, you have convinced me.”

He led her back to the bench so that she might set her feet to rights. “Be there at dawn.”

“I couldn’t possibly. My Mother and Brother would be most suspicious,” Minerva said, a frown pulling at her lips. “I have morning calls, and then there’s—”

“Surely you can think of something,” he interpreted. “It must be early if we are to shoot pistols.”

She picked up her stockings, then paused. Her brow creased with thought. “Perhaps I could feign a headache. Or, maybe, I can say I agreed to breakfast with one of my friends.” She nibbled her lower lip. “I’ll think of something. I am rather good at making plans.”

“That does not surprise me in the least,” he said, as he turned his back so she could put her stockings on. He busied himself retrieving her slippers as he waited.

“I am ready.”

He turned to find her holding one foot up and grinned as he approached. “Does the slipper fit?” He teased as he palmed her heel and placed her toes in the satin slipper.

She giggled, the sweet sound going straight to his heart. He found himself reluctant to return her to the ball and very much wishing for the morning. Before he slid her other slipper on, he asked, “I have your word, you will be at the park tomorrow morning?”

“You have my word.” She smiled, her eyes taking on a decided sparkle.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“I NEED you to cover for me.” Minerva stared at Carstine, imploring her to agree. She had spent the better part of the previous night trying to figure out a way to meet Mr. Kennington. Brian. Lord whoever he was.

None of that was quite right, but she had no idea what his title was or even where among the peers he ranked. For now, she rather liked not knowing. It kept him an adventure and lent a certain clandestine feel to their interactions.

“Cover for ye why?” Carstine asked.

Minerva nibbled at the corner of her lower lip for a moment as she collected her courage. “I wish to take a walk... alone.”

“For what purpose?” Carstine asked.

Minerva turned a bright smile on her sister-in-law. “No reason, really. Nothing of significance. I only wish to have a bit of time for myself.” Minerva tried one more time to convince Carstine without telling her the whole of it. “I only need for you to tell Mother and Blake that I have a headache.”

Carstine studied Minerva, her green eyes full of suspicion. “And while they believe ye are shut away in yer room, ye will be where? Doin what?”

“I will be at Hyde Park learning to shoot a pistol.” Minerva did her best to appear nonchalant.

Carstine placed her hands on her hips and peered at Minerva. “Absolutely not. Yer Brother is my husband. I’ll not

deceive him. Furthermore, ye would be ruined. Of all the hare brained ideas—”

Minerva sighed and squeezed her eyes shut. “Very well, forget I said anything.”

“So ye can sneak off and ruin yourself? I donna think so.”

Frustration welled in Minerva and she pivoted then stood to the window to peer out at the morning. Perhaps Carstine was right, but Minerva did not care. She craved adventure and for the first time in her life, someone was willing to give it to her.

Besides, hadn’t he promised to protect her?

Minerva’s heart lightened at the memory and she turned back to Carstine. “You have no reason to fret. He promised to wed me if we should be discovered.”

“He?” Carstine arched a questioning brow.

Minerva gave a firm shake of her head. “Yes, he. I met him at the ball and when we danced I expressed an interest in learning to shoot. Unlike Blake, Mr. Kennington offered to teach me.”

“Mr. Kennington?” Carstine gazed with speculation in her eyes. “I’ve nay heard of him.”

Minerva waved a dismissive hand. “He is of the peerage and quite fun to be around.” She smiled hopefully before continuing. “I really like him, Carstine. And I want to meet him. It will be fine. The park is all but empty at this time of morning, and I assure you, he is a gentleman.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Carstine said. “What time are ye tea meet?”

“Nine this morning.”

“Perfect. Give me ten minutes to ready myself.”

“And you will keep my confidence?”

“Ye have my word.” Carstine started toward the door, then paused. “So long as he is indeed a gentleman.”



Minerva nodded. She did not find this anywhere near perfect, but at least she would make her meeting. More importantly, Mother and Blake would not be the wiser for it.

A short time later, Minerva strolled along the Serpentine with Carstine at her side. As she had predicted, the park was void of lords and ladies, though there were several people milling about. Nanny's with small children in tow, the occasional couple of the lower class milling about, and even some vendors.

No one seemed to pay them much attention. Minerva was glad of it as she glanced around looking for Brian. The morning was bright, sunshine washed across the park causing her to squint despite the shade of her bonnet.

“Good morning Beauty,” his voice wrapped around her.

She turned, her gaze finding him, and a bright smile pulling at her lips.

“Careful, yer blushing,” Carstine said, a teasing lilt to her voice.

Minerva felt the warmth in her cheeks, but she did not care. With out an ounce of shame, she called back, “Good morning,” then started strolling toward him. He looked even more magnificent in the morning sun. His dark coloring in stark contrast to the days light. Tight breeches hugged his muscular thighs and his great coat clung to his wide shoulders and tapered waist.

She must be a heathen to notice such things, but she could scarcely help it. Nor did she wish to. He was a marvelous example of a man. Not at all like most of the gentlemen she knew. He was most certainly in a category all his own and only a fool would fail to notice.

When they reached one another, Brian took her hand and bent over it depositing a kiss to her knuckles. When he straightened he met her gaze, and her heart thrilled. She could not even tear her gaze away to acknowledge Carstine. Instead, she simply said, “Allow me to introduce my sister-in-law, you may refer to her as Countess.”

Brian released Minerva's hand, and turned to Carstine. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Countess."

Carstine gave a slight smile. "Likewise, Lord..." her eyes narrowed as she waited for him to fill in the blank.

"I see no need for such formality. Call me Kennington," he said, his tone brooking no argument.

Minerva thrilled at his words. And the fact that she had managed to introduce Carstine without providing a name. She would eventually wish to know exactly who her adventure was, and for him to know her identity as well, but not just yet.

"Very well." Carstine smiled. "I am pleased tea meet ye, Kennington."

"Scottish?" He asked.

"Aye," she confirmed.

"Shall we?" He held his arm out to Minerva, and she looped her hand through his elbow. As he led them toward a thicket of trees, he turned his head toward Carstine. "I have an uncle who lives in the highlands. Where about do you hail from?"

"Inverness. Perhaps I know him?" Carstine said, excitement in her tone.

Minerva listened to them converse as she enjoyed her proximity to Brian. As it happened Carstine did know his uncle and as the two conversed, Minerva noticed a decided softening in Carstine's demeanor.

When they stopped in a clearing, well away from the hustle and bustle of the park, Minerva released his arm with great reluctance. She could have strolled beside him all day, and would not have complained a bit. But then, she was here for a reason.

She pushed a wayward curl from her forehead and asked, "Are we to shoot now?"

He smiled at her, then opened his coat and pulled a pistol from within. "I thought to bring a ladies pistol, but could not

procure one fast enough. This is my own double-barrel flintlock. I assure you, it is far superior to a ladies pistol.”

“No doubt,” Carstine said as she drew closer inspecting the weapon.

Minerva thrilled at the sight of the pistol. It was intricate in design and the metal portions flashed in the sunlight filtering through the trees. Excitement bubbled within her as she asked, “May I hold it?”

“I think you must if you are to shoot it,” he teased, then his face went serious, “but first you must learn the proper way to hold it.”

“Is it loaded?” Minerva asked.

“It is,” he said.

Carstine interrupted, asking, “What will ye be shooting at?”

Brian nodded into the distance where there was a fallen tree. A row of glass bottles lined the trunk. “We will aim for those.” He grinned. “Do you wish to shoot as well?”

“Nea, I’ll just rest over there,” she nodded to a grassy patch several feet behind them, “and observe.”

Minerva watched Carstine take herself off. She had hoped Carstine would allow them at least a modicum of privacy and was ever so pleased that she did.

Brian moved behind Minerva, his hard chest pressing to her back as he brought his arms around her. “Are you ready, beauty?” His breath tickled her cheek.

“I... Yes,” How she managed to speak was beyond her, for at that moment her insides were all a fluster.

He placed the gun in her hand, then brought her other hand up to help steady the weapon. With his hands guiding hers, she raised the pistol.

“Do you see the sight? Those bits of metal raising up from the top of the pistol.”

“Yes,” Minerva said, doing her best to focus on the pistol rather than the heat radiating between them.

“Close one eye and look between them. Move the pistol until you have a bottle lined up between them.”

Minerva focused, she peered down the barrel and moved the pistol ever so slightly until she saw a bottle in-between the metal pieces. “Do I shoot now?”

“Slow down.” He chuckled. “The safety is on.”

“Safety,” she asked.

He reached out and slid a little round piece on the pistol. “It prevents one from accidentally firing.”

“Oh,” she said, realigning the sight. “So now I may shoot?”

He moved her finger to the trigger, then said, “Squeeze it.”

Bang.

Minerva thrilled at the noise of the gun firing, then bubbled over with excitement as the bottle she’d aimed for shattered. “I did it!” She exclaimed.

“You are a natural,” he praised. “There is one more shot in the pistol, would you like to try again?”

Minerva nodded, a wide grin tugging at her lips and her heart pounding.

“All you need do, is time and fire. Careful though, the safety of not engaged this time.” He released her and took a step back.

Minerva turned all of her focus to the task at hand. After sighting in another bottle, she drew in a breath and squeezed the trigger.

Bang.

Another bottle shattered following the shot. “This is so exhilarating. Can we reload and shot more?” She asked, pivoting to face him, the gun waving in a wild arch.

“Careful,” he said, taking the weapon from her. “You could hurt someone.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It is empty.” She approached and lifted the gun back from his hand. “Can you reload it?”

“I would do anything to watch your enjoyment, beauty. You are radiant when you are excited.”

Her cheeks warmed and she could only image how pink they had become. “You are a terrible flirt,” she chastised.

“I cannot help myself when in the company of such a charming lady,” he said, as he retrieved the gun. “Give me a few minutes and we will have you shooting again.”

After Minerva fired two more rounds, she reluctantly gave the pistol back to him. “I regret to say that we must be going.” She had no wish to see her adventure draw to an end. However, if they dallied much longer, Mother would grow concerned.

“Do not look so downtrodden. Your adventure is far from over,” he said.

Her brows drew together. “How did you know what I was thinking?”

He captured a lock of her hair and wound it around his finger. “You shared your scandalous to do list with me.” He winked.

Minerva swatted playfully at his shoulder. “Rogue.”

He chuckled. “I was thinking we could go riding tomorrow. Wear britches under your habit and bring a groom as chaperone. I’ll teach you to ride astride.”

“If any of my families grooms witnessed me doing anything of the sort they would promptly report it to my brother.”

“No one will see because once you arrive in the park, you will lose your groom.”

She glanced at Carstine then back to him. “I do think that will work. What time should I arrive and where will I find

you?"

He released her hair, then offered his arm as Carstine started toward them. "The fashionable time, rotten row."

## CHAPTER FIVE

BRIAN RODE across rotten row with his attention focused on spotting Minerva. He had thought of her well into the night. He'd never met such an adventurous lady. Never had a conversation with a debutante that entertained him. Never once had a lady elicit such need in him.

Not the need to bed her. Oh, that was surely part of it, but more so, he needed to be near her. The need to speak to her. And most of all, the need to watch her light up with excitement and joy—consumed him. She captivated him on a level nobody before her ever had.

And he did not know what to do about it.

Of course, he had vowed to wed her if their adventures led to ruin, but was marriage truly what he wanted?

The fact that it was even a thought should startle him. The very idea should send him in the opposite direction of the captivating beauty. In the past, a mere mention would have him breaking out in a cold sweat and fleeing the proximity.

Before he could ponder it further, Minerva rode into view. He slowed his mount and stared at her until their gazes meet. She gave a mischievous smile, then a barely perceptible nod of her head.

He followed her direction, spotting a group of ladies on horseback off to the side of the riding path. He could not be sure what she was attempting to convey, but the set of her lips and barely veiled mischief she displayed told him to pay attention.

The lady had a plan.

He nodded back, then watched as she said something to her groom. She met his gaze again before riding toward the group of ladies. He circled around to bring his mount to the far side of the group, staying several furlongs away as he watched Minerva.

She looked like a goddess, draped in a cream riding habit, her chestnut curls bouncing beneath her simple riding hat. Her jacket accentuated her breasts, wrapping tight around them while her skirt cascaded over the side of her regal grey mare. But nothing compared to the beauty of her heart-shaped face.

Her cheeks were flushed from being kissed by the gentle breeze blowing through the park. Her wide, lush lips curved into an enticing smile, and even from this distance, Brian could see a decided twinkle in her blue eyes.

Her zest for life was contagious, and he had caught a desperate case of it.

Their gaze's met, and she leaned close over her mount before giving another slight nod.

Brian returned the gesture, then indicated a less frequented path off to their right. He waited until she rode, then turned his mount in the same direction. Minerva soon rode past him, her laugh invigorating him as he set his mount into a fast gallop.

No doubt, several of their peers had taken notice of the pair racing away from rotten row. However, at their speed, one would be hard-pressed to put a name to them. Brian caught up to Minerva, but neither slowed their pace. They rode neck-or-nothing down the trail until they reached the most desolate area of the park.

He pulled rein and turned his mount toward her. The joy on her face caused his breath to catch, and whatever he'd been about to say escaped him.

"Do you think anyone recognized us?" Minerva asked, laughter in her voice.

Still trying to recover his words, Brian simply shook his head, indicating that he did not believe so.



“My groom will no doubt look for me. He is probably attempting to follow us at this very moment.” She smiled and shrugged one delicate shoulder. “I’d wager we have but a short time before he discovers us.”

Brian’s momentary loss of words resolved, and he said, “Then let us make the best of the time we have.” He dismounted and strode toward her. “Do you have breeches under that skirt?” He asked as he reached for her.

“Indeed,” she beamed, “We have a stable lad that is about my size.”

Brian placed his hands on her waist and lifted her from her mount. “And how did the lady procure the lad’s breeches?” Brian arched a curious brow.

“Why, she bribed him, of course.” Minerva laughed, a low throaty laugh that sent a wave of merriment and longing through him.

“I do hope the price was not too high,” Brian lowered her to the ground but did not release her waist.

“It was high indeed, but worth every shilling.” She notched her chin, her gaze boring into his. “I would pay any amount to be near you.”

Her cheeks flooded with color at the admission, but she held his gaze.

At that moment, Brian found himself incapable of ignoring the pull between them. He gave in to the desire she had sparked in him from the moment he caught sight of her on Bond St and pressed his lips to hers.

Minerva met his kiss with a hunger all her own. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her fingers finding their way into the hair at the base of his neck as he pressed his lips to hers.

When she opened her mouth to him, a jolt of longing mixed with the fierce desire to protect her surged through him, nearly knocking him off his feet. Brian pulled back, more than a little alarmed at the foreign sensations.

“We better get you on the horse before we are discovered,” his words came out raspy.

“Who are you?” She stared back at him, her eyes smoldering with desire.

He felt a little tug at his lapel and glanced down. She was fidgeting with his Wicked Earls’ Club pin. When had she moved her hand to his lapel?

“An earl, to be sure,” she continued, “But what is your exact title?”

He cleared his throat. “How did you surmise that?”

She darted out her tongue, wetting her lush lips. Brian nearly came undone. He swallowed hard.

“My brother used to wear this same pin. It is the symbol for the Wicked Earls’ Club.” She feathered her fingers over the gold W of the pin as she searched his gaze. “Who are you?”

“My name is Brian Kennington. I did not lie to you. But I am also the fifth Earl of Connlee.”

“The Earl of Persuasion,” she whispered.

He gave a roguish smile. “I have been referred to as such.”

“And you are not ashamed?” She asked but did not step away.

He averted his gaze for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Perhaps he should be ashamed. He had blazed a trail across England, leaving many an actress and widow in his wake. But he had never dishonored a lady—never would. Brian enjoyed life. He endeavored to live every moment. He had no regrets.

He shook his head. “I see no reason why I should be.”

Minerva’s gaze turned more serious, and she asked, “Am I safe with you?”

Her question weakened him and sent a fresh surge of protectiveness through him. He could not say why, but she was important to him. Brian cared for her and meant what he had said previously. He reached up and stroked his fingers across

her flushed cheeks. “Always. You will always be safe with me.”

He watched as several emotions seemed to pass through her eyes before they took on a decided tenderness. She gave a firm nod, then said, “I trust you. Now help me mount.”

He took her hand and led her to his horse. If she were going to ride astride, she needed a proper saddle, therefore, she had to ride his stallion. “Crusader is a good horse. He is well trained and responds easily. Just use a firm hand,” he instructed.

Minerva nodded, then hiked her skirts unto her waist, revealing the breeches beneath, which revealed her shapely legs and perfectly rounded bottom.

Brian’s mouth went dry, his words escaping him once more. Rather than try to speak, he took her by the waist and swung her into his saddle.

Pride surged in him when she found her seat and took up the reins. She appeared to be a natural. That is, until Crusader moved. Minerva’s bottom bounced most enticingly in the saddle, and his male anatomy took notice. Still, the decided smack of her backside against the saddle was all wrong for riding.

“Hold yourself up by pushing your feet against the stirrups until your bottom hovers just above the saddle,” he called out.

She did as instructed; her form becoming perfect as Crusader walked in a slow circle. “May I take him for a run?” She called out, her face full of wonderment and joy. “I want to feel the wind on my face.”

Brian nodded. He could not deny her. “But do not go far. Just a quick gallop,” he called after her as she turned Crusader toward the path they had raced in on.

She galloped only a few furlongs before Crusader reared up. His heart sank at the sound of her scream as she flew from the saddle. Brian ran toward her, his heart thundering with fear. She could be hurt—her neck could have broken.

He never took his gaze from her as he pushed himself to run faster. She lay in a heap on the ground, unmoving. “Minervas,” he yelled. “I’m coming, Minerva.” When he reached her side, he dropped to his knees beside her and placed his hand to her chest.

Thank God, she was breathing. “Minerva, can you hear me? Are you okay?”

Her laughter wrapped around him as her eyes fluttered open. “Perfectly. Better than alright. In fact, I have never felt more alive.”

He ran his hands across her shoulders, down her arms. “Does anything hurt?”

She pushed herself up to sit, her hands going to his face. “I am right as rain. Do not fret,” she said.

Relief swelled in him as he glanced toward Crusader, who had returned to the clearing and now grazed on the rich green grass at his hoofs. “What the devil happened? What spooked the horse?” He asked Minerva.

She pressed her eyes together for a moment, then turned her head. “We’ve been found,” she said, her words scarcely above a whisper.

Brian turned to look in the same direction and spotted her groom racing toward them. “Bloody hell,” he cursed.

“Now help me up before he reaches us.” She simply laughed harder. “I will attend the Duchess of Hathaway’s garden party.”

“Then I shall be there as well.” The words left his mouth before he had time to consider them. If he did not take care, people would think he was courting her.

And somehow, he did not care.

## CHAPTER SIX

*FOUR DAYS LATER...*

THICK CLOUDS GATHERED in the distance as Minerva stood beside Mother at the Duchess's garden party. The event had turned out most of the ton, but she'd yet to find Brian. She'd done little else but think about him and their adventures for the past four days. Today, she was full of anticipation.

Mother had noted Minerva's change in mood and appearance, commenting that Minerva was positively glowing and in a rather jovial mood of late. Carstine had held her tongue but exchanged a knowing glance with Minerva. Even Blake had raised a curious brow on more than one occasion.

Of course, Minerva could have told them all that she had met someone. However, doing so would be premature. Brian had not actually proposed to her. Nor was he officially courting her. Her heart squeezed at the thought. Somewhere along the way, she had stopped thinking of him as her adventure and now dreamed of a future with Brian.

Ninny! Minerva shook her head. He was the Earl of Persuasion. A proud member of the Wicked Earls' Club and renowned for being a rake. She doubted marriage had even crossed his mind, and she would do well to remember it.

She glanced into the distance and her pulse speed.

Her gaze found Brian's, and her pulse increased. He was leaning against a tree at the edge of the Duchess's refreshment

table. Brian saw her too, for their gazes locked, but he made no move to come to her. No gesture calling her to him, either. He simply stared.

Minerva hazarded a smile, her heart skipping when he returned the gesture. “I am rather parched. Might I go to the refreshment table, Mother?”

“Of course, and there is Lady Houghton, I should go to her.” Mother waved Minerva off.

Minerva fought the urge to hike up her skirts and run toward Brian. Instead, she took practiced steps; her gaze ever on him. Heart pounding the whole way. Today would not be a day of adventure, for what adventure could be had at the Duchess’s garden party, but just to be near him was adventure enough for her.

When she reached the refreshment table, she paused and looked back toward Mother. Satisfied that her parent was not watching her, Minerva circled around the table, then went to Brian.

“You are as lovely as ever,” he drawled as he captured her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

“And you are a perpetual flirt.” Minerva gave him her brightest smile.

Brian tucked her hand through his elbow and said, “You love it.”

Her heart soared at the mere mention of the word love on his lips. Surely she was a fool, but she did not care. Never had she felt so free, so alive, so much in control of her life as she did when she was at his side.

“I hope you did not get in too much trouble the other day,” he said, curiosity mixed with genuine care shone in his eyes.

Minerva shook her head. “None at all. I convinced my groom that his oversight was an accident and there was no need to tell my family about it.” The corners of her lips lifted as she shrugged. “I will admit that it was not well done of me. The poor man. But what else could I do? My brother, Lord

Edgemore, would have ordered me to my room and kept me there for the rest of the season if he had learned of my escape.”

“I can well imagine,” Brian chuckled as he led her into the Duchess’s hedge maze. “I am well aware of Edgemore’s disposition.”

“You know my brother, then?” Minerva asked, her curiosity blooming. “What a bird-witted question.” She shook her head. “You belong to his old club, and you are both earls. Of course, you know him.”

Brian patted her hand. “It was not at all a foolish question. I could have joined after he married. As for the rest, I spend very little time at society events and have made avoiding the marriage mark a refund skill. It is quite possible that I would not know your brother.”

“But you do know him,” she said, curiosity laced through her words.

He gave a firm nod. “I do.”

“Are you friends then?”

“No. More like acquaintances,” Brian turned them down a new path. “We have met on several occasions, enjoyed a few games of cards together and the rare drink. Nothing that bonded us, though.”

“I see,” Minerva said. Then she looked up at the gathering clouds. They were racing across the sky much as her thoughts raced through her mind. She wondered what her brother’s opinion of Brian was and how he would react to her keeping company with the earl.

Then her thoughts turned to Brian’s words about marriage, and she could not help but ask, “Why do you avoid marriage?”

His eyes narrowed, and for a long moment, she thought he would ignore the question. Then he released a breath and stepped around to face her. “I have never met a lady that I could envision spending my life with.”

“Oh,” Minerva fairly sighed the word.

Brian looked into her eyes and added, “I would not wish to be trapped into an unholy union the likes of which my parents had.”

Minerva saw pain in his deep brown gaze. She reached out and placed her hand on his chest. “Then yours was not a happy childhood?”

He shook his head. “My father was an angry, bitter man. He’d been forced to marry my mother... She, too, was unhappy with the match. They never allowed one another to forget their displeasure.”

“I’m sorry,” Minerva said, her heart heavy for the boy he had once been.

Brian placed his hand over hers, holding it to his chest. “Do not be. It is in the past.”

“And yet, it still affects you.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I learned from it and vowed not to make the same mistake.”

Mistake. Minerva’s throat tightened. If they were caught together and he was forced to marry her, she would be imposing that very fate on him. “Perhaps, I should go.”

“Whatever for?” He asked.

“If we are found—”

Brian smiled. “This is a garden party. People are everywhere, and we are merely strolling in the garden.”

“But, I would not wish—”

“If we are seen, it will only be assumed that I have taken an interest in you. At the worst, they would assume that I want to court you.” He rubbed his fingers up and down hers, sending tendrils of heat through her gloved hand. “Besides, we have more adventures to be had.”

Dumbfounded and entranced, she whispered, “We do?”

“Indeed, we do.” He looked up at the darkening sky. “I believe dance in the rain was on your list.”



Minerva looked up as the first drop of rain hit her cheek. “You are a wonder,” she said. “One could almost believe you control the universe.” He certainly seemed to be the center of her orbit.

He chuckled. “It is but a dash of luck.” He twirled her away from him, then brought her into his arms as the rain picked up intensity.

Minerva tipped her head back, allowing the cool drops to splash against her face, her laughter creating a melody all their own.

And then his lips were on hers, and they were clinging to each other without a care for the rain, or the party, or the risk of discovery. He pulled her close, and she held him tight as their mouths moved together in a rhythm as old as time.

This was more than an adventure. He was everything: all that she wanted and all she would ever need.

But he was not hers. Emotion overwhelmed her, and tears stung her eyes as she clung to him, kissing him with desperation.

Fool that she was, she had fallen in love with him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“MINERVA. Minerva, are you out here? Minerva?”

Brian pulled his mouth from Minerva’s. “Someone is coming.”

“It’s Edgemore. Go.” Minerva pushed against Brian’s chest.

Brian hesitated. He had no wish to leave her alone in the maze with the rain pouring down on her. Honor battled with the desire to escape as he stared at her. It would not take her brother more than a glance to determine what she had been doing. Her lips were kiss-swollen, her eyes hooded with desire.

“Hurry before he sees you,” she said, her voice low and imploring.

Brian pressed a quick kiss to her cheek, then fled. He dashed around the nearest corner, then stilled behind the hedgerow to listen.

“Over here,” Minerva called out.

Brian held his breath as he waited to hear what they said. His heart pounded while a battle raged in his mind. Honor demanded he return to her side, but fear kept him in place. If he went to her, Edgemore might demand marriage. If he remained hidden... who knew what she might suffer.

He felt rather like a mouse backed into a corner by a large tomcat.

“What the devil are you doing out here?” Edgemore’s voice boomed. “And just look at you. You’re soaked to the bone.”

“I only meant to take a walk. I’m afraid the maze is rather hard to navigate, and I lost my way,” Minerva said.

“A walk?” Edgemore seethed. “In the rain? While attending the Duchess’s party?” There was a pause, then Edgemore said, “Of all the ridiculous things you’ve done, this beats all!”

“How was I to know I would get lost?” Minerva said.

“Ah.”

“Hush. I should put you over my knee for this!” Edgemore fairly yelled the threat.

“I did not mean to cause trouble,” Minerva protested.

Brian could stand it no more. He stepped around the corner, his gaze going to Minerva. “The fault is not hers,” he said.

Edgemore turned his attention to Brian. “Connlee?” His gaze filled with suspicion, then anger twisted his face. “How dare you come anywhere near my sister!”

“Relax, old man. We were merely out for a stroll,” Brian said. “I assure you, her honor is intact.”

Edgemore peered hard at Brian, then turned his searching gaze on Minerva. Fury filled his voice as he said, “I can see that you are lying. Her lips are swollen.” He released Minerva and strode over to Brian. “If you dare to come within five feet of her again, it will be pistols at dawn,” he seethed.

“Stop it,” Minerva yelled. She raced to stand between the two men. “I care for him. Can’t you see that, Blake?”

Edgemore continued to glare at Brian.

Minerva glanced between the two of them. “You cannot forbid me to see him.”

“I can, and I have.” Edgemore took Minerva by the arm but continued to glare at Brian. “You will not see her again. Is

that clear?"

The strangest pain gripped Brian's heart. He could not trust himself to speak, nor could he argue. Oh, he wanted to, but he had no words. Edgemore was her brother, her guardian. He had every right to refuse Brian access to her.

"Is that clear?" Edgemore's voice reverberated down the hedgerow.

Brian gave a firm nod.

"And you will tell no one of this?" Edgemore added, his tone menacing.

Minerva jerked her arm to no avail. "Of course he won't. Lord Connlee is an honorable man."

"Hush." Edgemore gave her a slight shake.

Brian stepped forward, about to defend her, then stilled. He would only cause her more trouble if he interfered. He met Edgemore's angry gaze and said, "You have my word."

"Humph," Edgemore huffed, then tugged Minerva into motion. "Come along."

Brian ached at the misery he saw in Minerva's eyes. The fault was his. He had insisted on spending time with her. The adventures were her desire, but he was the one who made them happen. He should have left her alone. Should have stayed away.

Why the devil hadn't he?

He blew out a frustrated breath. The answer was rather simple. He had not left her alone because she captivated him. He had never met a woman quite like her. He'd been selfish, and now she would pay the price.

Bloody hell, he hated himself for it.

Brian did the only thing he could—sought the sanctuary of his club. He'd thought to drink Minerva from his mind, perhaps chase her away by losing himself in a willing woman. He had been fooling himself, he thought as he gazed out a window at the street parallel to the Wicked Earls' Club.

The rain pounded the ground, and the street was as empty as his hollowed body. He swirled the whisky in his tumbler. Why did he feel so empty? It was as if he had lost a part of himself.

He brought the tumbler to his lips and drained the whisky in one long gulp. The liquor did little to soothe the ache deep in his heart.

He hated himself.

He hated Edgemore.

The bloody man had no right!

And yet, he had every right.

Minerva was his sister. It was Edgemore's job to protect her.

How had the slip of a woman burrowed so deep into his heart?

Brian sat the tumbler down with a decided thump. Bloody hell, he was in love!

The realization both startled and excited him. He had not planned to fall in love. Never believed it possible. Yet, here he was, madly in love with Lady Minerva Fox.

And he could not have her.

He leaned his forehead against the cool glass as he wondered what she was doing at this moment. Did Minerva long for him? Did she love him as he did her? If there was the slightest chance she did, he had to fight for her.

He would call at Edgemore house tomorrow. Perhaps if he spoke to Edgemore, the man would allow him to court Minerva.

More likely, he would have Brian tossed out. No doubt, Edgemore's objection sprang from his knowledge of Brian's reputation. Honestly, he could not blame the man. If Brian had a sister, he would not want her in the same proximity as a man with his reputation either.

No, Edgemore would never consent.

But neither would Brian give up.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

MINERVA HUGGED HER KNEES, pulling her legs tight against her as she curled into her chair and stared out at the starlit sky. Blake had ordered her to her room the moment they returned home. She'd never seen him so furious. He went so far as to order Mother and Carstine to stay clear of Minerva. He said she needed time to think about what she had done and come to her senses.

Then the beast sent little more than soup to her room at supper.

Not that she cared. She had no appetite, at any rate. All she could do was think of Brian. He must have a care for her, or he would not have revealed himself. Did he love her?

How could Blake be so rude! He'd ruined everything without a care for Minerva's feelings. Blake did not even allow Brian a chance.

She wanted to hate her brother for all of it, but could scarcely do so. Deep down, Minerva knew he thought he was doing what was best for her. Still, she could not stomp out the anger burning just below her heartache.

Perhaps, once Blake calmed down, he would reconsider? Hope ignited in Minerva's heart. However slim the chance may be, it gave her something to cling to.

She turned her head toward the sound of her door creaking open.

Carstine peeked into the room. "May I enter?"

Minerva shook her head, and Carstine stepped in, closing the door behind her.

Perhaps Carstine's visit foretold good things? "Is he still angry?" Minerva asked.

Carstine sighed. "Furious, tae be sure. He will not listen to tae anyone. Yer mother threw her hands up in frustration and retired for tae night."

"Then it is worse than I thought," Minerva said, her chest squeezing and tears pricking her eyes. Heaven help her.

Carstine placed her hands on her hips and shook her head. "He's beyond reason. Blake insists Lord Connlee is tae worst sort. When I pointed out that he was once a rogue too, and that I found Lord Connlee tae be a perfect gentleman—"

"You didn't." Minerva brought her hand up to cover her mouth.

"I did." Carstine gave a firm nod. "Then he scolded me for not tellin' him who ye were keepin company with. Said I had no sense either and stormed from tae house."

Minerva squeezed her eyes shut against the threatening tears and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Carstine. I never meant to cause you trouble."

"Nonsense." Carstine came to perch on the arm of the chair. "He's stubborn, yer brother is. 'Tis not yer fault. Nothin anyone can do about that."

Minerva met Carstine's sympathetic green eyes. "I love him," she said, her shoulders slumping.

"I can see that ye do." Carstine patted Minerva's hand. "And if he loves ye too, then all will work out. Love is a powerful thing."

"Then you think Blake will change his mind?" Minerva asked, her voice full of hope.

Carstine squeezed Minerva's hand. "Nay, I donna think so. But that is not tae say there's no way forward." She stared into Minerva's eyes. "Love always finds a way."



Minerva had always been a romantic. In fact, she credited herself with bringing Carstine and Blake together. But in this instance, she could not fathom how things would work out. She could not court without Blake's consent, and even Carstine doubted he would ever give it. She saw no way forward.

"It is hopeless," Minerva murmured as she buried her face between her knees.

Carstine rubbed her back as she said, "Nothin is ever hopeless. Keep faith, Minerva, and hold out for what ye truly want."

They remained silent for long minutes while Minerva silently sobbed into her skirts, and Carstine rubbed small circles on her back. Exhausted and heartbroken, Minerva turned to Carstine. "I think I would like to sleep now."

"Verra well. I will check on ye tomorrow then." Carstine rose, gave Minerva a sympathetic smile, then moved to the door. "I'll send yer maid."

Minerva shook her head. "I would rather be alone. I can see to myself."

Carstine nodded her understanding, then stepped into the hall, closing the door behind her.

Minerva could not summon the energy required to change out of her dress, so she crawled onto her bed, still clothed, and buried her face in her pillow. Her tears flowed freely until she had none left to shed. Once the tears abated, anger swelled within her like a great tide wave.

She would not waste her time sobbing. Minerva would not lay here like a helpless kitten while her brother destroyed her chance at happiness. No. She had to take control of her own fate.

Minerva had to know if Brian loved her.

She jumped from her bed, then threw open her wardrobe and searched for the breeches she'd hidden in the back. After tossing them on her bed, she went back to the wardrobe and

retrieved a spencer jacket. Minerva had a plan. One that would give her the answers she sought.

With renewed energy, she tugged her dress off, then pulled the breeches on and tucked her chemise into the waist before pulling on her spencer and fastening the buttons. She moved to her vanity and secured her hair into a tight knot before pinning her riding hat in place.

Satisfied with the result, she moved back to the window and gazed across the estate to where the stables loomed up against the inky sky. With Blake gone to one of his clubs and Mother a bed, she should not have much trouble reaching the stable unnoticed. Convincing one of the stable lads to saddle a horse might prove difficult, but she had to try.

She pulled in a deep breath, then strode from her room. Minerva kept her steps light as she maneuvered her way down the hall, careful not to make too much noise. When her booted foot landed hard on the first stair, and she froze. Surely half the house heard that. She squeezed her eyes closed and pulled in another deep breath, calming her nerves.

Blake may well kill her for this. A moment's hesitation kept her at the top of the stairs before she found her courage and descended them. She'd not worry about Blake right now. Her very future, her happiness, depended on her finding her way to Brian.

Relief brought a small smile to her lips as she traversed across the lawn. She'd left the house unnoticed. By the time she returned, she would have her answers. She paused behind a large oak tree and tipped her face toward the sky. "Thank you, God," she whispered, though she wasn't entirely sure he had aided her.

"Beauty."

Minerva's heart pounded as she pivoted toward Brian's voice. "What are you doing here?" She asked, her voice just above a whisper.

"I came for you," he said as he closed the distance between them.

She smiled, her pulse racing. “You are mad.”

“Says the woman sneaking across the lawn in breeches.” He arched one dark, teasing eyebrow.

Minerva fidgeted with the edge of her spencer. “It would seem we had similar ideas.”

He took another step, bringing his chest against hers. “Tell me, beauty, what is your plan?”

Minerva swallowed, her gaze searching his. “I would rather hear yours.”

“I was planning another adventure.”

“Oh?” She fairly sighed the words, her heart melting a little more. “What sort of adventure?”

Brian pulled her into his arms. “The sort that lasts a lifetime.” He kissed her, fast and hard. A bruising kiss meant to brand her soul and claim her heart.

Breathless and weak in the knees, Minerva clung to him as she said, “I am not sure what you mean, my lord.”

Brian’s gaze turned serious as he held her against him. “Come away with me, Minerva.” He looked into the distance, toward the road. “I have horses tethered nearby. Accompany me to Gretna Green. Become my wife.”

“Brian—”

He placed a finger on her lips, silencing her. “I love you. I want—”

She nipped at his finger, causing him to move it from her lips. “Yes.”

“Yes?” He asked.

She nodded. “I love you too.”

He swept her into his arms and started racing toward the road. It was all Minerva could do to keep from laughing as she clung to him. “You are mad.”

Brian stopped running and sat her on her feet. He brought one hand up to cup her cheek. “Indeed, I am. But only for you.”

Always for you.”

Minerva smiled up at him. “Then we shall be mad together, my love.”

## EPILOGUE

*TEN DAYS LATER...*

*Gretna Green, Scotland*

THE MOMENT the hammer struck the anvil, Brian pulled his wife into his arms. His heart was near bursting with pride and happiness as he captured her lips in a tender kiss. They had done it. Together, the two of them had made it to Scotland and pledged themselves to one another. His beauty was now the Countess of Connlee.

And nothing had ever made him happier.

“Connlee,” Edgemore burst into the blacksmith’s shop, “I am going to kill you!”

Minerva pulled her lips free of Brian’s and stepped in front of him, holding up a staying hand. “And leave your only sister widow?”

Edgemore stiffened and glared past Minerva, his eyes boring into Connlee. “Then it is done.”

“She is my responsibility now,” Brian said as he pulled his wife into his arms. “And I will protect her.”

Edgemore shook with barely contained anger. “We will have the marriage annulled.”

“We most certainly will not,” Minerva protested. She gave Brian a reassuring look, then strolled over to her brother. “I

know you feel justified and that you only want what is best for me.”

“He will not make you happy, Min,” Edgemore said, still glaring at Brian.

Minerva brought her hand up to Edgemore’s face and directed him to look at her. “I love him, Blake. I could not be happy without him.”

“And I love her.” Brian stepped up beside her. “You have my word that I will be a good husband.”

Edgemore seemed to soften, his shoulders rounded in defeat. Then he looked to Brian and said, “You had better or it \_\_\_”

“Will be pistols at dawn,” Brian finished for him. “I hope you are not looking forward to that opportunity, for it will never come.”

“Did Carstine and Mother come too?” Minerva asked, changing the subject.

Edgemore glanced behind him. “I imagine they will come through the door at any moment. They refused to be left behind.”

Minerva beamed as she clapped her hands together. “Perfect.”

The patter of footfalls reached his ears first, followed by Carstine’s voice, “Wait. Donna do anythin foolish.”

Brian smiled as Minerva strode toward her Mother and Carstine. “All is well. Blake has accepted my choice.”

The dowager countess clasped Minerva’s hands. “Then let us have a wedding.” She turned her smile on Brian. “Oh, do say we are not too late? She’s my only daughter, you know.”

“You are too late,” Edgemore said, his tone void of good cheer.

Minerva met Brian’s gaze, imploring him to do something. He gave her a nod, then turned to the anvil priest. “We need to do the ceremony again.”

“But yer already wed,” the man said, his jaws shaking with the effort.

“I will pay three times your rate,” Brian said.

The man’s eyes lit with greed as he said, “Four times and ye have a deal.”

Blake reached into his pocket and retrieved a velvet pouch. He handed it to the priest. “There is at least six times the rate in there. Now marry us again.”

The man nodded, then focused on the rest of the group. “Gather round,” he indicated the anvil.

Minerva’s smile lit the dingy shop as she stepped unto the anvil. “You astound me, husband.”

He smiled back at her and shook his head, “No, it is you who astounds me. You are generous and loving. I’d not change a thing about you, beauty. I am the luckiest man in all the world, and I would marry you a thousand times just to gaze upon your smile.”

“Aw...” Carstine sighed. “Is there anything more beautiful than love?” She asked her gaze on her own husband.

Edgemore grunted but pulled Carstine into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

“Let us begin,” the priest said. He looked to Brian. “Do ye Lord Connlee wish to take this woman as yer wife?”

“With all my heart,” Brian said, as the love he felt for her overwhelmed him.

The priest turned his gaze on Minerva. “And do ye, Lady Minerva, wish tae wed Lord Connlee?”

“With all my heart,” she repeated his pledge as she reached out and wiped the rogue tear from his cheek. Her own emotions plain for everyone to see.

For the second time that day, the hammer came down on the anvil, and Brian pulled his wife into his arms, kissing her soundly.

Minerva's mother and sister-in-law sighed while Edgemore glared at him, but Brian did not care. He held his wife close and kissed her proudly for all to see. She was his heart. His very reason for existing and his greatest adventure—the one that would never end.



## MORE FROM THE AUTHOR

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# EARL OF BARROW

AILEEN FISH

# CHAPTER ONE

*MARCH 1818*

*London*

JAMES PEARSON, the newly styled Earl of Barrow quietly walked up the steps to his home shortly before sunrise. He opened the door equally quietly, then stood in the entryway of his deathly silent house. Closing his eyes, he strained to hear the laughter of two boys racing down the staircase, or the blustering shouts of their father when he found a dead rat on the chair in his office. His mother's voice telling him it was time for bed.

His brother's voice saying...well, anything. *Hello. What the hell are you doing here? What have you done now?*

*I love you.*

James would ask questions about Elliot's list of possible brides, what the current wagers were on the books at Boodle's, and if anything of interest took place while James was abroad. He'd ask everything except, *Did you do it?* He wouldn't have to, because Elliot wouldn't be dead, he'd be complaining about the early hour of James's visit, then saying something about strong coffee and his newspaper.

But none of that happened. The house felt lifeless, even though James knew there were servants about, likely rising to do whatever it is they did now that Elliot was gone.

They'd have readied the place for James, of course. Even though he hadn't announced his plans, all of London knew he had to come home and assume the duties of Earl of Barrow. Duties and a title he'd never planned to assume.

He couldn't remain there staring up the staircase as if he expected someone to appear at the landing and call down to him with a happy greeting. He must take the steps necessary to begin his new life, whether he wished it or not. Life moved on.

The unobtrusive door toward the front of the entryway opened and Gibbons, the butler who'd been with the family for most of James's life, came out, smoothing his hair back as if he'd hurriedly dressed. "My lord forgive me. I didn't hear your carriage."

"I walked." He'd taken a hackney from the shipyard to White's club last night with the purpose of getting belligerently drunk, but he hadn't even finished the first glass of his favorite whisky. He'd realized in all honesty that he didn't want to feel numb. He deserved every ounce of pain he endured in exchange for the pain Elliot had suffered because of him.

The house smelled musty, which was odd given the fact his brother had been gone only three months. Perhaps it had always smelled that way, but he only noticed after being away so many years. It looked the same, which was unsurprising given how neat Elliot was.

Had been.

"We've prepared your bedchamber, my lord," Gibbons said.

"Thank you." How long would it take before he became used to being referred to that way, without looking around to see where his brother stood?

James walked up the stairs as if to the gallows, as if upon reaching a certain spot in the house he would be anointed Earl of Barrow and everything would magically change. He didn't feel any different after hearing he was now Barrow. If he'd thought about the possibility in recent years, he'd have said it

would never happen. Elliot was in perfect health and had no enemies. He didn't ride recklessly nor race his curricule.

He didn't book passage on ships that sank.

James could only wonder why Elliot was traveling to India, of all places. They had no dealings there, or hadn't before James had decamped to Austria. And as for the rumors...they made no sense.

In the morning—later that day, he corrected, remembering what time it was—he'd talk to Elliot's man of business and learn what he could. And schedule an appointment with their solicitor.

And visit Elliot's grave.

---

THREE DAYS LATER, James called on his friend, the Earl of Woodcliffe, who had known Elliot well, too. The earl was waiting for him in the study of his Mayfair town house. "I was shocked when I heard about Bar—Elliot."

James sat in the chair Woodcliffe motioned to, crossing his legs in an attempt to convince his body he was relaxed. "How the hell did he become the suspect in a murder? It's ridiculous."

"I don't believe it, either. Rumors started filtering about naming possible culprits. Elliot's name was one of several the victim, Sam Kenworth, owed money to. Elliot sailed off to India and two days later, the Marigold sank with no survivors. Suddenly the rumors narrowed to one—your brother."

"Damned convenient of him to die at the right time to allow the actual killer to blame him. And there's been no further investigation?"

"It's ongoing, but I don't think anyone is working that hard on it," Woodcliffe said. "There's more. Elliot was seen entering the house earlier that evening."

James stood so quickly his chair nearly toppled. He clasped his head with both hands and strode across the room. “What? You couldn’t lead with that information? Who was Kenworth? What dealings did Elliot have with him?”

That information didn’t matter, James thought, because nothing would cause Elliot to kill a man. Well, perhaps with pistols at fifty paces to avenge a lady’s honor, but not outright murder.

“Kenworth was the nephew and heir of Baron Kenworth. He uses that connection to mingle in society as much as he is permitted. He’s known to gamble, to rack up large debts, and be terribly slow to pay. Elliot mentioned being owed a large sum several years past, but I don’t know if it was ever paid.”

“I’ve checked with the bank and the estate is still sound. My brother wasn’t desperate for money. Even if he had been...”

“I agree,” Woodcliffe said softly. “He is missed, you know. No one who knew him believes any of this nonsense.”

James continued to pace, the fingertips of one hand still pressed at his temple. “I must look into this myself; I can’t let his name be tarnished this way. Tell me what you know. Who is this witness you mentioned?”

“Miss Heloise Hamilton. Her father was the middle brother of the Marquess of Ellington. She states she was in a hack the evening of the fire and saw Elliot enter the home about a quarter past eight.”

“The light is poor at that time of night. How can she know that for certain?”

“I can’t say. I haven’t spoken with her,” Woodcliffe answered.

They continued to discuss the details, or rather James continued to ask the same questions repeatedly in different phraseology. When he finally came to realize he was doing so, judging from Woodcliffe’s voice growing tight, he stopped. “Forgive me for talking in circles. I must call on this Miss—?”

“Heloise Hamilton.”



“Yes, thank you.” James turned toward the door.

“Keep me apprised, James,” Woodcliffe said. The tone in Woodcliffe’s voice hinted at how deeply the man felt Elliot’s loss.

James sighed. “I will.”

---

WALKING BACK TO HIS HOME, James repeated the witness’s name, for it sounded familiar. Where did he know it from? He hadn’t attended social gatherings in at least six years, and very few back then. If he tried hard, he might be able to name a half-dozen women he knew but not Miss Hamilton.

He could easily picture the Marchioness of Ellington. The stout, loud woman was either proclaiming her niece was close to a betrothal with this or that titled man or dragging the poor girl around to introduce her to each and every single man in the room. The niece must have hated attending entertainments.

The niece. Why was it that the marchioness was so easily recalled, and not the girl she had in tow? A vague image came to mind. She’d been a skinny thing, average brown hair with no amber or gold to catch the light and draw attention. Average height, average features. There was not a remarkable feature about her. Hopefully she had a large dowry, although the fact she was as yet unmarried hinted that wasn’t the case.

Her name nagged at him, still. He felt like he’d heard of her, at the very least. Had one of his acquaintances courted her? He didn’t read the scandal sheets so he wouldn’t have noticed it there.

Then a conversation with Elliot popped into his head. Oh Lord, she was *that* Heloise Hamilton?

*“I need a favor, brother,” Elliot had said. “I’m supposed to dance the first dance at a ball with some chit named Miss Heloise Hamilton. It’s her come out, or something. Mama and the girl’s aunt are matchmaking and I’ve got tickets for the opera where I’ll be enjoying the company of a lady who’s not*

*looking for a ring. Go in my place, dance with the girl. I don't care if you remain at the ball, just make my apologies and say you're honored to etc., etc."*

*James had frowned, then laughed. "The girl's family is looking at the heir, not the spare. Besides, all the marriage-minded mothers will take my appearance as an announcement that I'm browsing the market. Not a chance I'll go."*

*"I'll forget that little wager you still owe me for."*

*Little was an exaggeration, the amount he owed Elliot was infinitesimal.*

*"And I'll attend the Venetian breakfast in your place next week."*

*Now that was tempting. James loathed rising before midafternoon, and spending hours exchanging polite inanities while swinging a mallet or shooting arrows was not to be endured. "Very well. But you can't make an excuse about the breakfast."*

James had gone to the ball. He'd introduced himself to the marchioness and explained his brother's absence. He'd noticed a flicker of irritation cross the woman's face, but then her polite smile reappeared, and she greeted another guest.

Knowing better than to find the card room at this early hour, and miss his requisite dance, James looked for an acquaintance among the men in the room with whom he could avoid notice by the young ladies. Instead, he saw Teresa, or was it Tamara, the lusciously curved woman who was so free with her charms. He and Tamara, or Teresa, he couldn't recall, and it didn't matter, had stepped outside and found a dark corner behind a tall hedge where she'd allowed him to partake of her charms.

When he'd returned to the ballroom, he saw dancers in the middle of a bouncy country dance, and Miss Heloise Hamilton was among them. Well, at least she hadn't been left standing beside her aunt.

James found the marchioness to make his apologies, but she barely looked at him. "Someone of consequence took your

place.” She flung her fingers out telling him to go away.

So, he had.

He’d told Elliot about it eventually—after the Venetian breakfast Elliot went to in his stead—paid the wager in question and put the matter out of his head.

But had she? And her aunt? It was one thing to not honor a promised dance, but this had been her first. Her come-out ball, where everyone would have been watching for her to lead the others to the floor. It had been five or six years ago, so he hoped she had forgotten.

James needed to question her about the night Kenworth was killed. She was the only name he had who might know something to point him in the direction he needed to go. While she had likely talked to whoever investigated the case, his questions might stir up some little detail she hadn’t remembered before.

Not knowing where the lady lived now, he sent his card to the marchioness asking permission to call.

## CHAPTER TWO

AFTER BEING SHOWN into the large drawing room of the marquess's stately home in Mayfair, James greeted the woman. "Lady Ellington, thank you for allowing me to call."

"Of course, of course. Do sit down. My neck grows stiff if I have to look up for exceedingly long periods." She paused, then added, "My condolences to your family."

James didn't point out that he was all that remained of his family. Thankfully, for their sakes, Mother and Father weren't alive to suffer the lies being told about Elliot. "Thank you," he said instead.

Not one for small talk, and knowing the marchioness wasn't expecting such, he said, "I hoped you could tell me where I can call on your niece, Miss Hamilton."

Her right eyebrow, bushy and gray, lifted haughtily. "What business do you have with her?"

"I was made to understand she saw my brother the night before he sailed."

"The night of the fire, you mean." She didn't pull her punches.

"Just so."

"Well, I'm not certain she'll want to speak to you, but she is not here."

For what might have been the first time in his life, James's gut tightened a bit in apprehension. Did Miss Hamilton still carry any pain in the memories of that night at the ball? Was

that why her aunt wouldn't let him speak to her? He grimaced at the realization he was imagining there was spite involved. "Might I call later?"

"You may." She offered no suggestion of when a good time would be, and he wasn't going to push the matter.

He gave a stiff bow and left the room.

The butler waited with Barrow's hat and gloves, which he offered with no expression. Then he cleared his throat and said softly, "Miss Hamilton spends her afternoons in her uncle's place of business on Bow Street."

Barrow frowned. He couldn't have heard that correctly. What would a lady be doing in that area? He lifted an eyebrow in question.

"Hamilton Brothers." After a moment, he added, "The late earl, your brother, was a good man. I didn't know him well, but servants talk, you know."

Nodding, Barrow snapped his hat on his head. He exited the door the butler held open and strode off in the direction of Bow Street.

Of all the places Barrow had thought of to find Miss Hamilton, Bow Street wasn't on the list. Her uncle allowed her to spend time there, close to the Magistrates Court, the Runners, and who knew what sort of men.

The sign bearing the name Hamilton Brothers didn't state what sort of business was done there. He stepped inside the door and searched the dim room for someone to speak to. No one sat at the single desk where a large book sat open, a pen and inkwell sitting nearby. The walls were devoid of artwork, the furnishings serviceable, as if guests—or clients—weren't expected.

"Hello?" Barrow called out. The two doors leading out of the room stood open and there was no sound from within either room.

A muffled feminine voice mumbled something from the room on the left.

Barrow waited, taking a few steps further in the room. Hearing soft footsteps, he looked in that direction. A young woman bore a stack of ledgers or books of some sort, her chin keeping them balanced. He dove forward before anything could happen, placing a hand above and below the stack. "Allow me."

He set the stack on the desktop and turned to face her, realized he blocked her path to the desk, and stepped aside.

He noticed first the pale-yellow gown she wore, a darker yellow ribbon below the bodice, then the pale curves revealed by the neckline. She was no longer a skinny filly, that was for certain. Then he found her lips, full and pink, and her eyes watching him from behind spectacles. Her eyes, so dark he couldn't name their color, spit fire at him. This was the lady he'd missed the dance with? In no way did she resemble the girl he remembered from that ball. This woman before him was a Diamond of the First Water, pure and simple.

He straightened his posture just a bit before bowing. "Miss Hamilton, good afternoon."

Miss Hamilton curtsied.

"Forgive me for not introducing myself. I'm Barrow."

"Yes, I know. Allow me to express condolences from my family," she said simply.

Miss Hamilton didn't tell him to sit, nor did she do so, so he clasped his hands behind his back and remained standing. "I am told by Lord Woodcliffe that you saw my brother the night of the fire."

"I did."

"Could you tell me what you saw?"

"I have already told the police everything I know, which is really nothing."

He nodded, trying to keep the polite smile he wore unchanged. "Compared to what I know, you know everything. Please, Miss Hamilton."

Her expression softened and her posture relaxed just the slightest amount. “Very well, but I do not exaggerate, my lord. I merely saw him on the doorstep of Mr. Kenworth’s house as he entered.”

“I know it feels tedious, but can I ask you to begin a bit earlier? You were in a carriage?”

“The marquess’s, yes.” As if realizing he wanted her to detail the entire block’s worth of travel, she slid out the chair on her side of the desk and sat, motioning to the one sitting opposite for Barrow to take. “I spent the day taking care of my aunt Hamilton who was ill. I left her home around eight, I believe. My path took me past Mr. Kenworth’s home. When I happened to glance out the window, your brother was entering the house. I looked away and continued home.”

And on that little information, half of London Society had crucified Elliot.

“You’re certain it was my brother?” He wasn’t about to ask how well she knew him and take the chance of bringing up *that* night. As yet, she’d not given any sign she remembered, he thought gratefully.

“Of course not. He’d removed his hat, so I saw wavy dark hair in the style he wore, like so many men. His coat was black and indistinguishable from any other black wool coat. Something in his manner...I just knew it was he who stood there, and I put it out of my mind.”

She’d thought of Elliot without question. How closely had she known him in recent years?

Barrow studied the toes of his boots, searching for the right question to bring up more detail.

Glancing around the room, he looked for something to clue him in on her uncle’s business. The Bow Street address made the list rather narrow. “Your uncle Hamilton is a solicitor?”

“The youngest of my father’s brothers is. My late father and the next younger brother investigate crimes.”

“They are Runners?” Barrow asked. The Bow Street Runners had a record of success at apprehending criminals.

“No, they work privately.” Her expression was reserved, polite, formal.

“Would they be investigating my brother’s death?” He shook his head, frowning and holding up a hand. “I mean the death of the man in the fire?”

“They did so but are no longer.”

“They’re happy with the same assumption everyone else has, that my brother was at fault.” Groaning inwardly, he remembered where that assumption had begun. “I’m sorry, Miss Hamilton. I didn’t mean—”

“I understand,” she said softly. “It must be shocking to learn that a loved one is capable of such a thing.”

“That’s just it. He’s not capable of murder. I don’t know that he had business with that man...”

“Mr. Kenworth,” she supplied. “The common opinion is that Mr. Kenworth was killed over his gambling debts, whether your brother was the culprit or not.”

Barrow wiped his hand over his face as if it would clear away the confusion he felt. “My brother wasn’t desperate for money. He would demand payment of the debt, but he would never...”

She remained silent, giving him time to think, or recover from the sad memory, or whatever. Maybe she simply had nothing to say.

“Gambling debts.” He seized on that topic and let his thoughts process aloud. “Has anyone claimed he left unsatisfied vows? Or, no, they wouldn’t do so, would they? That statement would move a man higher on the list of suspects. But others might discuss such matters privately. I assume your uncle...? Of course he did, the man makes it his duty to solve crimes. Has he mentioned rumors of who Kenworth owed?”

“My uncle doesn’t discuss his work with me.”

Barrow frowned, noting the stack of books she’d been carrying. “You keep his accounts, then.”



“Well, yes...”

“And you...” He waited to see how forthcoming she would be. Her expression was still a polite mask, probably a skill she learned out of necessity working in such a place. Her eyes, though, she was assessing him as much as he did her.

“Whether or not I transcribe my uncle’s notes is moot. I cannot discuss what he does. There are other people involved, innocent people sharing information that could bring harm to them if it were discovered they’d spoken to my uncle.”

She didn’t seem the type to accept a bribe, should he offer. Just the idea of the emotion he might read on her face should he suggest one made him cringe.

He gave her a smile as polite as the one she’d worn since he came in. “You have my respect for that, as much as it frustrates me to not get answers. Perhaps I should return when your uncle is available. Have him send a note advising me what time is convenient for him, if you would.”

He could think of nothing more to say. Standing, he smiled and bowed his head. “I thank you for your time.”

As he walked across the room, she called after him, “Lord Barrow, I’m sorry.”

He paused and turned back. “As am I,” he said.

Walking up the pavement in Bow Street, his thoughts were on Miss Hamilton, not his brother. She was breathtaking, even in her unadorned day gown and her hair braided in a crown around her head. The spectacles couldn’t detract from her porcelain skin, nor did the severe hairstyle hide the thickness of hair he’d wager would reflect the glow of candlelight in a ballroom.

Ballroom? He needed sleep. Not even a week returned to Town and his thoughts floated about Diamonds and ballrooms, two items guaranteed to give a man hives.

## CHAPTER THREE

HELOISE CONTINUED to watch the doorway Lord Barrow had just passed through as if he might suddenly return. She couldn't say why she expected that, or if she truly thought he would. After a minute or two, she looked away.

So, this was the scandalous James Pearson, now Lord Barrow. His appearance was much different than she'd expected, not that she'd thought about him in years. This man had a kinder mien, and not simply from the sadness in his eyes. He had nary a frown line, which told her he didn't often give in to stern glares. His lips had been pressed tightly, but again, she took that to be from sorrow, or the depth of his desire to prove his brother innocent.

Her aunt and uncle considered the late earl a friend, so she had seen him on occasion at social gatherings. That man never frowned, his face always lit with genuine happiness, as if being alive was a joy unto itself. She didn't believe the late earl was capable of murder—she'd never heard an ill word spoken against him.

The new earl, now there was a different story. The gossip was James Pearson had fled the country...why, she couldn't recall. His name was attached to many a scandal, even aligned with hers when her come out was mentioned. Yet nothing had been said to make him so wicked as to escape to the continent.

When she shook off her reverie, she gathered her bonnet and gloves and rushed off to her friend Anna Goldman's town house. The rush was necessary since she was alone. Her uncle normally accompanied her to and from his business, but she

didn't wish to wait for him. She'd met the infamous James Pearson.

Heloise wasn't much given to gossip but being the first to relate a sighting was worth passing along. For a few days it would give her cachet among the *ton*, which she and Anna would laugh about after. Society was such a sorry lot to spend so much time talking about nothing.

She was shown into the morning room at Anna's home, where her friend sat near a window to get the most out of the afternoon sunlight as she embroidered a pale green bonnet.

Anna held up the bonnet and asked, "What do you think? I'm not sure about that shade of yellow with this green."

"You know how I am with colors. My wardrobe would be completely white if not for you and my aunt. It's pretty, though. I wish my stitches were as even as yours."

Looking up, Anna held her gaze for a moment. "No, you don't."

"No, I don't," Heloise echoed, joining her friend's laughter. "I'm hopeless. I can't sing or play an instrument, my paintings are unrecognizable, and I dance poorly."

"None of which you truly care about."

"To my aunts' chagrin." Heloise paused a moment to give her news more emphasis. "You'll never guess whom I met just now."

Anna pushed her bonnet to one side and leaned forward. "Who?"

"James, the newly styled Earl of Barrow."

"He's returned from the Continent? I hadn't heard."

"Nor had I," Heloise said.

A servant entered the room to take away the tea dishes from earlier. "Please bring a fresh pot," Anna said.

"Well, the earl came to my uncles' office while the men were away. He's looking for details regarding Kenworth's death."

“What is he like? Is he handsome? Does he look suitably wicked for his reputation?”

Heloise waited until the footman set down the new tray and left the room. “He doesn’t look at all wicked. Not a bit like you’d expect a rakehell to appear. He’s soft-spoken, has kind eyes and a sweet smile.”

“He’s also mourning the death of his only brother,” Anna said. “Do you suppose he’ll go out in Society right away?”

“It’s only been a few months since the late earl died, so he shouldn’t, but he’s never been one to follow the rules. As awful as it makes me appear, I hope he waits long enough for me to have my moment of attention. This is probably the only time I’ll be first with news.”

---

A WEEK LATER, Barrow went to Hamilton Brothers for his appointment with Leo, Heloise’s uncle. Feeling a momentary disappointment that Heloise wasn’t in, Barrow brushed that aside and followed Hamilton into one of the smaller rooms, sitting in one of the two chairs in front of the desk.

“I assume you’re here for information about Kenworth’s death,” Hamilton began. “I’m afraid I don’t know much more than you probably do at this point.”

“What I know is that your niece is the only one to connect Elliot with Kenworth.” Realizing how that sounded, Barrow went on. “I believe she saw what she saw, but there’s nothing else to tie him to Kenworth.”

Hamilton rested his elbows on the arms of his chair and steepled his fingers. “The gambling debts, too, but there were a few of those, and some of those men he owed were disreputable.”

“Can you give me those names?”

Hamilton shook his head. “Ask your friends. It’s common knowledge who holds whose vowels.”

Barrow expected no more from Hamilton, but he'd needed to start as close to the beginning of the investigation as possible. "What can you tell me about Kenworth's death?"

"He was found hog-tied just inside his front door. I mean, they had to shove the door to open it, he was that close. Hands and feet tied with rope, gagged. They figured he'd been trying to escape the fire, but the smoke killed him.

"He'd been beaten. The fire was extinguished before the entire room was destroyed, but enough was damaged to suggest it could have been a robbery. Someone might have been looking for something that Kenworth didn't want to give up."

"None of that tells me my brother was involved," Barrow said.

"True. And my niece's description of the man she saw enter is vague enough to be any one of hundreds of men. No one has suggested the late earl is involved."

Barrow opened his mouth to respond, but Hamilton jumped in. "No one officially investigating Kenworth's death, that is. What gets said in drawing rooms and gaming clubs is rarely based on fact."

And those versions were putting a stain on Elliot's memory.

Standing, Barrow said, "Thank you for taking the time to speak with me."

Hamilton nodded, then followed Barrow to the door. "I can't imagine what this feels like from your perspective, so anything I can do to help, just ask."

---

SINCE HAMILTON MENTIONED DRAWING rooms and gaming clubs, Barrow decided his next step would be a ball, where he could find both gossips and card players under one roof. Once word had spread that he was in Town, invitations had poured in. Apparently, no one cared about his reputation anymore. He

was now a peer in need of a wife, the hottest commodity to a marriage-minded mama. He'd organized the invitations in chronological order and planned to visit several a night, if need be.

The first night was a waste of time, but the next held promise, he discovered as soon as he entered the ballroom. Just like the night before, the crowded ballroom parted like the Red Sea for Moses and conversations stilled to whispers as they watched Barrow stride into the room, head held high. Quick curtsies and head nods acknowledged him, but no one tried to speak with him. Being taller than most everyone was a benefit at times like this, and he easily found his hostess to thank her for the invitation.

Like all good hostesses, she immediately set to work making introductions to the chaperones of several of the young ladies standing nearby. He promised a dance to each one, the whole time keeping an eye out for the one woman he hoped to see—Miss Heloise Hamilton.

She stood to one side of the dance floor engaged in conversation with several other young ladies, all laughing at something he didn't hear. No one noticed his approach. Stopping beside her, Barrow bowed his head. "Good evening, Miss Hamilton."

Her eyelids widened as she turned to him, but she quickly recovered. "My lord. I'm surprised to see you, if I may say so."

"I'm equally surprised to be here, to be honest. It's been many years."

"Lord Barrow, are you dancing this evening?" a petite blonde with ringlets framing her face asked.

Her friends gasped.

"Of course, why else would I be here?" he answered. "Who has an open spot on your dance card?"

Three of the ladies giggled and offered their cards, and he duly wrote his name. Miss Hamilton was not one of them. He

raised an eyebrow when he met her gaze. She hesitated before holding out her card.

“There are no names on here,” Barrow said after glancing at it. A woman as beautiful as she should have her card filled, and a line of suitors standing by in case a dance partner failed to appear on time.

Why did he think of that? He was likely the only man to have missed a dance with her.

“I’ve been out long enough that the gentlemen all know how poorly I dance.” The laughter in Miss Hamilton’s eyes showed she teased.

“I’ll take my chances.” Without a second thought, he signed for the supper waltz. The orchestra played a few notes to signal the next dance, and Barrow smiled at the blonde with the ringlets. “I believe this is my dance.”

“Yes.” Her grin lit her face, she placed her hand on his sleeve, and he led her to the line of dancers.

It struck him how much joy one could bring to a total stranger by simply dancing with her. He’d never thought of this type of entertainment as anything other than a bore.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE MINUTE LORD BARROW and his dance partner were beyond hearing, Anna grabbed Heloise's arm. "If you don't ask for his hand in marriage this very night, I will."

Heloise laughed, shaking her head. "You may have him. I don't believe he's looking to marry, though."

"Why else would he be here?"

"Why do any of these gentlemen attend balls? To see and be seen. Barrow has to prove he's not the rake we all remember him to be so that he'll be an acceptable match when he does decide to marry."

"You can't mean that," Anna argued. "He's an earl with a good income, multiple estates in the country, and from the talk we used to hear, he's a doting lover."

Heloise gasped, then joined her friends' laughter. "He was reported to be quite romantic. Very well, I confess. Were I to look for an affair, he would be my first choice."

Susan Wheelock, a tall girl with pale red hair, leaned closer to the others to ask, "Isn't he the one...?"

"Yes," Heloise said simply.

"Which one?" Anna asked.

"*The* one," Susan said, as if everyone knew what she spoke of.

"Anna didn't come out until two Seasons later, Susan," Heloise said. "She doesn't know about that. Besides, I put it



all behind me that very night and haven't thought about it since." That was only a slight lie. For the following few weeks, she was apprehensive when the first dance of an evening was called and her partner wasn't at her side.

"You've kept a secret from me? I thought we were friends." Anna's lower lip drooped in an exaggerated pout.

"It's not a secret. It wasn't important enough to bring up." Heloise glared at Susan before giving an exasperated huff of breath. "You'll be very disappointed, but I'll tell you. The night of my come-out ball, my aunt had arranged for the late Earl of Barrow, Elliot, to stand up with me for my first dance of the night, my first of the Season. Elliot didn't attend after all, but he sent his brother, James, to dance with me. Only James didn't come for me when the music began."

Anna gasped. Susan nodded at Anna. Both waited for Heloise to continue.

"The Duke of Smyrna noticed something was amiss and led me out to dance. So you see, I had my first dance with a duke, not an earl's brother. There's no reason to keep the story alive," Heloise said with a stern glance at Susan.

"Tell her the rest," Susan responded.

Heloise looked at the ceiling as if her strength and patience hovered there. "James appeared much later to apologize, but my aunt shooed him away. Whispers from tattlers in the crowd suggested he'd been in the garden...with a widow."

"No!" Anna said, covering her gasp with her fluttering fan.

"I heard it was a wallflower," Susan said.

A softly seductive voice behind them gave Heloise a start. "She was neither, but she was quite willing," Barrow said.

Three wide-eyed misses with wildly fluttering fans looked up at him. The fourth girl, the one he'd just danced with, glanced from one friend to another. "What?"

All three girls hissed at her. "Hush!"

Heloise hadn't noticed the music had stopped. She searched Barrow's expression to see how much he'd heard,

and the cad had the nerve to wink at her. She had to cough to cover her laugh.

“I believe I have some time before my next dance,” he said. “Miss Hamilton, will you join me for a stroll around the room?”

She saw nothing to hint at what he was thinking. He smiled with all politeness and offered his arm. She took it. “Forgive my friends,” she said after a minute or two of silence.

“It’s what one does at such a gathering, isn’t it? Gossip?”

After smiling and nodding to one of her aunt’s friends, Heloise said, “It’s what one does all Season long, I’ve learned.” She was surprised he hadn’t rushed to apologize. It’s what most gentlemen would have done.

They walked without talking for a bit, both greeting those they passed with a bowed head. Barrow leaned close to speak softly in her ear. “Do you suppose they all remember, too? Are they saying I’m groveling for your forgiveness?”

She glanced askance at him and laughed as quietly as she could. “You think quite highly of yourself to believe all of Polite Society remembers your faux pas after all this time. Believe me, within a few nights the gossips moved on to discuss which peer was seen leaving which lady’s town house in the wee hours of the morning.”

Barrow cleared his throat. “I’m certain my name was mentioned in that respect a time or two.” He sounded more like a braggart than a repentant.

“I wouldn’t know,” she admitted. “I wasn’t listening for news about you.”

“Ouch.” He covered her hand with his where it rested on his arm. “And here I was afraid that I’d destroyed your Season. Why, I’d even grown curious when I returned—”

Heloise waited to see if he’d finish his thought. When he didn’t, she encouraged him. “You were curious?”

He cleared his throat again and glanced about as if he were searching for a door to sneak through so he didn’t have to

answer. “May I apologize before saying it? It truly isn’t what I think of you. Why—”

“Curious?” she repeated.

“Damn. The thought crossed my mind that you’d be hurt so badly it kept you from accepting the offers from other gentlemen.”

Her laugh sounded more like a hiccup. This man had such an ego!

“I could think of no other reason for why you’re as yet unmarried. You’re pretty, you don’t lack money...did I say you’re pretty?”

“Do you really think so?” She batted her eyelashes at him over the edge of her fan.

“You’re exquisite, Miss Hamilton.” Barrow’s voice was husky, sending heated quivers through her belly. The reason was becoming clear why he was said to be a good lover. He didn’t even need to touch her to fluster her.

He’d drawn his arm even closer to his side, trapping her hand there. The warmth of him beneath his coat drew too much of her attention. She must be wary of this man. She wasn’t likely to fall for his wiles, but it was best to be safe.

## CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN HELOISE SAT at her desk at Hamilton Brothers transcribing her uncle's notes into the books where he kept his records, she easily forgot about balls and gentlemen and brown eyes that glinted with laughter.

Well, apparently those brown eyes weren't as easily set aside. When she pictured them, she could hear Barrow's voice in her ear, close enough to feel the warmth of his breath. She could feel the shivers he sent down her spine. What had he called her? Ah, yes, exquisite. Coming from some men she'd feel like an alabaster carving on an ebony pedestal on display in one of the grandest houses in Town. In the entire country, in fact. But Barrow...something in his intonations made it clear she was a desirable woman.

Imagine that. Four-and-twenty years old, unattached, with no one sending posies and calling cards the morning after a ball did not describe an exquisite, desirable woman. She wasn't old enough to be on the shelf, as yet, but that was where she fully intended to be in the near future. Why marry when she was capable of providing everything she needed?

When Mama had died, she'd left a good sum to Heloise, enough to allow her the freedom to marry for love. During her first two Seasons she'd been so desperate to find that love, but the closest she'd got was a few cases of deep affection. She was still friendly with those gentlemen, and just as importantly, their wives. Once she'd started helping her uncle with his papers, she discovered she didn't need romantic love to be happy.

She was happy for happiness' sake alone.

Yet Barrow had awakened a tiny voice asking, *what if*, and she wasn't working hard enough to quiet that voice.

Luckily, on occasion the notes she wrote for her uncle pulled her into their story and she forgot all else, even eating. This week, for example, Uncle Leo had been told about recent activity in Brandy Hole, the creek used by known smugglers of brandy and wine. Smuggling liquor into England in that area had been done for hundreds of years, so Heloise couldn't understand why anyone would risk landing their transport there.

She continued to write what her uncle's scribblings said, mentions of names, dates, and who witnessed what. This particular case would make for a captivating romance, should someone add a dashing hero and equally capable heroine. Who knows, maybe Heloise should write the book herself.

In the midst of the names on one paper, she found one that stopped her mind from wandering. Samuel Kenworth. It had to be the same man who'd been killed a few months ago. The reported victim of the late Earl of Barrow. She scanned the note and the following page for more information, but nothing specific was said.

Flipping a page at a time, Heloise read through her past entries in search of his name. Only once did it appear connected to smuggling activities, in addition to what she was then transcribing. Had her uncle made the connection between smuggling and the man's death? It was a broad leap given the lack of details, but it bore investigation. She was not the person to investigate it, but she knew who was.

She wrote a quick note and paid a boy on the street a few coins to deliver it. *Meet me at the Serpentine bench at 4. HH*

That gave her just under two hours to search for further mention of Kenworth in the current book. There was no guarantee her message would find Barrow in time, but if it didn't, he would surely contact her to try another time.

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BARROW RESTED his head in his hands, closing his eyes to shut out the chaos of papers scattered on his desk. How could Elliot have been so unorganized? All of this...mess involved the estate. If he wasn't prepared to handle the duty himself, he should have let his man of business take care of it.

That's what Barrow intended to do once he knew exactly where the estate stood. Their solicitor had told him what he knew. He hadn't had the time to write to the land stewards yet. As a matter of fact, that might be best handled with a visit. He could see for himself how his properties were being cared for.

"My lord, a letter for you." His butler stood stern and stiff in the doorway of the library.

Barrow held out his hand, then opened the missive. "Thank you," he said, dismissing the butler. After reading the few words on the page, he glanced at his watch and determined he had time to put on a clean shirt and neckcloth before meeting Miss Hamilton. Curiosity kept him from doing any more sorting at the desk. Why would the lady reach out to him?

That question continued to simmer in his head as he attempted to keep his pace at a casual stroll in the park. He wasn't sure which had him more excited—the thought of seeing Miss Hamilton without an entire ballroom of people looking on, or the possibility she'd learned something about Kenwick.

He easily set aside the idea she'd contacted him for any reason other than Kenwick. She wasn't the sort of woman who would ask a man to meet her anywhere. As the niece of a marquess, she'd have had the does and don'ts drummed into her from birth. Why she didn't ask him to come to Hamilton Brothers, he couldn't say, but he'd find out soon enough.

There was no sign of Miss Hamilton when he reached the bench he hoped she'd directed him to. In order to make their meeting appear to be happenstance, he strolled further down the path, found a spot of shade and pretended to watch the

swans floating on the Serpentine River. He covertly watched the path for her, and when he saw her, he let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. She came.

Foolish man. She requested the meeting, of course she came.

Casually he turned to walk toward her, still keeping an unhurried pace, pretending not to have noticed her as he continued to look at the swans. When he drew closer, he called out, "Why hello, Miss Hamilton."

"Good afternoon, my lord." She curtsied. Speaking loud enough for passersby to hear, she said, "It's a lovely day, isn't it?"

Barrow couldn't look away from her eyes smiling up at him. They were hazel, he noted. He offered her his arm. "Would you care to walk with me?"

She placed her hand on his sleeve and they ambled in the direction she'd been walking.

"I'm surprised to see you unchaperoned," he said.

"Look behind us," she said. "Billy works for my uncle. Whenever I'm at the office he's always nearby. Your honor is safe, my lord."

He laughed at that. "It wasn't my honor that concerned me. No one else knows he's with you. There will be talk."

Miss Hamilton sighed. "There is always talk. My aunts and uncles trust me, so they don't listen to anything that is said."

That comment intrigued him. "Oh? Are you often the topic of interest to the *ton*?"

She shook her head and from the corner of his eye, he saw the curls around her face bounce. "My life is too dull to be of interest. I prefer it that way."

Barrow allowed the casual talk to continue, not wanting to push her to explain the reason for their meeting. If he were honest, he'd admit that coming to the point meant an end to their time together, and he wasn't ready for that.

A breeze carried her scent to him, something sweeter than lavender and not as cloying as rose. It suited her. Fresh, unassuming. She felt right walking beside him, their pace matching without much effort on his part. She was small beside him, as most women were, but she didn't have a fragile air. She didn't need him.

For a moment, he wondered if he could change that. "Do you enjoy the theatre? Could I escort you there one evening, perhaps?"

Miss Hamilton peered around the brim of her bonnet, studying him for a moment before answering. "That would be nice."

"Yes, it would be," he agreed.

The silence that followed was comfortable, as if nothing needed to be said, but the purpose of their meeting was still between them.

"On occasion," she eventually said, "I notice what's in the notes I transcribe for my uncle."

"In those books you aren't permitted to discuss."

"Yes, exactly. Names, dates...a word here and there that hints to something deeper than the matter-of-fact tone of the thought."

"I see." He wouldn't push her, no matter how eager he was to know if Elliot was mentioned.

"Places. Locations are mentioned, too. Silly places with names like Brandy Hole, as if somewhere with such a silly name could be the location of illegal activities that draw my uncles' attention."

Brandy Hole was a creek off the river Crouch where smugglers had been known to come ashore. Barrow hadn't realized there was enough activity in the area to be mentioned in current investigations by Hamilton Brothers. Nor could he fathom what this had to do with Elliot.

"Yes, one does wonder what people do there. The saltmarsh is reported to make travel difficult in that part of the



Crouch.”

“I didn’t know that,” she replied.

Elliot hadn’t been involved in brandy smuggling, nor any other kind. They had no need for illegal gains, no matter how profitable the venture might be. He invested in schemes, as did many of the peers and wealthier businessmen, but again, legal schemes.

“Sometimes the name is so familiar I know immediately which case to file it under. It isn’t always obvious. The notes are logged by date, you know. My uncles can easily find what they seek on the pages, but rarely do I have any clue.”

She sounded as though she were discussing a book she’d read or a gardening technique she’d learned. So casual, so blasé. Barrow wanted to scream with impatience but reminded himself that the revelation would signal the end of their visit.

“Would you be allowed to tell me if my name, or my title, appeared in those notes?” he asked.

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t answer that. No.”

He could assume Elliot would be mentioned by his title, so Barrow ruled out his brother.

“Recent events are usually the most interesting to read about, although I’m often confused how a particular name is related to, say, a location.”

Confused was a good word. The only recent event that would interest him was Kenworth’s death, and the location she mentioned was Brandy Hole. But he’d died at home in one of the nicer areas of Town. Was he involved in smuggling, and if so, how did that connect to his death?

“I see,” he said, although he didn’t. She’d given him what little information she could under the circumstances, and it gave him an area to investigate.

“Do you?” She glanced up at him and smiled. “I’m glad.”

Reluctantly, he turned them around so she could go home, or wherever she needed to be. When they crossed paths with

her chaperone, Barrow bowed and strolled off in his own direction.

## CHAPTER SIX

OCCASIONALLY, melancholy would strike Barrow hard, leaving him in need of relief. He must find connection to his past, to when Elliot lived, or their parents. A time before he and Elliot fought, and he'd decamped to Austria. Sometimes, he could quiet the unrest with a night of cards at one of the clubs, but other times he needed companionship. Only one woman met his needs.

Mrs. Gladys Dalrymple, former actress, stellar beauty, and a reputation to match his own, was that woman. In fact, she was the reason for most of the claims the ton made surrounding his reported debauchery and wicked ways. She wasn't the only woman he'd tugged in his day, not by half, but they'd had an ongoing relationship of sorts for more than a year. It had ended shortly before he left England for what he thought was the last time.

Gladys was as beautiful as always when he helped her into the hackney coach he'd hired to take them to the opera. Her red hair, a shade too bold to be completely natural, was piled high with curls, ringlets, ribbons and pearls, a style much too busy for anyone else. On her, it suited. Her crimson gown should clash horribly with her hair color, but they'd apparently agreed to meet somewhere in the middle of bold and gauche. The neckline revealed too much of her lush curves, scandalously so, but all of her gowns were that way.

"I've missed you," she said after arranging her skirts on the seat opposite him and adjusting her shawl. "Even when we only saw each other across a ballroom, it was enough."

“It was, wasn’t it?” he agreed. Theirs was a comfortable friendship formed from passion and caring. The passion had faded, but the comfort they felt in each other’s company remained.

“To be honest, you were never completely away from London. Every week someone had a new *on dit* about you to share. The German twins?”

“A lie,” he said simply.

“An Italian tenor?”

His eyes widened. “What? Of course not.”

“I didn’t think so, but you know how each person needs to make their tidbit juicier than the last. What about the princess? That rumor stayed around for three or four months. Each time you two were discussed you were in an outrageous location. St. Stephens Cathedral in Vienna?”

Barrow coughed and touched at his neckcloth, which was suddenly a bit tight. “That one is true. She was a minor princess from one of those tiny principalities. She had a rebellious side and a need to anger her father.”

“A side which you nurtured, I’m sure.” Gladys offered him a wicked, knowing smile.

“We got on well together for a time. Eventually her father called her home, not that we would have continued our liaisons much longer than we did. There was nothing between us beyond the physical.”

“Those are the words of a settled peer.”

He sighed and leaned back against the squabs. “Not settled as such, but rather, aware of the need to do so. When I received word of Elliot’s death, all the recklessness in me fled. Perhaps I’m merely in shock and the urges will return, but I think not.”

“From what I hear, you might be betrothed in the near future.” She idly brushed some lint off her lap.

Barrow chuckled. “How many misses are they wagering on? Who has the highest odds of winning my hand?”

“Oh, there’s only one name on the books, from what I’ve heard. Miss Heloise Hamilton.”

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HELOISE HAD BROUGHT her aunt’s opera glasses with her to see the performance better. Well, to see the audience better. She’d accompanied Anne and her family, and the young man courting Anne, to the opera and grew bored waiting for the performance to begin. Anne tried to keep her in their conversation, but those two young people obviously had a growing attraction. They needn’t be concerned with Heloise’s entertainment.

From Anne’s family’s box, Heloise could see all the boxes opposite her, and if she leaned forward, many on either side. The ones directly below were hidden, of course, but most of the seats in the orchestra and parterre sections had enough interesting people darting about to hold her attention. One woman waved to someone in a box, another gasped having apparently seen someone she didn’t expect. Gentlemen bent too low over a woman’s bosom, or kissed her gloved hand, wanting to impress someone.

She didn’t care enough about *on dits* to make note of who was with whom, but she enjoyed making up her own little stories based on the eye contact she saw. Not everyone arrived with the person they were most enamored with, apparently.

Then she saw a familiar profile. Well, a partial profile, but from his proud stance and straight hair combed just so, she knew without a doubt it was Barrow. Just as she’d known she saw Elliot that night. Her mind didn’t question that it was fact.

Who was that woman on his arm? She was older, quite pretty in a glamorous sort of way. The way she leaned in to speak with him said they were close acquaintances. Curious, and a touch envious, she nudged Anne and asked, “Who is that woman with Barrow?”

Anne followed the direction Heloise pointed with her fan. “Oh, don’t you remember? She’s the actress he kept company

with in the past.”

And apparently in the present, Heloise thought. Lucky for her she had no interest in pursuing the attraction she denied feeling for him. She went back to observing the audience members, but with much less interest than a few moments ago.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“I DON’T KNOW what to do,” Anne cried out a few nights later, looking at her reflection in a mirror in the ladies’ withdrawing room at the Marriot ball.

Heloise took the stray hairpin from her friend’s hand, smoothed the errant lock and maneuvered the pin into place. “You’ll do what you’ve been doing. Smile, dance, laugh when he’s funny, don’t gasp when he steps on your toes.”

“Papa has had enough. He says this is to be my last Season. If I cannot find a husband in town by summer, I’ll have to marry the vicar back home.”

Heloise said a prayer of thanks that her family was happy to let her make her own decisions when it came to her future. “Is the vicar so horrible?”

When Anne’s face crumpled into a threat of tears, Heloise quickly went on. “I shouldn’t have said that. Mr. Wilson will be here soon, I’m certain of it. He seemed quite happy to be with you at the opera. And he’s sent you flowers how many times?”

“Three last week,” Anne admitted. “He’s a good match, isn’t he?”

“If he’s the man who has stolen your heart, yes, he’s a good match. For that matter, if you can picture yourself sitting opposite him at the dining table for the rest of your life, accept his offer.”

“He hasn’t made an offer.”

Heloise hugged her, then gently pinched Anne's cheeks to bring out color. "He will. You just wait. Now, we must return to the ballroom, or you'll never know when he arrives."

She remembered her first few Seasons being just as fraught as Anne's. One is convinced her entire life depends on her ability to make a man propose. Not just any man, but one who is handsome, wealthy, good natured, and not prone to drinking overmuch. One's family didn't care if there was love between the two of you. A mild level of affection would do. Attraction, a basis on which to grow a friendship.

Heloise had insisted on love, which was why she remained unmarried. She still believed that was the only way she could be happy in marriage. And since she was happy on her own, there was no need to stress over a lack of dance partners, or no calling cards promising a visit the morning after a ball.

Hers was a good life. Yes, she felt a twinge of envy when she saw an old friend with her children, but most of them lived in the country after they married, and since Heloise remained in Town year-round, she rarely saw their families.

Truth be told, the only reason she continued to attend these entertainments was to accompany Anne, the last of her single friends. She was certain the Season would end happily for her. Next spring would be the first time in seven years Heloise didn't acquire an entire wardrobe of new gowns, stays, slippers, stockings and gloves. The ones she had were perfectly suited to morning calls with her aunts.

After she and Anne wove a path back to where Anne's mother stood with a few other matrons, Anne was led out to the floor by a nice-looking young man. "Please," Heloise whispered, "let her fall in love."

"Good evening, Miss Hamilton." Barrow stepped in front of her, his broad shoulders and sturdy build blocking her view of the dance floor. He smiled and bowed his head and she admitted to herself she'd rather look at him than the dancers, anyway.

Even the memory of the actress on his arm at the opera didn't squelch the flutter she felt at the sound of his deep, rich



voice.

“This isn’t the place to discuss it, but I learned more about the fire. I have an appointment with your uncle.”

“Oh. Does this mean you are close to an answer?”

“I’ll know more after I speak to your uncle.” He glanced at the dancers, then back at her. “May I get you a drink, perhaps?”

“That would be nice, thank you. In fact, I’ll come with you.” She didn’t want to remain standing with the matrons and wallflowers any longer than she must. People looked upon her with frowns of pity when she did, believing her to be overlooked. They didn’t know that most of the men had learned she wasn’t there to dance.

Barrow tucked her hand around his arm, clasping his over hers. Even through the gloves they wore, she felt the heat of his hand. It was reassuring, although she hadn’t noticed feeling out of sorts before he arrived.

Heloise could think of nothing to say other than to bring up the opera, which she would never do. She wasn’t jealous that he enjoyed the company of other women. They had danced at a few balls, gone together to the theatre, and met a few times in Hyde Park under the ruse of seeing each other by happenstance, so she had no claim on his heart. Or his time.

Barrow held a palm frond out of the way as they passed a potted plant and ducking it himself brought his head closer to hers. “You’re wearing a different fragrance,” he said.

He’d noticed her scent? “This was my mother’s favorite. It has a touch of lemon oil to brighten it.”

“I like it,” he said simply as he took her hand again to walk beside her. “Is there any chance you have the supper dance free?”

She gave him a wry glance. “You haven’t noticed I rarely fill my dance card?”

“I have, actually, and I don’t understand it. Do these other men not have eyes? Don’t they see what I see when I look at

you?”

Heloise wanted to ask him what he saw but reminded herself it didn't matter. He was not for her. “After a few years attending entertainments with the same people, one learns who is hoping for a match and who isn't.”

“And you fall in which category?”

“I'm here to see friends enjoy themselves. Their happiness is my happiness.”

They reached a table with refreshments, and he offered her a cup of lemonade. Taking one for himself, he motioned toward the open doors to the terrace. They strolled outside. “And these men give up that easily? They can put aside the thought of you with so little care?”

His words sent a wave of warmth over her, and she was certain her skin flushed. “Don't pity me. I prefer it this way.”

“I pity them, not you. But I'm also grateful to have you all to myself.”

He led her to the edge of the terrace beneath a bright torch, clearly not intending to do more than talk. Why did that disappoint her? While he stood a proper distance away, he was still close enough for his warmth to reach her side. With several other couples chatting nearby, Heloise refrained from inching closer, although she wanted to. She was tall, but she only reached his chin. He was a big man, not ungainly, and not threatening, but he'd never go unnoticed. Whenever they walked through the crowd, she saw women watching him, smiling, hoping to catch his eye. Yet she always found him watching her.

That was an odd sensation, being the sole object of a man's attention. She didn't dislike it.

“You're quiet tonight,” Barrow said.

“Am I? What would you like to talk about?”

“Hmmm.”

She could almost feel the rumble in his broad chest.

“It’s hard for me to think of polite conversation when I’m with you. I think of your hair, and how it would look if I took out all those pins. Would it curl on its own accord, or is it straight?”

Heloise swallowed hard but couldn’t find a single thing to say.

“Are your lips cold or warm? Would your kisses taste as sweet as your smile?”

Unable to stop herself, she drew the tip her tongue across her lower lip. It was warm, just like the tingling in her belly. How was he making her feel these things without touching her?

How dangerous would it be if she let him kiss her?

Her gaze lowered from his and landed on his lips. They were fuller than she remembered, relaxed now, not tight with tension as they got when he talked about his brother. The thought pleased her. Now she wondered if his were warm or cold. Should she find out?

With her hands on his shoulders, she rose on her toes, and he lowered his head to meet hers. Their lips met, gently, but with no hesitation. He moved as if to draw away, then captured her lips again with more need. She stretched farther, wanting more of him, but he pulled back.

He drew in a breath, then whispered, “We’re standing under the light.”

Heloise jerked back to put some space between them as she looked at the other couples standing on the terrace. None gave them any notice, so perhaps she was safe. For a moment she wasn’t sure she wanted safety, or the danger of his kiss. She found him watching her lips again—still?—and took another step back. “We should go inside.”

He glanced at the open doors. “I hear a waltz. You owe me a dance.”

“I do?” She couldn’t remember promising him one, but she’d love the chance to be in his arms again. “The dance has already begun. We’re too late.”

“It’s never too late,” he said, laughing, and he took her arm and swung her against his body. She barely had time to hold on to him as he began to waltz about the terrace.

She laughed with him, feeling the strength of his arm beneath hers and the warmth of his hand on her back. Low on her back. He held her close, so close, and his hand seemed to slide lower still. She didn’t know which would cause the bigger scandal, their kiss or the way he held her.

She couldn’t decide which she wanted to experience again, either. Or both.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“LET me take you back to your chaperone, and I’ll bring us something to drink,” Barrow said.

Anne was on the dance floor again, or still, and her mother barely noticed Heloise’s return, so perhaps they hadn’t been missed. The thought of what they’d just done had her pressing her fingertips to her lips. Their kiss had been brief, but left her with so much desire for another, unlike the other men she’d kissed.

After a bit, Heloise realized Barrow was taking longer than she expected to return with their drinks. She tried to see between the people standing between her and the punch table, since she couldn’t see over them. There he was, still at the table, talking to a woman. The same one he’d been with at the opera.

Barrow bent down to her ear and the woman laughed at whatever he said. Then he glanced in Heloise’s direction before leading the woman out on the terrace.

Heloise continued to watch the doorway, blinking, trying to convince herself she hadn’t seen what she’d just seen. After kissing her, Barrow was going outside again with someone else? What kind of man was he?

What kind of fool was she?

Forcing herself to turn away, Heloise pasted a smile on her face and pretended to watch the dancers. In truth she mostly saw the backs of the people standing between her and the dance floor, but it didn’t matter.

When that set of dances ended, Anne reappeared, winded, flushed, and glowing with pleasure. “You should dance more,” she said. “I can ask my cousins to stand up with you.”

How humiliating would that be, needing her friend to seek out dance partners for her? Heloise cringed inwardly but didn’t lose her smile. “You know I am perfectly happy just to watch.”

Anne studied her for a few moments, then looked at the people milling about. “Perhaps I’ll just call one of them over to talk, and they’ll think to ask you of their own accord.”

“Please don’t.”

Suddenly Anne’s eyes grew wide. “Lord Barrow is here. He’s coming our way. Maybe he’s going to ask you to dance.”

Heloise closed her eyes and chewed her inner cheek before catching herself. He hadn’t been gone long enough for a tryst, but that didn’t lessen the hurt she felt that he would even think about taking another woman outside.

“Miss Anne, you look lovely. Are you enjoying yourself?” Barrow offered a cup of punch to Heloise. At least he hadn’t completely forgotten her in his distraction.

“Oh yes, and you? Are you dancing?”

“As soon as Miss Hamilton will join me, I am.” He smiled down at her but she couldn’t bring herself to do the same.

She sipped her drink. How childish of her to pout like this. The music signaled a brisk country dance, so Heloise held her cup out to Anne. “This set will do.” She walked toward the couples lining up without checking to see if Barrow followed.

His hand suddenly pressing on her back guiding her around a stout old man told her he did, indeed, come with her. They lined up opposite each other, and when the music began, they stepped forward, back, forward again and circled each other before returning to the line. “I still want my waltz,” he said when they were close enough to speak.

“Wasn’t that what we had on the terrace?” she asked politely.

He frowned at her tone of voice, then his features eased into that devil-may-care rakish grin of his. “That was merely a few steps. I want an entire waltz with you.” She could almost believe he’d added “in my arms” to the end of that sentence.

Just a short time ago, his insistence would have given her warm flutters in her belly. Why couldn’t she just erase those few minutes after they returned from the terrace?

Their hands clasped in the next movement and Heloise was startled by the firmness of his grasp in the brief seconds before he let go. Then they paraded side-by-side between the rows of dancers and his gaze locked on hers was a physical touch. What was wrong with her? Why was her body betraying her?

The set continued this way, passionate, demanding, with nothing other than their gloved hands touching for mere moments. If she agreed to an entire waltz, they might combust.

As the music faded on its last notes, she wasn’t sure combustion wasn’t a good thing.

When Barrow tucked her hand under his arm and led her back to Anne’s mother, tension sparked between them and Heloise couldn’t make herself let it go.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Something changed from when we left the terrace and when I led you out for this set. Did someone say something to you while I was gone?”

“No,” she said. It wasn’t a lie.

“Will you please tell me? Did someone see us kiss?”

“It’s nothing.” She tried to walk a bit faster, but there were too many people around them. Then Barrow tugged her in the opposite direction, toward the hallway that led to the card rooms. “Where are we going? Are you planning to make sure someone sees us kiss? What if I don’t want this?”

He waited until he found a dark room and closed the door behind them when they entered. Moonlight spilled through a window, but there was no other light. Heloise crossed the

room to look outside, to find some sense of control of the situation. Her thoughts were scrambling, arguing with what her body wanted.

Another kiss.

Barrow kept his distance when he came to stand by her, she gave him credit for that. “I thought we were enjoying ourselves.”

She said nothing, because that much was true.

“And no one said anything to you while I was getting our drinks,” he said for confirmation.

“That’s right.”

“Heloise,” he said softly gently pulling on her shoulder to turn her to face him.

She looked up at him and sighed, knowing she was still behaving like a spoiled child, but trembling with anger at the same time. “Who was she?”

“Who was...? Oh, Mrs. Dalrymple? Is that who you mean?”

“Is she the woman you took outside?” She bit back the rest —*after you’d just gone out there with me?*

“That’s what has you concerned?” In the moonlight, she saw his features relax and a bit of a smile return. “She’s an old friend. She’s been asking questions about Kenworth for me and wanted to pass along what she’d learned.”

Heloise let the words settle in her head, using them like a blanket to smother all the petty jealousy she’d fought to hide.

Barrow stepped closer, took her gloved hands in his. “Is that what was wrong? Does this mean you have feelings for me?”

“I don’t know what I feel, Barrow. It’s so confusing. And I’m still angry.”

“At me? But I tell you, it was an innocent conversation.”



“No, I’m angry at myself for allowing you close enough to hurt me.” There, she’d admitted the truth.

“Hurt you. I see. You said I thought too much of myself to think I’d hurt you when I missed your first dance, but that’s not true, is it?”

She shook her head, not lifting her gaze above their clasped hands.

“I’m sorry. I hurt so many people in those days.” His voice was thick with emotion, and he tightened his grip on her hands. “I can never take that back, give you your trust back. It’s my fault you’ve never married.”

“No,” Heloise said quickly, then sighed. “If I’d met the right man, I would have trusted him enough to fall in love. It’s love that’s missing with all the other men I’ve met. Not trust.”

“All the other men?” His wicked grin returned, and she allowed him to lighten the mood.

“I should have worded that more carefully.”

“As long as it’s not anger against me. Will you allow me to earn your trust?”

She squeezed his fingers, still holding hers. “It’s more a matter of allowing myself to learn to trust.”

“We’ll learn it together, then. I like you, like the way I feel near you. When I had you in my arms on the terrace, I didn’t want to let go. I know that’s trite, but I wanted to shout to let everyone know you were mine.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “I’m yours? Isn’t this a bit sudden?”

“Aren’t you mine? Will you be?” With the gentlest touch on her chin, he lifted her face and pressed his lips to hers. Softly at first, then with increasing demand that she returned. His arms wrapped around her, pulled her close. Her hands were trapped between them, spread against his chest feeling the pounding of his heart. The kiss affected him as much as it did her.

It seemed like hours passed before they slowed down enough to part. Heloise missed his warmth the moment he

moved back, but she knew she had to let him go before they completely lost themselves in the kiss.

“You haven’t answered,” he reminded her.

What had he asked? Oh, yes. “I care for you, Barrow.”

“James. My name is James. May I call you Heloise?”

“When we’re alone, yes. James.”

In the morning she couldn’t say how long they stood just gazing into each other’s eyes before he said they needed to return to the ballroom. She hated saying goodnight as she climbed into the carriage with Anne and her mother.

And it wasn’t until she was drinking her second cup of hot chocolate that she remembered what he had said. What did Mrs. Dalrymple discover about Mr. Kenworth?

## CHAPTER NINE

BARROW MET with Mr. Hamilton the day after the ball to discuss what Gladys had told him. From the hints Heloise had offered, Barrow felt certain Hamilton was investigating the smuggling connection.

Heloise was nowhere in sight when Hamilton led Barrow into his office and asked him to sit. That was probably a good thing, because she distracted him beyond comprehension.

“Thank you for seeing me,” he began. “A friend has suggested that Kenworth was involved in smuggling. Is there any chance his death is connected to that.?”

Hamilton nodded. “It’s quite possible. I’m afraid I don’t have enough information to say definitively, but that makes more sense. It gives a reason for Kenworth to be killed. Some argument between him and the others involved, perhaps, or someone who felt he was treading on their territory.”

“How can I learn something more definite?”

“I don’t know that you can. Without a witness, without someone saying more than they should after a few too many drinks, we have nowhere to look.

Barrow grimaced, his gut knotting. “And in the meantime, everyone continues to blame Elliot.”

“Not necessarily. Yes, some said so at first, but anyone who knew your brother denied the possibility from the start. Kenworth wasn’t important enough in society for the *ton* to be crying for satisfaction over his death.”

The answer wasn't good enough, but it had to be. Barrow must learn to let the frustration go, move on and put his energy into the earldom. He stood slowly, unable to fit the feeling of defeat. "Thank you for seeing me."

Hamilton also rose. "Of course. If you hear anything more, let me know. We want to catch the killer before he can kill again."

As Barrow turned to the door, Hamilton stopped him. "My brother tells me you have been spending time with our niece."

Barrow smiled at the mention of her. "Yes, I have. I care for her a great deal."

"In some ways I'm happy to hear it, but a part of me remains apprehensive. You understand me, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I'm not that man anymore."

Hamilton nodded. "Good, good. Just remember, if you hurt our girl..."

"Understood. You have no reason to worry."

"Very good." With that, the older man went back to his papers and the matter seemed settled.

As he walked home, Barrow wished he felt settled in any way. It was easy to say he'd just accept the fact they might never completely clear Elliot's name in the murder, but in practice, it was the hardest thing he'd had to do in his life.

He'd always looked up to Elliot from the earliest memories he had. Their father wasn't demonstrative in his emotions, but their mother and Elliot made James feel loved. As he grew older, their father showed his disapproval for James' antics, always telling him he was going to waste his life.

"You need to join the army, or navy, perhaps. Give yourself a purpose. The church is certainly not your calling," Father added once after James had been discovered in a passionate embrace with a maid.

He couldn't argue with that.

“I don’t think you have a head for business, either. With your penchant for gambling—and losing—I suggest you avoid speculation, too. It’s time you make something of yourself.”

That had been before father died, obviously, and before James and Elliot fought.

He couldn’t even recall what had started their argument. Had he been caught with another servant, or the seamstress in Town? Maybe it was that big loss in *vingt-et-un*. James was rarely sober enough at that point to know what the argument was that day.

The reason they fought wasn’t important. The fact it had become physical was what still haunted James. Elliot made the same pronouncements their father had about the likelihood of James accomplishing anything more than depleting his allowance for the rest of his life. It was true, and James hated that truth. But he couldn’t admit to it, so he blamed Elliot, blamed their father, for not giving him the chance to prove himself. After James sobered up enough to wipe the blood off his face from their fight, he’d set sail for the continent with no intention of ever returning.

He had the chance now. How he wished he’d proven himself when his father and Elliot could have seen it.

And now he’d failed at his first chance at redemption—clearing Elliot’s name.

*I’m sorry, brother.*

---

JAMES PICKED Heloise up in a curricule that afternoon.

“Where will we go?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll let the horse decide.”

She lifted her face to the sun, eyes closed, a bright smile stretching her lips.

Those tempting lips. He turned his head to look at the road just before they ran down a man with a vegetable cart. He

couldn't think straight when he was with Heloise. He could think of nothing but her when they were apart. Was this what love felt like? If not, he couldn't imagine how much more he could feel for her.

"You seem happier today," she commented.

"I'm with you."

"No, the tension between your eyebrows is gone. I don't believe that your uncertainty about my feelings caused it, because it was there the first time I saw you last month."

She was very insightful. He wasn't sure how to explain. He didn't want those old emotions spoiling what could be a perfect day. He'd tell her the whole story one day, but not today. "I'm beginning to recover from the loss of my brother."

"I'm glad to hear it, James. He'd want you to be happy, or not to let your grief overwhelm you at the very least."

"You're right. He'd be happy I found you, too." James knew that was true, at least. "Oh, your uncle spoke to me about you when I saw him this morning."

"He did?"

"Yes. He warned me about what would happen if I hurt you."

She smiled. "My aunts and uncles love me very much."

"As they should. You're very loveable."

Heloise watched him as if expecting more, then said, "When he knows you better, he'll see the man I see."

"Oh? And who is this fine fellow you see before you?"

"He's a kind man, a good man. He is proud, and loves his family dearly."

"Is that all?"

"Well, the bit about how handsome he is was understood, I thought. And he has a very high opinion of himself, I dare say."

"Does he? And do you care much for this man?"

“You see? A very high opinion. If you’ll recall, I told you last night I care for you.”

“But do you love me?” he asked softly. He cleared his throat. “Could you love me, Heloise?”

A look of peace swept over her features and her smile grew rather shy. “I believe I could.”

“That’s good, because I love you, Miss Heloise Hamilton. I couldn’t bear the thought of you never loving me back.”

She snuggled closer and rested her head on his shoulder.

James went to kiss her head and realized her bonnet was in the way, so he just rested his cheek against her head. They had many years ahead for gentle, loving kisses and wild, passionate embraces. For discovering all the ways they could share their love.

And with each year he would become more of the man his brother and father knew he could be. He’d earn the title Earl of Barrow.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling Author Aileen Fish is an avid quilter and auto racing fan who finds there aren't enough hours in a day/week/lifetime to stay up with her "to do" list. There is always another quilt or story begging to steal away attention from the others. When she has a spare moment she enjoys spending time with her two daughters and their families.

Stay up to date with book releases at her website <http://aileenfish.com>, or on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Pinterest](#).

Finally, if you have a bit of time, I hope you'll consider leaving a review. Your opinions can help readers find books that are the right fit for them, and are always very much appreciated.

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Falling for the American

# EARL OF SHEFFORD

ANNA ST. CLAIRE

## CHAPTER ONE

*LONDON, England*

*September 1822*

“THAT, I BELIEVE, IS THE GAME!” Colin Nelson, the Earl of Shefford, breathed a sigh of relief. How had Bergen talked him into one more game with Lord Wilford Whitton? He already suspected the man cheated when he could, and failing that, he was a terrible loser. Tonight, the man could not cover his losses without giving up some part of his estate, having already lost both his horse and a building. A building, indeed, which now belonged to Colin, even though he was uncertain of what it looked like or its actual worth. *Nevertheless, I plan to put it to good use*, he mused. *Hell and confound it! The paper feels damp*. He glanced at the vowel before tucking it into his waistcoat pocket—making sure Whitton’s perspiration had not smeared the ink before wiping his hands on his pantaloons.

“My lord, might we exchange a few words about this for a moment? Perhaps there is another way to pay you. The building has been in my family for a long while.” Lord Whitton grabbed his chewed, cold cigar, which had been resting next to his empty glass, and stood up from the table. The short, red-faced lord had been huffing since he had shown his losing cards. “I have an idea and I think you might be interested in my proposal.”

“I cannot imagine what else you could have. You have already wagered your horse and lost it; and now, this family building. I do not make a habit of leaving women and children homeless by winning a man’s house from him.” He watched Whitton wipe the sweat from his head. By now, that handkerchief had to be soaked, he thought, trying to decide how to handle the man who was growing more and more fidgety. Instinct told him it was time to leave. “I have no notion whether this building is worth the hundred pounds you owe me, but I know the area and will take a chance.” Colin pushed back from the table and stood up. “The game is over. I suggest you go home.” He looked around the room. Circles of cigar smoke hovered over several heads before making its way to the general haze of smoke at the ceiling. Activity ceased at the closest tables, as the players’ heads turned to watch. Even the popping and crackling from the enormous fireplace across the room seemed louder and closer. He found himself buoyed by the temporary audience.

“If you will, please hear me out.” Perspiration coated the man’s forehead. “I should not have wagered the building.”

“Yet you did,” Colin responded coolly. “The gaming table has not been kind to you this night. Perhaps you should have stopped playing after you lost your horse to Lord Bergen.” People like Whitton would benefit from house limits on wagers, yet they rarely put one in place.

“I thought I could win back my losses. ‘Twas but a small debt,” the man whined. “My horse is a thoroughbred. It should have carried me further on the wager.”

Colin noted the tone of indignation steeling Whitton’s voice. “Yet you lost that to a different person,” Colin said with a note of astonishment even he could hear.

“He is your *friend*. How do I know the two of you have played fair?” The man sneered, the accusation clear.

From the corner of his eye, Colin observed his friend, Thomas, the Earl of Bergen, quietly signal the stalwart individual standing beside the door with a nod of his head. The last thing they needed was to dive into a mill in this hell. Colin

was already regretting the decision to try out this new hell. They should have gone to the club. He did not care for public displays.

“I will give you one chance to redeem your building. If you can satisfy your entire debt by tomorrow evening—*in cash*—I will return the deed to the building. If not, consider the building payment in full.”

A tall, burly man with dark hair and a trimmed beard appeared at the table. “My lord, the night has ended for you. We ask that you leave now,” the bouncer said, his eyes on Whitton. For added emphasis, he pushed up each of his sleeves, revealing large, muscular arms. A tattoo of an ace of spades with a dagger across it showed on the underside of one arm.

“They have cheated me,” Whitton accused, pointing a finger at Bergen and Shefford. “These are the gentlemen you should throw out—and I demand the return of the deed he stole from me,” he rasped, taking a step back.

“Did you just call me a cheat?” Colin stepped forward, his voice low.

The bouncer grabbed Lord Whitton by the back of his coat. “My lord, there are windows throughout the house. If there was any cheating occurring, we would see it. I will escort you to the door. Your participation for the evening—*here, at least*—is over.” With that, the guard forcibly removed the squirming, protesting man.

“You have not heard the last of me,” Whitton yelled over his shoulder, before being dragged to the door.

“Well, that did not end too well,” observed Colin, quietly. “I hope he finds his way home.”

“Without his horse,” sneered Bergen.

“Do you think he will try to take his horse? He lost it to you,” Colin added wryly.

“I conjured that he might and removed the horse to the stable across the street, with ours, when I took a break from the tables earlier. I am glad I insisted on a signed bill of sale.”

“Ah. Yes, that was probably wise,” Colin quipped.

“Faro does not appear to be his game, Shefford,” Bergen said, taking the last sip of his brandy. “Mm, I think this must be French brandy. How unusual to find it at a gaming hell.” He sniffed the rim of the glass and smiled, as if confirming his point.

“I feel the need for more salubrious surroundings. What say you we head to the club?”

“That *is* funny! I am right behind you, my friend.” Bergen sniggered. He picked up his coat and followed Colin.

As the two men approached the stable, a young man jumped up from where he was sitting, beneath a tree near the gate.

“M’lords,” he started, brushing off his breeches. “Can I bring yer horses to ye?”

“This is the young man who has been taking care of my winnings tonight,” Bergen said, chuckling.

“Me name’s Danny. I’m glad to see ye, m’lord,” the young man rejoined. “A shorter gentleman came fer that horse, just like ye said. I ’ad placed her in the back, in case I was with another when ’e came. He was really mad when I told him ye had taken her.”

“That was good thinking. Here is a little something extra for watching our horses and being so thoughtful, Danny,” Colin said, withdrawing the money from his waistcoat.

“Get away! A crown. You gents are the dog’s whiskers!”

“We had a run of luck at the tables tonight and our good fortune has become your gain,” Bergen added, grinning.

“Thank you,” the lad said with gusto. “I’ll be back in a jiffy with the horses.” He pocketed the coin and hurried into the stables.

“It is interesting how Whitton’s demeanor changed so rapidly,” Bergen remarked thoughtfully. “You should beware. A loser’s remorse can do strange things to a body. Perhaps I should apologize for talking you into one more game.”

“There is no need. I won.” Colin grinned. “Although I will admit I do not understand the building’s worth. It could have the walls eaten through and be overrun with rats, for all I know. I plan to take a look in a day or so—if he does not find the readies for his debt.”

“That was a very generous offer. You were more than fair.”

“Here come our horses.” Colin never felt comfortable with compliments, no matter how sincere. “I merely gave him an opportunity. The old codger seemed abnormally worried about the loss of the building.”

“What are you thinking to do with a building you have yet to see, Colin?” Bergen asked, his tone one of amusement.

“Ah! Here are the horses,” he said again in an attempt to deflect his friend’s attention. He had an idea for the building but preferred to speak to his brother first. “It would seem our return will be slower... I suspect you will have to pull along the second horse.” He eyed the mare with disfavor. “It was very well of you to move her...” Colin let his voice fade as he noticed the boy’s face. Something was wrong. The hair on the back of his neck prickled. He turned around, just in time to block Lord Whitton’s knife as the man thrust it towards his back. Colin’s right arm received the punishing blow instead, but ignoring the pain, he pummeled Whitton with both fists, knocking him off balance. Shouting to Danny to run for help, Bergen joined him, and the two men wrestled Whitton to the ground.

“You should have that looked at,” Bergen observed some minutes later as they watched a pair of constables lead Lord Whitton away in handcuffs to the lock-up. “I have never seen that man so out of control. Attacking a peer—whatever next?” He grimaced. “I cannot imagine what drove him to do such a thing.”

“I will speak with the magistrate on that situation tomorrow. I have a disquieting feeling about that gentleman, and I need to make sure that they punish him for the assault,” Colin muttered. “Can you help me on to my horse?”



“I will. However, I insist you come to my house. I will send for the doctor. The cut is deep and needs to be attended.”

“Very well. However, I wish you will not make too much of it,” Colin returned, grimacing in the other direction. *Distraction could help.* His arm felt on fire. “I would like to speak with Baxter about Whitton and make sure that he does not escape justice.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Hopefully, the magistrate will send him to gaol, and they keep him there for a goodly while,” Bergen added.

“He can rot there,” Colin returned. “The man is dangerous and should not be among decent folk.”

“He is obviously in quite deep. Unless someone owes *him*, he is not likely to have enough bluntness to grease the gaoler’s fist,” agreed Bergen. “Whitton may be a scoundrel; however, he is also an earl. I will send word to Baxter and Morray once I have you safely home. The sooner he is under lock and key, the better.”

## CHAPTER TWO

HONORIA MASON GLANCED about the room, taking in the sleeping faces of fourteen children. *My little angels*. The room still smelled of paint and lye soap, despite her efforts to air it, yet it was an affirmation of the level of cleanliness she demanded. The school reopened three months hence, and these small children had already claimed their places. All of the children were ten years of age or under, with one toddler—a little girl. Since they did not have older children, they had made the decision to put them all in the largest room, while the painting and repairs continued in the others. Too soon, they would need the other rooms. For now, it was nice to see them all together.

One small iron crib and thirteen wooden beds lined opposing walls. A small iron sconce held a single candle that flickered from the wall on which it hung, away from the bedding. The dim light it provided was barely enough to see all the children's faces from the doorway. Lately, Nora had wondered about the women who might not have cast their children away had they had some financial help. Merely surviving, financially, was out of reach for many of these women without support.

Nora herself did not have money, but she had space and she had some connections. Much though she reviled the *ton*, perhaps there were some situations in which they could help others less fortunate. She needed to give the idea more thought. While she would never understand how someone could cast off their child, no matter the circumstances, she was open-minded enough to know that everyone did not fit that

mold. Society saw many of them as unworthy and, in some cases, by-blows to be hidden away from view.

Parents or relatives of these children had abandoned them here or on the streets, unable or unwilling to care for them. They often cast the children out without a look back, something which broke her heart to even think of. Others lost their parents through disease or worse and were left with nowhere to turn. To remain on the street would only lead to them becoming pawns of the pickpocket gangs, who taught them to steal. It was important that these cherubs learn a respectable trade, one which would place them away from danger. She did not wish for Society to have so much control that they had no choices in life, Nora reflected, realizing with surprising clarity she was thinking of her own situation.

“Och! They are quiet at last.” A voice spoke behind her, startling her from her thoughts.

“Yes, you are right, Mrs. Simpkins,” she murmured, her mind still trying to grasp the notion that perhaps the *ton* itself could help undo some misfortune she saw in front of her. Nora was no fool. Some of these children were bastards, born out of wedlock to women who, perhaps because of their positions within a household or Society, could not keep a child. These women could ill afford to lose their positions and had few resources to use. *How difficult that must be*, she thought, *to choose*.

“I ken ye well enough to see ye are thinking about something serious,” the older woman whispered. “It does me heart good to see how much like yer grandma that ye be.”

Perceiving only benefits from her ideas, Nora determined to list them and visit her benefactor—Grandmama. She needed more than money to make some changes she envisioned.

“I feel as though I am taking advantage, yet my grandmother has often urged me to apply to her whenever I have need of anything,” returned Nora.

“Nay. Ye do not ken how proud she is of ye.” After a moment of silence, Mrs. Simpkins smiled and added, “I do not hear the wee one that came today. Perhaps that is a good sign.”

It was not unusual for the new children to cry themselves to sleep for several nights upon their arrival. She and Mrs. Simpkins worked hard to soothe the transition. Nora was thankful that her grandmother had loaned her the older cook—who constantly showed a heart of gold towards the children. Three women—herself, Mrs. Simpkins, and Mary, the maid—made up the household. In addition, Mr. Marsh, Grandmama’s gardener and handyman, came twice a week to help with the land and any jobs that might require a man’s strength.

Nora’s means were barely sufficient, and while bread and soup had become a staple, she had found Mrs. Simpkins to be a genius at making a sumptuous meal for the children from only a few supplies. Nora refused to take more money from her grandmother than necessary.

A cry came then from a toddler in the corner, and Nora rushed over. “There, there, Amy. I am here, little one.”

“Mama,” the child wailed, and then coughed repeatedly.

An older child raised her head. “I think she misses her mama, Miss Nora. She can sleep next to me, if that’ll help.”

“Alice, that is very sweet of you. I think I will walk about with Amy for a few minutes.” She leaned over and kissed the six-year-old girl on the forehead. “Go back to sleep, little one.”

“Thank you, Miss Nora.” The child had barely whispered her response when soft snores came from her cot.

Turning to the crib, Nora took a deep breath and out of habit, smoothed her skirt with her hands. “This transition will be hard for you, little one.” She reached into the cradle, picked up the whimpering child and held her to her chest, to comfort her.

“There, there, fret not, little one. We will look after you,” she cooed to the little girl.

Mrs. Simpkins met her at the door. “I remembered we had a little of this left over and thought warm goat’s milk could help.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Simpkins. It may take both of us to help her recover from her grief. It never ceases to amaze me that people consider children as chattel. They have hearts and feelings. I will take her to my room and rock her to sleep. I should probably have a small bed installed in the corner for times such as these,” she added.

“’Tis not a bad idea. Remember, I am here if ye need me, Miss Nora. I will care for the children as if they were me own,” the woman responded.

“I know you will. You are a good, thoughtful woman, and you always made my visits to Grandmama better when I was a child. I do not recall that your lemon biscuits ever hurt me,” Nora said warmly as she kissed the toddler on the head. Mrs. Simpkins’ kind heart was one reason that Grandmama had lent her to the school. The thought forced a smile to bubble up. She had long ago recognized her maternal grandmother as having a kindred soul to her own, and often, she had not even had to ask before Grandmama had responded with what was needed.

“The wee one has only been here a day. Give her time. She is strong.” Mrs. Simpkins gently squeezed the little girl’s hand and kissed her on the cheek.

Little Amy had arrived yesterday, and already the tiny, amber-haired toddler threatened to steal Nora’s heart. A friend of the child’s mother had delivered her. Circumstances forced Amy’s mother into prostitution to survive and she had died of syphilis. Nora knew little about the disease, it not being a subject considered suitable for young ladies. However, she understood it was a horrible death. She shuddered, recalling the moment the child arrived. The woman who brought Amy handed the crying child to Nora at the door.

“I wrote everything I knew about her on the note in her bundle,” the woman said, pointing to the knotted shawl sitting on the step. “I would keep her, but I know naught about children. Her mother loved Amy very much. She was a kind woman who did what she must to survive. Please—you will find me if I can help Amy?” she said, brushing away tears. “She knows me as Auntie Gemma,” the woman added before

turning and rushing down the street, clearly eager to distance herself from the task she had undertaken.

The small child's story made Nora's eyes mist as she recollected it and, out of instinct, she pulled the child closer to her own heart. Nora knew that each child in the room had a story equally sad, and she could not allow herself to dissolve into tears with each one. These children needed strength and permanence. She would work hard to give them that. If her idea had merit, it could help some children to stay with their mothers. Buoyed by her thoughts, she looked around once more.

The orphanage which had once occupied the building had closed about ten years past. Although Grandmama owned the building, she had not had the will to open it again, as Grandpapa had died about the same time. Eager to assist those 'thrown on the parish', Nora had found a willing partner in her grandmother, and felt fortunate to have talked her family into reopening the building—although her uncle had threatened to sell it on many occasions, citing its uselessness. According to Aunt Sophie, they were at low water because of his gambling debts. She would be exceedingly worried if Uncle controlled the property, yet she need not be concerned. Papa had informed her shortly after her grandmother discussed reopening the orphanage, that Grandmama owned the property, as it had been part of her wedding portion. *Thank goodness, Grandmama holds the deed to this building.*

The whimpering stopped at last as the small child stilled in her arms, content to sleep. Deciding to let the child sleep, Nora walked to her room and took a chair in the corner, careful not to disturb Amy. She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes, suddenly overwhelmed with her own need for sleep.

## CHAPTER THREE

*TWO DAYS LATER.*

FREE OF THE fever caused by the knife wound, and healed sufficiently, Colin determined he needed fresh air. He intended to take advantage of the clear London skies this morning presented. Adjusting his waistcoat, he withdrew the folded paper from his pocket, shaking it open. Finally! Here was a chance to set the wheels in motion for the fencing club he and his brother had talked about for years. Winning this building had become a prompt in his mind to make it happen. He would have the building renovated to his brother's specifications and Jonathan would run it. He was the expert in the *duello*. Their father had encouraged the skill, often sparring with his sons. Colin considered himself more than proficient at the art of fencing; however, Jonathan's skill was far beyond mere competence. He almost equaled the legendary Angelo.

Besides, Colin reasoned, he was much too busy to run a club. He had taken the bet on faith, being previously unaware of the building's existence, let alone having knowledge of its condition. Upon reflection, there had been little—if not naught—trustworthy about Wilford Whitton. The nasty knife wound in his own arm, that was still in danger of infection, was proof of that. However, he could no longer tolerate staring at the four walls of his room.

Still involved with the Crown, and now with his estate, Colin found fencing an excellent way of releasing pent up emotion and helping him to feel bobbish. He felt sure this

entertainment would also be a welcome diversion within his set at the Wicked Earl's Club. The gentlemen met almost nightly, and no matter the requirement for amusement, the club could, for the most part, meet it. As yet, it had not provided a fencing saloon.

The sport itself had diminished somewhat in status, overtaken by the popularity of shooting; however, it remained an effective and punishing method of defense that, if vigorously practiced, kept a gentleman's body at peak performance.

Caught up in the excitement of his thoughts, he picked up his cane and whipped it into a parry at an imaginary opponent—only to be immediately reminded of the stitches he had received only two days ago.

His arm ached, and that Whitton had caused it pricked his pride. He should have been more careful, expecting something from the man. He pulled out his pocket watch, mindful that Bergen and Lord Morray were meeting with him soon.

Where was Joseph? His valet was taking an inordinate amount of time to find a suitable coat. He fingered the frilled cuffs of his shirt distractedly. The man had pursed his lips anxiously when the bandage around Colin's upper arm did not easily fit inside the brown wool coat he had chosen for today and had hurried from the room, muttering about fetching one with a better fit. Some minutes earlier, he had informed Colin that his black coat had been returned, repaired by his tailor. Presumably, therefore, the man had gone to fetch the garment.

Colin turned his head at the slight knock at the door. "Come in."

"My lord, I apologize for the delay. I took the liberty of remeasuring the arm openings, in order to compare them with the brown coat. They are just as required and should provide room for your injury. It has also been cleaned."

"God's teeth, man! I was wondering where you had gone. I had hoped to view an investment before meeting with my brother." Colin stretched his arms into the sleeves as Joseph fussed with the shoulders. "It looks better than new. Thank



you, Joseph,” he acknowledged in a milder tone. The black coat would suit for what he needed to do today.

Joseph was the grandson of his father’s valet and had proven himself more than capable. The man had become indispensable in the three years he had been in his service.

“Mr. Weston has attached a new sleeve,” Joseph responded abstractedly, still twitching with the back.

Colin wanted to set out. “Have the footman summon my carriage to be brought around, if you will.”

“I anticipated your need, my lord. The carriage is already at the front, awaiting your convenience,” Joseph said, smiling. “Lord Bergen has arrived and is waiting in the drawing room.”

“Your ability to predict my requirements never ceases to amaze me, Joseph.”

“It is merely a part of my duties, my lord. I apologize for not considering the need to accommodate your bandage.”

“Think naught of it,” Colin responded, suddenly feeling guilty about the way he had spoken to the young valet. The lanky young man that shadowed his grandfather in those last years of the older man’s service had matured into a fine young man. Tall, with blond hair, broad shoulders, and bright blue eyes, he was a favorite among Colin’s staff. Surprisingly, it was more for his willingness to help anyone that needed an extra pair of hands than his masculine stature. “Thank you, Joseph.”

Humming to himself, Colin grabbed his cane and joined his friend downstairs. Adam Beaumont, the Earl of Morray had not yet arrived. The Earl was the one gentleman in Colin’s set he had counted upon to give him a realistic idea of the popularity of the venture he had in mind. He was not only a friend, but a frequent sparring partner at Jackson’s Saloon. His opinion on both the location and the popularity of the investment meant a great deal to Colin.

Less than an hour later, his coachman pulled the town chariot into a short, circular drive. Colin and his two friends stepped out of the carriage and stared up at a three-story, faded

pink building surrounded by iron railings on a corner, northeast of Mayfair. Russell Square was a respectable if not fashionable neighborhood, yet not considered a dangerous one. He did not wish customers to be set upon by riff-raff. He found it was close enough to his prospective clients, while far enough removed for discretion. The location pleased him.

“Not a bad locality,” he remarked, hoping to spur his friends’ opinions. An instant later, he thought he saw movement in a window and squinted. *Are those curtains? It looks inhabited. According to Whitton, this was supposed to be an empty building.*

“I thought you had mentioned the building being empty. Unless my eyes deceive me, I saw a woman’s face—a rather charming woman’s face—in that upper window,” Morray said, pointing to the large second-floor window, centrally placed above the door.

“Then I was not seeing things,” Colin retorted in some chagrin. He regarded Bergen, who stood next to him, smiling, having not uttered a word.

Colin prompted Bergen with a slight nudge of his elbow. “He said the building was empty, did he not?” he queried.

“He did. However, he also tried to weasel out of the bet. I am thinking the reasons he failed to share are currently residing in that building, and *she* has no notion she is being evicted. Unless my memory fails me, this used to be an orphanage before it closed some years ago.” He eyed his friends. “Could it be that it has become so again? I say we should meet the young woman inside and find out. I would like to have a complete story to share with Elizabeth when I return home.” He laughed sardonically.

Colin tried to be irritated with his friend, but he could lay nothing at Bergen’s feet. In fact, he almost envied his friend. Bergen was happily married—something he could never achieve himself. He was uncertain he was even ready to consider marriage at this time. Thomas Bergen had married Lady Elizabeth Newton over five years ago, after discovering her living a quiet but remarkable life, caring for her children

and abandoned animals. He had brought her an orphaned donkey he had found while on the way to London, having heard she adopted strays of all types. The donkey, Clarence, had found a home and his friend had found a wife he had not been seeking. Besides the three children she had already adopted, they had twins of their own—a boy and a girl. *Lucky fellow*, he thought irrationally.

“I cannot see the humor here,” Colin said, irritated. This created a whole new wrinkle in his quest to help his brother. He pulled out the deed and glanced first at a brass sign attached to the railings and then back to the deed. “We have the right of it. Shall we find out what more there is to this story?” It incensed him to be caught like a flat through accepting a chance wager.

“You should probably determine the legitimacy of the paper he gave you,” Morray added in a droll tone. “Yet we are here. I propose we meet the *chit* and find out what we can.”

Morray was always willing to *meet the chit*, Colin thought miserably. “She occupies my property and is *not* grist for your mill, Morray. This may very well be an orphanage.” Even to his own ear, he sounded testy. Perhaps it was the combination of being injured and swindled. He had thought things might not be as Whitton represented, and rather than follow his intuition, he succumbed to the lure of the game. Winning the building presented a suitable solution to his and Jonathan’s desire to honor their father.

Morray snorted. “Ownership remains to be seen, but fear not, my fine fellow. You *know* innocent ladies are not to my taste. I prefer, shall I say, a more savage entertainment. Your young woman is safe.”

“She is not my woman,” Colin snapped.

“I say, Shefford, you are letting this become bothersome. I have found that the biggest surprises can sometimes turn out to be the best ones. I, for one, am eager to meet the face behind the curtain.” Morray jerked his head toward the same curtain which had moved earlier, revealing a lovely face framed by soft, blonde ringlets staring down at the three of them.

The large oak door at the top of the steps had recently been rubbed down, most likely to prepare for a fresh coat of paint. Colin took in the neatened appearance of the portico and lifted the plain brass knocker to announce their presence. Less than a minute later, a small hatch above the knocker slid open and an older woman's face appeared for a moment before the opening closed and the door opened.

"Good day, my lords. May I be of help?" A short, mob-capped woman stood at the door, filling the opening.

"I am Lord Shefford, and I wish to look over my recently acquired property. I must admit to being somewhat startled to find the house occupied," Colin began.

"Oh, dear! Beg pardon, my lord." The short woman closed the door.

"I say, did you just get the door closed in your face?" Bergen gibed.

"Stubble it, Bergen." He lifted the knocker and gave three quick raps.

"I am sorry, Shefford. I should not be fooling at your expense." Bergen smirked, putting the lie to his apology. "'Tis just that this reminds me a little of my first meeting with Elizabeth. I think I am merely amused by the coincidence."

"This has no similarity to when you met your wife, I assure you. I am not meeting my future wife," he grumbled as the door opened again. The older woman had disappeared, replaced by a beautiful young woman dressed in a plain cotton dress of a deep navy-blue color, covered with a white apron. She had golden blonde hair, bound neatly in a loose chignon, and chocolate brown eyes—eyes a man could lose himself in. "May I speak with your employer, my dear," Colin said politely.

"Good day, my lords." She bobbed a curtsey. "My name is Miss Mason and I am the headmistress here. Please forgive my housekeeper's lack of deference." She paused, smiling sweetly. "We are unaccustomed to having many visitors,

especially gentlemen as distinguished as yourselves. Have you come to make a donation to the school?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

NORA COULD NOT IMAGINE why these three gentlemen—obviously members of the *ton*, judging by their dress and means of transport—had remained standing in front of her school for what seemed like an eternity. They were all dressed in the height of fashion, with superfine coats sporting high collars, pantaloons, white linen shirts, colorful silk waistcoats, and elaborately tied cravats. She watched them chatting among themselves until they finally approached the door. She had hoped they would leave. While two men dressed in navy and burgundy jackets with buff pants, the tallest one dressed in black, which she thought an unusual color for this time of day. When that tall, dark-headed man with the soft grey eyes unfurled a folded piece of paper and looked up at her, her stomach both fluttered and sank to her feet, a curious feeling she failed to understand. Perhaps it was a premonition. Various people acquainted with the family had told her that her mother had been subject to them; however, Nora made it a practice to follow her instincts, and they told her something was wrong here. Whatever the gentlemen's reasons, she remained on her guard as she greeted them, forcing a smile and the cheery voice she employed whenever she felt worried and fearful. The gentleman took a moment to take her measure and take stock of the room behind her before speaking.

“I fear there has been some mistake. Would you be so kind as to invite us inside to discuss it?” he finally said. “I should hate my business to be discussed by eavesdroppers and passers-by.”

She had to admit several wagons, and people on foot had slowed down or even stopped to watch. This was a busy street, yet not one accustomed to gentlemen of such style and fashion. She nodded in agreement.

“You have me at a disadvantage, my lord,” she returned, noticing that the other two had remained quiet and observant. He seemed in charge.

“It would appear my shock has stolen my manners, Miss Mason. Forgive me. I am the Earl of Shefford.” He made an elegant leg before continuing, “The gentleman to my right is my friend, the Earl of Bergen, and to the left of me is the Earl of Morray.” Both men removed their beaver hats and bowed.

Chagrined that not only was this gentleman being too nice to dislike, he was also remarkably attractive, Nora stepped back and allowed them entry.

“The parlor is to the left,” she directed them, pausing a moment to speak with her cook, who had remained standing quietly at the foot of the stairs. “Mrs. Simpkins,” she whispered to the older woman, “please ask Mary to bring us some tea.”

“Aye, though I be glad to do it for ye, missy, Mary is quieting Amy just now. The poor lass refuses to nap,” the cook replied. “I be afraid she has adopted ye for her mama,” she added with a rueful smile. “She has taken a likin’ to ye for sure.”

*Poor little Amy.* She had not forgotten the child, although she had become very distracted by the appearance of these gentlemen.

“I am afraid you may well be correct,” she said with a sigh. “If you do not mind bringing a tray to the parlor, I would appreciate it. You are a treasure, Mrs. Simpkins.”

“I’ll add some fresh lemon biscuits I jus’ took from the oven. That should help with whatever trouble awaits ye,” she murmured. With a curt nod to the dark-haired, grey-eyed man who stared in their direction through the open door, the older woman left to gather the promised refreshments.

Nora pushed the door behind her towards its frame, leaving it open a crack. Instinct told her that whatever business they had, the children should not hear of it.

“Gentlemen, I have requested tea for us.” She walked over to a somewhat worn, blue velvet settee and sat down. “Please make yourselves comfortable, and once again, I trust you will accept my apologies for earlier. I should perhaps explain... you have caught us at an awkward time. We are still establishing our routines. The orphanage has just reopened after being closed for ten years, you see. There is much to repair and I have yet to appoint a porter.”

“*Orphanage?*” the Earl mouthed to his friends as he took his seat in a yellow and blue patterned chair next to a matching blue sofa. Although her grandmother had insisted, she was tired of the colors, Nora was well aware it was a Banbury story. She could not refuse without appearing ungrateful and, truth be known, she had been very glad to accept, for it meant she had one respectable room in which to receive guests,

The other two men quietly retired to a small, round maple table with two matching chairs. Turning the chairs towards Nora and Lord Shefford, they sat down.

“Permit me to beg your pardon for the intrusion, Miss Mason. We thought the building was unoccupied. I wish to inspect it with a view to its suitability for another use entirely. You can imagine my surprise,” Lord Shefford responded, his voice echoing disbelief.

“Then I think we must both be thunderstruck by these events,” she said, forcing her lips into a stiff smile. “My family has fully supported my efforts to reopen the orphanage which closed, as I informed you earlier, ten years past. I am trying to understand how it can be possible you thought the property to be available,” she added sweetly, trusting the tremors in her voice were hidden beneath the strength of her words. Uncle’s threat to sell resonated in her head. *Surely Grandmama did not agree to that. There has to be a mistake.* Her heart pounded.



“I can only apologize again for thrusting business upon you,” Lord Shefford replied, “but I think this document will convey everything.”

Nora studied the paper. It appeared to be a deed to the building, signed by Uncle Wilford.

“How can this be? I have been told that my uncle does not own the rights to this building. My grandmother does.”

“Perhaps he has been placed in charge of her possessions,” Lord Shefford offered.

“I hesitate to disagree with you, sir, but my grandfather purchased this building as a gift for my grandmother. She recently encouraged me to reopen the orphanage.” Nora took a deep breath and tried to quiet her nerves. “I fear there has been a dreadful mistake,” she continued.

“I hardly think so, Miss Mason. Your uncle used this deed to cover a wager in a game of chance two evenings ago. He lost. The building is mine.” He gazed about the room. “I did not understand the property was occupied...” He paused. “I have no wish to turn women and small children out of their home. Therefore, with your forbearance, I should like a few days to consider an alternative for you.”

Nora wanted to scream, but training dictated she remain as calm as possible, no matter how boorish this man was being. It was all of a piece and joined the other reasons she hated the *ton*—its members only thought of themselves. Her family had lost too much. *She* had lost too much. She would not lose this building. Her children would not lose their home.

“With all due respect, my lord, there has been a mistake. This building is owned by my grandmother. If she had given it to my uncle to *manage*...” She nearly spat the word. “...she would have informed me, as she has been assisting me with the reopening.” Silence fell over the room, broken only by the ticking of the long-case clock in one corner. Nora tried not to fidget with her hands where they lay folded in her lap. What could she say? The faces of the three gentlemen gave no clue as to their thoughts.

A slight knock on the door heralded the entrance of Mrs. Simpkins with the tea tray. Nora was never more glad to see anyone in her life.

“Thank you, Mrs. Simpkins,” Nora said, with more warmth than perhaps the service warranted. Then, stiffening her spine and smiling through clenched teeth, she addressed Lord Shefford. “My grandmother has also generously lent me her cook. Mrs. Simpkins has been kind enough to take on the role of cook-housekeeper for the school.”

“Your grandmother’s cook?” Lord Bergen spoke up from the back, ignoring the startled faces of his friends. “May I inquire who your grandmother is, Miss Mason?”

Nora took a deep breath. At least one of the three had a reasonable mind. She turned to Mrs. Simpkins.

“That will be all,” she said firmly as Mrs. Simpkins showed a desire to linger.

“Very good, miss.” Bobbing an unsteady curtsy, the cook reluctantly left the room.

Turning back to face the gentlemen, Nora’s gaze met Lord Shefford’s before she lowered it politely.

“I find this whole matter most distressing, but since, on this occasion, it is so important,” she said, pausing, “I will tell you. My grandmother is the Dowager Countess of Whitton.” She fought the smile that threatened to burst forth at the pale look on Lord Shefford’s face. Doing her best to contain her glee at turning the tables on the arrogant earl, she smoothed out her dress before picking up her favorite cornflower blue porcelain teapot. “Tea, gentlemen?” she offered, as she began pouring the beverage and passing the filled cups to her astonished guests.

Each of the gentlemen sipped their tea, apparently lost in their own quiet contemplation. When Nora had finished the contents of her cup, she rose, forcing them also to stand.

“Gentlemen, I would greatly appreciate the chance to consult with my grandmother. She is due to visit later today.” Adopting a look of utter puzzlement, she peered up at Lord

Shefford. “My lord, I can only imagine how you must feel. Allow me to discuss this with my grandmother, for she may wish to consult with you regarding the signed deed.”

“Ahem,” he said, clearing his throat. “I apologize for my apparent rudeness. It was not meant. However, it would seem we have an unexpected tangle here. I will also engage my man of business to look into this matter further.”

Lord Shefford returned his empty cup on the tray at the same time she moved the teapot and inadvertently, Nora touched his bare hand with her own. Quivers of feeling shot straight up her arm causing her to nearly jerk her hand away. She willed calmness over her body, puzzled over the something she had never before experienced. “Certainly, my lord,” Nora choked out, startled when she caught herself staring—most improperly—into the gentleman’s grey eyes. *Not that I would... yet if I could ever be accepted as a viable match for a gentleman of his standing, I would not mind one who looked as fine as he does.*

The soft telltale scuffle of footsteps in the hall interrupted her thoughts and drew her attention to the door. Unnoticed, Mrs. Simpkins had left it open to the room, giving some semblance of propriety. Meeting three men alone in her parlor had not been anticipated, and with minimal staff and no lady’s maid, Mrs. Simpkins probably stood close enough to offer a chaperone’s assistance. Despite initial frustration, she found herself appreciative of the older woman’s efforts to add a level of decorum for reputation’s sake.

When the three gentlemen had finally taken their leave, she leaned against the door and heaved a heavy sigh of relief. She realized it was only a reprieve. Surely, Grandmama would have some solution?

## CHAPTER FIVE

“WELL, *that* did not proceed as I would have predicted,” Bergen observed in a jovial voice. “By golly, though, I enjoyed her spunk!” he added as the three men made their way to the carriage.

“If I have followed this situation correctly, Lord Whitton has not only deceived his family, but he may also have forged a deed,” Morray propounded. “I know the Countess to be quite a force among the *ton*—she differs greatly from her wastrel son.”

“While it is best not jump to conclusions, instinct tells me that Whitton has forged the deed. Still, I shall ask Thomas Yarrow, my man of business, to scrutinize it and advise me on a proper course of action.” Colin stuffed the questionable deed into his pocket.

“A sound plan,” agreed Bergen. “I bet Yarrow has come across such doings before—perhaps, even, with Whitton. It would be helpful to know.”

“In our business, we have had dealings with a great number of rogues, but I have never encountered a peer forging a deed to cover his gambling debts. I cannot even credit Whitton with having originality,” muttered Colin in a sarcastic tone. He was still smarting from the astonishing interchange with the headmistress of a school that was occupying what should have been the *empty* building he owned. Bergen had been right. He felt embarrassed for having blindly trusted the man’s deed, especially after he had tried to kill him.

“One might assume,” Morray began in a soft voice, “that Whitton’s attempt to kill you transpired to conceal an illegality. We had assumed him to be bedeviled as a result of disappointing his family; however, it would appear he wanted to hide a more shameful act. Still, I am not inclined to think it planned. I see him more as an impulsive sort. And that fits his reputation. I do not think this was premeditated.”

“I imagine the Countess will petition to see me, and before she does, I desire to have more facts before me. I suspect you are correct, Morray, and this deed may not be valid,” agreed Colin, climbing into the carriage. His annoyance was rapidly turning into anger. “Mayhap I should try to be beforehand and call on her first.”

Following closely behind Morray, Bergen snorted as he seated himself on the opposite bench.

“Her granddaughter is no shy miss. Rarely do you meet a woman who can deliver such a guileful blow without losing a hint of composure. Her grandmother would be proud, I think. The Countess is known to be quite charming and also a shrewd negotiator, so be warned.”

“I hate to be a stickler, and I would be less inclined to cut up stiff had he not tried to kill me. Yet now, I find, I am more determined than ever that his debt be honored. This deed,” he went on, patting the pocket holding the paper, “whether fake or real, should serve as a credible substitution for the debt he owes. My father was friends with the Countess’ husband. He always considered the Earl an honest gentleman—a gentleman very different from his son.”

“I have encountered Whitton in some of my dealings. I am afraid that his... ah... habits of late have driven the man towards some unscrupulous people. His level of desperation does not surprise me. What will surprise me is if the deed you hold is not a forgery. The headmistress sounded very certain of her advantage,” Morray countered in an unaffected tone.

Colin smiled despite his wounded pride. “She was rather certain,” he murmured, as his thoughts drifted back to their meeting. “At first, I thought she was inviting a negotiation

over tea.” He chuckled. “I will admit I did not expect such a worthy check.” If he were honest, he mused, he had been rather engaged by her clever play. *If I were to marry, that would be the type of woman I would choose.*

“Ah... so you *noticed* the beautiful headmistress, Miss Mason,” Bergen taunted, grinning.

“It is futile to bamboozle you, I see.” Colin chuckled, feeling his irritation lifting. Bergen was always good to have about. “I believe I have just suffered checkmate at the hands of a lovely opponent,” he agreed. *I noticed her.* No woman in memory had caused such inner conflict as this one had. An inconsequential touch over a teacup came to mind and he briefly wondered if it had affected her as it had him. Pulses of pleasure had raced up his arm. He felt more than a sense of annoyance. Surely, it was not attraction ... *or was it?*

“I own that I cannot recall seeing her in any *ton* events, at least none that I can summon immediately to mind. There must be more to her story than meets the eye. She reminded me of my own Elizabeth,” Bergen persisted, beaming. “She came with a menagerie of children and pets, and never ceases to make me merry!”

“Your wife is a genuine find,” Colin agreed, lost in thought for a long moment before he finally continued, “I shall go to see the Countess tomorrow and make my case.” Once she realizes that I am indeed owed this building, it will be resolved, he told himself.

“Since my family is residing with me in London at the moment, there is no reason whereby I cannot go with you tomorrow, should you so wish. I can bear witness to the events of that night,” Bergen offered.

“A sound idea, Shefford. ’Tis a shame three might be a crowd.” Morray spoke up. “I was just thinking about a loose end... and I hesitate to bring this up, yet have either of you enquired whether the Earl is still being held? I have heard that Sir Edward James, the magistrate, who you mentioned leading Whitton away, held Lord Whitton’s father in high regard.

Based on the events of this day, I can imagine Whitton using that circumstance to his advantage.”

“Of course! I mean, no; I have not checked, and you are right. I, too, recall seeing them in company together at White’s before the older Earl passed away,” Bergen said with an exaggerated exhale. “He might gain a measure of protection from his father’s friends, who were not there to see him attempt to kill a peer.”

“Our business is not without its perquisites. I shall consult with some of our connections, including the Earl of Baxter, and see what I may learn about our friend Whitton,” Morray proposed sardonically. “I should look into his sister’s family as well...”

“No, I should prefer to do that myself,” Colin stated, noticing that both friends were smirking at him.

“What?” he demanded, feigning indignation.

“Do not even try to defend yourself, my friend.” Morray laughed. “The lady definitely gained your notice.”

The carriage turned off the road onto the small, semi-circular drive leading to Colin’s house in Mayfair. It stopped in front of a three-story, grey stone mansion with a large, covered portico and tall windows rising from the first floor. A mixture of flowering evergreen shrubs lined the front of the walls, adding a sense of warmth to the home.

“I will take my leave, Shefford. Send a messenger when you decide what time we should meet with the Countess. I can meet you here and we may ride there together,” Bergen said.

“I think I will head to the club. It might be well to let Baxter know what has happened these last few days. He may have information that could prove useful.” Morray tipped his hat and went with Bergen towards the stables, located just behind the house.

Colin handed his greatcoat, hat, and cane to Franklin, intending to avail himself of a brandy in his study and distract himself from thoughts of the vexing meeting with the lovely headmistress.

“You have had a visitor, my lord,” the retainer said, holding out a silver salver on which lay a visiting card. “He was a short, balding individual with, if you will forgive my bluntness, a distasteful appearance and attitude. And Lady Shefford awaits your return in the drawing room.”

“Thank you, Franklin.” Colin barely glanced at the card before he stuffed it in his pocket and proceeded down the dimly lit hall to his office. *How odd. Franklin rarely remarks about visitors.* He was almost to his office when he recalled Franklin’s last words. *His mother was here?* He wanted to look at that card again, but the sound of his mother’s voice gained his attention.

“Davis, please bring my son and I some tea. I have no doubt he is hungry, so please have Cook add a small plate of meats and cheese.”

“Yes, my lady. Right away.”

Colin turned to see his mother approaching. The footman bowed and withdrew. He opened the door of the study and stood back for his mother to enter. “I was about to join you in the drawing room, ma’am.”

“I thought you might need a little push, dearest, in case you became... distracted on your return,” she said, walking to the fireplace and stretching her hands towards the welcoming warmth.

“By Jove, Mother—!” he protested. “That is outrageous.”

“It is always nice to see this picture of your father,” she mused, ignoring his outburst and looking up at the portrait over the mantel. “I recall that day well. It was the day after you went to Eton. He was so proud of you and could not wipe the smile from his face. If he said it once, he said it a dozen times, that he was glad you enjoyed attending his alma mater.” She turned to him and wiped a single tear from the edge of her eye. “While we always valued your opinion, he had strong feelings about you attending the same school. When you wrote and told us how much you enjoyed it there, I could feel the pride emanating from him.”



Colin looked at the portrait of his sire, who stood behind his mother, with her small dog, Pepper, seated in her lap. He had always admired this painting, for it portrayed his father in a more jovial mood than the traditional, unsmiling portraits. “I have not heard that story before, Mother.” Neither had he realized the reason for the near smile on his patriarch’s face until now.

“You resemble your father, Colin. He enjoyed the excitement life offered, yet he had a moral sense of duty.” The Countess walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek. She looked as if she wanted to say more.

The footman chose that moment to return with the tea and refreshments.

“Place it on the side-table next to the leather chairs, Davis,” Colin instructed, watching his mother move to the tea service.

“There! A small amount of sugar, just as you like it,” she said as she handed the saucer of tea to him. It always seemed to taste better when his mother served the beverage, he thought, taking his first sip.

“I do have a reason for my visit,” she said finally, taking her seat near him and setting her teacup down on the small table between the chairs. “I received a message yesterday that disturbed me. I read it several times and could not imagine its meaning. I believe whoever wrote it intended it for you, although that does not make me feel better.”

“Your house is only a few doors from mine. I suppose it is conceivable someone could have mistaken the address and sent you a message intended for me. Did you bring it?” he queried as he swallowed a mouthful of meat and cheese and chased it with his tea. He was hungrier than he had imagined.

“Yes, I did,” she responded softly. “I saw you leave this morning, just as I was about to bring it to you, so I waited a few hours before calling.”

He cleared his throat and took another sip of tea. “Do you have it now?”

“I do.” She reached into her pocket and withdrew a wrinkled paper.

Colin turned the paper over, curious as to why it was withered and dirty. There was a single message with no signature. Whitton!

*Return the deed.*

“THIS DOES CONCERN ME,” he started slowly, noticing his mother staring at him as he once more glanced down at the message. *She already knows this is connected to me*, he thought. “Mother, I cannot imagine why you have received this.” For a moment he debated what to tell her, deciding, in that instant, she could help him.

“I cannot conceive the why of it either,” she returned. “Especially since they tied it to a brick and hurled it through my parlor window.”

Colin fought the fury which mounted in his blood. The blighter must be deranged to throw a brick through his mother’s parlor window, although it was possible the man could have confused the addresses. This was too much. It also seemed to affirm that he was not being held in gaol.

“Mother, it appears to be from Lord Whitton...”

“The man—I will not call him a gentleman—is a wastrel. I cannot imagine any business you might have with him,” she said, cutting him off. “Seriously, though, Colin, you cannot but admit I have been most indulgent with your need for adventure. I have asked little of you and have waited patiently for you to *marry*.” The last word was almost acerbic. “Pray tell me, what business have you entered with this man that he would do such a thing?”

“Mother, he wagered a deed for a building—that I had not until this morning even seen—on a game of chance. He lost.” Colin decided it would be better to leave out the attempt on his life. His mother knew naught about his business dealings, and

he wanted to keep it that way, as much as was possible. “I gave him the opportunity to pay his debt in full, even after losing the deed, and he has chosen this route instead. As it is, I am questioning the validity of the deed itself. It could be a forgery.”

“Mercy! she exclaimed. “His family is of excellent stock. I cannot imagine what could have driven him to such lengths.” She paused. “What more can you tell me about the circumstances of this... *debt*?”

He never doubted his mother’s intelligence. She was astute. “It is supposed to be a vacant building in Russell Square. Morray, Bergen, and I went there this morning, to scrutinize it. It was not vacant. A Miss Mason has opened an orphanage there.”

*How strange.* His mother smiled and suddenly, her demeanor changed.

“The Dowager Whitton’s granddaughter?” she queried, yet it seemed she merely wished for confirmation.

“Do you know her? I do not recall ever seeing her at a *ton* event,” he acknowledged, continuing ruminatively, “Miss Mason was most unwelcoming.”

“Pish! She is a delightful young woman and most intelligent. I met her once at a tea party held by her grandmother. She came with her mother. A beautiful young woman, to be sure,” she added, seeming to have forgotten the message wrapped around a brick and delivered through her glass window. “I did not have a chance to speak with her beyond the niceties.”

He saw where this discourse was leading and struggled to put an end to it. He had no intention of becoming leg-shackled, even though Mother had effortlessly navigated onto her favorite topic—his marriage. Still, this information was useful.

“I will admit the young woman seems to be a diamond of the first water. That being said, I confess to being bemused as to why she has not had a come out,” he probed gently. He

would have remembered her, had they ever met. *Although she had begun to occupy his thoughts since their meeting.*

“Her mother disappointed *her* parents and eloped with a handsome young lieutenant... Peter, I believe is his name. It is a curious relationship. The Lady Eliza Mason, her mother, maintains a distance, socially. She visits her mother but has withdrawn from any activity which would require her to be with Society, including balls and entertainments. Her daughter is an unknown. Lady Mason’s husband is the son of a barrister, who also was a merchant. I believe her husband also chose the law. I would have to determine the truth of that. However, the grandmother is very close to her granddaughter, a relationship encouraged by both parents. Because of the power of the Dowager Countess, her granddaughter has never been the subject of idle gossip. Neither has her mother, for that matter.” Lady Shefford set down her saucer and directed a half smile in his direction.

“That answers a few questions, to be sure. Whitton has a reason to wish for the return of this deed, and I suspect it has something to do with an illegality. If what I suspect has occurred, it might not go well for him—even if his mother does not wish to pursue the matter.”

“You infer that he may have falsified the deed,” she stated matter-of-factly. “I would be careful of admitting that abroad, even though his reputation has never been savory.” On those words, she stood up. “I am sure you will take care of this matter. Please extend my regards to both the Countess and her granddaughter, when you see them next.”

“I will walk you home, Mother.” He rushed to grab his coat and join her in the street, finding her change of attitude very odd. He kissed her cheek when they arrived at her residence and he glanced to the right of the entrance, at the broken pane of glass. Her staff had already covered it with a board. “I will take care of getting this repaired for you, Mother.”

“Nonsense. I have already taken care of it,” she said flatly as she reached her door.

He watched the door close behind her before turning and heading back to his own house. Needing to address a bothersome concern, he fished in his pocket and pulled out the card. As he walked into the light of his office, he read the scribbled name over one that had been scratched out.

*Lord Wilford Montgomery, The Earl of Whitton*

WHERE HE WAS MERELY CONCERNED before, he was now deeply troubled. Whitton apparently knew the house he had hurled a brick into belonged to Colin's mother, for this card had been left with Franklin. Morray's fears had been well-founded. The Earl had found his way out of the lock-up and was on his own business. *The question is... where is he hiding?* As he opened the door, he gained his butler's attention.

"Franklin, have my carriage brought back around, *immediately.*" The brandy he had imagined having an hour ago would have longer to wait.

## CHAPTER SIX

FINALLY, allowing herself to relax, Nora shut the door and leaned back against it, taking a fortifying gulp of air. She had known better than to show uncertainty, but since the gentlemen were now gone, many doubts accosted her. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing her body to become calm. What else could this morning bring her way? *What if the deed they hold is real?* She wished to believe it was a forgery, but knowing her uncle as she did, she could not take the chance.

The cook scurried from the parlor, carrying a tray of cups, saucers, and the empty teapot.

“Mrs. Simpkins,” Nora called softly, hoping not to perturb the woman and cause her to drop the china. The woman was forever moving in rapid motion.

The housekeeper slowed and turned. “Ah, there ye are, Miss Nora! I had wondered where ye had gone. How did it go with the gentlemen?”

“Well, and not so well, if that makes any sense. The tea helped, and your lemon biscuits were, of course, delicious. However, Lord Shefford holds a deed for this property, signed by my uncle.”

“That cannae be right. Lady Whitton would ne’er do such a thing,” Mrs. Simpkins responded. “Ye need to speak with yer grandmama afore ye get in a pucker,” she cautioned.

“I have the same thought in mind. I should go to her... but will you be able to manage matters here without me?”

“Aye, I can, that. Never doubt it, lass.” Her gaze swung past Nora to the narrow window beside the door. “Will ye ever believe it? If the Countess hasnae just rolled up in her fancy chariot!”

“Really?” Nora looked out of the window. Waving her walking cane in emphasis, Grandmama was instructing a footman in her requirements. Then she turned and walked up the steps. “Good gracious, she is here!” All at once, a rush of anticipation and dread filled her. She repressed her anxiety and fixed her attention instead on the man accompanying her grandmother. *Who is he? I need no more shocks this day.* Nora took a calming breath and opened the door.

“Grandmama! What a pleasant and welcome surprise!”

“Nora, is something wrong? I thought we had agreed I should visit today,” the Countess asked, concern evident in her voice.

“Yes, yes, of course! You are quite correct. Forgive me; I am at sixes and sevens. Come in and warm yourself. There is a pleasant fire in the parlor. Mrs. Simpkins is fetching some tea and lemon biscuits.” It was perfect timing, but how had she forgotten her grandmother was to visit today? *Disordered nerves!* Nora took a deep, steady breath.

“That sounds like a lovely idea. I have some matters I wish to discuss with you, and afterwards, I would like to see what you have done here,” her grandmother replied.

“I am a little done up, although otherwise quite well, Grandmama.

“Before we go further, allow me to introduce you to one of my most trusted menservants.”

Nora opened the door and a lackey came in carrying a trunk. She looked back to the curb and saw two more trunks and a large, handled wooden box.

“I have brought Amos Woods to help you with whatever you need doing, whether inside or outside the house. He will serve the duties of footman and watchman. I would feel better if you would direct him to answer the door when you do not

have any other duties for him.” She turned to the servant. “This is my granddaughter, Miss Honoria Mason. She is the headmistress here, and I wish you to do whatever you can to make easier the lives of the children and women living here. Place the trunks in the parlor, if you please, and remove them to where Miss Mason desires, when I leave. I have some items for Nora and the children.”

“Yes, my lady,” he answered before returning for the rest.

Nora realized that her mouth was hanging open in a foolish fashion and swiftly closed it.

“Thank you, Grandmama. That is so thoughtful of you. We shall be glad of the help. Will he take the place of ... ?”

“The gardener?” her grandmother finished for her.

Nora nodded.

“No, my dear. Marsh will continue helping with your garden and assist you with maintenance.” She nodded towards Amos Woods. “Woods also has certain skills as a handyman and given your desire to open as much of the building as possible, as soon as may be, I thought the additional labor would be beneficial.”

Mrs. Simpkins entered then, interrupting their conversation, and gave a small curtsy before setting down a tea tray.

“Would ye like for me to pour?” she asked.

“Thank you, Mrs. Simpkins, we will makeshift for ourselves. Would you be so kind as to show Mr. Amos Woods, our new footman, handyman, and man of all work to a bedchamber?” Nora asked, putting forth a cheeriness in her voice she did not feel. She noticed her grandmother observing her.

“Yes, miss. I will be happy to,” the retainer responded, before withdrawing from the room.

“Shall we have tea, my dear? I must say that I have missed Mrs. Simpkins lemon biscuits.”



Nora found herself grinning, as she watched Mr. Woods deliver the final trunk. Her grandmother's visits were a welcomed respite from the rest of her day. She would never be too old for Grandmama's surprises.

The Countess finished her tea and looked with satisfaction at the stack of trunks. "Come, now. I would like to see what you have accomplished. It would bring me immense pleasure to meet these children," Lady Whitton prompted. "We will get to those later." She gave a short wave towards the boxes and trunks in the corner of the room.

Brightening, Nora thought immediately of little Amy and her devoted friend, Alice. "You must meet the two newest children, Grandmama. They are not sisters, but they are as sweet together as any two children could be. Little Amy's mother died of a dread disease caused by her occupation. We have a wonderful group of children." She glanced up at the wooden clock on the fireplace mantelshelf. I believe they will be washing their hands for their midday meal. Nonetheless, I would love you to see their rooms."

"That would be delightful. Shall we, my dear?" the Countess said. She rose from her chair and extended her arm to her granddaughter. "We will chat afterwards."

Nora took her grandmother's arm and led her up the stairs and down the hall to the children's large room, where they found the children in two lines, washing their faces and hands at the two bowls set upon a large table, one or two of the older children helping the little ones.

"The room is very tidy, even with such a large number of children, and they are so well-behaved," Grandmama observed in excited tones. "I am delighted you chose to begin our tour here. The room is so cheery, and that is good for the children."

Nora cleared her throat and clapped her hands. "Children, we have an esteemed visitor today, who I would like you to meet. This is the Countess of Whitton. It is because of her generosity that we have this wonderful school."

At her announcement, a dark-haired boy of about eight, and a tow-headed stripling a year or two older, attempted to

bow politely. Grandmama smiled her pleasure. Not to be outdone, a red-headed girl and an eight-year-old girl came forward and curtsied. The others cheered, with two exceptions...

Before she could ask, a small child of six emerged from behind the bigger children, holding the hand of a toddler. "Grandmama, these are the two girls I wished to introduce you to," whispered Nora, watching them walk towards them. Amy threw her arms up when she came near enough; leaning down, Nora picked her up.

"This is Amy, and this is Alice. I mentioned them a few minutes ago, if you recall," Nora said softly. "Amy arrived two days ago and Alice came a day or two after we opened." Affectionately, she smoothed the older child's blonde curls. "Alice has already become a wonderful big sister to Amy."

The Countess lowered herself until she was level with Alice. "Young lady, I have some special gifts for everyone. The only question that remains for me to ask is what are your favorite colors?" She gave a small nod to Alice.

"I once had a doll with a pink dress. Pink is my favorite color," the little girl answered happily. "And Amy likes it, too," she finished.

Nora crouched down with Amy, wanting to be part of this small gathering.

"Indeed!" Grandmama looked at the smallest girl. "Do you like pink?" she asked merrily. Amy's red curls bounced up and down in affirmation, and Nora was pleased to see a smile forming on her lips. "Then, perhaps I selected the right surprises," she said cheerily.

"It is a delight to meet you both," the Countess said, giving each a small hug, before standing up again. She turned to Nora. "We have a few things to discuss, so we should continue our tour."

Nora put Amy down and showed her grandmother around the living rooms and the classrooms, pointing out what her plans were in the unfinished areas. She needed paint, some

carpentry and cabinetry and was thrilled by the addition of Amos Woods as a man of all work. With his labor and that of the gardener, Marsh, she envisioned living in more comfortable circumstances. She planned to teach the fundamentals in reading, writing, arithmetic, and manners. In addition, she intended to provide some essential skills which would eventually enable the children to secure safe employment, away from the streets and the life they would, most likely, have faced without her intervention.

“I can see that your present situation agrees with you, Nora,” her grandmother said, shaking her from her reverie.

“Yes, Grandmama, I believe it does. I enjoy having the opportunity to help these children, and being able to contribute, in a positive way, to society. I wish for them to learn a trade so they might better themselves and have skills to rely upon in times of uncertainty.” Her own family situation was a salutary reminder of that necessity, she thought ruefully.

Once the door to the parlor had closed behind them, the Countess stepped forward and gave her granddaughter a big hug.

“Tell me, child, what is the matter?”

“You *know*?” Nora’s vision misted.

“I *see* you are troubled, girl, and that is all I need to understand.” She gently wiped the tears from Nora’s eyes and looked around the room.

“I am worried about the future of the orphanage, Grandmama,” Nora admitted as calmly as she could.

“Nonsense. You have accomplished much here, my dear. What has you so upset?”

Nora sought to avoid regaling her grandmother with the details of Lord Shefford’s call. She wished this visit could be only about the children and thus had preferred to show her the orphans’ adorable faces—faces belonging to the children Grandmama had helped. Nonetheless, Nora needed to know the truth. She drew in a sharp breath. “Grandmama, I had a visitor earlier this morning—three visitors, in fact. They left

shortly before you arrived. The Lords Shefford, Bergen, and Murray called on me. Lord Shefford had in his possession a deed to this building which Uncle Wilford had signed.” She searched her grandmother’s face, and the disbelief she saw in that lady’s expression acknowledged her worst fears.

“Lud! My son has *sold* the building?” the Countess exclaimed, her face coloring red. “How can that be?”

The response was *not* what Nora had hoped to hear. She grappled with the icy feeling of shock and fear in the pit of her stomach.

“Grandmama, Uncle did not sell it. He *lost* it... at the card table.”

Her grandmother opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it and stayed quiet for a moment.

“I will look into this immediately. In the meantime, I do not wish for you to worry about your orphanage, Nora. Come, let us be seated.” They both moved to the sofa. “This is highly improbable, my dear. My husband, your grandpapa, gave me this property, and I have kept it separate from the estate business.” She patted Nora’s hand. “I will resolve this. I should speak with Lord Shefford. If your uncle has hoodwinked a peer, there could be a steep price to pay, and I will be the least of his worries. Shefford is a powerful gentleman, and while I am not without my own connections, this could be disastrous for your uncle.”

“I shall do my best not to worry, then.” Nora spoke the words although she did not feel the sentiment. *Where will my children go? Who will care for them if there is no orphanage?*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

A FEW HOURS after taking his leave of Miss Mason, Colin directed his carriage to stop and he and Bergen took the steps to the club two at a time. Anxiety was palpable in his friend's demeanor—and no doubt his own—as Colin pulled on the brass lion bell.

A tall man with greying hair answered the door. “Lord Shefford, Lord Bergen, good evening. How may I be of help?”

“Henry, has Lord Morray arrived?” Colin inquired.

“He is here, my lord. I believe he went to Lord Baxter's office.”

“Excellent.” Morray had undoubtedly already spoken to Baxter. “Thank you,” Colin returned, as he and Bergen handed their coats and hats to the doorman.

“I was here earlier and heard Baxter moved his office to the second floor. We can access it with the back stairs,” Bergen supplied as the two men hurried down the hall. They pulled the door open to the hallway and knocked on the ornate wooden door in front of them. Hearing an invitation, they entered.

“I am glad to find you both here,” Colin said without preamble. “I need your help.” He looked at Morray. “You were right. Whitton persuaded the magistrate to release him and he has threatened my family—my mother, to be specific.”

“What happened?” Morray withdrew his cigar from his mouth and pressed it out in the ashtray sitting next to him.

“This situation with Whitton has grown out of control. I cannot conjecture why the magistrate has let him go. However, the man threw a stone through the window of my mother’s town house and followed that infamous act by leaving a card at mine,” Shefford stated, much more calmly than he felt. “I will not allow the man to threaten my family.”

“Was a note attached to the stone?” Morray asked.

“Yes. It told her to return the deed. Of course, Mother would not know to what he was referring.”

“Give me a few hours to find him,” Baxter offered. “We have connections, and avenues not open to the majority of Society.”

“We will find Whitton,” Morray added. “The man needs to be brought to justice.”

“Morray has acquainted me with the facts. However, there is more I would like to know before I petition lords and magistrates. Take a seat and join us. I have just ordered a light repast. There should be plenty for the four of us.” Baxter pulled a cord beside the fireplace. “It will give me a chance to hear more about the game which could have done for two of my best men.”

“Your mother, is she unharmed?” Morray inquired.

“She is.” He nodded his thanks. “Thankfully, she did not feel threatened either. Of course, it was one more opportunity to see her matchmaking schemes in motion. As soon as I mentioned Miss Honoria Mason’s name, I could practically see the wheels turning.”

“Do be careful! Matchmaking mamas can be fierce when they think they are being deprived of grandbabies.” Baxter guffawed.

“We cannot all be so fortunate as to find a wonderful bride such as you have found with Lady Baxter,” Colin acknowledged with a grin.

“She is a treasure,” Baxter returned, smiling from ear to ear. “She has added an element to my life I never before realized was missing.”

“Still, I plan to delay that step for a goodly while yet,” returned Colin.

“Yes, so have we all said,” chuckled Baxter. “We should return to the business at hand.”

“The man is dangerous. I am not completely sure he has not run mad!” remarked Bergen. “He came at us from the dark, completely unexpected. Had it not been for our instincts and the boy we had hired to watch the horses, he could, at the least, have seriously injured Shefford.”

“One can never underestimate a deranged man,” Morray agreed as he passed a ledger to Shefford. “I paid a visit on a contact whilst on my way to the club. He has just delivered this to me. Look.”

“Whew!” Colin exhaled slowly. “I almost feel sorry for him,” he muttered, turning the pages of the ledger. “He has taken out loans which are now due. Are his properties not prosperous?”

“His father’s wealth was known well. However, the son has not capably managed it. In the few years since his sire’s death, he has, it appears, lost quite a tidy sum. The elder lord expected it. In a highly controversial move, the Dowager Countess maintains control of much of the wealth, as unusual as that may seem. Her husband trusted her business acumen enough that, before his death, he passed much of the ready coin and most important property deeds into her control. I must admit, she has made wise investments through her husband’s former man of business. The banks respect her.”

“I see a couple of notations on one or two deeds, but not the deed to the building I am supposed to now own.” For a moment, Colin felt better about the bargain. “I hope...”

“That the property in question was in his possession,” finished Baxter in a wry voice. “Perhaps. My parents used to remark about the charitable contributions the older Whitton made to support an orphanage and school which occupied that building some years ago. Lady Whitton worked there when the Earl met her. It would not surprise me if they separated it.”

Baxter's words settled upon him, and Colin felt his shoulders slump. "You are inferring the opposite of what I need to believe. You think she may hold that deed, herself." In that moment, he tried to imagine what he would say to Jonathan. Thinking the only thing he needed to do was survey the property, he had sent word to Jonathan, almost promising his brother they had the site for the fencing club.

Baxter gave a quick nod in Bergen's direction. "Murray told me of the fencing club you and your brother wish to build. It holds appeal for me, as well. I would be a willing investor."

"It was Jonathan's idea and he will run it. We aspire to honor our father, who was a considerable proponent of fencing. Father encouraged all of us to learn. Although the popularity is not what it once was, the skills can make the difference in life and death." Colin was rarely without his cane, which concealed a rapier inside. It had been a gift from his father. Ironically, he had not taken it with him on the night Whitton stabbed him. That mistake only reinforced his desire to open the fencing club. "At least this gives me a better idea of my position when I meet with the Countess."

Murray coughed. "It is a ticklish position. Has she asked to see you?" Murray inquired. "We passed her carriage when we left the school. I assumed she was going to see her granddaughter."

"Yes. I expect she will send for me. However, I am not sure I can wait. I plan to call upon her when I leave here," Colin responded.

A knock sounded on the door before it opened and a footman entered, carrying a tray of meats and cheeses.

"Lord Murray, I have a message for you," the footman said, after setting the tray on a side-table.

"Thank you, Jeffers," Murray returned, accepting the note and reading it.

The footman bowed and left the room.

"Gentlemen, please do not be shy. Help yourselves to a light meal. We have tea, or can offer something stronger,



should you prefer,” Baxter said.

“Tea will do for me,” Morray responded, tucking the note into his pocket.

“I will take tea as well,” Colin added.

Bergen had already poured himself a glass of brandy from the open liquor cabinet.

Colin realized he was hungry. Helping themselves, the four men ate for a few minutes in silence, enjoying the variety of foods in front of them. As he munched on a small selection of meats and cheeses, he thought about what lay ahead of him. He wished circumstances did not dictate a meeting with the Countess, but it could not be avoided. She was reputed to be both witty and sharp, and a decent negotiator. While he feared no meeting, a plaguy feeling told him this was one occasion when he should.

“The note Jeffers delivered is from one of my contacts. Whitton is hiding in his ladybird’s apartment on Baker Street. The woman’s name is Jenny Maven.”

Morray’s words broke through his thoughts.

“She works at the gaming hell where all of this started,” Bergen added. “The woman served drinks and also ruffled his hair while he was playing.” He chuckled. “I found the exchange entertaining.”

“Now that you mention it, I recall a woman doing that. Did she not have dark hair and blue eyes, and was rather plump? It seems like she wore some sort of feathered headdress, now that I think on it.” Colin added.

“The very one. My, what close notice you took,” Bergen offered a wry smile. “She also employed an overly seductive walk when she left the table. Whitton acknowledged her by name.”

“That makes it easier to find him. I want him back under lock and key. The brick which broke my mother’s front window was no accident.” Colin said.

“You mentioned that vexation,” Baxter remarked. “We wish for him to account for his crime when they arrest him. I might suggest we send a couple of Runners to apprehend him.”

“I can take care of that, and I have just the place to keep him.” Morray smirked. “I will also send word to the Prince Regent on Whitton’s activities. He is not held in the highest esteem, judging from the way no one raised so much as an eyebrow when the previous Earl moved much of his wealth to his wife’s control. Whitton appealed the changes, but perhaps, because of a lengthy letter from his father, included with a copy of the Will, nothing changed.”

“I do not believe the Regent would even consider changing a Will, letter or no letter,” added Baxter. “Let his mother know about his activities and she may take care of the situation herself,” he suggested, wiping his hands on the napkins provided with the meal.

“I appreciate everyone’s efforts on my behalf.” Colin flicked at an imaginary piece of lint from the leg of his breeches and then stood up. “I have one more call to make today, and I need to make the most of the afternoon. I should not put it off any longer or I will be cursing myself by evening for procrastinating.”

“Say ‘Good afternoon’ to the Countess.” Morray snorted at his own jest.

“You will find her a worthy opponent. Stay sharp,” Baxter warned as he, too, stood up.

When he and Bergen left the club, Colin had the overwhelming feeling that life as he knew it was about to change yet could not determine why he felt that way. *It is a woman, for goodness’ sake.*

Bergen and he rode quietly towards Mayfair. The Countess’ house was one of the largest and grandest in the area. Colin considered how Whitton must have felt when his father withdrew Whitton’s control from most of their family’s funds and gave power to his mother instead. That could test a man’s ability to keep his head. Colin did not, however, have

too much time to reflect. His carriage halted only a moment before a pair of black iron gates opened and then closed behind them as they approached the four-storied stone house.

The door opened as soon as he and Bergen stepped from the carriage. "Good afternoon, Lord Shefford, Lord Bergen," a tall, thin man, with thick grey hair and dark brown eyes, greeted them when they mounted the steps. He waved them towards a grand stairwell. "The Countess is expecting you. Please follow me."

Clearly, the woman had him at a disadvantage, Colin mused. *How did she know I would call upon her?* A warm feeling shot up his neck. Stepping onto the landing, the retainer led him directly across the hall to closed double-doors. Before he had another moment to think about it, the man opened the door to a spacious drawing room. "The Lords Shefford and Bergen, your ladyship," the retainer said.

Bergen and Colin crossed into a room tastefully decorated in pale gold, creamy whites, and burgundy. A large, burgundy Axminster carpet interwoven with subtle patterns of cream covered the floor, while a patterned cream damask wallpaper and a matching large sofa brought their attention to the center of the room. The room was separated by the settee into two sections. Behind the sofa, a large mahogany pianoforte graced the front of large windows covered with burgundy velvet drapes, held back on each side with gold-colored tasseled ropes. A bouquet of red roses filled the room with scent from a round, marbled table sitting to the right of the settee.

"Thank you, Masters. Please have some refreshments sent up."

"Yes, my lady." The retainer bowed and left.

"Good afternoon, my lady." Simultaneously, Colin and Bergen effected a bow displaying an elegant leg.

The grey-haired, buxom Countess sat down on her cream and gold settee, smoothing the skirt of her deep blue satin dress, she encouraged both men to be seated. They each took a burgundy-covered mahogany armchair facing the couch.

“Gentlemen, I fear we should get straight to the point,” the Countess stated in a matter-of-fact tone. “I have just left my granddaughter, Nora, and my orphanage. She is most unhappy.”

Shefford shifted subtly in his seat, and glanced at his friend, who hastily tried to hide the surprise on his face. “You come straight to the point, my lady,” Shefford said, withdrawing a folded parchment from his waistcoat. “I will do so as well.” He rose and walked over to her, handing her the deed.

“Is this the deed you showed to my granddaughter?”

“It is, Countess.” Remaining detached, Colin watched her scrutinize the document. She then picked up a small leather pouch and withdrew an envelope. Picking up the envelope, she held it close to her as she spoke.

“Many years ago, my husband gave me a gift. He did so from sentimentality, but it meant a great deal to me. When Nora told me of your visit, for a moment I wondered if my son had somehow secured my gift for his own nefarious ends.” She passed him her small packet.

He opened the envelope, feeling a mixture of dread, anger, and frustration. Reading the parchment clarified that his deed was a forgery. However, the fact her son had forged a deed and used it to pay a debt still gave him a measure of influence, at least in his mind. He looked up.

“What do you suggest? Obviously, you have a legitimate deed and I have a forgery.” He paused, debating how to gain the advantage. “I am not sure how much of your son’s behavior you are aware of.”

“I know that my son is a prolific gambler and womanizer. My husband tried very hard to reform him, to no avail. I can think of naught we did not try.” She took a deep breath. “You will probably be unaware of this, but my husband moved everything unentailed to my care before he died. I still owe my husband inordinate gratitude for allowing us to preserve our holdings this way. It has only added to my son’s anger and resentment. Yet I consider that a small price compared with

the very real likelihood we would have lost our home, given his flagrant need to drink and gamble.”

“I have heard you have made some astute investments.”

“Is that what they say?” She laughed sarcastically.

“My lady, how do you propose that we resolve this problem?” Colin asked, feeling very frustrated, as the Countess passed the forged document back to him. “I am still owed the blunt.”

“Would you mind sharing with me the amount you are owed and how the bet transpired?” she asked.

Colin recounted the information. By his calculations, he had been owed a little over a thousand pounds and had accepted the deed as payment. Bergen could verify that if it proved necessary.

“If I am to understand this correctly, you accepted this *deed*, without accounting for its worth?” She drew herself up straighter.

Colin felt himself cringe. How had he not anticipated this?

“My lord, surely you realize *your deed is worthless.*” Her eyes met his.

“I prefer to think of it as his vowels, my lady,” Colin returned. He sounded more confident than he felt.

“Countess, there is another important matter I would bring to your attention,” Bergen put in. Without waiting for her answer, he continued, “Your son attempted to kill Lord Shefford. He attacked him with a knife as we left the gaming hall.

Colin noticed that she did not lose her composure. Why did he have the feeling she already knew of Whitton’s infamy?

“That does make a difference,” she conceded and was quiet for a moment. “I have a proposal for you.”

He hoped she would honor her son’s debt.

“First, I wish for your word... both of your words... that this conversation will not be repeated,” she said slowly.

“You have my word,” Colin responded.

Bergen nodded his assent.

“This orphanage is important to me, and I wish for it to have at least the chance of survival. My granddaughter does not understand that your deed is a fake. I would like you to make an agreement with her. She needs to realize how accomplished she is. Give her two weeks to prove to you that the orphanage is more worthwhile than any use you may otherwise have for it. I expect you will require to spend considerable time there, or else your proposition will not appear authentic. In the meantime, I will tell her I am investigating the deed. That would normally take time. I will continue to support her. Nora, like her parents and, indeed, myself...” She smiled pleasantly. “...has a great deal of pride and will not mention this arrangement, I am certain.”

“I am flummoxed, my lady. How does this benefit me?” Colin tried to suppress his irritation yet was aware of a sharp note in his voice.

“I would like your appraisal of how my granddaughter does when forced to weigh her needs against the needs of others—as with the school, which already has fourteen children relying upon her.” She smiled. “There are certain intentions... certain aims I have for her which I would like to see fulfilled.”

“Ma’am, I think I should tell you I am far from happy with my role in this,” he said, no longer able to hide his annoyance.

“Indulge me in this matter and you will have the choice of that building or, should you decide the orphanage is worthwhile, as I hope, I will give you the value of the property instead, which is considerable, and you may purchase another suitable for your purpose.” She was quiet for a moment. “As for my son’s attempt on your life—I only ask that you show some mercy. I love my son, but I cannot get him to see the error of his ways. I do not wish him hurt, of course, but he should answer for his actions.”

Colin felt his mouth hang open and quickly closed it.

“Lord Shefford, are we in agreement?” she said, rising from her chair.

Standing up at once, Colin looked first to Bergen and then back at Lady Whitton. To all appearances, the arrangement seemed harmless, an exercise in futility. And he would spend time with the incomparable Miss Honoria Mason. What were the objections? *I have never made a more certain bet.*

Bergen stood following Colin. He cleared his throat and idly, seemed to unfasten and refasten a button on his waistcoat.

“My lady, I can see no harm in your proposal. Two weeks does not seem an interminable amount of time for me to wait before beginning my own project. I accept your terms.”

Colin glanced at Bergen and noticed his friend’s strained expression. This agreement was stacked in his favor. What could possibly have Bergen at sixes and sevens?

He and Bergen bowed. Having given his answer, Colin suddenly felt eager to leave. This whole meeting felt surreal to him.

Five minutes later, he and Bergen walked down the steps of the town house and into the carriage.

When the door to the carriage closed, Bergen turned to Shefford. “There is more to this than meets the eye. You realize that do you not?”

“I allow her granddaughter to continue to indulge her charitable inclinations with this orphanage project and she honors her son’s debt to me. I may stand to make a profit. It is simple enough.” He adjusted his hat and relaxed against the black leather squabs of his carriage.

“*That* is what you heard?” Bergen persisted.

“It is...” Colin stopped and considered his friend. “I will spend two weeks with her granddaughter—her very attractive, unmarried granddaughter—” He broke off again as the ghastly truth hit him. *By God*, he had just been bamboozled!

## CHAPTER EIGHT

NORA WOKE to the sound of a child softly whimpering and another one whispering. She slowly opened her eyes and saw Alice standing next to her bed, holding Amy's hand. Amy had tears streaming down her thin cheeks and wet auburn curls stuck to the sides of her face.

"Amy misses her mam," the older child explained, pulling Amy to her. "She was crying, so I climbed into the crib and Becca helped me get her out so's I could bring her to you."

"Oh, gracious! That was very thoughtful of the two of you. Did you notice where Becca went?" Nora asked thoughtfully. It concerned her that the other child might wander about the house. There were too many sections still under construction and the child could be injured.

"Becca crawled back into bed. Didn't take long fer her to go to sleep. I know, 'cause she snores. Her cot's next t' mine."

Nora smiled. "You were right to bring Amy to me," she said, meaning it. Her curtains were open to the full moon, allowing the brightness to filter into the room and give her plenty of light to see the two girls. She had always preferred moonlight to having a pitch-black room. "Hmm, I am not sure what time it is, but the moon is still out and 'tis very dark." She sidled across the mattress, against the wall, thus making room for the two girls, and patted the space next to her. "Climb up here, both of you. We will not make a habit of this, mind you, but just this once, it can do no harm."



The two girls crawled up into her bed and snuggled under the warm covers, with Amy nudging herself tightly against Nora's chest. Nora lay for several minutes, listening to the soft snores of the two children. A strange yearning tugged at her heart, one she had never felt before. She looked at the angelic faces of both girls and realized a desire to have children of her own, one day. Unfortunately, with no prospects, Nora felt she was destined to be a spinster, a future that, until this very moment, she had not minded. Determined to sleep, she squeezed her eyes closed, only to feel a lone tear escape and roll across the bridge of her nose before falling to her pillow.

The night passed without further incident. When Nora awoke the next morning and stretched her arms, movement to her left riveted her attention on the two little girls. They were sitting together in a worn green tapestry-covered chair, quietly drinking milk and eating a biscuit each.

"You really did come in here last night, then, my dears." She swallowed a giggle. "I wondered if I had dreamed the whole thing." She swung across to the side of the bed and slipped her feet inside the warm slippers that she kept nearby and looked at the younger little girl. "Do you feel well now, Amy?"

"She does," answered Alice. "She told me so."

"I have never heard her speak more than a word or two," Nora teased. "What did she say?" Nora had noticed that Alice had become so protective of Amy that she kept the toddler close to her and even spoke for her. The small child did not seem to object and stayed quiet.

"Amy said she was glad you let us sleep with you," Alice answered brightly.

Nora chuckled. "I am surprised Mrs. Simpkins did not take you back to your beds," she remarked hopefully. She knew Mrs. Simpkins had a soft heart where children were concerned, which made Nora doubly glad of the cook's help with the orphanage.

"She asked if we wanted to go to our room or wait until she came back with your chocolate. We stayed here," Alice

offered, licking her fingers.

“You are lucky indeed, not to have been frog-marched back to your rooms,” she smiled, glad they had chosen to stay. “And young ladies do not lick their fingers,” Nora reproved, not desiring to scold, but needing to use the moment to educate. Alice immediately dried her fingers on the hem of her dress and sat up straighter. Amy stayed intent on the biscuit she was nibbling and took no heed.

“Amy cried so bad, I didn’t know what to do. Becca woke up and helped me get her out. She likes you, so we found your room,” Alice explained in between bites of the shortbread biscuit. “Becca went back to bed. She said we’d both get a whipping for waking you, but I didn’t think you was mean like that,” Alice continued.

“A whipping?” The idea alarmed Nora. She tried to recall where Becca had come from. Had they whipped the child? She supposed that many of the children had not been treated kindly before they arrived at the orphanage and made a mental note to pay more attention to Becca.

“’Tis time you both return to your room. I must dress.” The children nodded. Standing, she pulled her wrapper from the chest at the end of her bed. Drawing the silk about her, she glanced out of the window. “We look to have a lovely day ahead of us, girls, and you will miss breakfast if you stay here much longer.” Nora heard the rumbling in her own stomach and determined they could all use a good meal. “Hurry now, my dears! It is hardly seemly for a headmistress to break her fast, thus scantily dressed, you know. Mrs. Simpkins will ring the bell for breakfast shortly, I am sure. We should not be late.” Nora picked up Amy and walked the two girls downstairs to the communal dining room. The men had finally finished working on it. The rooms were slowly taking shape, she reflected.

On her way back to her bedchamber a little later, she met Mrs. Simpkins by the stairs.

“I noticed you had company last night,” the cook said, smiling. “Those two girls are attached to you.”

“I know—as I am to them,” Nora said out loud, realizing how true it was. “Once they learn they can climb out...”

“They do it over and over,” laughed Mrs. Simpkins. “I will look for another bed in the attic. I was up there yesterday and found a box of broadcloth I think we can use, if we wash it. The mice did not do too much damage.”

Nora winced. She would never get used to the mice. Her parents’ home, while not grand, rarely had the little creatures. “I am hoping we can drive those pesky things out of here. I should speak to Grandmama about perhaps installing a couple of cats.”

“I didn’t see any evidence of rats, which is unusual, considering how long the building was empty,” Mrs. Simpkins added. “If we adopt some cats, I would be ’appy to take care of them. I like the dear creatures.”

“I plan to visit with Grandmama later this morning and will ask her thoughts on the matter. Will you ladies be able to take charge without me for a few hours?” Nora wanted to gain an idea of how long it might take to learn about Lord Shefford’s supposed deed to this building. She felt reluctant to add any more mouths to their care, even cats, if it meant an obnoxious lord who cared only about his winnings, would soon displace them.

“Aye, Miss Mason. I believe we can come up trumps.” The older woman winked.

While Nora realized her thinking was unkind, she did not relish another meeting with *his lordship*. Jaded by both her mother’s and her own experiences with Society, she maintained what she called *a civil distance* from the *ton*. She loved her grandmother dearly, yet she could not but suspect that dear lady of machinations whereby she might endeavor to introduce Nora into Polite Society.

Her mother had felt the sting of the *ton*’s dismissal when she married a soldier who was also the son of a well-established merchant. instead of a man of her own rank. When her grandfather’s business failed, Society turned its back completely and the few contracts Grandpapa had thought he

could count on were withdrawn, sending him into bankruptcy. By association, Grandpapa's fall from grace had destroyed her own father's fortunes. With the barest number of servants, her father had strived to keep a roof over the heads of her two brothers, her sister and herself, being unwilling to ask anything of his in-laws.

As a young girl, Nora had vowed she would not add to her parents' misery by sharing their misfortune with Grandmama, although she suspected her grandparents had both known. *Uncle knew*. He had lorded over them with his veiled threats, like the one to sell this building.

Shaking off her musing, Nora finished her ablutions. Not having had a lady's maid of her own, she had become proficient at getting in and out of her clothing, despite the difficulty her undergarments presented. The seamstress had helped by championing buttons and a dress style designed to open down the front. Deciding to wear her yellow and white striped muslin, with a yellow sash and her sensible half-boots, she quickly dressed.

Securing her braided hair into a low chignon, she dabbed at the edges of the tightly confined locks and pulled a few small curls forward. She thought of Becca's comments about whipping and, reminding herself of her intention to befriend the child, laid down her brush. If she hurried, she could catch the children before they finished breakfast.

She also felt an overwhelming need to see little Amy and make sure she and Alice were well. Nora could not imagine what went through the children's minds. Bridging the void left by the loss of parents remained an insurmountable task. She peeped into the room where the children were sitting and eating at long wooden tables with bench seats. Amy and Alice were eating together. Everyone seemed well enough, although she did not see Becca.

"Miss Mason, this note came for you." Mary's voice sounded from behind her and pulled her from her thoughts. "I believe it was from that woman who brought little Amy to us."

"Aunt' Gemma? Did she ask to see Amy?"

“No, ma’am. Quite the opposite. She insisted that I not disturb either you or little Amy. She only wanted her note delivered.” Mary looked down at her clasped hands before adding, “Ma’am, Miss Gemma had a lot of bruising on her face and looked ill.”

A sick feeling clenched Nora’s stomach. She knew of the atrocities that were committed in the East End, where Aunt Gemma lived, and praised her lucky stars that the woman had brought Amy to them as she sat down to read the handwritten note.

*MISS MASON,*

*Please do not let little Amy out of your sight. A man named Mr. Sneed claims she is his, but she ain’t. And he got naught to prove it. Amy’s mother was my best friend and asked me to keep her baby safe. She told me she did not know who the father was. By my thinking, that means Mr. Sneed can’t know, either. I believe with my heart he would raise Amy to steal. That ain’t no life for her. Her mam wanted better. Tell our baby I love her.*

*Aunt Gemma*

*SNEED?* Nora had never heard the surname before. If Gemma was right, the man meant to train Amy for the streets. Nora vowed never to allow that to happen. Meeting Grandmama would have to wait. Nora needed to ensure no one would harm Amy. She darted down to the hall and called Mrs. Simpkins and Mary.

“Miss Mason, is there something wrong? Was it the note?” Mary was out of breath, hurrying downstairs from the children’s room, where she was no doubt tidying up and helping with the younger children.

“Yes, the note concerns me,” Nora acknowledged. “I have questions I must ask of you. Did Aunt Gemma say anything else? Think hard, please, because it could be important.”

Mary bit her lip and cast her eyes down, as if struggling to recall.

“Is something wrong, Miss Mason?” Mrs. Simpkins hastened into the front hall, a little winded from rushing from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

“I have received a disturbing note.” Nora pulled it from her pocket and passed it to Mrs. Simpkins, whose eyes only grew larger as she read it.

“It speaks of a man who is passing himself off as Amy’s father. We all know that there was no father. Had there been a responsible sire for the child, her mother may not have died in the way she did.” Nora stopped. Her explanation sounded most uncharitable, and she had not meant to slander the poor woman. “I did not mean that as harsh as it sounded,” she amended. “It is most important that, should anyone inquire about the child while I am gone, you do not give any affirmation that she is here. Amy’s own mother did not know of a father for her child, and this man... this creature... is probably gathering small children to teach them to steal or send up the chimneys. From what I know, it is a horrible business and they treat children like animals.” Tears sprang to her eyes. “Keep them inside until I return. I do not want our dear children to end up like that. Do not allow this man entry.” She then turned to her cook. “Mrs. Simpkins, do you know where Woods might be working? I would like him to be on duty at the door, in case I have need of him.”

“No, ma’am. After his meal, I noticed him returning upstairs to work on some of the rooms that needed maintenance. I think he is working on the boy’s bedchambers,” Mrs. Simpkins supplied.

“She... Aunt Gemma said...” interrupted Mary, whom Nora realized had still been struggling to recall more details, as asked. “She said the man had black hair and ’is face had scars on it.”

“Do you remember if there was anything else?” Nora asked gently.

“I am not sure, miss. I think she also said ’e was tall. I tried to remember what she said. The woman trembled so, I dinna wish to press ’er. Even though we were inside the door, she kept looking over her shoulder.”

“Thank you, Mary. That description should help immensely.” Nora noticed that the maid had begun to fidget, perhaps also shaken by the occurrence.

“I will get Mr. Woods, ma’am,” offered Mary. Without waiting for a reply, she shot up the stairs.

Nora saw a slow grin form on Mrs. Simpkins’ face.

“Do you have something worth sharing?” she queried, half-smiling. “I would love some good news.”

“No, Miss Mason. Well, maybe. I noticed them two being friendly to each other, ‘tis all,” she answered.

“Ah. Thank you for telling me. As long as their work does not suffer, I cannot see any reason to forbid a friendship,” Nora answered, considering each word as she spoke and hoping she was not making a mistake. However, she saw naught wrong with couples in the same employment. Decisions seemed harder when more people’s lives were involved.

Moments later, Nora heard footsteps approaching the parlor and stood up to see who it was, on the chance it could be two of the older children. Amos Woods opened the door and Mary followed him into the room. Nora bit her bottom lip at the look of adoration on Mary’s face. A small pang of regret struck her at the realization she might never experience such a feeling towards a man.

“Miss Mason, Mary said you needed me, ma’am.”

“Yes, Woods. I have just received some startling news. We have fourteen children here and they are all dear.” Nora drew in a deep breath to calm her nerves. “One of those children, little Amy, may need to be watched closely. I have received a note which appears to threaten her position here. A man

calling himself Mr. Sneed claims to be Amy's father. I do not know a delicate way to put this, except to say that Amy's mama could not say who the father was, and therefore, Mr. Sneed cannot know either. Her last wish was that Amy be given a chance at a better life, and we are charged to do that." She turned to Mary and Mrs. Simpkins. "If you see anyone strange loitering outside the house—even across the street, watching it, please make sure you bring the children inside, lock the doors and alert Mr. Woods and myself. I will not have *my* children snatched to learn street trades in the East End," she finished, almost out of breath.

Nora had not realized how upset she had become over this note. She cared for the little girl and would, somehow, see her with a better future. She needed to visit her grandmother. Grandmama would have ideas about how to deal with this additional problem. However, what Nora really needed was answers about the deed. "I shall return in a couple of hours. If you have need of me, a message will find me at Countess Whitton's town house," she added as she began to put on her pelisse and hat.

"Yes, ma'am," Woods responded. "I will take a look around the house now and make sure the windows are secure."

"That is a good idea. I had not even thought of that. Thank you."

The servants left the room and checking her hat and pelisse in the room's mirror, Nora picked up her reticule before walking to the front door. As she was about to open it, there was a knock. The pulse in her throat pounded as she peered through the small peephole. She was momentarily relieved it was a familiar face and opened the door. A completely different tension overtook her—one she was thoroughly unaccustomed to. With a start, she realized was attracted to this man. That only complicated her pique.

Lord Shefford removed his hat and gave an elegant bow. "I believe there may be a few details to discuss, Miss Mason. I apologize for arriving unannounced. You were just leaving." He said the last as he observed her apparel.



“Lord Shefford, good morning. I was leaving to visit my grandmother. To what do I owe the pleasure?” she said, smiling tightly and trying to regain the composure this last hour had taken from her.

“I think it is important that we talk now,” he said coolly, arching a brow. “May I?” He pushed past her and nodded towards the parlor. Without waiting for a reply, he opened the door and walked into the room.

## CHAPTER NINE

COLIN IMMEDIATELY NOTICED Miss Mason's crossness, but it did not signify. He had much more important matters on his mind. He sought to have this pact over with soon so his life would return to normal, and that meant *without a wife*. Bergen was right. Countess Whitton had bested him in the bargain. It would give him great pleasure when he could return to the calculating Countess and collect the debt her son owed him—unencumbered by a wife.

For now, he would do as she asked.

“May we talk?” Colin asked, ignoring the huff of impatience the woman expelled behind his back.

“As you seem to believe we are about to discuss something, I will attempt to give you my full measure of attention,” she remarked in a severe tone.

He fought not to smile. It was too easy to rile Miss Mason. Sparring with her was enjoyable. Who knew? Perhaps there could be some redemption in this two-week interlude, he thought, catching himself gazing into very expressive, chocolate brown eyes.

“I recognize the distraught manner of your appearance. May I be of assistance?”

“I appreciate your keenness. I will be well enough, sir. However, I wonder at the urgency you must feel, having rushed past me,” she said acerbically.

He narrowed his eyes. “I see that I have not made a good impression on you. I would like the opportunity to correct that.

Might we start again?"

"No, thank you," she snapped. "I expect ours to be a perfunctory connection, Lord Shefford, and therefore I feel no need to begin again, as you request. You arrived, unannounced, to tell me you had won my orphanage in a bet and all but made me feel I should immediately pack my bags and those of the children. Before I can even verify that to my satisfaction, here you are again." She narrowed her eyes and took a cleansing breath. "Pray, tell me at once your most urgent need to meet with me which keeps me from my business."

He deserved that, Colin admitted to himself. His civility with her had been the bare minimum to non-existent, recalling that he just barged past her—a poor display of behavior which had not been his intention. Still, she could be the most infuriating of women. How had winning one game drawn him into such a predicament? He reminded himself that he needed to rub along with her for two weeks. "While sparring with you gives me much amusement, Miss Mason, I would seek a better level of understanding. I have a proposal for you."

"A proposal?" she tittered. "What kind of proposal? I understood it was a foregone conclusion that the orphanage would be displaced because of my uncle's loose morals."

"That was my first thought, I will admit. However, I see that you are especially attached to this place." He looked around the room. "I have done some research, and it seems this was a very popular orphanage in years past. Many of the children that lived here have gone on to make sizeable contributions to society." He considered the meeting with the Countess as research, he reflected with some slight malice.

A smile formed on her face then, Colin noticed, despite her best efforts to suppress it. *I hope she does not call me on this.* He was on thin ice, unsure why he had fabricated such a tale, except that it seemed important to give her one rubber at least.

"What do you expect to achieve with this, Lord Shefford?" she questioned, remarkably with less hostility in her voice than before.

*Good, I have her interest.* “My proposal is that I come fairly regularly for a fortnight. I will be a willing participant in the day-to-day operations. My aim is that you prove to me that this orphanage has more chance of success in this building than the business I had in mind.” He noted her face, particularly the irritation flickering in her brown eyes. The hostility had returned.

“*Lord Shefford.*” She emphasized his surname with a hint of distaste. “That is a preposterous proposal—and it is a colossal waste of my time, for I am doomed before I begin. You do not have a reputation for charity, and I cannot imagine you deciding anything in my favor. You and your friends seemed both surprised and disgusted to find this building occupied when you arrived the other day.” She drew a slow breath. “Before I decide, I would invite you to meet some children the move would displace.”

“Certainly. To show you my sincerity, I would be happy to meet a few of your charges.”

“There are fourteen,” she challenged.

“Fourteen,” he concurred. “Where are they?”

“You shall meet one or two of them any moment now, unless I miss my guess.” At her words, Alice and Amy scurried into the room, accompanied by Mary.

“Miss Mason, Alice has something important to tell you,” Mary blurted out as she came in, giving a quick curtsy. Alice stood very still, squeezing a cloth in one hand and holding tight to Amy’s little hand with the other. She had a thumb in her mouth.

“What do you have to say, Alice?”

“I was looking out o’ the window and there were a tall man out on the street. A scary-looking man,” the child said, her voice wavering from fright. “I seen him before. He was near me old house.”

“Alice...” Nora pulled the child closer against her skirts. “I promise to do everything in my power to keep that man away from you—all of you.”

“Mary told us you would keep us safe,” she said, sniffing from tears.

“Who is this man?” Colin asked from behind, pushing down annoyance at having to reassert his presence.

With an exaggerated sigh, Nora turned to him. “I will have to tell you in a few minutes.”

Something in her eyes told him she could not speak of it in front of the children.

“Who are these pretty little girls,” he persisted, crouching down to their level.

Miss Mason gave him that questioning and exasperated look she seemed to have perfected. Admittedly, she challenged him more than any other female had ever done before, and found it amusing. He also found her intelligence stimulating, and imagined loosening the tight chignon that bound her blonde mane.

“Lord Shefford, these curly-headed beauties are part of our family. This is Alice,” she said, nodding to the taller one, “and this is Amy.” The smaller child turned and hid her face inside the folds of Miss Mason’s skirt.

Still crouching, he leaned over and held his hand out to Amy. “My name is Lord Shefford, but you have leave to address me as Uncle Colin,” he said, thus reminding himself he was not on a first name basis with Miss Mason. “It is nice to meet you, Amy, and you, Alice.” He observed that Alice was scrutinizing him closely.

“You don’t look nasty like that other man,” she offered as she took his hand.

“Miss Mason...” He looked up at her. “I feel the need to learn more about this man. He has upset the children greatly and that will not do at all.” He turned to Alice. “Where did you say you saw him?” He really wanted to know. He would not have a criminal sort watching these children. There could be a need for more security.

“I will show you, my lord,” Miss Mason interrupted brusquely. “First, let me help Mary get these two sweetings off

to bed. 'Tis been a while since they ate. They need a wee nap.'

He watched Miss Mason pick up Amy and hold her close, cooing to her as she walked the girls away. Alice held her free hand. Suddenly, he realized he had been there almost an hour and still had not struck the bargain that the Countess had asked of him. Annoyed with himself, he determined to do so when Miss Mason returned.

A few minutes later, she walked back into the room.

"Your day has varying levels of unpredictability to it," he offered in solicitous tones, "and yet you do not believe my sincerity."

She stared at him. "You are quite right. I wonder at your surprise, sir. After the way we met, and the proposal you have, with such *grace and consideration*, just proffered, I cannot believe you to care. Nevertheless, I appreciate your kindness to the children."

"Did you think I was just being kind for show?" His chest lifted with indignation. Catching himself before he uttered an unforgivable retort, he swiftly composed his features. "I beg your pardon. I truly wish to help. What can you tell me about the man?" Colin realized he was sincere. He was genuinely concerned for this woman and her children.

"Very well, if you insist," she sighed. "I received a note earlier from a friend of Amy's mother. When Amy's mother died, leaving the child alone, this woman brought her to us. Amy knows her as Aunt Gemma." She fished in her reticule and withdrew a note, passing it to him. "This note says a man is trying to claim Amy. However, Gemma is certain he is not the child's father. *I believe her*. Hearing Alice say she has seen him, confirms it for me."

"In the eyes of the law, fathers have rights," he said calmly. "I would like to have this man investigated. If he means Amy, Alice or any of the other children harm, I will ensure we keep him away from the premises."

"How can *you* stop him?" she asked. "If Gemma and Alice are right, this is a man who could not care a straw for the law."

And he has already located Amy. He aims to take her away from me, I know it.” Her voice rose to a high pitch.

“Your grandmother is a countess and a powerful figure in Society. How can you ask me that?” He could not prevent the jeering tone. “You may recall, I am an earl.”

“I do not rely on my grandmother, and since I have little or no involvement with the *ton*, I am not familiar with the power of an earl,” she responded tartly.

“Does all this mean you need my help?” He found himself becoming irritated with the minx, *again!* “What is it about my proposal that you find so offensive? Is there any likelihood of our coming to a mutual agreement?”

“In a word, sir—*no*. That is not to say I do not welcome your help. However, as far as the proposition goes, I fear that would not be possible, sir. We both know the orphanage is merely your momentary charity. Something new will claim your attention and you will be away!” She waved her hands in a sign of irritated display. “To you, this... *my orphanage*... is only a building, a trophy for your winnings.” She actually glared at him. “Now, if you will forgive me, I must be on my way. Is there anything else?” She retrieved her hat, which had *somehow* found its way to the hall tree, placed it on her head without recourse to a mirror and picked up her reticule.

“That is palpably untrue. I came here in the spirit of friendship in the hope we could work together, for a short period, in order that I might learn more,” he argued.

“Not that it is any of your business,” she said scathingly, pulling on her gloves, “I am off to visit my grandmother—if you will but allow me to leave.”

This woman was dismissing him! Up until now, Colin had been doing his utmost to control his temper, but suddenly he had had enough. He had never met a woman so infuriating.

Without thinking, he snapped, “*If I asked you to marry me, would you take that seriously?*” Colin stiffened as the words left his lips, his mind absorbing what he had just done.

The room became quiet; starkly quiet. For a long moment she eyed him curiously. Putting down her reticule, she spoke in a composed voice.

“I accept.”



## CHAPTER TEN

*I HAVE JUST ACCEPTED a proposal of marriage.* The impulsive side of her had responded when she heard the words, his offer something she had never thought to hear from anyone. She was certain he had asked her, although she could not imagine *why. Is it real?*

A curious reaction bubbled up inside her. She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. It would not be a love match, as she had always wanted. The gentleman was very handsome, she admitted, especially when he became flustered. If she was being honest with herself, she felt energized in his presence and enjoyed the interchanges, terse as they were. There was a level of excitement she could not deny—abruptly astonished to realize she had become focused on his lips.

Nora started to speak, to say she had made a mistake—anything to unbind her from this man—yet she did not. As she thought about it, it was the perfect solution. Marriage to Lord Shefford could be the *complete* answer. She would have the protection of his name—whatever that meant—and perhaps she would have the financial wherewithal to save these children, if he agreed. She might also be able to create an opportunity for a stream of revenue, through charitable contributions, to support a place for single women to live, as long as they held a paid position. *It could work.* Still, marriage was a leap in the dark. Nora realized her imagination was doing leaps and bounds of the same magnitude. Nonetheless, she could not deny herself. Marriage, children of her own, a home and a loving husband were all things she had imagined having... just not with a member of the *ton*.

*What would Mama and Father have to say about it? I suspect Grandmama will be over the moon.*

“Did you say, *you accept?*” Lord Shefford had paled to the color of whey and looked so dumbfounded Nora was hard put not to laugh.

“I did indeed. It seemed the most reasonable proposition you have put forth this day,” she acknowledged, pleasantly. “I will admit to being surprised by your offer.”

“You are not alone,” he muttered, his voice almost too low for her to hear.

Nora was obliged to bite her tongue to hold her humor at bay.

“I beg your pardon? I did not quite catch what you said,” she commented in the sweetest of voices as she once more removed her gloves and hat. She could not forsake her betrothed at this most romantic of moments, she thought cynically.

“I said, I meant it,” he replied.

His mouth spoke the words; however, his eyes registered what Nora could only determine as shock.

“Are you quite certain, my lord?” As she offered him a chance to back out, it occurred to her that maybe she was rather giving herself a chance to renege.

“Quite certain, my dear.” He cleared his throat. “I do not suppose you would stay and discuss one or two matters with me before you leave for your grandmother’s house, would you?”

He almost sounded as though he were pleading. “I will be happy to, my lord,” she returned. “I am not the girl to accept an offer of marriage and then leave the gentleman in the lurch.” Nora’s brain screamed at her to stop talking. She had locked herself into this betrothal. She glanced at Lord Shefford and noticed he was staring at her with a curious look on his face.

“Since we are now betrothed, I should dearly like to know what you are thinking...” he started.

“Indeed? I fear my thoughts are quite jumbled. I have no notion why you asked me to marry you. We barely know each other; in addition, our exchanges have been less than amiable.”

“We can change that,” he mumbled, moving closer.

She savored the fresh essence of bergamot that his nearness brought, yet was a little shocked by the curious reaction it caused. Perhaps it was the excitement of this day so far, she mused. Suddenly nervous of what it all meant, she fought against an impulse to swoon and instead, gazed into his face, finding herself transfixed by the movement of his lips.

“I can admit to my astonishment at having,” he said lazily, “proposed... so quickly. However, I cannot regret it.” He tilted her chin up with his finger.

Her heart began to pound as strangely familiar pulses of pleasure shot down her neck and across her shoulders the second he touched her face.

“As we have just become betrothed, I am inclined to seal the proposal with a kiss.” Without waiting for her agreement, he slanted his head and captured her lips with his.

At first, Nora was speechless. Yet his lips felt so soft and wonderful. He pulled her closer and a strange headiness took over her senses. *This kiss!* Nora had known nothing like it in her life. She craved more. A sense of need thrilled and overwhelmed her. She relaxed and circled her arms about his shoulders, fingering the dark brown curls at the base of his neck. Nothing she had known had prepared her for this. He nipped gently at her closed lips and she opened them to admit his tongue, which swirled around her own and touched the sides of her mouth seemingly to gain her participation. Nora could not resist the temptation he offered and met his tongue with her own, dipping and swirling together as if in a dance. Their breaths mingled with a ferocity she had never imagined. Everywhere his hands touched, even merely sliding down her arms, sent incredible bolts of sensation to her core. She

savored the stir her body was experiencing and wanted to stay in this moment forever, but propriety dictated...she stop.

Half-heartedly, she pulled back. They both stood there, panting.

“I apologize...” he said before breaking off.

“No, please... There is no need to apologize. I... have never been kissed before... of course... and... I-I would not wish such... such a first kiss not to have been meant,” she whispered, obviously shaken.

“I was not apologizing for kissing you,” he said. “I was merely about to express my regrets for not having kissed you sooner.

Her heart gave a little flip.

They stared at each other, neither speaking for some moments.

“I plan to spend time here and see how an orphanage—this orphanage—operates. I wish to understand more,” he finally said. “Will you allow it?”

“Did... did you mean what you said, then? Your proposal—the one you presented before you made your declaration of marriage?” she asked. Her voice was barely audible. She could tell, before he said a word, that he *had* meant it.

He nodded.

Regret stirred throughout her body. She had barely listened to him and had snubbed him whenever he had tried to speak. Yet, his tone had remained that of a gentleman. *Have I misjudged him?*

“I-I rather liked it,” she admitted with a little more voice, feeling heat rise in her cheeks.

“You have me at a disadvantage. *What* did you like?” he asked.

“Your kiss,” she murmured. The heat scorched her face at her brazen words. She lifted her chin and met his gaze, refusing to be missish. “If truth be known, sir, I enjoyed your

kiss very much.” *What was it about this man? It was as if her mouth said things without her brain’s permission.* She craved his closeness. Why was one taste not enough? She had worked herself into a lather over his winning the building, and because of that, had tried her best not to pay him any heed. To make matters worse, she had felt forced into an impossible position because of the man who threatened Amy. Having a gentleman to take care of her made sense, and while she was not in disagreement with her decision, it went against all she had *thought* she desired.

“Perhaps we should talk,” he prompted.

“I presume you mean about our engagement?” Her brazenness stunned her — yet, there were questions that needed answers. What kind of marriage would theirs be? She wanted to know what he expected but was unsure how to broach the subject.

“Yes, although there is more we should discuss than just that. Would you consent to accompanying me on a drive in the Park tomorrow? I could take you up at ten of the clock.”

A lump had formed in her throat and her voice rasped when she spoke. “Very well,” she answered simply.

He inclined his dark head and a smile creased his face. “It is arranged. Now, tell me everything you know about this Mr. Sneed. We need to look into this matter. And I would very much like to meet the other twelve children.”

She studied his face and was sure a look of incredulity must have stolen across her own.

“You are sincere! You would help me, even after I ignored everything you said earlier?”

He chuckled. “You *did* do that,” he said, a meaningful look in his eyes. “However, I never offer anything which I do not wish to give.” He edged nearer.

She sensed he was as surprised by his offer as she had been. *I never offer anything which I do not wish to give.* His words played over in her head and gave rise to that peculiar burst of excitement fluttering deep within her stomach. Nora

looked up and saw only his lips as they unexpectedly claimed her own.

This time, their kiss was softer. As he pulled her close, she relaxed into it immediately. A tingling sensation shot across her arms and down her neck to her toes.

His hands encircled her waist and drew her even nearer, as his tongue gently swirled about the warm caverns of her mouth. Entranced, she fingered the waves of his hair. His caresses stirred feelings she had never known. *Was this desire?*

“You smell delicious. Is that honeysuckle?” he murmured, capturing her earlobe with his teeth. Then, nuzzling her neck, he dusted kisses along her collarbone.

Nora started to speak but was immediately lost in the sensations aroused by his kisses along the neck of her gown. Time stood still, until rapid steps in the hall awoke her senses, reminding her where she was.

“*Yes... oh good heavens!*” Nora drew a quick breath. “I confess, I find myself muddled by your nearness, sir. My good sense seems to have left me,” she said. Her hands slipped from his shoulders and she stepped away.

The door opened, and Mrs. Simpkins hesitantly stepped inside. “Miss Mason, we have a situation.”

“*A situation?* Whatever has happened?” Her face crinkled in concern, she briefly regarded Lord Shefford.

Mrs. Simpkins wrung her hands. “Miss Mason, I apologize for the interruption. That man is back.”

“He is here, *now?*” Lord Shefford demanded as his eyebrows shot up.

“Aye,” she said in a tremulous voice.

“Can you point him out to me?” he persisted.

“I saw him, m’own self, m’lord, staring at me from outside the kitchen window. His face were pressed to the glass. Right fierce it were.” Mrs. Simpkins waved her hands and then nervously wiped them on her skirt and anxiously led them towards the dimly lit kitchen. “I was about to start the ovens

for supper. Something made me look up... and there he were. A big, ugly fellow he was, sir.” She pointed with a shaking hand towards the offending window. “It near frightened me to death. Soon as he saw I’d seen him, the ugly rascal ran towards the woodshed, over there by the big elm tree. I dropped me soup pot and all me beans went everywhere,” she lamented.

Lord Shefford glanced at Nora, before walking to the back door and opening it. “I do not see him. Where did you say he was standing?”

Mrs. Simpkins hesitantly stepped towards the window and peered outside. “He was right there... I don’t see him now, my lord,” she whispered. “He was so close he could see me own icy breath in this room, and I could see his.” She leaned down and unsteadily picked up her soup pot and placed it in the sink.

“Could you more fully describe him to me, Mrs. Simpkins?” Lord Shefford asked, his voice soothing.

“M’lord, he was tall and looked cruel. His hair was dark, and I think his eyes are black. Big black eyes they looked.” She puffed out a tremulous breath before continuing, “His face has pimply scars and a black moustache.”

Lord Shefford stepped back inside the room, looking around. “I believe you, Mrs. Simpkins. Where is Woods?”

“I expect he has gone back upstairs to work on the classrooms.” Nora spoke up.

“I came straight away to find you, Miss Mason,” the housekeeper added.

“Thank you, Mrs. Simpkins. I will see what can be done. Please fetch Woods and ask him to look around the premises. Do as Miss Mason suggests and keep the children within sight.” He turned to Nora. “Unless I am wrong, this man has determined that the orphanage offers more than one opportunity. I know the fear you feel is for little Amy. However, I would suggest you treat all the children as if they are in danger. I think you are safe for now.”

Luckily, the younger children were taking a nap and the older ones were practicing their letters, so she did not have to worry about their whereabouts. Saying nary a word, Nora listened cautiously. Lord Shefford had become protective. *He cares*. There was still so much that she needed to ask him, but the orphanage and the children were vastly more important to her. She bit her lip and inclined her head, refusing to allow her own nerves to show.

“There are things I can do to help. Nevertheless, there is only so much I can do while here. Although I need to leave, I will return. Might I have a few moments of your time before I go, Miss Mason?”

She turned to Mrs. Simpkins. “Please make sure the latches on the doors and windows in the kitchen are fastened securely. Keep the light down. I will come down shortly, to assist you.”

“Yes, Miss Mason.”

Nora did not miss the small iron frying pan the cook held within her skirts. Barely holding in an inopportune giggle, she remarked:

“I can see you are well-armed.”

“Yes, ma’am. The man looked like the Devil himself, with eyes black as coal. I don’t intend to let him near our little Amy.”

“I am certain you will acquit yourself well with the frying pan, should the challenge present itself,” Nora responded, her voice as solemn as she could muster. “I will accompany Lord Shefford to the door.”

She and Lord Shefford walked in silence to the front entrance.

“I plan to return later with more men, Miss Mason.” His eyes glimmered, challenging and teasing her. “And I would like to meet the other children.”

She nodded, unable to speak and suddenly unsure of what to say.



“I would ask that you call me Colin, as we are now betrothed,” he added, leaning closer.

Nora worried her bottom lip. The man’s nearness excited and flustered her. Shyness gripped her throat as she struggled to speak.

“You may call me Nora... Colin,” she said, looking into his eyes. Would he kiss her? *She hoped so.*

He leaned forward, but just as quickly, pulled back again. An easy smile spread across his handsome features.

“I am sincere about my offer. May we speak of it tomorrow?”

“I would like that.” She reached into her pocket and withdrew the note she had placed there in what now, seemed an eon ago. “Here. Take this with you. It is the note we received this morning, about Mr. Sneed. You may need it.” *I trust him.* She could not have imagined such a thing only a day ago—or even this morning. Truthfully, *no one* could have imagined any of this. “Thank you.”

He placed the note in his pocket and tugged her closer. “This is a different side to you,” he observed. “I enjoyed the fiery side, but this new side is nice. I find I want to know you better.” His eyes blazed down at her. “I would like to kiss you once more.”

She could not resist and softly lifted onto her toes, moving her arms about his neck as his mouth covered hers. A now familiar flutter shot down her spine to her center, eliciting a small shiver.

“Are you cold?” he murmured, his lips hovering above hers.

She gave a slight shake to her head, her eyes fixed on his. “This is the warmest I have ever felt in my life,” she whispered.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

COLIN TOOK the steps to his front door two at a time. Franklin opened the door for him to pass through and accepted his gloves, hat, and cape as he entered.

“My lord, Lord Bergen awaits you in your study. He has just arrived,” the retainer said.

“Thank you, Franklin.” Colin turned. “Please send a footman to my study. Send Davis. I have a task which needs to be done quickly. Wait,” he interrupted himself. “Send Davis and two more footmen.”

“Yes, my lord.” The retainer bowed. “At once.”

His mother’s laughter tinkled from upstairs and Colin shook his head as he hurried to his study. He would never tire of the sound of her laugh. It warmed him. Mother would dearly love the tangle he had just created for himself, he knew, yet he had no plans to tell her. Wisdom dictated he first accept it himself. Try as he might, he could not regret it. Swiftly walking into the room, he moved behind his desk and picking up the decanter of brandy from the library table, poured himself a healthy measure. He swallowed it when he heard Bergen’s voice behind him.

“What has given you such a thirst?” he asked with dry humor.

He turned slowly, a smile stretched across his face. *I walked right past him. How did I miss him?* Franklin had mentioned Bergen was here, yet with his own preoccupation, Colin had forgotten—in the space of a few strides!

“I came to see how you were progressing. I was on my way to the club and waited for you,” his friend said, his voice full of mirth. “You look as if your attention is elsewhere.”

“*Damnation!* I cannot go with you. This day has not gone as I would ever have imagined.” He picked up a second glass from the silver tray and poured a generous amount for his friend, passing it to him as he refilled his own. “Congratulate me, Bergen. I should get this over with.”

“Congratulate you?” Bergen raised an eyebrow in amusement. “You had my full attention at *damnation*. I am listening.” His eyes glittered with enjoyment as he raised his glass and took a small sip.

“I should start from the beginning. However, I do not have time; and I need your help,” Colin responded. “I am engaged. I also need to hire a good Bow Street Runner.”

Bergen spat out a small amount of the brandy as he struggled to sit up straight. “Wait! Who? What? Can we go back to the beginning?”

“Miss Mason...” Colin started before breaking off, certain of the ridicule he would suffer.

“How did that happen?” Bergen sniggered.

“Hush! Mother is upstairs. I have no wish to have her join this discussion.” Colin felt heat rise past his ears.

“*Hear what*, my son?” A swish of silks and taffeta accompanied her query as his mother glided in and took the chair in front of his desk. “Thomas, I was unaware you were here. It’s always good to see, you, my dear. Did I hear you say Miss Mason’s name?”

He was well and truly caught, mired in mud up to his waist with nowhere to go.

“Mother. To what do I have the pleasure?” he asked politely.

“Whisht! Do not distract me. I wish to hear more about Miss Mason.” She waved at him. “Tell us at once.”

He turned away, unwilling to watch their faces. This was not like him. Hell! This day had been like no other he could recall. To top it off, he felt a burning need to return to the orphanage. "I asked Miss Mason to marry me," he said in a low voice, turning slowly. Two shocked faces stared back, both gaping rudely. The silence was deafening.

"You appear displeased, Mother," he quipped. "I thought you, of all people, would be happy." His tone was sarcastic and at once was ashamed. Mother did not merit that.

She walked to him and hugged him, her arms about his neck. "I am thrilled. However, I am rather taken aback. When did this happen?"

"I apologize for my tone, Mother. There was no need for that." He kissed her on the cheek. "I am as eager to review the details as you are to hear them. Yet I beg you will allow me to do that later. My... b... betrothed..." He stumbled over the word before moving on. "...is in trouble and I need to assist her." Clearly, becoming accustomed to his new circumstance would take time.

"This was a 'gallant knight' type of engagement then, was it?" his mother said, her expression radiating pleasure. "I rather like it. There are so many possibilities."

Colin turned to Bergen, who still sat in stunned silence. "I can see I must say more." He sipped his brandy, hoping for fortification. "I was trying to carry out the Countess' wishes in order to gain my winnings. Miss Mason was not compliant. We argued, and the next thing I knew, I had proposed. She accepted before I even comprehended my words."

"Whew!" Bergen whistled. "I would never have guessed such a turn of events. You have won yourself a beautiful lady with a brain to boot. You shall never be bored." Now grinning widely, he returned his drink to the tray and stood up. "I offer my heartiest congratulations," he said, extending his hand. "Did she run?"

"Is that why you need the Bow Street Runners?" his mother enquired in a neutral tone.

“I suppose you both think yourselves very funny.” His mother and Nora shared a quick humor. “You should enjoy Nora’s wit. I find her verbal sparring very attractive.” Colin realized his affliction today, for saying things unchecked by his brain, was continuing. But strangely, he realized he liked the sound of her name on his tongue and acknowledged a warm feeling he felt when he thought of her. “There is danger afoot, and I need to return to Nora and the children. A man is trying to claim one of the smallest children, whose mother passed away in a drugs den. The child is but a toddler. He is watching the orphanage. The household servants have reported seeing him twice. I want to protect them and find this villain.”

“*Good God, man!* Trouble continually follows that bet with Whitton,” Bergen exclaimed.

Thankfully, Bergen did not elaborate on the wound he had suffered. “It does,” Colin agreed. “As you will realize, I am sure, I had had no intention of offering for her. Quite the opposite, in fact. It was quite extraordinary; it was as if I was witnessing the event from without my own body.” He chuckled. “Yet, I cannot say I am sorry,” he added hastily. “I find her passionate and engaging, and as I will eventually have to pick a wife, this lady will never bore me.”

His words met with disapproval from his mother, who was glaring in his direction. Father and Mother had been a love-match.

“I apologize again for the unfeeling remark, Mother. I understand it will not be the marriage you have always envisioned for me.” His mother had always wished the same for him and had never engaged in chicanery or other means in an attempt to leg-shackle him as he had seen happen with other *ton* friends.

“My son, ideas and circumstances change. I am happy to be of help,” she answered, with a gleam in her eye.

“Good. The first thing I would ask is that you stay here so I will not worry about you. I have men searching for Whitton. The man is desperate, and I vow he will regret what he did to your house.”

She bobbed her head in agreement. He paused, expecting her to leave the room, but to his surprise, she stayed where she was. Moments later, Davis entered with two other footmen.

“Perfect timing, Davis. I need you to find John Pelling of the Bow Street Runners. Check the office in Bow Street and his home. Tell him I wish to see him as soon as possible.” Colin looked past Davis at the two footmen who had followed him into the room. “Both of you report to one Amos Woods at this address,” he said, scribbling the address of the orphanage on a piece of paper. “You are to keep the location secure. Although two men work there currently, they need more help. A tall, dark-haired rogue is threatening the children. I believe he means to snatch them to work on the streets. We need to keep them safe.” Behind Colin, his mother sucked in a deep breath at his remarks.

“Does the Countess know of this?” she inquired.

“Not as yet. Nora—Miss Mason—was on her way to speak with her grandmother when I arrived,” he replied.

“I have many questions. However, I stand ready to assist in any way needed,” Bergen declared.

The two men watched in amused astonishment as his mother walked to the brandy decanter and filled a glass before retaking the seat next to Bergen.

“I believe you may afford me a few minutes to tell me about my future daughter-in-law. I would like to be of help—to both of you” she said, sipping her drink. “What manner of celebration will you allow me to plan?”

“Believe it or not, we have not yet discussed it. The activities of the orphanage have occupied us somewhat, and we have not spoken about it beyond my offer and her acceptance. The truth is, I was hoping to learn more about her family from you,” Colin responded. “I can say that the engagement was a surprise to us both. I offered in a fit of pique,” he admitted, standing and walking to the fireplace. He tossed a crumpled-up wad of paper into the low flames and watched it ignite before regarding his friend and his mother. “However, I find I cannot regret it. She gave me an

opportunity to withdraw, and yet, I could not. I find her fascinating,” admitted. *Was he smitten? No. That takes time, does it not?* In truth, he had no idea. Colin had never felt this way about any woman. He glanced at his friend for succor, but the smirk on Bergen’s face told him nothing was forthcoming.

His mother regarded him for a moment before breaking into a smile that seemed almost giddy and clapping her hands.

“Dearest, I cannot wait to meet her. If she is anything like her grandmother or her mother, she will be a delightful and spirited young lady. Her mother has maintained very little involvement with Society and therefore, I do not know her daughter.”

“You lost your temper and offered for her?” Bergen choked out the words within a peal of laughter. “I beg your pardon. I wait with bated breath for the details. I have always known your temper to be your weakness. I never expected it to be your salvation!”

“I cannot explain my actions.” Colin fell silent for a moment. “I ask you both to reserve judgement.” He realized that his protective nature had become fully employed with the woman to whom he was now betrothed. Perhaps that explained the overwhelming need to return to her today. He had promised to make the orphanage more secure.

He gave his mother a quick kiss on the cheek and walked towards the door. “I shall return once I ensure Nora and her charges are safe. The footmen should be able to keep things in hand until I have a Runner in place.”

“I understand, my son. I will send for my maid and clothing, and make myself comfortable,” He could tell she wanted to say more but chose not to. Instead, she took another swallow of her brandy. “Be off with you. Attend to your betrothed,” she urged.

“I will follow you out, Shefford,” Bergen added, also giving Lady Shefford a quick buss on the cheek. “It was good to see you, my lady.”

“Thomas, see that you give Elizabeth and the children my best. I have every intention of gathering us all together before you leave for the country,” she chided softly. “You have always been like another son to me. I cannot wait to see your family again.”

The two men walked quietly to the door and retrieved their coats, hats, and gloves.

“Franklin, will you send for the carriage?”

“It already awaits you, my lord. I expected you would need it.”

Colin looked at his butler and dipped his head. “Thank you. You never cease to astound me.” Turning to Bergen, he continued, “I know you have questions. I can set you down at your town house and we may talk for a few miles, if you care to tie your horse to the back of the carriage.”

“I accept your proposal,” his friend replied buoyantly. He signaled for the footman waiting with his horse to secure her to the back of Colin’s carriage. “Merry will enjoy the respite.” Bergen climbed into the carriage and took the seat opposite Colin.

As the carriage lurched forward, he leaned across. “I am more than ready to hear the rest of this story,” he said with a big grin on his face.

Colin chuckled. His mother was right... Thomas Bergen was like another brother. He had been his best friend for as long as he could remember. Neither had kept a secret from the other in all those years.

“There is no possibility you will wait to hear this with Morray, is there?” he suggested weakly.

“Not a chance, my friend.” Bergen’s lips twitched. “I plan to savor every word which comes from the gentleman who swore he would never marry.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE

*A SMALL APARTMENT in East End...*

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, *he overheard you speak*, woman? You have told a man—a man who deals in children like cattle—where to find my... mother’s orphanage?” A thick vein pulsed in Lord Wilford Whitton’s neck and his bulbous nose flattened in rage. “Tell me again how you spilled my business to a stranger, and how you know this man!”

“I should ask you the same,” the woman muttered, her voice barely audible.

“What did you say?” he roared, propelling his flaccid body from the chair beside her bed.

She stepped out of his path and moved to the window overlooking the street and stared outside at nothing.

“I swear, Lord Whitton, I did not know the man was lurking in the shadows. I had to find a place for the child. He already has a cough... that cough that small children get what crawl in chimneys. He would not survive a life like that. I ’ad to do something.” Tears streamed down her face as she turned to face him.

“You took a *child* from the chimneys and moved it to the orphanage? To my mother’s orphanage? My niece lives there!” he bellowed. “If something happens, they will blame me. My mother will never forgive me—she is not one to cross.” He paced the small room.

“I am sorry...” Jenny Maven let her voice trail off. She had grown tired of Whitton’s huffy attitude, and after all she had done for him. *A lord, indeed!* she thought acidly. Instead of finding a protector, she had trapped herself with this odious excuse for a gentleman. He still had not told her *why* he was here, and she had stopped asking. It no longer mattered. She had hoped he felt something for her, yet now knew he cared only for his own hide. A sigh escaped her.

“Did you say something?” he thundered. “My niece has two women and about a dozen children living there, and you tell a blackguard who would do them all harm where to find them?” He held her gaze. “I cannot trust you with any information.”

“Is that so, your lordship?” Furious and no longer afraid, she walked right up to him and pointed her finger close to his face. “Keep your voice down. I have some pride, and I do not need everyone to hear us. As far as your niece and the children are concerned, do not pretend to care about anyone but yourself. And I might suggest you stop shouting, considering you may want no one to know you are here.” To her surprise, he stopped blustering and stared, boring into her with obsidian eyes. “Yes. I took Benjamin there. *What of it?*” She refused to cower to this man.

“You *know* his name? Is he your bastard?” He squinted, and his mouth pulled into a sneer as he taunted her.

“What business would it be of yours, if he was?” She hurled the quickest response she could think of in return. Were he standing closer, she might have slapped him. He had repulsed her. Lord Whitton was not a handsome man. He looked utterly revolting, like a squat, red-faced toad. How had her life become so desperate that she had committed any of her time to *him*? Jenny resolved, in that moment, that Whitton would know nothing further about her life. “I did not know he had followed me.” Her voice sounded calmer and more measured than she felt. She had not even considered the possibility. Realization of her carelessness sent shivers of fear quaking through her. It was likely the child she had tried to save was in danger, thanks to her stupidity. *If Sneed sees him,*

*he will take him.* She had been nothing but stupid lately, starting with allowing this short wad of a man into her apartment.

“What business is it of mine?” he mocked. “The man is a murderer!” Whitton continued his rant as he paced the room. “He has no conscience. The children play only a small part in his evil deeds.”

It was clear Whitton feared his mother’s wrath. Guilt over her sharp criticism of him—even though it be to herself—made her consider the possibility that he cared for at least, *some* of his family. He blustered enough about each of them. She surely knew every member by now—at least, everything he felt was wrong about them. His niece was a spinster, and according to her uncle, it was because she shunned the *ton* and all it afforded her. Jenny could not imagine spurning such a glamorous existence.

His niece’s father was a stupid man, according to Whitton. He could have appealed to his mother for funds to care for his family when the family business fell on hard times, yet pride had kept him from asking. And Jenny could not even start on the confused web of insults and attributes he directed at his sister, although it seemed he cared for her.

“You have placed me in a difficult position,” he finally said. His voice sounded calmer.

“I have apologized. Do you not think I feel bad enough about it? I could have kept my suspicion my own secret and not shared it with you.”

“There has been nothing else you should tell me about, has there?” he taunted again.

“Fret you not, my lord,” she said with a firm note of sarcasm, adding untruthfully, “I have said nothing to anyone about you being here. I merely feel sorry about the boy—Benjamin. However, your being in this difficult position is of your own doing,” Jenny derided, holding her hands on her hips. “Do not forget that. You stabbed a peer.”

He started at her words, causing her to back away a step.

Pretending more courage than she felt, she caught his gaze. “Yes, I know what you did. You refused to tell me, and I stopped asking, but people talk hereabouts.”

“What do you want with me, woman?” An edge had returned to his tone.

“Nothing,” she heard herself say. “You could at least be agreeable. Other gentlemen treat their mistresses with...”

He cut her off. “*Mistress?* You think you are my mistress?” His entire body recoiled from her. “You are naught but a bit of muslin.”

The cruelty of his words rendered her speechless. He had not called her his whore, *exactly*, but he might as well have done.

Before she died, her mother had made Jenny agree to better herself. “Jenny” she had said, “promise me that ye will do yer best t’ find a life that ye can be proud of. M’ own life has me dying of the pox. I’ll ne’er see ye grown. Oi want more fer ye, child.” Jane Maven had died later that very night.

Jenny had promised her mother to do better, but the gambling hell and its vices had been too tempting for a young girl, already hungry and penniless. She drew herself up. Quaking at her knees, she knew she had to change her path, *now*.

“Perhaps you should leave. I have no standing with you, and I am not sure why I ever cared. You are a horrid man. *Leave now!* Go home to your wife.”

“Stop talking, Jenny. I need to think.”

His reversal in attitude made her head spin. “Did you hear me, Lord Whitton?” She fairly screamed his name. “I said, ‘go home!’”

“Perhaps there is still some advantage to be made with my mother.” He spoke aloud, almost to himself, while pacing up and down again.

He had ignored her.

Benjamin had wormed his way into her heart. She desperately needed to help him—*somehow*. Except, first, she needed to free herself of this man.

“I am an earl. I have a great deal of influence.” She heard him say.

He was not listening to her at all. What mischief was Whitton planning now?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“MISS NORA, here’s ye chocolate and a couple o’ pieces of toast, and a wee biscuit from the batch I jus’ pulled from the oven. I thought ye could use the indulgence this morning after the night ye had,” Mrs. Simpkins said, placing a tray down on the small table next to Nora’s bed. “I thought as how, with the extra men about, ye would sleep better.”

Nora had been lying there, awake, and when Mrs. Simpkins knocked, she sat up and stretched, holding back a yawn. She needed a stout dish of tea.

“I could smell your heavenly biscuits all the way up here,” she said with a giggle. “Did I wake you last night?”

“Ye did, miss. I came in and ye were screaming. It sounded like ye were praying. I sat next to ye and smoothed yer hair back from yer forehead until ye calmed and were resting again. Ye kept mumbling about little Amy but never opened yer eyes. She slept soundly all night. I looked in on her when I left yer room.” The older woman scanned the bedchamber. “I confess, I worried about ye.”

Nora recalled the dream. She had been running for her life, holding Amy close to her. Growing tired, she had stepped behind a building to catch her breath when powerful hands had pulled her backwards. It was a man, but she could not remember a thing beyond that. Perhaps Mrs. Simpkins’ soothing manner had finally coaxed her from the dream. She wondered if it had been a vision, as a chill of fear seized her and shook her to the core. Nora had experienced visions in the past and had never deciphered their meaning until she

witnessed the same incident happen in life. This dream frightened her still. It had to be the dastardly Sneed chasing her. Certainty eluded her—maybe because the dream had ended too soon. She could recall nothing about the man who caught her and fought to quell her growing panic. Had it been Sneed?

Nora had expected to sleep better, knowing that the perimeter of the school was being watched by Lord Shefford's footmen and was secure. Her mother had always said that visions did not happen until the body and the mind were relaxed. A shiver ran from her spine to her toes. She would let no one take Amy—or any child. Yesterday's visit to her grandmother had been delayed. Today, she hoped, nothing would prevent her from seeing Grandmama to discuss the deed and other things which had transpired, still needing to tell her about her betrothal.

As she sat on her bed, reflecting on her dream and nibbling her toast, Uncle Wilford's face flashed across her mind. Gosh! It had been a long time since she had had a foretelling. Could this be a second one? Could he be in danger or was he stirring more trouble? She knew naught of what it might mean and shook her head to clear it. The sun had already been up an hour, and she was eager to see Amy and Alice.

She stepped to her wardrobe and withdrew her golden muslin. Pleased with her dress selection, Nora secured the hooks and buttons on the front before leaning down and pulling on her half-boots. Having finished dressing, Nora gulped down the last of her chocolate, gathered together the dishes and hurried with them down to the kitchen.

“’Tis good to spy ye up and about Miss Nora! The children have just settled down to breakfast,” the cook said, peering over her shoulder from the sink. “Spending time with ye before they begin their lessons will put a smile on a few faces,” she added with a wink.

“I fear I slept a little longer than I usually do, and I do not want to miss this time with them,” she said as she set down the tray and hurried back towards the schoolroom.

As she headed up the stairs, male voices in the entry startled her. One she recognized as Amos Woods. She must remember to thank Grandmama for adding the handyman to the household. Having him to watch the front door was helpful. Another male voice spoke then, and his husky tone relaxed her immediately. Colin had arrived! No gentleman had ever stirred as many feelings within her as this one. *Curious. Why is he here so soon?* Had she forgotten something? Their carriage ride was not until ten.

The previous evening, he had arrived in time to oversee the additional guards he had arranged. It was thoughtful of him to lend her the footmen. Four men and three women now made up the employees at the school. The topsy-turvy nature of the household struck her as funny, causing her thoughts to turn fanciful. It was quite obvious that Mary had set her cap at Amos Woods, who clearly returned the attraction, and their burgeoning friendship was exciting her own sense of longing for a close relationship. Of course, Nora had not shared that she and the handsome Lord Shefford were betrothed. Still, theirs was a convenient arrangement—not the connection her heart desired. If she were honest, her heart desired him for reasons she failed to comprehend.

That only left Mrs. Simpkins spouseless. She snorted. *Just supposing...? No, that is just nonsense.* Still, she could not deny the amusement. The matchmaking mamas of the *haute ton* would marvel at the success found under one inauspicious roof in less than one week's time.

Nora avoided going downstairs to meet the company, reluctant to squander her time, and certain Woods could handle whatever presented itself. Instead, she visited the children to see how they did. They had finished their early meal and according to the schedule; it was time for watercolor painting. Easels and stools were being placed about the room by the children. Mary had already mixed the paints and set out the brushes. Paper and a pile of smocks were on a table by the door, for the girls to pull over their dresses. The boys had aprons that her grandmother had thoughtfully supplied. The Dowager Countess was an avid supporter of the arts and made



sure supplies were plentiful, even encouraging all the children to take part.

Nora had her own supplies at the ready and positioned her chair across from her easel, choosing the space in front of one of the tall windows which lined the outer wall. She moved the curtains out of the way to allow for more light.

“There you are!” Colin sauntered in sporting an impudent grin and gave her a quick bow. “I am here to do your bidding, my lady.”

*Her bidding?* She had looked forward to spending an hour or two with Amy and the other children. Frustration welled inside her and she felt confused *why*. This man was everything that most women would clamor to claim. He was a gentleman; he was handsome and according to gossip, he was rich. She looked up and his grey eyes found her own brown eyes. As he held her gaze, she realized that what she had called grey was actually a very pale blue with silver flecks. His eyes held her captive. *Damn it. She wanted him, too.* Once again, he was taking over her plans.

“I am quite sure I have professed no bidding,” she snapped. *What was it about this man that could make her eager to see him and also wish him elsewhere?* He looked hurt. She immediately regretted her short-tempered response but did not apologize.

“I can be a quiet observer,” he coaxed. “I thought it a good time to meet the other children—perhaps get to know them a little.” He studied her face. “I can see you had not expected me, so please allow me to apologize for not speaking of my intention last evening. However, I am serious about our bargain and if I am to uphold my part of the bargain, I need to understand everything about the orphanage, and that includes the beneficiaries.” He regarded the room about them. “You are setting up for a class.” It was an observation.

The state of annoyance kept her more alert and distant. Yet, despite her wariness, his unabashed honesty negated her efforts.

“Yes, I plan to start with simple painting techniques to see who has a talent for the subject. As a society, we expect girls to love art and endeavor to gain a certain skill. My own observations do not support that contention. Famous painters are usually men. We intend to give all the children a good basic education in reading, writing, and arithmetic. In addition, I think some tuition in the arts, and perhaps music, would give them an advantage in the world. My mother always told me that art encourages the finer ability to discern and read your surroundings. I feel the skill would be helpful to the children.”

“You are sure it is wise?” His voice drifted off towards the end of the question.

Nora started to snap a retort, but sensed his comment seemed a more discarded thought than a proper question. The Earl had busied himself perusing the supplies, picking up the aprons, the papers, and looking at the table easels.

“I am heartened by your effort.” As he spoke, his eyes remained focused on the children’s efforts. “All the same, I fear you will need more paint and brushes. I shall have them delivered—paper, too. As I think about it, your reasoning makes sense. Children need to be alert to their environment, perhaps these children more than most, and if painting can aid that, so be it. You mentioned music.” He paused and turned his head. “Do you have an instructor for that?”

Nora opened her mouth to respond and closed it before finally answering, “Eventually, my lord, I might do some rudimentary teaching using an older pianoforte. T’would be nice to have one in the parlor for small recitals, that is an aspiration only. There is so much more we need. Painting is our first endeavor.” She still had much on her mind. Perhaps his wish to observe would, after all, not be too obtrusive. While a physical attraction between them felt more and more obvious to her, their ability to become contentious still existed, and she had no wish to have an argument in front of the children.

“Is my uncle in trouble?” she blurted out. Drat. She had meant to ask that with more propriety.

“I beg your pardon?” Colin’s face wore a sudden formidable look. “Has something happened? Has he been here?”

“Your questions... and that look,” she said, her skin prickling with alarm. “I feel there is something I do not know, yet I should. What might that be?”

The mention of Uncle’s name appeared to create some level of concern, because Colin paused for a long moment before answering.

“Your uncle tried to kill me after losing this property to me.”

She gasped.

“My friends and I have an idea where he is staying.”

“Does my grandmother know?”

“She does.” His voice was emotionless.

“I saw him.” She instantly regretted her words, fearing his reaction to her gift.

He raised a brow. Nora was not sure how much to reveal, not wanting to be ridiculed. She enjoyed laughter, but not at her expense.

“I am prone to forewarnings, and his face flashed across my mind at the strangest of times this morning. I make it a habit *not* to think about my uncle, so I found it most odd.” *I trust him with my feelings.* She discerned in that instant that her heart had begun to rule her head.

Showing only surprise, he did not laugh.

“I am interested in what you saw,” he said, his voice softening. “My own mother has spoken of such presentiments. She has sworn many times that the fairer sex oft possesses the ability, and it should never be taken lightly.”

“It was nothing more than that. ’Tis wholly unusual for me to even think about him. He has never been pleasant to my family, especially to my mother, his own sister.”

Colin casually pulled up a brush from its holder and fingered it while he studied her.

“Your uncle has a... female companion... who lives in the East End, and we think he is staying with her,” Colin informed her.

“A *ladybird*? I cannot imagine why she would ally herself with him, beyond the lure of his money.” She heard herself disclose. She immediately regarded him. Had she shocked him? His expression remained calm.

“Uncle has never been pleasant to my mother or myself, and my grandmother does not mention him. In fact, he is tight-fisted,” she added. *Really, I must learn to guard my tongue. Whatever possessed me to tell him that, and in front of the children, for heaven’s sake? I should know by now to keep my family business to myself.*

“Her name is Jenny Maven, and she is employed by the gambling establishment on the hill.” He seemed nonplussed by her disclosure. She was unsure how she felt about *that*.

“Do you refer to *Lattimore Hill*?” There was little doubt what Uncle had been doing there, yet Nora wondered about Colin’s presence at such a place. She wanted to ask, but a lady was supposed to know nothing of such establishments. Good sense this time kept her tongue in check. It was one more reason that she detested the *ton*. They went to places like East End and Seven Dials to mix with low company and visit the gin shops. It was not enough that the social classes were so abruptly dissimilar. Although the upper classes were aware of the needs of the poor, most turned a blind eye, their only concerns being to satisfy their own needs, their own vices. Was there another attraction for him in the East End beyond gambling? “Do you intend to have him arrested?” Would it be too harsh to hope the answer to this was *yes*?

“Indeed. That is my plan. Still, I am pursuing some additional information before having him arrested. He has already bribed an official, for his release on the night of the incident, and is not aware we know where he is. Attempting to

kill a peer is a very serious offense.” He looked at her, his gaze holding hers.

To her surprise, she felt both pity and relief. The prospect of Uncle getting his comeuppance should thrill her considering how disagreeable he has been.

“What would you have me do?” he asked in a solicitous tone.

A fissure of contentment shot through her. Colin cared about her opinion. “You are in earnest? I would like to see him punished just enough to allow him to feel how he has made others feel,” she ventured finally. The clamor of feet and the sounds of giggles sounded from the stairs. “Perhaps we should continue this later this morning, when we are in the carriage. The children are... coming... and here they are,” she said brightly as the smaller children rounded the door-case and began eyeing the assembled art supplies. Amy and Alice made straight for her. “Sweetings, you recall Uncle Colin, do you not?” She caught his expression of amusement from the corner of her eye. *The energy she felt when in his presence was addictive.*

“Good ’ay, Uncle Colin,” Alice said. The little girl gripped Amy’s hand in hers. “Amy says good ’ay, too.”

He chuckled. “I understand that you children are all going to turn your hands to painting today. I would very much like to watch, if that would be acceptable to you.”

Nora and Colin looked about the schoolroom at nodding faces. “Well, it seems the children have spoken,” she said—and even she could hear the smile in her voice. “Children, before we start, please find an overall. The girls have the smocks and boys wear the aprons. Here are some for you younger children.” She held out a few that would fit the smaller girls. There were no grumbles—not that she had expected any. She was fairly certain this was the first time most of these children had even seen supplies such as these, much less use them. “Everyone listen carefully, and I will show you how to begin. I want you to draw something that you like—anything you like,” she told them clearly.

Repressing a smile at the open mouths before her, Nora looked about the room and noticed Colin squatting down, talking to Becca. The little girl appeared to be drawing during their exchange.

Nora opened her mouth to say something, but chose instead to instruct the rest of the children so they might start. When she finished, she noticed Colin was still watching Becca draw, with few words being spoken. Satisfied that everyone could put something on the paper, she put down her brush and wiped her hands on her apron. Carefully edging nearer, she could hear their conversation.

“Is that a picture of your last home?” Colin’s voice was gentle but laced with concern.

“Yes,” she mumbled. “I lived with my aunt when my momma left.”

“Who is that with you in the drawing?” he asked.

“It’s my aunt and her friend.”

Nora had heard enough. Coupled with the recent conversation she had had with Alice, it overwhelmed her curiosity. She quietly moved behind Colin and peered at the drawing taking shape in front of her. The dark-haired little girl was no stranger to paper and charcoal. Even though they were primitive, the faces held more detail than one might have expected from a child of seven. Nora recalled that there had been very little information about Becca and wished to know more. She noticed the drawing of a man with black hair and a moustache. Curious, she had to ask.

“Becca, my child, who is the man?” Nora inquired gently.

“Aunt Sarah said he was a friend.” *What a curious statement*, Nora thought.

Becca looked up, her little face grimacing with concentration. “He said he was Aunt Sarah’s beau.”

“Do you recall his name?” She could not help persisting. *Can he be the same man? Impossible! You are grasping at straws, Honoria Mason.*

“She called him Tom when he was nice to her. He was mostly mean and caused her to cry a lot. When he was horrid, she would tell me to hide and not make a sound unless she called me. I heard someone call him Mr. Sneed. I am not sure, though.” She looked back at her work. She had drawn a room with the three people standing side by side. The child had drawn herself looking away from Mr. Sneed.

Nora smiled and nodded. “That is a very good drawing, Becca. You have so much detail. Have you drawn before?”

“A little,” she said quietly.

“Did your mother or your aunt show you how?” She noticed that the expression on Mr. Sneed’s face was one of anger. He stood on the other side of what must have been her aunt. It was hard to miss the dark smudge on her aunt’s arm. *Is that supposed to be blood?* She itched to ask, nonetheless resisted the urge, deciding not to stir a potentially painful memory.

“Aunt Sarah drew a lot, and I watched her. Sometimes she would give me a piece of paper and a block of charcoal to draw with,” she responded casually. “I had to put it in the woodpile when I finished.”

Colin stood up and gave Nora a quick glance before returning his attention to Becca’s drawing.

“May I ask what happened to your Aunt Sarah?”

“She died. Somebody found her floating in the river and said I had to leave before Mr. Sneed came for me. That’s when they brought me here.”

Nora gulped. Afraid to ask anything more about the picture, she changed the subject. “’Tis a perfect first effort, Becca.” She looked around the room at the rest of the children working at their easels, some with more success than others. This morning’s exercise had certainly been enlightening. Giving a hurried nod towards the door, she said, “Perhaps such a big effort deserves a surprise.” As if on cue, Mrs. Simpkins entered, carrying a tray of small sandwiches, biscuits, and a pitcher of milk.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COLIN FOUND himself both amused and alarmed by various things he learned during his time with the children. The process made him more beguiled with Nora. His head swirled with thoughts of both her and the children. The drawings had been informative, and it had been joyous to watch them. Becca's drawing had been thought-provoking and sad. It had gripped his heart. Now he was standing next to a small, thin, blond boy who was drawing what looked like a chimney. Curious, he bent slightly over him to take a closer look.

To his surprise, the young boy looked up at him and smiled. "Good 'ay, Uncle Colin," he said in acknowledgement. "I ain't never met a fancy gentleman afore. You are a lucky cove to have yer own home."

Colin's heart immediately engaged with the child. "What are you drawing with your charcoal stick?"

"Miss Nora said to draw what we know. 'Tis a chimbley," he said, smiling.

"What inspires you to draw it, if I might ask," Colin persisted.

"I think it's because I wanted to look at it from this angle.

"What do you mean, *this angle*?" The boy and his talent intrigued Colin. The child possessed a vivacity about him that made one happy in his company.

"'Tis so much nicer than from inside." The child grinned.



While he understood the darker meaning of what Benjamin had said, Colin smiled in return. The child seemed not to let his past dampen his mood.

“I can understand that lad.” The boy’s drawing stirred his interest. “What is your name?” he asked.

“They call me Benjamin, sir.”

“Ah. That explains your picture more.” A sadness gripped Colin’s heart.

“I cleaned chimbleys afore I found my way ’ere,” the small boy explained. “A lady what paid me to clean ’er chimney, tol’ me I reminded her of someone she once knew. She was a nice lady and said I should not clean chimbleys and brought me ’ere. I gave it a chance, like she asked. Truth is, chimbleys made me feel bad. I like Miss Nora.” Benjamin coughed—a dry hacking sound—almost as if it punctuated his point.

“That cough sounds painful. How long have you had that young man?” Colin asked, concerned.

“It comes and goes. Reckon I’ve had it fer a while, now,” he answered, coughing into his shoulder. “The lady what rescued me tried to take care of it, too.”

“I will speak to Miss Nora about it,” Colin said, more for himself than for the boy. He would ensure a doctor saw Benjamin. That was something he could help with—and he knew the perfect doctor for these children. He should speak with Nora about it first, aware that he wanted her approval.

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew his watch. It was almost nine o’clock. Colin looked around and realized Nora had already left the room. He had become so absorbed by Benjamin that he had failed to notice that the children had cleaned the room and prepared for their next activity. The discipline the women had instilled in these children, in such a short time, astounded him. He needed to take care of something.

“Benjamin, I have enjoyed talking with you and I look forward to spending more time in your company on my next visit.”

“Thank you, sir!” he said, leaning down to scoop up a brush he had dropped.

On his way out of the orphanage, Colin saw Amos Woods. “Would you inform Miss Mason I plan to be back in an hour? And could you see that Mrs. Simpkins gets this note?” He wanted the afternoon to be perfect and felt sure the woman would help him with a few items.

“Yes, my lord.” He heard the door click shut behind him.

Colin strode towards the stables and met his carriage, clearly startling his coachman, who had not expected to take him anywhere until ten.

“I wish to make a quick trip,” he explained to the man, who, with the groom, scrambled to the coach.

“Very good, my lord. Where will we be going?” the groom asked, opening the door for him.

“Do you know where I may buy flowers and some confectionery in a hurry?” Colin directed the question to both men before he stepped into the carriage.

“I know just the place, my lord. ’Tis but a step from here,” Gerard, the driver, returned before climbing into his seat. The groom closed the door and climbed aboard. Colin closed his eyes and settled back against the black leather squabs. He hoped he had enough time.

The sleek black carriage maintained a slow, yet steady pace to allow the coachman to navigate the cobble-stoned streets safely. Colin noticed the flower carts before he saw the small confectionery just beyond them.

*This spot is perfect!* He raised his cane to tap on the roof, whereupon the carriage stopped.

“My lord, I think you will find what you need here,” the coachman remarked with a grin. “’Tis my mother’s pastry shop. She makes the best marzipan in London.”

“Your mother? This establishment belongs to your family?”

“Yes, my lord,” Gerard replied, tipping his hat.

“How marvelous that you have brought me here! I have not had sweets in an age. I shall keep this confectionery in mind for future events, Gerard!”

Fifteen minutes later Colin came out with several packages tucked under his arm and a bag. Using his free hand, he purchased a large posy of yellow roses from a sidewalk cart vendor. Colin felt pleased with his purchases and happy that he had managed them so quickly.

“Your mother also had biscuits covered with nonpareils and taffy! I think I may have bought her entire stock. The children will be besotted with it!” He handed the flowers to his groom and arranged the packages, before reaching for the flowers.

“Yes, my lord. It is a certainty,” his cheerful driver replied.

It seemed the carriage had barely started again before they were back in front of the orphanage. Colin shook himself from his bemusement. Still not able to fathom the workings of Miss Mason’s mind, he hoped the flowers and confections pleased her. He wondered if any of the children had ever tasted candies or pastries. That thought weighed on him as he thought again of both Becca’s and Benjamin’s artistic efforts. That had been an easier goal before meeting some of these children. Their brief lives had been like nothing he could even imagine. Part of him was ashamed, realizing that such brief excursions into the East End as made by wealthy rakehell blades often left by-blows behind. It had been his plan to make this school into a fencing club. Sorrowfully, he wondered how many of these children had had such a beginning, considering it for the first time from a fresh perspective.

As he approached the steps of the house with packages in his arms, the door opened, and Nora came out onto the flags beneath the portico.

“I wondered where you had gone. Woods assured me you would return,” she said with a nervous laugh.

“I hope you do not mind. A drive about Town could prove relaxing and would give us time to talk uninterrupted,” Colin offered.

Her eyes opened wide in surprise. “What a wonderful idea.”

The sound of hurried footsteps announced another’s approach from behind her, and Nora stepped aside just as Mrs. Simpkins appeared, holding a small basket.

“My lord, here are the items you requested on your missive.” Sporting a giant smile, the housekeeper pushed the covered basket into his hands.

“Thank you, Mrs. Simpkins. I appreciate this. I left too early this morning to have all of my thoughts properly collected, I fear.” He chuckled. “These are for you.” He pushed a small, wrapped package into her hands and closed her fingers about it.

The older woman swiped at her eyes. “That is so thoughtful, my lord,” she enthused, fondling the small package. “’Tis a long time since a man gave me a gift!” She giggled.

“I cannot imagine you being overlooked,” he said, beaming. “I hope you enjoy the gift. There should be enough sweets and marzipan in this larger package for everyone, especially the children.” He passed a second parcel to her.

“Oh, the children will love this!” Mrs. Simpkins’ excited tone brought a smile to Nora’s face.

“Capital!” Colin had held back a small package, containing marzipan and the nonpareils, for their drive. “That is what I had hoped.” He tipped his head and held out his arm. Nora placed her hand lightly on his arm, and he guided her to the carriage, helping her inside. After securing the basket underneath the seat, he sat down next to Nora. They were engaged, after all. It was their pending marriage that they needed to discuss, and he wanted as much as possible for the discussion to be in his favor.

The coachman gave his horses the office and the carriage rumbled forward at the steady pace suitable for negotiating the London traffic. Colin suddenly felt his throat go dry. While it would be rude to drink lemonade at this moment, he was glad

he had asked Mrs. Simpkins to prepare a flask of the drink. He might surely need it—*soon*. Despite their obvious attraction to each other, his conversations with Nora were awkward. He replayed his proposal several times in his head. He felt no regret for their betrothal. She was unlike any other woman he had known. She challenged him to see things from a fresh perspective—her perspective. And he delighted in finding out new things about Nora—and made it his mission to learn everything about her. His head filled with curious thoughts—concerns for children he had never considered existed. He had known of the base-born children littering London's streets, of course. His father had repeatedly schooled him on the cruelty and irresponsibility of spreading his seed in such a manner. Father had brooked no indifference, having no patience for that sort of thing, and had even fought in Parliament to force more attention on the matter.

Sadly, Father had been in the minority. Society knew, but ignored, that the children fulfilled a need, working where small hands and bodies were *de rigueur*, and Colin had himself grown comfortable with that knowledge. However, there were faces now attached to these outrages. He could no longer ignore them. He also had the means to help.

“Did you enjoy the children's lesson in drawing?” Nora's voice interrupted his musings.

“I must confess, I learned much about these children I had never given thought to before.” Colin pictured Benjamin cleaning a chimney and swallowed past the small lump that had formed in his already dry throat. “It was... revealing,” he managed.

“I noticed you had struck up a friendliness with Benjamin. A woman left him on the front steps a few weeks ago, with nothing but the clothes on his back and a note. An unsigned note, curiously. The child *has* no family, as far as we are aware. He claims to be eight, but I doubt he knows. Benjamin seems small for his age. However, he communicates rather well.” She folded her hands in her lap. “He is enjoyable to be with and makes me think,” she said. “I suspect it is his gift.” She paused. “We all have one, according to my grandmother.

Benjamin tells me things and I want to laugh at his presentation of those events, yet at the same time, what he says nearly brings me to tears. Does that make sense to you?" she asked, her gaze holding his.

"He indeed possesses a gift; and what you say makes a great deal of sense. His drawing created a painful reminder of the abuse these children have faced. He climbed into chimneys," he began.

"I had not realized he had been a sweep's apprentice until some days after he arrived. He has a cough," she added, her face drawn. "I am concerned, although there are plenty of negligible reasons for a persistent cough."

"I heard it, too. It could be nothing more than a cold. However, I think it warrants a visit from a doctor. I wonder if you would object to a friend of mine—Dr. Perth—visiting? He moved his practice to London about two years ago from Kent."

"I have heard of Dr. Perth. My grandmother recommends him. She describes his manner as straightforward and comforting." Nora's face colored, and she turned away slightly.

Colin ignored her discomfort, not knowing what he could say to change it. Perth would have found the description amusing.

"*Good.* It is settled, then. I shall have him come to see all the children—unless, of course, you have already done this?" He regarded her, suddenly unsure of where he was heading with this train of thought. Her bright, chocolate brown eyes seemed to smile on their own as she took in the surrounding scenery. Gerard had driven them beyond Mayfair towards Kensington Gardens, an older section of Hyde Park. He had earlier asked his coachman to take a long route through the park, feeling the need to gain clarity with this woman. The more time he had, the better.

"Becca's drawing upset me," Nora interjected. "I could see it troubled you too. Could the man, Mr. Sneed, have been Sneed, do you think?"

“I noticed that. Her picture resembled the description that Aunt Gemma had given of him, and the man that Mrs. Simpkins told us of. “I plan to put a Runner on it. I have already sent word and intend to meet with the man who is in charge of one of the patrols. I am concerned about the dealings, if he was the one, that he might have had with Becca’s aunt.” *The woman turned up dead.* What was his involvement with Becca? “Her drawing concerned me.” He considered his next words. “I will meet with a Runner later today, as I mentioned. I initially planned to have him locate your uncle, but now I feel Sneed needs be found.” He had wondered whether to mention that Sneed could be very dangerous and seemed to be a common thread with several of the children, but concluded they could defer the subject for now. There were other, more important matters to discuss. Until he knew more, he saw little advantage to worrying her.

“His involvement in so many children’s lives concerns me,” Nora murmured, almost reading his thoughts.

“Yes, that was in my mind, too. There are men whose financial existence depends on the backs of children—who they consider disposable.” His instinct told him there could be much more to these men. He decided to speak with Morray as soon as possible.

Colin found he was enjoying this time with Nora. They were already joining in concern for the children, something that he would never have envisioned.

“I have a favorite spot here and thought we might go there today.” he ventured, seeking a lighter note.

She smiled. “That sounds perfect. I had hoped we might discuss our... betrothal.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT PLEASED Nora that Colin had taken the trouble to select a pleasant spot for their outing, even if it was to discuss the facets of their *arrangement*, although she could not help but worry what the particulars would be.

As a child, she had indulged her fancy over a love match when she married. Yet she had agreed to this arrangement and would see it to the end, resolving to make the best of it. Lord Shefford's interest in the children astonished her—she had not expected that he would truly be interested when he asked to take part. He had been earnest in his request. He had asked nothing mundane and seemed truly concerned about the children's well-being, particularly with respect to Benjamin, who seemed to have gained special favor with the Earl.

“Gerard will set us down and take the carriage and horses to wait beyond those trees. There is not enough room for him to draw up here,” the Earl said, stirring Nora from her musings.

“I have never picnicked by a brook before.” Nora spoke before she realized her intention. There had not been many opportunities to attend frivolous functions, far less enjoy a picnic. She had worked in the family's mercantile whenever her parents needed her. The store had sold all sorts of sundries, including fabrics, notions, and other household items. Since her grandfather's death, her father had struggled to keep the family business afloat. He recently moved his law office to the top floor of the mercantile, and his clients had not seemed to mind. Mother had once commented on the number of new



clients found once he moved his office to the mercantile. When she was young, she wondered why Grandmama or Grandpapa had not intervened and helped. As she grew older, she realized pride was a powerful antagonist.

“I find that hard to believe,” he answered. “My governess introduced me to picnics as a small child. She would trick me into thinking it was playtime and so I would learn French or Italian while eating the fruits and cheeses she brought along.”

Nora liked the way his smile filled his face and his eyes sparkled when he spoke of things that made him happy.

“Did you bring cheese?” she asked. His smile was contagious.

“I did, as well as lemonade and wine. I believe Mrs. Simpkins has packed everything.”

“*Both* lemonade and wine?” She laughed. “Not only does she like you, she would do anything for those gifts of sweets.”

The groom opened the door. “My lord. I have placed the blanket and the basket on the ground near the water. Please let me know if there is anything else you require.” He bowed, pivoted, and went to the front of the carriage, where the driver sat.

“I shall return in a moment,” Colin said as he alighted from the carriage.

Two minutes later, the door opened again, and Colin waited, his hand held out for her. Nora accepted his hand and stepped from the conveyance. Once they had walked away from the carriage, she heard it pull away.

“That is lovely!” She stared in wonder at the display before her. A large blue cloth covered the ground between two trees. On the top rested an open basket and two stout pillows—one resting against each of the trees.

“Allow me.” Colin guided her to the blanket and gave her time to sit down. She tucked her legs underneath her skirt and smoothed the folds about her.

Nora looked around and noticed, for the first time, that they appeared to be alone. A hint of unease crept up her neck. While she was not uneasy with Lord Shefford, her grandmother would not appreciate having to defray commentary from the *ton*, should they be discovered in this clandestine position. She nibbled her lower lip, suddenly feeling anxious and short-sighted. Perhaps she should have brought Mary along to serve as a chaperone. Yet that would have left Mrs. Simpkins as the primary caregiver with the children. Woods and Marsh would be busy working on renovations on the upper floors. She would simply have to make this a short picnic. There was nothing else for it.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Colin asked, rousing her from her contemplation.

“I am afraid I was fretting. ’Tis something I seem to do more of since the orphanage opened,” she replied.

“I sense something is wrong. Pray enlighten me and allow me to share in your concerns.”

“I daresay I might...” Her voice sounded tentative, even to her own ears. “Would you think me dreadfully ungrateful if I asked you to find a less private place? It is a delightful spot, and in different circumstances I should love to sit here and enjoy the day. However, if we are discovered here, unchaperoned...”

“Say no more,” he said. “I understand completely. I should have given more thought to this. I had been thinking of my own needs—that is, I wanted us to have a place where we might speak uninterrupted. I did not consider your reputation. I know somewhere which might feel more suitable.” He turned and gave a quick whistle. Immediately, she heard horses and a carriage moving towards them.

“Gerard, drive on to the lake. There is a pretty prospect close to the palace gardens, with a statue and some benches.”

“At once, my lord.”

Within minutes, they had collected up the basket and blanket, and returned them, with themselves, into the carriage.

Nora was not sure what to say. She had not meant to create such a stir. They probably would not have been discovered. Anyway, since when did she care what the *ton* thought? She cared about what Grandmama thought, however, and she did not want to create a problem for her dear benefactor.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Of course! I should have considered. Please accept my apologies. There can be no objection here.”

As he finished his sentence, the carriage slowed to a stop. Nora glanced out of her window and saw that they were but a few hundred yards from the Guard’s House by Kensington Gardens. Here, the river which formed the Serpentine was surrounded by wide, open spaces. One or two small, empty rowboats bobbed up and down in the water, attached to a small dock beside a boating house. A clump of trees clustered near the bank, and a sandy path led down to a little beach. Logs and the occasional bench on which visitors to the park might sit, dotted the path, each sufficiently distanced. They were not in the main flow of Society, but this north side of the river was a public promenade. They would not be isolated. This was a pleasant prospect.

“This is a lovely spot,” she mused out loud, noticing there was no one about apart from a couple walking in the distance. Still, it was more public, at least, so it felt more *proper*. Nora hated that term and found Society’s use of it to be hypocritical, at least in her experience. Many of the unwanted children that found their places in orphanages—and worse—had been born on the wrong side of the blanket... a problem created by the *proper* aristocracy.

“Good!” Colin declared jovially.

The groom opened the door. “Will this be satisfactory, my lord?” he asked.

“Yes. Thank you, Gerard,” he replied to the coachman. “Give me a hand.” Colin nodded towards a small grassy knoll in front of them, and the two men quickly reassembled the cozy picnic spot of ten minutes past. Gerard drew the carriage

on to the grass beside the road. He and the groom settled themselves on the box to await his master's orders.

Driven by an uncomfortable growl in her stomach, Nora checked her hat and picked up her reticule, ready for luncheon and conversation. Not waiting for Colin to return for her, she descended from the conveyance and followed the men.

Colin held her hand and helped her sit down comfortably. Before her, a spread of meats, cheeses, bread, and grapes waited.

"Please, take a plate," he offered.

Feeling pinched, she smiled and selected a plate, filling it with the delightful fare, hoping to eat before the embarrassing growl of her empty stomach became an amusement.

"I daresay we should discuss expectations of our engagement," she began, hoping to quell the nervous fluttering in her belly that had added to her discomfiture.

"Things have become somewhat different from the way they were when we first discussed marriage," he said crisply, handing her a glass of lemonade. Nodding towards her glass he added, "I had heard from the children that Mrs. Simpkins makes the best lemonade, so I thought it sporting to try it today."

"How so?" she ventured cautiously, accepting the glass.

As if recognizing her feelings of alarm, he smiled warmly. "Have no fear, my dear. I told you before that I always honor my offers. I have not changed my mind. We will marry." He tugged at his cravat, a sign that he might have felt some uneasiness. "However, I want more."

"Please elaborate, sir," she said, cringing inside and seeking refuge in sipping her lemonade. She gazed at the bottom of the glass as she drank. As she consumed more of the liquid, she discovered more and more clarity. She took the last sip and peeped down at the bottom of the glass. *Now all is clear.* It was an interesting analogy for her life.

It had been her belief that marriages of convenience favored only the men—once his duty done and the calves in

the meadow, the bull is free to graze elsewhere. *She* would also be free to *graze*. Had she just used that vulgar comparison? A shudder shot through her as she realized *she had*. A marriage of convenience was not what she wanted. It was exactly what she did not want. She wanted love. She had grown up watching her parents support each other, love each other, grow old with each other. However, the lives of the children and this orphanage were now her priority. It would secure their future. Grandmama had offered security, but in turn, Uncle Wilford threatened it. Nora needed assurances and marriage to Lord Colin Shefford offered that.

“You must be thirsty,” he remarked, nodding to her glass. She blinked.

“Y-yes. I suppose I was,” she acknowledged, summoning a smile to turn up the corners of her mouth.

“I was as well.” He smirked, picked up the flask of lemonade and refilled their glasses. Nora watched his movements, entranced. His hands were spectacular. They were a comfortable size—hands which could fully enclose her own and keep hers warm. They were hands that could gently smooth away the hair from her face. She remembered his hands holding her, stroking her and pulling her closer.

Some sort of connection between the two of them had developed over the past few days, and she found it hard to disagree with a single thing. *He* had inserted himself into her life, changing everything familiar to her. She shook her head in disbelief. And now, she was engaged to *him*. Her life had turned upside-down, yet she was not unhappy, only puzzled. He was handsome, and despite her initial assessment of him, he was gallant and kind—and very handsome. That point, she decided, could not be accentuated enough.

“Nora.” A deep male voice penetrated her thoughts and Nora turned to her betrothed.

“Yes?” Her voice was tremulous. Nora realized she had become so immersed in her musings, she had forgotten what they were speaking about. *Oh, yes, the marriage.*

“I would like to see how we deal together before making any pronouncements about our future life. There is something between us I cannot identify. You are unlike any lady I have ever known, and I find I like you... *rather a lot.*”

“I should, perhaps, thank you for that endorsement,” she returned, feeling slightly uncertain over the mixed compliment. “I believe I may like you, as well.” Did he mean he wanted to know her better? Perhaps they could gain a more serious understanding of each other? Nora gave a quick shake of her head, realizing she was uncertain of anything where he was concerned.

“Perhaps we should discuss the ceremony. I have yet to speak of this with Grandmama. It will thrill her, of course. It is what she has wanted all my life—something she could not give her own daughter...” She allowed her voice to drift away on the words. She had always understood Mother’s reasoning, as she had explained it to her. However, did Nora want something altogether different?

“You are right, of course. We should speak of the ceremony.” Colin picked up a small piece of cheese from his plate and nudged it against her lips.

She opened her mouth and accepted the cheese, following it with a sip of lemonade.

“Thank you.” Smiling, she pulled a grape from its cluster and fed it to him.

“It is my turn to thank you,” he said, edging closer. “Would you mind if I kissed you?”

She glanced about them and saw no one about them. A thrill shot through her body. She wanted his kiss. “I would very much like you to kiss me, my lord.”

He placed his hands lightly on either side of her head and leaned forward, feathering small kisses on her lips.

“Mm... your scent is so soft. I think I can detect more than honeysuckle in the fragrance.”

To her astonishment, she giggled. “I must compliment your nose, my lord. There is more to my fragrance than

honeysuckle. Mother and Father gifted a bottle to me for my twelfth birthday, and I have worn it ever since. Do you care to hazard a guess?"

"I do." He smiled devilishly. "It does require a deeper investigation, though." His mouth moved from her lips to her neck, grazing kisses along her collarbone.

Warm heat from his breath traveled through the yellow muslin of her dress, causing an involuntary shiver and a gasp of excitement.

"Are you cold?" he breathed, his concern clear, as he cupped her face in his hands and rested his forehead gently against hers.

"Not at all. I am quite..." She grappled for the right word, "...enchanted."

"Is it citrus?" he continued, delicately nibbling her earlobes. "Your fragrance?" he clarified.

"Yes... and one other ingredient..." She exhaled slowly.

"Ah... I recognize... bergamot." He did not wait for her to respond. His lips covered hers in a deep kiss. His tongue swirled the cavity of her mouth, dancing with her own. When he pulled back, she noticed they were both struggling to slow the rapid accent of breath the kiss had stirred.

"That was a... pretty *thank you*, Colin," she said, amused. "I wonder what a piece of meat would have achieved me?"

He roared with laughter. "I have to admit, I rather enjoyed its delivery." A teasing smile lit up his face. "There is such intensity when we kiss." He paused, as if debating his next words. "For a moment, I rather lost my head. I am thus grateful for the privacy we were fortunate to enjoy. Perhaps we should return to discussing our wedding?"

Nora noticed he had changed 'the' wedding to 'our' wedding. Her heart hitched.

"My grandmother will wish to make this a famous event, even though she knows I would prefer to avoid that." She face

warmed as she eyed the basket. “Perhaps a glass of wine would aid our discussion?” She laughed, feeling brighter.

“That sounds like a good idea,” he agreed, opening the wine. He took their glasses and poured some wine into each.

“This is quite good.” Nora swirled the white wine lightly in her glass before taking another sip.

“My mother will doubtless wish to be involved. I am sure their guest lists will be very similar. Would a larger wedding be so bad if it pleases two ladies we love?”

“I had always envisioned a small, intimate event,” she ventured. She started to add something inane, such as her dreams that a prince would scoop her up on his white horse and whisk her off, but swallowed and held her tongue. She doubted he would comprehend such a desire, and she did not want to disturb their growing understanding. “Mayhap, the ceremony can be intimate, and include some of their closest of friends,” she conceded, realizing that her grandmother would want to share her joy with her dearest friends. She imagined Lady Shefford would, as well. What Nora wanted was another one of his kisses. *I had never been kissed until he kissed me. Now, I feel almost wanton—in constant need of another. I need more of him.*

“If you feel strongly about the wedding, I will inform my mother of your wishes. I would imagine your grandmother will agree, as well.”

“You truly do not object?” she asked.

“I want what you want.”

Her heart squeezed at his words. Nora realized she cared about this man. Her heart had become engaged and she was unsure how she felt about it.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LORD WILFORD WHITTON stood hidden behind a large mulberry bush across the street from the orphanage. Wearing a battered, hooded, black cape—apparently unnoticed—he watched a carriage arrive. Two occupants alighted. He recognized his niece, although not the gentleman. The man carried a basket and a blanket and appeared to be dangling after the woman.

Awareness struck, and the side of his mouth curved up in a crooked smile. He studied the two as walked up the steps of the building. Whitton chuckled at his own prowess. He had looked over the entire property, using a loosened board from the tall fence surrounding the backyard as entry.

“It seems my niece has discovered another means of support. I wonder how my mother would feel about her granddaughter’s new occupation,” he scoffed under his breath. Even saying it out loud, he knew it was just wishful thinking. His niece was as proper and boring as they came. She spurned the *ton* and all that it represented, yet here she was stepping from a carriage. “Her father was too proud to accept my parents’ funds when they were offered. Now look at them. She works in an orphanage and her own mother, my sister, works in a mercantile.

“Mother would do anything for her precious Honoria,” he sneered. *Out with no chaperone. That’s a new peccadillo, even for my hoity-toity niece.* He scrutinized the man’s face. Recognition sent an icy chill down his spine. *Lord Colin*

*Shefford!* Instantly, Whitton withdrew further into the bush, considering his next move. *I cannot let him see me.*

*Fiend seize it!* This complicated everything. His mind unchanged about the task ahead, he studied the landscape, seeking opportunity. A dark movement behind the pale-colored stone building pulled his attention from his niece and her escort. *Lawks! That had to be him. There's been no movement back there for almost thirty minutes.* Still not confident enough, he thought the best option was to wait for Shefford to return to his carriage. Each minute chafed him, and he grew tired of waiting. Most likely he would get no credit for helping, anyway. And he had already spent enough time here. *If I duck behind the carriage quickly, the bushes at the side of the building will cover me.* He looked around and took the chance, moving as quickly as he could until he got to the back corner of the property. At once, he saw him.

His fears confirmed, he knew his niece and her orphanage would suffer if he did not do something—and Mother would blame him. If Shefford is here, I am certain my dear mother knows about my little deception. It sent a sick feeling to the pit of his stomach. He had been naught but a disappointment to her, although his parents had never said a word.

“No, instead she and Father kept the family money from me, leaving me in damned low water. I should not lift a finger to help,” he complained to himself. Still, he loved his sister, and he would not see her hurt through Nora, even if his niece’s contemptuous attitude galled him.

It had injured his pride when his sister and brother-in-law had refused the opportunity to live at his estate. Truthfully, he had hoped they would maintain it for him. He never seemed to have enough funds and had seen this as an answer to his own need. His mother would credit him for maintaining the estate properly, he had conjectured. His plan had failed.

A tall gruffly bearded man, wearing a filthy brown coat and fingerless gloves, stood from a crouched position at the right front corner of the orphanage and sprinted to the back of the building, apparently still unseen by Shefford’s coachman. The coach appeared drawn up for a while, leaving Whitton

little choice. He had to take his chances. Checking the door and the coach and seeing no movement, he dashed across the street and stole down the side of the pink brick orphanage. He went quickly and quietly, hoping to catch up with Tom Sneed, although he was not exactly sure what he would do if he caught him. After having stabbed Shefford, Whitton knew he needed to stay away from Shefford's notice. If they caught him, would they believe him?

Whitton reached the back of the building in time to see Sneed leave a spot under an open, second-floor window, before slipping through a second loose panel of the back fence and escaping. Whitton glanced up at the window, and he could hear the sounds of children's voices. He wished he could walk away, yet he had to do something. He had to warn somebody.

*Where are the watchmen?* His mother would not have placed Nora here without reassurance in her well-being. He had hoped to leave a note for one of them and keep his involvement simple. *So, there it is... plan two*, he thought, vexed. Certain he could reach the loose plank Sneed had inadvertently shown him, Whitton reached into his pocket and pulled out a paper-covered stone. Securing his hood, he surveyed the area. *No one*. Quickly he hurled the stone through a window and sprinted towards the back fence, sliding the loose plank aside and slipping through the gap. As far as Whitton cared, he had fulfilled his responsibility. *I warned them—my conscience is clear.*

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“WELCOME HOME, MISS MASON.” Woods opened the door and collected her pelisse. “You have a message, miss,” he said, handing her a folded note.

A whiff of rosewater met her nose. She flipped the missive over. Grandmama's lavender wax and rose medallion was as distinct as her scented paper.

“It is from Grandmama. I should look at it in case it is something important. Would you mind?”

“Absolutely not. Please do.” Shefford gently nudged her hand.

Grandmama’s note said simply that she planned to visit around late afternoon. She could be here at any moment, Nora realized. She looked up and fixed her gaze on Colin.

“May I offer tea before you leave?”

“I would like that,” he said, taking off his hat and cape and handing them to the footman.

“Miss Mason, I will ask Mrs. Simpkins to send in the tea. My lord.” The footman acknowledged Shefford with a polite nod before heading down the hall to the back of the house.

“I still have much to discuss with my grandmother. Her note said she will be here later this afternoon. I should expect her.” Nora’s head swam with thoughts of the day. She had discovered her betrothed to be a man who cared about the feelings of others, something she would never have expected. The afternoon had been more than she had imagined. More than she had ever hoped to imagine. Was it possible that they shared the understanding she felt?

A flurry of footsteps could be heard in the hall, ending at the door to the parlor. “Miss Nora, Miss Nora! Someone has just hurled a stone through the kitchen window!” Mrs. Simpkins stood in the doorway, fanning herself and holding a wrapped stone in her outstretched hand while clutching her chest with the other. “I was standing with me back to the window, readying the biscuits for the oven when this crashed in behind me.” She fanned her face with her hands. “Oh, me word! I can barely catch me breath.” The visibly pale housekeeper/cook slid into the striped chair near the parlor door, furiously fanning herself.

Nora passed the stone to Colin, who at once unwrapped it. “I have employed a Runner. He should have been at the back of the house, watching. I cannot imagine this happening without him seeing it.” He stretched out the crumpled paper. The smudged, wrinkled sheet of vellum held a scribbled penciled message.

*Your children are in danger.*

“WHO DO YOU THINK LEFT THIS?” she asked, after reading the note.

“The handwriting looks familiar.” He stared at the paper in her hands. “Would you mind if I took this with me? I would like to compare this to something.”

Nora assented, and Colin folded the note and stuffed it in his waistcoat pocket. “This concerns me. I had hired a Runner who should have taken up his post. He was to have taken over earlier, from the two footmen. I had hoped he would provide more experienced protection.”

Mrs. Simpkins piped in from behind them. “A tall, red-headed man came shortly after ye left and said he ’ad been hired to watch over the orphanage. I saw him head towards the stables.”

“Did he give a name?” Colin asked.

“Let me think. I ’ad been helping set up the new boys’ room. Mr. Woods and Mr. Marsh finished the room today, you know. The boys, they ’ave a nice new place to sleep...”

“Mrs. Simpkins...” Nora interrupted this prattle without apology. “Did the man give a name?”

“Ah, yes, begging yer pardon, miss. I was just so excited about the new room fer the boys. Let me think. It was a cooking word... give me a minute. I cannot think properly when I get flustered.” Her voice cracked as she struggled to recall. Suddenly, she broke into a smile. “Peeling... Mr. John Peeling. I remember, ’cause ’tis an easy name to recall, since I peel carrots and potatoes and what not,” she announced proudly.

Nora bit her lip to hide a giggle. It would hurt the woman’s feelings, and she would never consciously do that. In Nora’s estimation the cook could run circles around two women half her age. “Thank you, Mrs. Simpkins. I never doubted you would remember the name.”

“Thank ye, Miss Nora. If ye don’t mind, I need to see to the evenin’ meal and the broken window. ’Tis getting cooler at night and it needs covering. In case ye are in need of her, Mary is upstairs getting the children readied for the evening. I will ask Mr. Marsh to help me.” She curtsied and hurried from the room towards the kitchen.

Nora gave a soft shrug. “It seems we never run out of excitement in this house, Colin.”

“Yes, I can see that,” he concurred.

“The men have added shelving and storage in several of the rooms during the week. They completed Mrs. Simpkins’ kitchen first, and she is quite ready to jump over the moon with it,” Nora explained. “I am sure she is most upset to see her window broken. According to her, the kitchen was near perfect.”

“Be that as it may, if Peeling was doing the job I hired him to do, he would have seen whoever threw this stone and broke the kitchen window. I need to find him.” Colin stood there for a moment, pinching the top of his nose. “Something seems very wrong.” He turned to Nora. “Would you mind if I asked Woods to help me? We need to make sure the house is secure.”

Nora nodded. “Not at all, Colin. Shall Marsh assist, as well?”

“I think Woods and I can cover the back. I would feel better if Marsh remained inside with you and the children.”

She pulled a cord in the corner of the room. “Grandmama had this installed. I tried to insist it was unnecessary. Perhaps she was right, though.” A moment later, Woods poked his head into the room.

“Did you call for me, Miss Mason?”

“Yes,” she responded. “Would you accompany Lord Shefford outside and help secure the perimeter?”

“Certainly, ma’am. I would be happy to do so.”

“Good. Come along with me,” Colin interjected.

Nora watched the two men leave, feeling oddly safe even after having her window broken with a stone. It was Shefford's presence. Other than her father and grandfather, she knew of no other man who made her feel wanted until Lord Shefford.

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“Do you have a sense for what looks normal out here, Woods?” Colin asked.

“Yes, my lord. The footmen you sent to watch the building suggested that I should not only learn the outside of the building but also the interior. They left this afternoon, shortly after showing Mr. Peeling around the orphanage. Come to think about it, I have not seen him in the last hour,” the footman said gravely.

“I am regretting having allowed them to leave,” Colin muttered, mostly to himself.

The area behind the building had vastly improved under Marsh's attentions. Rose bushes provided an additional thorny barrier to the fence on two sides. A vegetable garden was being tilled on the right, marked off with a small, white picket fence. To the far left, a stable large enough to house a carriage and a horse or two stood next to gated access to the cows and chickens they kept in the mews for the daily dairy needs. Behind the stable, they had not cleared an older garden. Rogue bushes stood at the sides and several tall oak trees, in need of pruning, shaded the roof of the stable.

His footmen had been instructed to stay in the small loft above the main floor of the stable. Surely Peeling was not sleeping up there, he thought, irritated with himself. *I should have left at least one footman here.* Yet, with Woods inside and the Runner outside, he had felt that there would be enough surveillance. He feared he had been dreadfully wrong.

“I am going to look upstairs in the loft. Would you check the perimeter, particularly behind the stable?”

“Right away, my lord.” Woods hurried to cover the area.

“Peeling?” Colin called out the man’s name, annoyed by the lack of response. The carriage bay was empty. “The ladies have this stable, although no means of transportation, it would appear, save going by foot,” he muttered to himself. Long, neatly stacked wooden planks lined the rear wall, affirming the projects that Nora had described. He heard a groan coming from the stalls. Carefully, he edged in that direction. Glancing inside the first, he saw a prone figure sprawled across the swept floor. Dashing under the breeching chain, he found the red-headed Runner moaning and trying to regain consciousness.

“Woods!” he yelled, “I have found him.” There was blood on the wall of the stall behind Peeling’s head, as if his assailant had hit him from behind and dragged him here. His mouth had been stuffed with a blackened rag and his feet and hands were bound with rope. Colin heard sounds of running from outside and moments later, Woods appeared.

“Help me get him to the house,” he ordered the footman.

“There is a small cot in the storeroom near the kitchen. We can put him in there,” Woods suggested.

“That is a good idea. Did you find anything behind the building?” Colin remembered to ask after a pause, watching as Woods pulled a small knife from his pocket and cut the rope around Peeling’s feet and hands.

“Someone had pried loose a couple of planks from the fence. It appeared new because the nails looked fresh. Marsh repaired the fencing early on,” he explained.

“Here. I will carry him by his shoulders, and you lift his feet. It looks to be a severe head injury. We need to keep from jostling him too much.” Colin recalled being told often enough by physicians that head injuries were dangerous.

The back door to the kitchen opened. “Mercy me! He is bleeding,” Mrs. Simpkins, evidently harried, cried out.

They carried him to the small room Woods had described. They had added shelving to the back wall and small jars of preserved items sat alongside baskets of dried spices.



“Mr. Woods,” Mrs. Simpkins stated more calmly, “we need to clean the injuries. Could ye retrieve some coal and stoke the kitchen fire? I’ll need boiling water t’wash these wounds. It appears he also ’as rope burns where his hands and feet were bound. I can make him comfortable and tend ‘is wounds, my lord. And please send Mary to me if ye see her. I’ll need her help with this.”

“Thank you. I defer to your experience, Mrs. Simpkins. I will send for a physician.” Colin was about to find Nora when she appeared at the door to the small room, with Mary behind her.

“Oh, my!” Nora cried as she scrutinized the man on the cot. “Is this your man?”

“Sadly, it is, Miss Mason. I will send for Dr. Andrew Perth, the friend I mentioned earlier. He is very good with head injuries, having trained on the battlefield years ago.

“Thank you, Lord Shefford. I appreciate your thoughtfulness and will be glad of his services.” She turned to her servant. “Mrs. Simpkins, please do anything you can. I will see Lord Shefford to the door and be back in a few moments to help you.” Her voice trembled. It was the first time Colin had heard any sign of unease from her.

They walked to the front door without a word.

“I will return as soon as I can,” he said, drawing her near. “There is no one about...” He could not help himself. Slanting his head, his lips caressed hers, drinking her in. Then he pulled back and cradled her face in his hands. “I think I know who wrote the note; however, I need to be sure. I will send Perth with my driver. And I will make haste.”

“Thank you for earlier,” she breathed. “Do be careful.”

“I will be careful, I promise you.” A chill went through him, almost a feeling of foreboding. “Keep the doors locked and have Woods again check all the windows, upstairs and down.”

She nodded and opened the door. To both their surprise, her grandmother was standing there, a look of astonishment

shaping her features.

“Grandmama!”

“I apologize for leaving in such a hurry, Countess...”  
Colin began.

“Go, there is no time for delay! I will tell her everything,”  
Nora responded, giving him a reassuring nod that all would be well.

He gave a quick bow. “In that case, I shall return as soon as possible.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NORA GAVE her grandmother a warm hug and a kiss. Grandmama had smelled of violets for as long as Nora could remember, and the scent always soothed her. She needed soothing at the moment. Her nerves were as frayed as she could remember them ever being.

“Let me take your cloak,” Nora said, holding out her hands.

The Countess drew back, clearly perplexed. “Where is Woods? I expected he would meet me at the door.” She offered Nora her hat, gloves, and pelisse. “I had hoped he would take over the porter’s duties. Now I find you assuming the role of butler. The day normally quietens by this hour,” she remarked, her speech more succinct than usual.

Nora exhaled a long sigh. “I agree, and it is usually quiet at this time of day. Woods is helping with a situation that has occurred. There is much to tell you.”

“Then let us adjourn to the parlor and be comfortable. I always find that a good chair and a cup of tea ease day-to-day upsets,” she said affably.

“I shall have Mrs. Simpkins prepare some tea. I want to show you the additional room that the men have completed today. Our little orphanage is coming along so nicely.”

The Countess preceded Nora into the parlor and took a seat on the sofa just as Mrs. Simpkins came in with a tray bearing the requirements for tea.

“M’lady, ’tis wonderful to see you. I have served dinner to the children.” She picked up a silver teapot and carefully poured both ladies a cup of tea. “’Tis a wee past four of the clock. I would be happy to bring you ladies a light repast to hold ye until dinner,” she said, smiling.

“That would be very welcome, Mary. Miss Mason and I have much to discuss. Perhaps a light repast would be appreciated,” she said, nodding toward her granddaughter.

“I believe I could partake of a sandwich,” Nora agreed.

“Very good, ma’am. I shall return shortly.” The maid curtsied and pulled the door closed as she left.

“I rarely need to ask Mrs. Simpkins to do anything. It is as if she knows we need something and appears with it. She is a delight. Thank you for lending her to our orphanage, Grandmama.” Nora looked around the room. “We are all quite taken with her, you know, especially the children.”

“She is a jewel, to be sure. I was sure she would prove indispensable,” her grandmother responded, considering Nora meaningfully.

Nora dipped her head in acknowledgement. “I will endeavor to keep the story short. A man threw a stone through the kitchen window and a Bow Street Runner, who Lord Shefford had engaged to protect the property, was found beaten and out of his senses. Lord Shefford seems to suspect a particular person and left to look into the matter. There is a lot of concern about this afternoon. We do not know whether the person who hit the constable was the same person who threw the stone.” Nora bit her lip. She wanted to tell her grandmother about the engagement, which, absurdly, seemed insignificant compared to the rest of the goings-on.

“Obviously there is more, yet perhaps I should begin with my personal news. There is so much to tell you.”

“So, it would appear!” the Countess remarked, arching both brows, not bothering to disguise her bewilderment.

Nora stared into her teacup, absently stirring the contents with a spoon. “I have received an offer of marriage.” She stole

a glance from the corner of her eye to see her grandmother's reaction. To her surprise, the Countess was smiling widely.

“Grandmama, you do not yet know from whom.”

“Perhaps I have reacted too quickly. I suspect Lord Shefford.”

Nora blushed, bobbing her head slightly in response.

“Not only do I approve, I wish to hear every detail.” Gone was all evidence of her irritation at the lack of decorum exhibited by her granddaughter at the front door.

“We began with quite a contentious relationship. You will recall, our first meeting was more or less a notice to vacate the orphanage. Mention of your name gave me a small measure of redress, relief, and a sliver of hope. When he returned, he offered an arrangement. Can you imagine such a thing? He asked that I *show him* that the orphanage had merit beyond the purpose he had in mind for the building.” Nora felt renewed irritation at the mere recollection of that request. “I could not conceive the nerve of him. He insulted my abilities, and I refused him. Unsympathetic, I saw how incensed he became in return. Clearly exasperated, he demanded that if he offered marriage, would I turn it down? Out of sheer pique and without proper reflection, I accepted.”

Her grandmother's eyes shot open for a second before she tittered, almost dropping her cup.

“I am sure, my dear, your grandfather is smiling from Heaven at you in this moment!” she touched her granddaughter's arm with affection.

“I think Lord Shefford's offer surprised him as much as it did me.” She put down her teacup and smiled winsomely at her grandmother. “Of course, he assured me he would stand by his offer. While I am convinced he was duping me, truthfully, his words and honor emboldened my decision to accept. I have no regrets. We seem to rub along well, which I find... refreshing,” she said, struggling to contain the heat rising up her neck.

“Considering you have always held little but contempt for the *ton*, I find it ironic that your betrothal makes you a member of Society.” A glimmer of laughter glittered in her grandmother’s eyes and a satisfied smile settled on her lips.

Nora winced at hearing the truth so candidly, and she recognized when her grandmother felt satisfied.

“We have spoken about the marriage...” she answered carefully, “...today, as a matter of fact. It has been our first opportunity.”

“Judging from the urgency in his words as his lordship rushed past me in the doorway, dare I hope that he has developed more feeling towards you and you towards him?” Her grandmother shamelessly prodded for information.

Nora’s blush deepened. “I think that is a possibility.” She straightened her shoulders and sat closer to the edge of the chair. She had promised Colin she would ask, and at this moment, she had her grandmother’s full attention. “I must ask a favor.”

“Tell me, my dear. There is naught you cannot request.”

Nora studied the Countess’ face. She appeared happy, which could prove of benefit.

“Grandmama, I know how much you have wanted me to marry, for as much as it will grant you the opportunity to plan the occasion as a good match would secure my future.” She drew a deep breath. “Would you consent to consulting with his mother and sharing the planning of the wedding? It would mean a good deal to him, and he has been so kind to the children, and to me. He is to ask his friend, Doctor Perth, to examine the children. We are particularly concerned about Benjamin, a small boy of eight, who has been here but a short time. He has a horrible cough, and I know he worked in the chimneys before he came to us.”

“Are you truly giving me license to plan the wedding your grandpapa and I would have wanted for you?”

“I am but would hope you limit the size of the ceremony,” Nora answered, hoping she would not regret this decision. Her

grandmother enjoyed creating extravagant affairs.

Grandmama clapped her hands in delight. “It would be my pleasure to take Lady Shefford into my confidence. We are old friends. I find it very thoughtful that you asked. I am assuming I have leave to contact her?”

“Yes. Colin told me she is already aware of our engagement.”

“How wonderful.” Her grandmother clasped her hands together excitedly. “You and Lord Shefford will form a good partnership. “And I feel there will be much more to this than a mere social pairing.” The Countess rose and stepped over to her granddaughter’s chair, holding out her hands. “I shall make known to your mother that she and your father should visit soon. I am certain they will be pleased, even with the unconventional offer. The origin of the proposal itself suggests promise. Passion adds spice to a marriage, and to become engaged in a fit of pique is most extraordinary,” she added, smiling and angling her head. “Lord Shefford’s family is reputed to be honest and generous. ’Tis an excellent match.” She sniffed. “And by the way, Dr. Perth is an exceptional choice. He opened his practice in London two years ago and the *ton* accepts him as a doctor of high regard. I would also like to meet this young man, Benjamin, when we review the rooms.”

“Grandmama,” Nora cried with relief, “how happy it makes me to know you approve! I was worried you would think me too impulsive.”

“Not at all, my dear. I understand your temperament well,” she responded, her eyes crinkling with amusement.

“If I did not know better, Grandmama, I could almost think you had something to do with this...” Nora let the words die. “I apologize. I know not why I said that.”

“Ha! Let me say that if the opportunity had ever presented itself to see my favorite granddaughter married to a man of impeccable reputation and character, I would have tried,” the Countess said, once more wearing a knowing smile.

Nora felt a twinge of something. It was the same feeling which came upon her when she had a forewarning. Did her grandmother know something? *No, impossible.* If she did, she reasoned, the Countess would never tell.

Nora shook her head, clearing her thoughts. “Grandmama, have you found anything out about the deed to this building?” She still wanted to know the title’s legitimacy, regardless of her promise to Colin.

“I expect to have news soon. My lawyer has quite a few papers to sift through, but he felt it would not take long. I visited his office on my way here, as a matter of fact.”

Nora inclined her head. “Thank you. Now, I might tell you of this latest difficulty.”

“I have been waiting, although it was delightful to hear of your betrothal first. It has quite diverted me!”

Again, that strange feeling surfaced. Nora studied her grandmother for a moment before shaking her head. *Impossible. What could she have known I have not told her?* Nora took a deep breath and began the tale.

“Lord Shefford and I arrived back after our brief carriage ride. As I mentioned, we were discussing our marriage,” she blurted, glancing at her grandmother’s face. “Shortly afterwards, someone threw a stone through the kitchen window. It was a warning.”

“What kind of warning? Perhaps you *should* have told me this first—*not* that your engagement is less important.” The Countess’s voice trembled. “This portends trouble and I shall want to take some measures to further secure your safety. How was the threat conveyed... and what was the threat?”

“A piece of paper covered it. His lordship and Woods went out to check the garden and stable area, and found the Runner seriously injured. Lord Shefford sent for Dr. Perth,” she replied, realizing her response had become more formal.

“Tell me again. *What was the threat?*”

“My apologies. The paper said, ‘Your children are in danger.’”



“May I see it?”

She noticed her grandmother’s face had suddenly paled. “Colin, I mean, Lord Shefford, took it. He plans to return later.”

“My dear, he is your intended. You may use his given name.” Her grandmother made a dismissive sound with her tongue and then smiled gently at her. “I would like to see the note, when he returns. Tell me about the injured investigator.” Grandmama pressed quietly.

“To my knowledge, he has not yet recalled anything. We have made him comfortable in the storeroom off the kitchen. Incidentally, Woods and Marsh have built some excellent shelving for Mrs. Simpkins. She and I are in awe of their ideas and talent. Thank you, Grandmama.”

“I am glad they are here. For the time being, perhaps they spend less time on the renovations until they have resolved this!”

“Yes, Grandmama. I quite agree.” Nora planned to speak to them as soon as her grandmother left.

“Shall we go upstairs? I would like to look in on the children. They should be readying themselves for bed now. The boys will use the newly refurbished room, which lies across the hall from the other room, for the first night. I love the small cabinet-type beds the men have crafted on the far wall. It makes more space for beds, without making it crowded,” Nora enthused.

“I grew up with a bed similar to those you describe. I would like to see them.”

Together, the two ladies went upstairs and looked over the new furnishings. Nora could not shake the strange feeling that had come over her. She did not like the uncomfortable sensation that events were careening out of her control. With the broken window and the injured Runner, she was feeling more and more anxious. When they reached the new boys’ room, they found Benjamin in the doorway, staring at the cabinet beds.

“Ah, there you are! Grandmama, this is the young man I wanted you to meet.”

Benjamin extended a hand. “Pleased to meet you, your ladyship,” he said, bowing.

“Oh! I like him!” her grandmother cooed. She glanced from Benjamin to the room. “Young man, why are you staring at the beds?”

“‘Cause I ain’t sure I wanna be stuffed in a cabinet. I likes to stretch me legs, me lady, and have more’n one way out.”

Nora interceded. “Benjamin, we shall allow each of you to choose. We have a few extra beds in here, if you look.” She extended her hand towards the six beds already placed in the room. You may choose your favorite one.”

“Thank you, Miss Nora. I want the one nearest the door.”

Seeing his apprehension and understanding that it could have something to do with being squeezed into a chimney, she had an idea.

“Benjamin, turn down the blanket on the bed you wish to have. That will signify that you have claimed it.”

Excited, he stopped at the bed nearest the door and turned the blanket down. “Thank you, Miss Nora.” Happy, he joined the other children, whose voices were coming from what was becoming known as *the girls’ room* across the hall. The process to claim the beds had started, and the children were enjoying themselves.

A loud knock sounded downstairs. “That sounds like the front door. It could mean that Lord Shefford is back,” Nora said, taking note of her own wistful tone. Colin had not promised to return that day. *He said he would return as soon as possible.* An empty feeling hit the pit of her stomach. She missed him and wished they could have touched once more or had one more kiss before he departed.

“I agree. When he returns, I would like to know more about the message. Perhaps he knows more,” her grandmother returned.

They had reached as far as the parlor when Mrs. Simpkins opened the door for Dr. Perth.

“Thank goodness ye are come. The man seems fevered,” she exclaimed, quickly ushering him along the hall towards the kitchen.

The doctor stopped at the parlor door and bowed.

“Good day, Lady Whitton. This must be your niece, Miss Mason. It is nice to meet you both. Miss Mason, I will inform you of anything I find.”

“He seems to be a nice young gentleman,” her grandmother observed as he walked on down the hall. “The ladies of the *ton* find him quite handsome. Even without a title, many ladies have singled him out as a prospective spouse.” She inhaled, primly.

“I should keep him from Mary’s sights,” Nora responded with a quick laugh.

“She keeps things entertaining,” the Countess responded, amused. “I fear I should probably go home. It is getting rather dark outside. You should go to sleep early, my dear. There are dark circles under your eyes. Please have your Lord Shefford call on me with details of what he finds.” She paused. “I do not believe the person who threw the stone meant any harm, based on his message, although that is strange.”

“Why do you say that, Grandmama?” Nora questioned.

“To me, the person who wrote the message and wrapped it around a stone, before tossing it through a window, seems desperate. The other person,” she continued, “is more concerning. Knocking out a guard takes some calculation, I would imagine.”

“You think there could be two men?” An icy shiver skirted down her spine. For the first time in all of this, Nora’s unease threatened to overcome her.

“Do you feel unwell, Nora? You look pale,” her grandmother remarked, clearly concerned.

“No, Grandmama. I am quite well, although perhaps a little overwhelmed with the day’s events. I shall make a point of calling upon you and we can then talk more.”

“I should like that very much, my dear. If you will forgive me I shall take my leave.” The Countess turned to Woods, waiting unobtrusively near the door, and showed her readiness with a nod. He helped the Countess with her pelisse and handed her her hat and gloves. “I expect you to maintain the comings and goings of this house, Woods. Keep a close eye on my granddaughter and the women and children,” she said firmly and loud enough for Nora to hear.

“I assure you, my lady. I have just taken a tour of the environs. The property is secure.”

Nora watched her grandmother leave, feeling thoroughly unsettled by her visit.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

COLIN FOUND Bergen at the club, enjoying drinks with Morray. He handed his coat to the doorman who pointed him towards the corner of the primary room where the two gentlemen were sitting, laughing at something one of them had said.

“What has you with such a serious look, Shefford?” Bergen held out his glass in a cheerful toast.

“I am afraid this day has been too eventful by half,” Colin replied, accepting a drink from the footman and taking the leather chair nearest Bergen.

“How so?” Morray asked, accepting another cup of hot tea from the footman. He preferred it to the alcoholic beverages. No one ever commented on Morray’s choice of refreshment.

“I must find Whitton. Another stone was hurled through a window at the orphanage this afternoon. The note appears much the same as the note pitched through my mother’s window—just a different message.”

Bergen sat up. “May I see it?”

Colin passed it to them and noticed their concern. “I see I do not have to say more,” he commented, his voice calmer than he felt.

Morray reached into his waistcoat and extracted a small piece of paper. “I thought you might need this. It is his ladybird’s address. We should not waste time.”

Colin studied the address. “That is two streets from here. I need to go immediately.” He stood to leave on his words.

“Would you like company?” Bergen placed his glass on the side-table and rose from his chair.

“Would three be too much company?” Morray took a last sip from his tea and placed his cup beside Bergen’s tumbler.

“I would appreciate the help, if you have the time. There is more to tell. We found the Runner I sent to protect the orphanage with a large crack to the back of his head. It looks serious. Perth should be there now.”

“That does not sound like Whitton,” interjected Morray. “He is more liable to react to events. And, despite the nasty attack on you, his reputation is one of duplicity, not maliciousness.”

“I agree, although that only makes this entire episode more troubling,” Colin conceded.

“Let us find Whitton first. He issued what appears to be a warning. He knows something that we need to know,” Bergen suggested.

Fifteen minutes later, the three men arrived at a three-story residence on Cleveland Avenue. The tall, shabby pink building at the corner stood in stark contrast to the mostly white ones that dominated the street.

“I assume that makes it easy to spot,” teased Bergen.

“The pink building enjoys a reputation based on the lack-luster women who live there—not that I have ever frequented this building,” Morray added, “However, it has often made my business easier, as I have found many targets of my investigations here.” He sniggered.

They took the stairs to the third floor. Four shabby red doors faced the hall, with only a number to distinguish them. They knocked on 3B and a small opening in the top slid open.

“What can I do for you fancy gentlemen?” a woman’s voice asked.

Colin recognized the raspy voice as belonging to the woman from the hell. They had the right place. “We would like to talk to you. I will make it worth your while.” He held

up a gold coin. “Not for your services—for information,” he clarified, to Bergen’s amusement. The door opened and a woman with reddish hair and a red velvet wrapper stood in front of him, not saying a word. She waved them in and closed the door behind them. Her hair looked like an enormous bird’s nest, being uncombed and unrestrained. Lip color remained on her mouth and black kohl lined the underside of her eyes. It was obvious they had awoken her.

A bed stood in the corner; it sagged in the middle and was covered with what appeared to be dirty laundry. It was obvious she had slept on top of the linens. The rest of the sparsely furnished room looked dusted and well-ordered—a cabinet, a small table, a chair with a side-table and a lamp. An almost threadbare carpet covered the floor. It was hard to make out anything but blue and pink for the colors. Except for the bed, it appeared she cared about a neat home.

“What do you toffs need?” she asked sharply.

“We know Lord Whitton stays here and we need to speak to him,” Morray stated. “I am Lord Morray, this is Lord Bergen and Lord Shefford. We are not here to cause you distress.”

At the mention of Bergen and Shefford, her face went pale. “I don’t need no trouble. This ’ere’s my ’ome.”

“We only want information.” Colin quickly explained the note, withdrawing the slip of paper and showing it to the jade.

“He did it!” she uttered. “He cares. I knew it.”

Unsure of what she meant, Colin noticed her speech was more refined than before.

“We merely need to speak with him. Wait. What did you mean, *he cares?*”

“There was a boy, ’bout eight, what I saved from the chimneys and took to an orphanage. A man overheard me telling a close friend about the boy. He used to work for the cove, see...”

“Doing chimneys?” Colin inquired.

“Tom Sneed is his man and a right villain. A regular brute. Whitton come over furious with me for telling ’im, although like I said, I did not mean to. It just happened. Sneed is awful dangerous, and I be worried about Benjamin.”

“You care about the boy.” It was more of a statement.

“I do, but I don’t have the wherewithal to help him. He already coughs. I wanted to save him—not have him have to make a living like me, doing something he hates...” Her voice faded.

“I know of Sneed,” Morray said.

“Thank you.” Colin passed the woman two gold sovereigns.

They left and met Whitton coming up the stairs. Colin smashed him against the wall, holding him by the throat.

“Why were you at the orphanage today?” he demanded.

The man’s face swelled red from lack of oxygen and he stammered incoherently.

“Cannot breathe,” he choked.

Colin relaxed his hold and let him slide down the wall. Crumpled on the floor, Whitton looked up at the men.

“What are you doing here?”

“Do not make me regret not beating you to a pulp. Tell me what you know,” Colin demanded.

“I went there to warn my niece. Sneed is looking to make off with some of her children. My visit was to protect her. My mother will be furious if anything happens to her.”

Colin angrily cut him off. “You worthless shit. You should have had the ballocks to warn her of this rogue. Instead, you nearly killed my man and threw a stone through the window—frightening the women and children.”

No one said a word for a long moment.

Whitton appeared to process the information. “I did not hurt anyone. I only threw the stone. *Sneed did it*. He was there.



I tried to find him—to tell him to leave off or...”

“Or *what?*” Colin sneered. “You will throw a stone at him?” He grabbed Whitton by the scruff of the neck. He wanted to hurt him. He felt a hand on his shoulder and reluctantly dropped the miserable excuse for a man. Breathing heavily, he stepped back.

“We need to return to the orphanage,” Whitton croaked. “Without your guard, they are in trouble. Sneed is ruthless. I love my sister and even though Honoria is difficult, I do not want to see her hurt.”

“We need to stop him before he makes his move. You can help us with his address.” Bergen spoke up.

“This is all my mother’s fault. If she had not placed me in the position of having to beg for a farthing, I would not be in this situation...”

“Silence! What is his address?” Morray glared at Whitton. “I, for one, am sick of your sniveling.”

“He stays at the lodging-house behind the hell, near the stable where we... met.” Whitton slumped further.

Colin recognized regret on Whitton’s face. The man bullied others less fortunate than he, yet he did seem to care about his family—even if most of it was fear of his mother.

The three friends turned, leaving Whitton piled on the floor of the grubby hall.

“I need to check Nora is safe,” Colin said as they exited the building into his waiting coach.

“Set me down at the club, if you will,” Morray commented as they drove across Town. Send word when you have decided when you want to find Sneed. He is a parasite.”

“I will go with you to the orphanage if you do not mind, just in case,” Bergen offered. “My horse is at the club. It can stay there for the time being.”

“I appreciate both of you. Morray, I shall send word as soon as I have seen Nora and know everyone is well.” The

coach stopped at the club's Belford Place address and Morray jumped down.

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DUSK HAD GIVEN way to nightfall. The doctor had given the Runner laudanum and pronounced that Peeling would recover in a few days. His head would hurt with the ten stitches the doctor had applied to the gash in the man's scalp. Once Perth had left, Nora asked Mary and Mrs. Simpkins to put the children to bed. She had the headache a little, so had taken her grandmother's advice and retired early, yet thoughts stirred in her head. *She missed Colin.*

He did not return, as she had hoped. Surely, he would be here tomorrow? The other two women had the same idea, according to a comment Mrs. Simpkins had made. There were no more sounds of children. *They must be asleep.* She closed her eyes and tried to make herself go to sleep.

A scraping sound, coming from the direction of the boys' room, dispelled those efforts. She sat up and tied her robe, deciding to investigate. Perhaps a hot cup of tea afterwards would help her to sleep.

The room was dark, with only the filtered light of the moon streaming in. *How strange. We never leave a window open at this time of year.* Nora adjusted her eyes and stared into the half-light. There was a figure standing over Benjamin's sleeping form.

"Benjamin, roll away from him! Run!" she cried. The man grabbed her and dragged her to the window. Nora screamed, kicking and struggling in vain as he shoved a dirty rag into her mouth and thrust her on to the window ledge.

"Miss Nora," Benjamin screamed."

The small boy ran to her, pulling at her feet, yelling and finally gaining the aid of the other boys. One ran down the hall for help. Two others tried to help Benjamin pull Miss Nora away. The man reached over to grab Benjamin and was bitten for his efforts. He roared his anger and struck his fist into

Benjamin's head, then thrust a filthy sack over Nora's face. She fell limp and slipped over the window ledge. As gravity stole her last chance of survival, her feet followed; barely sensible, she felt one slipper fall off before she succumbed to the cloying darkness.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

NORA WOKE TO A POUNDING HEAD, a freezing room, and a foul odor. Opening her eyes, she saw only blackness and could barely feel her toes. Her feet felt like frozen blocks of ice. She tried wiggling them and rotating her ankles, thinking it might help. She missed one of her shoes and thought she remembered losing it in the boys' room. As her senses adjusted to her mean surroundings, she heard heavy breathing coming from across the room and men's voices filtering up from below.

The sound of something thudding against a wall, she presumed, and followed by loud cursing, encouraged her to listen. *Where was she? Where were they?*

"Damn it, Hyde! You do me bidding or ye'll finish yer days slung wi' bricks and tossed to the bottom of the river," a deep voice growled. "I'll say what happens to the wench."

Nora recalled what Becca had said about her mother and shivered in fear. They had found her facedown, floating in the river.

"Yer sure she ain't connected to the gentry, Mr. Sneed? She smells clean," a higher male voice persisted. "She 'jes don't seem like no Haymarket ware."

"Quit yer belly-aching and git her to the game. Wrap her up and git her gone. And never address me by my name if you value yer life."

"Kill me. Ye threaten 'n bluster, yet I knows of none as is mutton-headed 'nuff to take yer coin in trade fer thur soul. I

promised me missus I'd not dangle at the end of a rope. Selling a Society miss could make a liar out of me," the second man challenged.

"Do what I pay ye fer. The blonde in the robe will bring more money on the sale table than the other. Make sure ye grab the right one. I want that bitch to pay for interfering with my trade."

"What'd she do, guv'nor?" Hyde probed.

A loud slap sounded. "Damn! What'd ye do that fer?" It was that same higher-pitched male voice. *Hyde*, Nora thought.

"Never ye mind. Yer asking too many questions. Git down there to the tables and tell me when they are ready fer the next one. I need to git to the boys. I have a chimney business to run."

"Yus, yer 'onour," Hyde spat out, the sarcasm evident even above.

*Are they discussing me? What game are they talking about?* Swallowing a gasp with her fist, Nora realized her eyes had adjusted to the light in the room. It was so cold she could see her breath, and the only thing she had on was her pink wrapper, and gown beneath it, and one pink satin slipper. At least it had a leather bottom. One shoe could not get her far. At least she had not been tied. Perhaps they felt the laudanum had been sufficient.

Nora heard a door slam. It sounded from the room below her. She might not have much time. For a moment, she recalled the dream of a knight in shining armor rescuing her and snorted.

"I had a dashing prince this afternoon. Tonight, I find myself near Hell's door," she lamented. Another snort and a snore reminded her she was not alone in the room.

Something smelled putrid. Sniffing, she leaned closer to the mattress. "Lud, I think something died on this bed. 'Tis nasty," she whispered to herself.

She quickly scanned the room. Boards covered two windows, which had no glass in this mean dwelling. Opposing

streams of light pierced the darkness—one from a sizeable crack in the boards covering the window near her, and another from under the door. She scanned the room. There was a broken-down dresser in the corner. It had but one drawer; a second dangled in pieces from an opening. A bed in the corner held the body of the room's other occupant. *One who snores*, she thought. Catching her attention, the moonbeam hit a shining item on the wooden floor in front of her bed. Shards of glass lay everywhere. Cautiously, she bent down to investigate. She had to be careful with only one shoe.

Shivers shook her body, and she tugged her wrap tighter, gingerly extending one foot over the side of the small bed. A squeak sounded, and she withdrew her foot in time to watch a rat run across the room and disappear into the wall. Another involuntary tremor assailed her, and she waited for it to pass. Whether possessed by cold or fear, she had to escape. No prince could find her in this dungeon.

Summoning all her courage, Nora crept to the other bed, carefully avoiding anything that reflected light from the floor, and using the foot with the shoe to clear her path. When she reached the bed, she studied the person lying there. The body belonged to another woman, and a rather bosky one at that, judging from the deep snores and the sour smell of alcohol. There was no telling where they had abducted her from—if there had even been an abduction. The fuddled woman could be up here sleeping off her potatoes.

Suddenly, Nora had an idea. She pushed aside any inkling of guilt. It could be her only chance to save herself. The woman looked close to her size. It seemed simple enough, but with dead weight, her plan proved harder to put into operation than she had thought. Unsure of how much time she had, Nora tried to stop breathing for long stretches as she tugged the clothing off the woman and replaced it with her own. The clothing stank, but if it saved her life, she would not complain. *At least the shoes fit*, she thought, taking the woman's sturdy boots and replacing them with the single pink slipper. Changing her mind, Nora held onto her slipper. Oddly, the woman was wearing several undergarments, including pantalettes, that looked to have been decent at one time. She

refused to wear the filthy undergarment but had an idea. Rolling them up as quickly as she could, she stuffed them into the crack in the window boards. She would need all the help she could create, and eliminating the light would assist that purpose. She stuffed her pink slipper into the pocket of the dress.

A scraping noise on the stairs caused her to abandon switching beds, and she ran back to hers and crawled on to it, turning to face the wall. She gave her best impression of drunken snores and said a silent prayer.

The door opened, and she heard footsteps enter the room. “Damn you, Sneed. This be the last time you tell me what to do. Me missus is right. I’ll git me an honest wage from tomorrow. He thinks I’m going to be his lackey. I’m done wi’ ’im and his bullying.” His footsteps stopped at the bed Nora lay in. “She’s still asleep. Won’t hurt ol’ Hyde if’n I take a little peek.” Large fingers grasped her arm. “Huh? What the devil? This don’t seem like her. The wench was dressed in a nightgown. Strange, oi thought she were on this bed.” The man cursed as he stumbled over something on the floor before reaching the other bed. She heard him roll the blanket around his quarry, apparently abandoning his idea to take a peek. *Thank goodness!*

The man grunted as he hoisted the woman onto his shoulder. “Must be that I’m tired,” he muttered. “The wench feels heavier. No matter. This is the last time I’m doing this fer ’im.” The door closed behind him and Nora breathed a sigh of relief. Sneed and Hyde. A sense of familiarity pricked her consciousness. She would remember eventually. For now, she needed to find a way out of her prison. First, she needed a weapon. *Where is that large piece of glass?*

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“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, she is gone?” Colin’s voice bellowed across the room even as bile rose in his throat. Pain stabbed at his heart. Whitton had been right. Sneed had taken her. Perhaps it was a stroke of luck that Benjamin had witnessed

the kidnapping. However, the young boy was beside himself that he had been unable to save her. From his incoherent babbling, it seemed that she had saved him. Colin had to find her.

“Mrs. Simpkins, if Benjamin is willing, I would like to see the room and hear the details again, for myself,” Colin asked. The women were weeping, and the house was in an uproar.

Benjamin had described the scuffle to the housekeeper and the maid, telling them a big dark-headed man had snatched Nora from the window. Something was missing. He needed answers. He scanned the room, hoping for a clue to her whereabouts. Fresh scrape marks marred the new paint of the recently painted window. Hanging in the inner branches of a large oak tree next to the open window swung a knotted rope.

Woods was leaving to inform the Countess when Colin’s carriage pulled up before the orphanage. He asked the man to deliver a message to Morray and have the Earl meet him in the East End, at the lodging Whitton had described. He was sure Morray would understand the location. He planned to search there, first.

Nora Mason’s ability to manage the intricacies of running the orphanage astonished him. He felt sudden shame for having belittled her on the occasion of his first visit and made a mental note to make up for that somehow. The parlor reminded him of her—and of how he had diminished her with his bumptious offer. Shefford reminded himself that it was her grandmama who had convinced him to make that offer. He owed her a debt of gratitude. First, though, he needed to find his betrothed.

Loneliness crashed in on him. *He missed her.* It felt like more. Did he love her? He had never loved a woman before. Even having his best friends with him did nothing to ease the emptiness. He had never felt this way about a woman.

Benjamin appeared in his night-robe, holding onto Mary’s hand. “My lord, I tried to get him to sleep. He insists he knows where Miss Nora was taken.”



“I should like to speak with him. I will make sure he goes back to bed,” Colin promised, crouching down so he could be eye level with the boy.

“M’lord, I know where he took her. He brings the women to the Table.”

“*The Table?*” Colin had never heard of it. Was it another hell?

“A bunch of men pay money. I heard him discuss it once with his man, Hyde, while I was in a chimney.”

“Where is *this Table?*”

“He called it *the Tunnel*. Said the drunk toffs practically never see their pockets cleaned.

At that moment, the door to the parlor opened, and the Countess sailed in, followed by Bergen.

“Where is my granddaughter?” she demanded.

“Benjamin thinks she is in a place called the Tunnel,” Colin said. “Bergen and I are on our way.”

“What is the Tunnel?” the Countess insisted, closing her eyes and biting her lower lip.

Colin recognized the same look of fretfulness that he had seen on Nora.

“Take me with you, m’lord.” Benjamin’s small voice pierced the silence. “I know where the Tunnel is. I want to help find Miss Nora. She saved me life.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out her pink shoe. “This fell from the window when he took her.”

Colin looked at the slipper. It was delicate and pretty, just like the woman who had worn it. “May I?”

Benjamin nodded and handed the shoe to him.

“Nora will be angry, yet I am fairly sure this orphanage has no way to contain him unless we lock him up. Take good care of him,” the Countess interjected, sniffing. “Bring my granddaughter home... please.”

Less than an hour later, Colin's carriage drew up in front of the same hell where he had been not more than a sennight ago, except this time he and Bergen had a young boy of eight with them. Colin gave a silent prayer that the boy knew where Sneed had Nora.

"Wait here, m'lords. I must jaw with my friend, Danny." Before they could say anything, Benjamin shot off towards the back of the stable.

"Imagine what it took to bring us back here," reflected Bergen. "When all this is over, I would like Lizzie to meet Nora. I think they could become friends."

"I would like that too," Colin said absently, fingering Nora's shoe in his pocket. He wondered how long it would be before Morray arrived.

Benjamin returned to the coach with Danny close behind. The two men recognized him immediately. "Danny and I learned pick-pocketing together," he said stoically. "But that was afore Danny found a place 'ere. I also 'elped out here, afore Tom Sneed bought me from the owner of the hell.

"Excuse me? You were owned?" The truth suddenly dawned on Colin. No wonder Sneed wanted him back. Benjamin was one of his cutpurses. And knowing this child, he was good at whatever he tried to do. The man considered Benjamin his property—it was a common enough occurrence—and he was losing profits with Benjamin's disappearance. Colin also recalled the story about little Amy and wondered if Sneed was likewise an opportunist, trying to steal the little girl by posing as her father.

"Yes, m'lord. Me own parents sold me." His voice cracked as he related his sad past.

"We will discuss this later, Benjamin. First, we need to find Miss Mason. Danny, have you seen Sneed?" The thought of these boys being sold distressed Colin, although he would have to consider what he could do about it later.

"'E went in the main 'ouse earlier," Danny offered.

“The Tunnel sits a floor beneath it, m’lord,” added Benjamin.

“I think we should start where he lives. Benjamin, where does Sneed live?” inquired Bergen.

“Follow me. I know a way to get in with no one seeing you,” the small boy told them.

“Danny, I have a friend who should arrive here shortly. His name is Lord Morray. Will you send him to where we are going?”

“Yes, m’lord. I will bring him to ye,” the boy agreed.

The three of them crossed a narrow, cobbled street behind the stable, keeping to the darker side of the structure and avoiding light. Benjamin led them, stopping at the edge and signaling they wait. He approached the building and tapped on a red, paneled door. After a minute, when no one answered, he signaled for them to follow. They went through the door, climbing dark dusty steps which were lit only by a single wall sconce in the corner of the first-floor landing.

“This is how they bring people into the building for the Table,” the boy explained.

A knot formed in Colin’s throat as he imagined Nora being carried through this filthy passage. He dearly hoped they would find her here and not in the Tunnel.

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A LOUD COMMOTION stirred Nora to wakefulness. *Dear God! How did I fall asleep? I have to escape this room!* While she waited for her eyes to adjust, an argument flared up from somewhere beneath her.

“Ow did you get the two wenches mixed up, you stupid fool?” a loud voice demanded. A loud crack sounded, as if something large had hit the wall.

That had to be Sneed, she mused.

A tiny, nervous giggle escaped her when she thought of the reaction of the roomful of men when they unwrapped the drunken trollop.

“Yer lying. Oi checked, and it were the right one, Mr. Sneed,” a second man answered.

Nora recognized Hyde’s voice.

“She ’ad the robe and all,” Hyde added.

She heard what sounded like a door burst open and smash against the wall.

“Who are you?” Sneed yelled.

She could not make out the conversation but heard struggling and a loud crack, followed by a loud “Umph!”

Thinking she was in untold and added danger from whoever that was, she steeled herself, deciding the window would be her best hope.

Finding a loose board, she pulled at it, hoping to pry it free. *If I can move a couple of these planks, I may escape through the window.* Recalling the dangling drawer, she retrieved it and used it as a lever under the loose end of the board, ripping it from the window. She tried the one above it. Success! Luckily, the commotion below covered the noise she made.

Satisfied with her efforts, she looked outside and saw what appeared to be some sort of stable with a brightly lit building in front of it. There had to be help in that direction. She glanced down at herself. She could no longer smell her own body and imagined she resembled a common strumpet—not that she had ever seen one before today.

Heavy footsteps, from what appeared to be several men, sounded outside the door. They were coming towards her. She had run out of time to escape. Alarmed, Nora grabbed the large shard of glass, no longer concerned with cutting herself. Summoning a prayer, she moved to stand beside the door, holding the glass above her head, ready to strike. A few seconds later, the door opened. Afraid to look, Nora squeezed

her eyes shut and brought the glass down. At the same moment, two enormous hands caught her arms.

Fear and hysteria overcame her, and she began to shake and scream. The two hands securing her wrists pried the glass loose and pulled her close.

“Hush! Nora, ’tis me, Colin.” He pressed a warm kiss on her forehead.

“Colin?” She was still shaking from fright. “How did you find me?” Tears ran freely, followed by loud sniffs.

“Be at ease, my love. We shall soon have you away from here.” He pulled off his coat and wrapped it around her.

“We?”

“Oi came to help, Miss Nora,” a small voice beside him answered.

Nora recognized Benjamin at once. “Benjamin! What are you doing here? Why are you not in bed?”

“Oi wanted to help find you...”

Realizing the little boy had helped in her rescue, she pulled him into a hug, cutting off any further speech.

“We must leave. Now.” Lord Bergen’s voice sounded from behind them. “Danny is guarding the carriage at the door. There are a dozen angry men rioting in the main room—just feet away from the door. They are shouting something about a substitution made in the Tunnel.” His mouth curved in a knowing smile. “Murray has secured Sneed and his accomplice for the magistrate—trussed up and tied in a small stall in the stable. He and his men will watch them and make sure neither villain escapes justice.”

Nora’s head swarmed with questions as Colin hastily ushered their small group down the long staircase and out through the door that opened into the alley below. He quickly placed her on a leather seat inside the waiting coach. Benjamin climbed onto the seat opposite her. She saw Colin give the boy called Danny a handful of coins before joining them on the carriage. As they approached the stable, she recognized Lord

Bergen's voice and heard him and Danny drop from the rumble seat. She felt immediate relief—almost elation—once the carriage started again. *I am safe!*

“Thank you! I feel like a princess rescued from a tower—a very nasty one,” she whispered hoarsely.

Colin gave a sly smile and tugged her closer to his side. “Did you have something to do with a *certain exchange* that caused a riot in the Tunnel?”

A chuckle escaped her. “I may have had something to do with it,” Nora admitted timidly. “I tried to save myself.”

“Remind me never to underestimate you again, my darling. I did so once before and I vow never to allow it to happen again,” he said with a chuckle.

“I beg your pardon, sir! When would that have been?” she asked demurely.

“Impudent minx! When I challenged you to prove the orphanage to be more worthwhile than my project. However, had I not persisted, we might not be betrothed.”

“Very true...” Tired, she laid her head on his shoulder, no longer caring how she smelled. All she cared about was that *he* was here. He had saved her. *Just like my dream... my dearest dream!*

The coach rumbled faster than normal over the cobblestones, tossing the three of them uncomfortably on the bench seats.

Noticeably relieved when the carriage turned onto a smoother road, Colin drew back and lifted her chin with his finger.

“I have a big question,” he said, grinning broadly.

He slid from the seat next to her and balanced on one knee. “I do not think I presented my proposal correctly the first time.” He cleared his throat and held on as they rounded a bend. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my countess?”

She had to be dreaming. Unsure of whether she really wanted to wake up, she reached up and scrubbed at her eyes. It

felt real. She blinked. It looked real. Tears welled up and crested on her eyelids. “Yes, sir, I would love to become your countess.”

Colin cradled her face in his hands, his eyes snaring hers.

“Nora, you have made me the happiest of men. When I discovered you missing, my world tilted. I could think of nothing but finding you.” Not waiting for her response, he kissed her, at first feathering her lips before leaning in for a deeper kiss.

As if remembering, of a sudden, they were not alone, Colin pulled back and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a pink satin slipper.

“I brought this along to remind me of you. Benjamin found it by the window.”

Smiling through her streaming tears, Nora peered behind Colin at Benjamin, who sat wide-eyed and quiet.

“You may both see the humor in this,” she teased. Reaching into the pocket of the slattern’s skirt, she extracted her other slipper and delicately shrugged one shoulder. “It did little good to have one. I am afraid I sent the other woman to the tunnel without shoes.” She considered the gentleman and the boy in front of her. “I am the luckiest person to have two men who care so much for me. Thank you, Benjamin, for helping to rescue me, and thank you, Colin, for making me the happiest of women!”

## EPILOGUE

*THREE WEEKS later*

*London, England*

NORA CHECKED the looking glass above her dressing table once more and adjusted her headpiece. She felt like a princess in her gown. She and her mother settled on an elegant, pale pink spotted muslin dress with a train. A stylish, shimmering gold-pink ribbon separated a one-piece bodice and skirt. Short undersleeves of white linen added form to the long muslin sleeves, which ended at the elbow. A shimmering over-dress of the palest pink gossamer she had ever seen covered the bodice and skirt. A small tiara of pearls and tiny diamonds was carefully woven into a loose chignon, with her blonde curls softly framing her face.

Absently, she repositioned a stray curl and stared at the image looking back at her. So much had changed in her life in little more than a month. Today was a day she had never imagined possible. She was marrying her own prince—the man who fulfilled that wistful dream of fairy tales placed in her head as a child. This was her day—her wedding day and the day she moved to her new home. Colin had already given her leave to redecorate anything she wished to. She learned that Grandmama had offered another building to repay her uncle's debt, but he had refused it. Uncle had been arrested. According to Colin, the deed to the orphanage had not been the first document that he had altered. At least one more had



surfaced, although she had not heard the details. Father was helping Grandmama get it all sorted.

Colin's younger brother, Jonathan, had located the perfect property for their fencing salon quite by accident. With Colin's backing, their dream would soon become a reality.

Her betrothed had made no demands of her, instead telling her to decide about her life and her duties, new and old. That raised him above any gentleman she knew, save her sweet father.

With Grandmama's agreement, she had already established a reduced presence at the orphanage. Mrs. Simpkins and Mary had proven themselves quite competent with the children, and they adored their duties. With the new headteacher she and Grandmama had hired, her own duties would be more supervisory. Miss. Britthaven brought a wealth of experience, and remarkably, shared their philosophy, having once been an orphan herself. Nora planned to use her newly-gained status to influence the ton and follow her dream to raise funds for orphanages. She envisioned working with her Grandmama to establish at least two more in the East End.

True to his word, Colin made sure that Doctor Perth visited the children, especially to check on Benjamin's cough. The doctor had initially worried that the boy might have sustained permanent damage to his lungs. Yet upon thoroughly examining him, Perth determined that exercise and a tonic for the cough would, in time, clear the ailment from Benjamin's system, which was welcome news. Had his time in the chimneys been much longer, the doctor said the lung damage could have threatened Benjamin's life. Uncle's ladybird had probably saved the young boy's life, Nora contemplated. Her grandmother had been so delighted with the news, she offered to help Doctor Perth find a building for his office closer to the orphanage — an offer the good doctor readily agreed to take.

A gentle knock at her door signaled it was time to go.

“Are you ready, my dear?” Her mother stepped into the room, followed by her father. The years had been kind to Lady Eliza Mason. Nora's mother looked young enough to be

mistaken for Nora's older sibling. Translucent skin, rich auburn hair with naught but a trace of silver, and a youthful figure still turned heads.

"It means so much to me you could be here. The wedding is happening so quickly." Nora reached over and hugged each of her parents. Her father's law practice, together with the management of his father's fledgling business, gave them little time to be away from home. To her relief, the hard work was finally having the desired result. Her parents' financial straits had eased. Father's pride impeded her grandparents' ability to help them, yet Nora knew her grandmother took every opportunity to direct business in their direction.

"Your sister and brothers are with your betrothed in the church. They have done nothing but speak of Colin and how wonderful he is. I am afraid we may have difficulty persuading them to leave with us." Her mother chuckled.

Lt. Peter Mason pulled his daughter close. "We are all happy for you, Norabelle."

She felt comforted by her father's use of his pet name for her. "Thank you, Father." A small tear worked its way down her cheek. She had missed his hugs. Nora's father stood tall and looked trim for his age. He was the type of man who commanded attention from all the women in the room when he entered, even though it was obvious he only had eyes for her mother.

"Daughter, nothing could keep me from seeing you marry." He cleared his throat. "Tell me, does Lord Shefford treat you well? 'Tis not too late to back out. I would stand by you." A slow grin quirked his mouth.

"Thank you, Father, but you need not worry," she returned, feeling the warmth of a faint flush tingeing her cheeks.

"We are so pleased you have found a love-match, Nora. It worried me when Mama told me you were betrothed. We wanted you to marry for the right reason—love. Having seen you together, I can see I worried needlessly," her mother said, planting a kiss on her cheek.

A furious blush heated her neck. “We have not spoken of love, yet I feel my heart is engaged.” She took a deep breath. “Colin looks at me the same way Father looks at you.” She had expressed nothing thus to her parents in her twenty years. Nora bit her lower lip, discomfited and uncertain of their reaction.

“He has not mentioned his feelings?” Father queried, sounding surprised.

She dipped her head. “Not yet,” she smiled. “Yet, the things he does for me... I feel sure he shares my feelings.”

“Fear not,” her father rejoined with a slight smirk. “Sometimes the man’s brain is the last to resolve these things.” He glanced from her mother back to Nora. “Are you ready, my dear? We should not keep them waiting too long.”

“I almost forgot. I have something for you.” Her mother withdrew a black velvet box from her reticule. “It would mean so much if you were to wear this. I wore these pearls on my wedding day. They were my grandmother’s.”

Nora wondered what Grandmama’s reaction would be when she recognized them. She was certain there would be tears.

“Thank you,” she breathed, turning the delicate necklace over in her hand and running the pearls through her fingers. “They are lovely, Mother,” she whispered, leaning forward for her mother to attach them.

“There,” her mother said, softly touching the strand of beads and stepping back to admire them. “You look perfect.”

Peter Mason extended his arm for his daughter. Proudly, Nora accepted it, placing her fingers lightly on his arm, reveling in the feel of having him there to help her brave her way through the ceremony.

The small family arrived at St. George’s Chapel in time to see Grandmama and a small convoy from the orphanage arrive. Fourteen children followed her into the church, all outfitted in new suits and dresses. Nora inhaled a deep breath at the sight of all the carriages. She sent up a prayer that she

would make it through the ceremony without creating undue attention. Their wedding had become the *ton* event she had feared. She had given her word. Her mother's only wish had been to help with her dress. Nora could not be happier with the selection. The pearls looked perfect against her gown.

As she walked down the aisle, she focused her attention on her betrothed. He stood next to Jonathan, a tall man who bore a striking similarity to Colin except for his blond hair.

The ceremony was a blur until the Reverend called for them to recite their vows. Colin placed an emerald and diamond ring on her finger. As he slid the ring down her finger, he looked into her eyes.

"I know this is but a token, but I hope you will accept this ring as a sign of my affection. I love you, Lady Shefford. Marrying you has made me eternally happy.

Tears clouded her eyes as she looked from her finger to his face. "I love you, Colin. I had never thought to find my prince—until I found you." She lifted onto her toes and placed her arms around his neck as his lips covered her own.

As they walked towards the door, he leaned close to her. "There is one more slight surprise, Lady Shefford."

"What could that be, Lord Shefford, when everything I need is with me at this moment?"

"I will tell you when we reach our carriage." When they arrived at the conveyance, four of the children stood beside it, waiting—Alice, Amy, Becca, and Benjamin. Benjamin stood next to his new 'uncle' Jonathan, proudly dressed in a black coat and pantaloons, with a gold Paisley patterned waistcoat.

"They are all ours, now." Colin beamed.

"Mama... ." The smallest of her children smiled up at Nora with her hands arms outstretched.

"Her first word!" Filled with sudden emotion, Nora picked her up and nuzzled her with kisses. "Oh, Colin, I am so very blessed," she said through her sudden tears, giving each child a hug and a kiss. "I would never have asked you..."

“You did not have to. I know that leaving these children behind would have been too much to ask—even for me. I asked them if they would care to live with us and be part of our family and they accepted. We will give them the love every child deserves.”

“Where will they stay while we are gone on our honeymoon?” A moment of concern assailed her. She could not send them back to the orphanage when they had just found a home.

“They will stay with me,” her grandmother’s voice declared from behind them as she moved closer. “My dear, you make a beautiful bride.” Grandmama feathered her fingers across the pearls. “I am so pleased you wore these. I have not seen them in years. They were my grandmother’s too, you know.”

Nora pushed back tears as she hugged her grandmother close. “Thank you for everything you have done for me... for us,” she said, swiping at her tears and smiling at her suddenly large family. “This has been a perfect day, Grandmama.” She saw her parents and three siblings approach and waved to them. It thrilled her to see them.

“We will see everyone at my mother’s house. For now, I intend to have a few minutes alone with my new bride.” Colin pulled her close and whispered in her ear, “We should hurry to the wedding breakfast, so we can the sooner disappear...”

His warm breath elicited a giggle she could not contain.

Benjamin raced to the carriage and stopped in front of the door. “Allow me to open the door for you, *Mother and Father*,” he said haltingly as he opened the door. He tried out their unfamiliar names, speaking in the King’s English with only a hint of his accent. He had obviously been practicing hard for the occasion. “Would you mind if I rode with Uncle Jonathan to Grandmother’s house?”

There could be no better gift from her husband than these four children. Nora reached over and hugged her little gentleman. “I am sure your Uncle Jonathan will take good care of you. Off with you, now!”

“I will be happy to,” Jonathan answered. “Do not take too long.” With a grin, he tapped Benjamin on the shoulder and the two of them walked to his chaise.

The door to the bridal carriage closed as it lurched forward. “At last, I have you to myself,” Colin said, leaning in to give her neck a soft kiss. “I meant what I said a few minutes ago. The night awaits us, wife.” He cast a sly look at her.

Nora had never felt so happy in all her life. “My husband, I cannot wait to learn all you have to teach me,” she said coyly. She placed her head on his shoulder and peered up at him, letting herself sag against him. Her body pulsed with an unfamiliar need. She was not hungry for food.

“Impudent wife.” He cupped her face in his hands. “This will be the shortest wedding breakfast in history... I promise.”

He leaned closer and his lips gently feathered a trail of warm wet kisses down her neck as she inhaled his delicious bergamot scent. His slow, gentle nibbles to the lobe of her ear sent delightful pulses to her core and prompted a groan of need. As if in answer, Colin slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her in a way that left no doubt Nora had found her prince.

## ALSO BY ANNA ST. CLAIRE

Also By Anna St. Claire

The Earl She Left Behind

Romancing A Wallflower

The Duke's Golden Rings

My Lord, My Rogue

The Earl of Weston

Earl of Bergen

Earl of Shefford

Silver Bells and Mistletoe

Embers of Anger

Christmas on Scandal Lane

Lyon's Prey: The Lyon's Den

The Earl of Excess (The Rakes of Mayhem, Book One)

The Marquess of Mischief (The Rakes of Mayhem, Book Two)

The Duke of Disorder (The Rakes of Mayhem, Book Three)

The Wedding Wager

Sunflower Season

Upon a Midnight Dreary

Duke In Winter

Sunflower Season

Hello Rogue

Some Wallflowers Do

EARL OF ALNWICK



# CHAPTER ONE

*ALNWICK HALL*

*Northumberland, England*

*September, 1821*

KATIE PRINGLE'S scream caught the attention of Niall Jameson, Earl of Alnwick, while he happened to be nakedly bathing in a side pool of the river between the boundary of their estates on this fine autumn day. The sun was shining and a gentle breeze ruffled his hair as he washed off the sweat and grime of a solid day's work rebuilding the rundown stables at Alnwick Hall. "For the love of...Katie, no!"

Niall watched in horror as the bane of his childhood existence, the Perfect Miss Pringle, caught her fancy slipper on the hem of her elegant gown, tripped, and tumbled headlong into the deepest part of the river.

He cursed as she fell in with a loud splash and was immediately caught up in the swiftly moving current that would certainly pull her down into its cold depths because the irritating girl, his childhood nemesis, did not know how to swim.

She had never learned.

For this reason, Niall knew she'd always been afraid of the river and had never dared go near it before.

So what was she doing here now?

He pushed off the bank and swam as fast as he ever had in his life toward the irritating girl, desperate to reach her before she sank beneath the surface, never to be seen again.

As often as he'd dreamed of tossing her into these swirling waters and laughing as she flailed and sputtered, her perfect pigtails and neatly tied bows coming undone, he had never considered actually having her drown.

His heart was pounding by the time he reached her side. All that remained visible was one lace-gloved hand. He firmly entwined his fingers in hers and hoisted her upward so that her head broke the surface. "Katie, of all the stupid, reckless—"

She coughed in his face.

Well, she hadn't meant to do it. She was obviously terrified and struggling to regain her breath. As he helped her, she spit out water and took in great gulps of air. "Katie, you—"

"I know. Don't yell at me."

She tearfully threw her arms around his neck and pressed herself to his body, holding him in a death grip while sobbing. "Thank you! I'm so grateful. You saved my life."

Yes, he had.

He was surprised by how good it made him feel. He'd spent most of his life avoiding responsibility, doing all for himself with little care for others. His father and grandfather before him had been cut from the same cloth, which probably explained why the Alnwick holdings were in such a dismal state.

But now that he was earl, he'd been trying to improve matters.

Katie suddenly gasped and tried to push away. "Oh, spillikins! It's you. What are you doing here, Alnwick?"

He tightened his grip on her body on the chance she was stupid enough to actually let go of him. "Fight me and I vow I shall let you drown, you little peahen. The more important question is what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to

be in London marrying into one of England's wealthiest families?"

Her wedding was supposed to have taken place a week ago. She was marrying the Marquess of Yardsley, an inconsiderate arse who was never going to be faithful to the Perfect Miss Pringle, but why should he care? Katie was an uptight, righteous—

"I ran away."

He burst out laughing. "What? Am I hearing right? You? The paragon of perfection, the obedient, never a hair out of place, never a white glove soiled, soul of propriety and decorum, is a runaway bride? Did you run off before or after the wedding ceremony?"

"Before."

He began to swim her over to the safety of his side of the river, but slowed his strokes so he could pry more information out of her. The sun was shining down on them and there was not a cloud in the sky. He'd finished his daily chores and was in no hurry to get back to an empty home. "What happened?"

"He...he was...I caught him with my best friend." He could not tell whether the water now spilling down her cheeks was from her soaked hair or whether she was crying. He hoped she was not crying.

Then he'd be forced to feel sorry for her.

"You caught him with Sybil? As in caught talking to her? So what?"

"They weren't talking. He was *with* her."

*Bollocks.*

He supposed it was too late to simply set her safely on the grassy bank and swim away. He was too incensed by the way she'd been treated by Yardsley, that selfish prig. Nor had he ever liked her supposed best friend. "Sybil was never to be trusted. I warned you about her."

She sniffled as she frowned at him. "And she warned me never to trust you."

“And you believed that lying witch?” He had a mind to let go of her and watch her flail for a few desperate moments before taking her back in his arms. He would have. He should have. Except her body felt surprisingly good against his and he was not eager to let her go.

“Why shouldn’t I believe her? You were a terror as a child and an impossible rake as you grew older. You did nothing to improve your reputation. What was I to think?”

He tried to concentrate on their conversation and ignore the fact that she was no longer a skinny rail but had lovely, soft breasts that were now rubbing against his chest. “Even so, Sybil was no better. She was just sneakier about it.”

“I learned that lesson the hard way. I caught them together in the clerestory. Yardsley did not even have the decency to wait until after the wedding to be unfaithful. He and Sybil were...” She inhaled raggedly and released the breath in a sob. “They were...cavorting...in an intimate manner in the church. *In the church*. Less than an hour before we were to marry.”

“So you ran off.” Her legs were entwined with his and her thigh was now rubbing against his private parts, although he was trying his best to avoid *that* contact.

Not that she realized what she was doing.

Or that he was naked.

Katie always was a naive widgeon.

In truth, it was perhaps the only thing he liked about her. Well, he’d now add her breasts to the short list of things he liked about her.

In truth, she was a good, sweet girl.

He’d been the bad one, and too much of an arse to appreciate how nice she was.

“They laughed at me when I caught them. Yes, I ran off and never looked back. They are welcome to each other for all I care.”

“Good for you. That took courage. I’m proud of you.”

Her eyes rounded in surprise. “Why do you say that? I thought you hated me.”

They were now approaching his side of the river and he knew he’d soon have to release her. “I never hated you. Yes, you rankled me. I disliked your perfect manners and your always perfect behavior. There were often times I wanted to push you into a mud puddle just to knock you down off your pedestal.”

“You did push me into a mud puddle once.”

The accusation surprised him. “When? I don’t ever remember doing that.”

“I was fifteen and you were twenty. You showed up drunk and soaking wet to my birthday party. It had been raining hard earlier in the day so the ground was wet. You were too cobbled to find the front door, so you stumbled around to the back and passed out on a bench in our garden. I ran out to fetch you and bring you inside before you caught a lung infection and died.”

He hoisted her onto a grassy patch of the bank, briefly wondering when she was going to realize he was naked and start screaming again. “Why did you run out to me? Why didn’t you send a footman?”

“I didn’t want you to get in trouble and thought I could sneak you in myself. But when I tried to help you up, you tumbled off the bench and took me down with you.”

“Into a mud puddle?”

She nodded.

“If one were to be precise about it, I didn’t push you into it then. We simply fell in because you were foolish enough to try to lift me.”

“I was only trying to help. I wanted to protect you so that you would not get in trouble with your family.”

He laughed. “That’s rich. My family? My father and grandfather would have clapped me on the shoulder and asked me how many girls I’d...entertained that night.”

Katie looked as though she was about to cry again.

“*Blast*. What’s wrong now?”

“Is that what you were doing on the night of my party?”

“No, I wasn’t. I was merely drinking. I’m nothing like Yardsley.” Not that he was a saint, but even he would have had the decency not to cheat on his bride on his wedding day.

“My parents assured me you were worse.”

“They just assumed I would be since I’m a Jameson. But Yardsley’s reputation is no better. They were willing to overlook his because he is one of the richest men in England. I’m sorry they pushed you into marrying him. I could have told them it would never work. A girl like you needs to marry for love.”

He started to get out of the water, but thought better of it. Katie, despite being the most irritating girl in existence, had just endured a bad scare and narrowly avoided drowning. He would take it easy on her today. “Close your eyes, Katie.”

“Why?”

“Are your senses so addled that you have not noticed? I’m wearing no clothes. And by the way, that twitching thing you felt against your thigh wasn’t a fish.”

She shrieked and rose to scamper away, but her slippers were wet and the grass was slick. She tumbled back into the water, panicked and began to flail even though the water on this side of the river was not deep. It would have only come up to her chest had she bothered to stand.

He lifted her up and held her against him. “Katie, calm down. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Stop struggling. You’re not going to drown.”

She shrieked in his ear.

Which reminded him to ask why she was screaming earlier. “Was someone chasing you?”

“Not someone. Some *thing*. I accidentally walked too close to a fox den and the mother fox chased me away from her kits. I thought she was going to bite me.”

He tried not to roll his eyes. “You are quite the adventuress, aren’t you?”

Her bottom lip quivered. “Don’t mock me. I’ve been ridiculed enough this week.”

“Sorry. My point is, you wouldn’t last more than five minutes on your own.”

“I’ll have you know I’ve lasted perfectly well since leaving London, and that was almost a week ago. I made it all the way up here on my own, didn’t I?”

“I suppose. Why are you still wearing your wedding gown? And your perfect white gloves? Don’t you have a wardrobe filled with clothes at Pringle Grange?”

She cleared her throat. “I do. But no one knows I’m here yet. I rode the mail coach as far as St. Michael’s Priory and then walked the rest of the way. I was just cutting through your property on the way to my house when the fox chased me.”

No wonder she looked pale and exhausted in addition to looking like a drowned water rat. Her long, dark hair fell flat against her cheeks. Her big, green eyes usually sparkled as bright as emeralds, but also looked rather flat at the moment. She had dark circles under her eyes. “Katie, do your parents know where you’ve gone?”

She cast her gaze down. “No.”

“Bollocks, they’ll be worried sick about you.”

“I know. But I needed to get away before they made me marry Yardsley. I wanted time to decide what I’m going to do. Oh, dear! What if they have Bow Street runners waiting for me at Pringle Grange? I should have thought of it sooner.”

He gently brushed back the few strands of hair plastered to her cheek. “You are too tired to think straight just now.”

She nodded and began to nibble her lip.

After a moment, she looked up at him with pleading eyes. “I can’t go back there until I’m certain it’s safe. Would you mind terribly if I came home with you?”

“To Alnwick Hall?”

That would be a terrible mistake.

She was still looking up at him with soft, trusting eyes. “Just for a day or two.”

“Out of the question. Phillipa isn’t here. You and I would be alone save for the Crisps. The wife is my housekeeper and her husband takes care of the Alnwick grounds.”

“I remember them. They’ve been with your family for ages. I would be no trouble to any of you. I’ll do my best to stay quietly out of your way.”

He arched an eyebrow. “You do know my reputation, don’t you?”

“Are you suggesting I’m in danger of being seduced by you? I thought you didn’t like me.”

“I don’t,” he grumbled, surprised that she was not more afraid of him. In truth, she appeared intrigued more than horrified.

“Then where’s the problem?”

“I suppose there isn’t one.” Since she did not seem at all put out by the arrangement, he lifted her back onto the river bank. “Fine. Sit here while I dress. Close your eyes and don’t you dare peek.”

“As if I ever would.” She tipped her chin in the air. “I have no interest in gawking at you.”

“Good. Then don’t. Because I am completely, bare-arsed naked. Something you would have noticed if you weren’t so distracted by almost dying.” He swam the few strokes to the spot where he’d left his clothes spread atop a gorse bush. The low lying shrubs and small trees with branches leaning out over the water were not going to hide much of him if she did choose to look.

As for him, he did not much care if she saw him naked. But the sight of him would give the girl another shock and she’d had enough surprises this week. Not even he had the heart to cause her more strife.



He quickly donned his breeches, boots, and work shirt that still reeked of his sweat. “Mrs. Crisp will feed us,” he called over his shoulder as he tucked in his shirt. “She’s an excellent cook. I’m sure you’re hungry.”

“I am.”

He strode out from behind the barrier of shrubs and took the reins of his trusted gray, Templar, who was tethered nearby. “She’s a much better cook than your Mrs. Simms at Pringle Grange. Her food tastes like sawdust. Why does your mother keep her on?”

“Her cooking is just fine. But I will agree your Mrs. Crisp is unrivaled.”

He returned to her side, wondering why she was suddenly blushing. Had she been peeking? No, the Perfect Miss Pringle would never do such a thing. “I’m sure there will be a hearty stew waiting for us. But you’ll have to change out of those wet clothes first. Phillipa keeps some gowns here. We’ll find you something of hers to wear.”

“I would appreciate that.”

“Mrs. Crisp will help you out of your wedding gown.” Because he certainly had no desire to put his hands on her to help her out of her clothes.

“Don’t call it that.”

“What? Your wedding gown? As you wish. It’s ruined anyway.” The fine silk was soaking wet and molded to her body.

Her very shapely and beautiful body.

Blessed saints!

When did this happen?

He picked her up, ignoring the jolt of heat now coursing through him as he took her back in his arms to seat her on Templar. “Hold onto the saddle or Templar’s mane. I’ll walk you back.”

“No. I don’t want anyone to see me. Get on behind me and take me back to your home as fast as possible.”

*Bad idea.*

He shrugged. “All right.”

“Thank you, Alnwick.”

“Call me Niall. I hate that title.”

“Why?”

“Because it came with nothing but a pile of debts and an estate on the verge of turning to rubble.” He climbed up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, telling himself it was only to keep her from falling off.

It had nothing to do with the fact that perhaps...just perhaps...her body was magnificent and felt extraordinarily good against him.

This was Katie Pringle.

His lifelong nemesis.

He was never going to admit that he might have been wrong about her all these years.

No, he and Katie did not like each other.

He was going to keep it that way.

Even if his body disagreed.

## CHAPTER TWO

KATIE DID NOT TRUST Niall Jameson, Earl of Alnwick.

She never had.

Oh, he'd been nice to her today and quite valiant in rescuing her. But he was still a womanizing, rakehell cad, and she could never, ever let down her guard around him. Nor could she ever let him know that she had peeked while he was dressing.

She couldn't help it.

Curiosity got the better of her.

And now that she'd seen all of him, her treacherous her heart was still in palpitations. Who knew a man could be so finely shaped?

She hadn't expected his body to look better than those on the marble statues depicting the gods of Olympus one found in museums. She knew he had a handsome face. He'd always been sinfully handsome. But his body had filled out incredibly well. Spectacularly, now that she'd seen all of him.

And by all, she meant *all*.

Front, back, legs, chest, and all parts inbetween. Gawked, ogled, and noticed with heart pounding clarity.

He had long legs, a trim waist, and muscles piled on muscles that were attached to fascinatingly broad shoulders and firm arms. "Do you think the Crisps will let on that I am here?"

“No, Katie. They’ve always liked you. They can be trusted.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes, intending to rest them for just a moment. There was something quite reassuring about the resonant depth of his voice and the protective way he held her in his arms.

She’d often dreamed of being held in his arms, but never imagined it would ever happen. He didn’t like her.

She didn’t really like him, either.

Yet, she’d always been drawn to him. Infatuated, she supposed.

And he’d always rebuffed her.

She shook out of the thought, not wanting it to mar this perfect moment. The day was perfection as well. A gentle breeze blew in from the North Sea, carrying the scent of salt water inland with it. The sun was shining brightly, and the scent of grass, pine leaves, and roses also filled the air. It was so much nicer than the London air and the scents emanating off the Thames.

“How are you holding up, Katie?” he asked as Templar loped across the meadow toward Alnwick Hall.

“I’ll be all right. My heart is beginning to calm after that scare.”

He laughed wryly. “So’s mine. It was a frightening thing. Don’t ever go near the river again without me.”

“Believe me, I won’t.”

“Good, because you came seriously close to losing your life. No jest.”

“I know. I’ve never felt so helpless in my life. I hate that feeling.”

“Why did you never learn to swim? You’ve spent plenty of summers up here, at least a dozen by now.”

“My parents considered it a hoydenish thing to do. Proper young ladies did not jump into the water. They stayed indoors

and protected their alabaster complexions. They worked on becoming accomplished. I had lessons to become proficient on the pianoforte.”

“You play nicely. I’ve heard you a time or two.”

“Oh, thank you. I’m much less proficient in painting and dancing. I had lessons in those, too. And endless tutorials on how to hold a fan. I learned languages. French. Italian. Because one never knew when an Italian prince or French comte might walk into one’s life. But nothing could be better than an English peer. I was forced to memorize Debrett’s list of peers and peerages.”

“I’m sorry. I had no idea your family squashed the life out of you.”

“They did. They really did. But you could change that.”

He stiffened. “How?”

“For pity’s sake, you can start breathing again. It is nothing dreadful.” Well, he might think it was an awful idea. Although, why would he? She wasn’t asking him to seduce her or... heaven forbid...marry her. “Do you...would you...that is, I ought to learn how, don’t you think? Because if I am chased, as I surely will be once Father’s men catch up to me, it would be convenient not to drown.”

“Blessed saints! Are you asking me to teach you to swim?”

“Yes. What did you think I was asking? How else am I to help myself?” He had called her a squashed thing. Her betrothed must have also considered her to be this same nothing of a girl, one he could cheat on and laugh at when he was caught. “I could pay you for the lessons.”

“Don’t insult me, Katie. I’m not taking your money.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to be rude.” She hadn’t seen him since her fifteenth birthday. After that debacle when he’d landed drunk atop her - and obviously did not remember it - he’d returned to university and she’d gone down to London with her parents. She knew he was often in London and that he belonged to the infamous Wicked Earls’ Club.

She thought about him on those rare occasions when she passed by Bedford Place where the club was quartered. All sorts of wicked goings on occurred there, she'd been warned. Not that she would ever consider entering such an establishment.

Perish the thought!

She'd also noticed him at the various balls and other entertainments held throughout the season, but he usually traveled with a fast crowd and never paid her any notice.

"You haven't changed much, Niall." He was still exceptionally handsome as he'd matured into a man. The firm cut of his jaw, his perfectly aquiline nose, broad mouth, and eyes that always held a gleam of mischief. They were still the vivid blue of a May sky, almost ensorcelling in their depth and brilliance.

His hair color hadn't changed much either. He still had a head of rich, golden hair that looked stunning on him when wet and slicked back, but also looked just as good as it dried under the heat of the sun.

He laughed softly. "And you've changed completely. I mean that as a compliment, Katie. You've filled out nicely. I expect you'll look quite pretty once you dry off."

"Did you not think I was pretty before?" His remark hurt her feelings, not that he ever had a care what he said or how he hurt her. He wasn't mean, really. He was just careless, and would usually apologize once he realized it.

He was quite sincere about his remorse, too.

So, despite never wanting to like him, she sometimes did.

She also liked the way he stood up to people who tried to foist rules on him.

At those times, she would quietly cheer him on.

But he never bothered to look at her.

"Of course, you were pretty. But you were a child. There was a five year difference in our ages. I was not going to consider you as anything more." He placed a big, warm hand

against her waist to secure her in the saddle. “What I thought back then doesn’t matter. We both know I was a complete and utter idiot and a wastrel.”

She laughed. “Yes, that’s true. You were, at times.”

He was never really an idiot, but he certainly had been a wastrel. Yet, he’d always had a good heart. It was something he was often reluctant to show. She assumed his careless habits were his father’s bad influence. Or his grandfather’s.

These elder Jamesons were known to be straying hounds.

But Niall was different.

She knew it and felt it to the depth of her soul.

Because if he was like them, then he would have already found himself an heiress to marry. He would not have had to dirty his own hands with the heavy toil of fixing up his estate. After securing his bride’s fortune, he could have returned to his sordid London clubs and spent his days in idle pastimes and his nights in debauchery.

But he hadn’t done any of it.

Well, he was a bit of a womanizer.

That would end when he fell in love and married. Again, she felt it in her soul. He was a decent, honorable man. This is who he really was.

She did not understand how or why she’d come to this conclusion. Perhaps it was because he had the hands of a laborer, rough and callused.

Was it wanton of her to like the way they felt on her body?

Oh, good heavens.

No!

They rode the rest of the way to Alnwick Hall in silence.

As they drew nearer, she noticed improvements to the manor and grounds. “Niall, you’ve done a fine job. The hall is looking better than I’ve seen it in years.”

She turned slightly to glance at him, and found him looking at his home with pride. “My father and grandfather never did much to keep it up. I’m trying now, but it’s slow going.”

“You’ll get it done. I know you will. I’ll help you while I’m here.”

He laughed, his breath soft against her ear. “You’ll ruin your delicate hands.”

She shrugged. “I’m not made of porcelain. I can be useful. What would I do otherwise?”

“Don’t you have more on your mind than to think of fixing your wastrel neighbor’s mess?” But he seemed pleased by the offer. “You need to consider what you’re going to do about Yardsley. A bridegroom’s infidelity is not necessarily sufficient grounds to end a betrothal. Is there a chance he is willing to let you go?”

“A very good chance. I’m sure of it. He never liked me all that much. I don’t even know why he chose me out of all those young hopefuls. Perhaps because his family was leaning on him to marry. He thought I was a timid drudge who would put up with his womanizing and other arrogant foibles without complaint.”

“Then he’s a great fool,” he said with surprising anger.

“No, I was the fool for going along with it. I was nothing more than a wealthy door mat for him.”

They’d now arrived at Alnwick Hall.

He dismounted and placed his hands around her waist to help her down. But to her surprise, he did not immediately release her.

Not that she cared.

If he wished to hold her, she was not about to gripe about it.

“Can you stand on your own?” He was looking at her as though seeing her for the first time.



“I’m sure I can.”

“Because I thought your legs might buckle. You look spent, as anyone would if they’d taken the mail coach from London to here. You probably got very little sleep. Then you walked all the way from St. Michael’s Priory. Not to mention the dip you took in the river a little while ago. Perhaps I had better carry you inside.”

“Oh, that’s actually thoughtful of you.” She cast him a hesitant smile.

He chuckled. “It is, isn’t it? Good grief, Katie. Too long in your company and I might turn into a bloody saint.”

“I’m sure there’s little chance of that.” She put her arms around his neck as he took her back in his arms and carried her into his big, rambling house.

A shocking thought struck her the moment they passed through the doorway.

They’d crossed the threshold!

As in...I’m carrying my bride over the threshold to signify our new life together as husband and wife.

Yardsley, the toad - yes, she thought of him as a lowly toad she’d love to squash beneath her boot - would never have done this.

But Niall had.

Did it signify anything?

## CHAPTER THREE

NIALL WAS NOT GOING to think twice about what he'd just done, carrying the Perfect Miss Pringle into his house as though she was now to be mistress of his home. His sanctuary. Well, she wasn't.

She would never be his wife.

He was not going to marry a paragon of perfection and spend the rest of his life walking on eggshells to please her.

But he would carry her upstairs to Phillipa's room since there were no other guest chambers properly aired out and readied for company. "My cousin won't mind if you use her bedchamber. She won't be back for another week, so you would not be putting her out."

"How is Phillipa? I look forward to seeing her."

"She's at a house party at Lord Wrexham's country manor. He's taken quite a fancy to her and she rather likes him, too."

"A love match?" She sighed. "I'm so happy for her. I've always liked your cousin. She deserves the best."

"And she's always liked you." He opened the door to Phillipa's bedchamber and carried Katie inside. "Take whatever you need."

He set her down and forced himself to take his hands off her, not quite understanding why it was so hard to do. "I'll send Mrs. Crisp up to assist you. Her husband and I will bring up a tub and hot water for your bath."

“It seems an awful lot of bother. I can wash my hair in the basin.” She pointed to the ewer and basin atop the bureau. “As for the rest of me, I can scrub myself down with the remaining water. All I need is a washcloth and soap.”

“It’s all right, Katie. We don’t mind spoiling you a little today.”

She started to thank him, but sneezed instead. “Oh, dear.”

“Here, let me help you with the laces. You had better get out of that wet gown right away.” Heat shot through his entire body the moment he came up behind her and loosened those wet ties. *Bollocks*. He’d barely touched her.

But they stood aching close.

And her body - good heavens - those full, pert breasts and long, slender legs would turn any man into a mindless, rutting ram.

He turned away as soon as he was finished and flung open the doors to his cousin’s wardrobe. He found nothing but light, summer clothes in there. Not even one serviceable woolen wrap. He removed the only robe he could find, a thin, silky thing. “Here, put this on until the bath is ready.”

He strode out before he did the unthinkable and kissed her. The mere notion of Katie’s soft body hidden under nothing but silk had turned him to fire.

Obviously, he was delusional.

Him and Katie Pringle?

The idea was laughable.

He strode downstairs in search of Mrs. Crisp, knowing he only needed to follow the heavenly aroma of lamb stew into the kitchen to find her.

He saw her bending over a large pot, stirring the stock for the stew. “May I have a word, Mrs. Crisp?”

“Yes, m’lord. I assume it has to do with Miss Pringle? I saw you carry her upstairs.”

“It’s all innocent. You don’t need to hit me with your spoon and tell me what a good girl she is and what a despicable knave I am.” He quickly explained all that had happened to Katie.

“Blessed day! And you’ve left the lovely lass alone to fend for her herself after all she’s just been through? She must be shivering. Here, take up this pot of tea and a slice of last night’s apple tart. This ought to hold her for now. I’ll find Mr. Crisp and have him help you bring up the bath and water.”

Niall stared at the tray she’d just shoved in his hands.

“Well, go on with you. Don’t keep the sweet girl waiting.” She tried to shoo him out of her kitchen as though he were nothing more than a cat underfoot.

But he stood his ground and attempted to shove the tray back at her. He was a bloody earl, not a hired maid for the girl. “You ought to be the one to bring it up to her.”

“I need to find my husband and finish cooking. Why are you suddenly so reluctant? Are you scared of Miss Katie?”

He snorted. “Why should I be? Of the Perfect Miss Pringle?”

Mrs. Crisp frowned. “That is not a nice thing to call her. You’ll hurt her feelings. She’s always been kind toward you. It isn’t fair of you to mock her, especially now that she’s had her gentle heart broken by that wretched lord.”

“Fine. Stop boxing my ears.” He carried the tray upstairs and knocked lightly at her door, knowing his housekeeper was right. Yardsley had treated her abominably and it would be shameful of him to behave as boorishly.

The door flew open and Katie greeted him with a big smile on her face. “Mrs. Crisp, how lovely to—” Her eyes widened and a fiery heat shot into her cheeks, turning them a pretty shade of pink. She gathered the robe about her, Phillipa’s silk robe that was obviously too big for Katie, which explained why it was partially slipping off her shoulders.

He almost spilled the tea on himself.

She ought to have looked ridiculous in it, but she looked like a seductive, kittenish bundle. Indeed, she looked remarkably splendid in the pink silk that did not so much hang upon her body as deliciously hug it.

He took particular note of how the silk fell worshipfully over her soft, round breasts.

*Bloody nuisance that.*

He glanced at the bed, then silently chided himself for the slip. His body was eager to cavort there with her, but his brain - as boiled and useless as it often was - thought better of it.

However, the little fool had placed her unmentionables over the footboard, in his plain sight. Which suggested she was completely naked beneath the robe she was still clutching in her soft and slender hands. Not merely suggested this fact, but screamed it at him...naked Katie...take advantage...slip it off her.

The thought should have revolted him.

Sadly, it did not.

His heart, as well as that treacherous lower part of him, was going to burst if he did not get his mind off her. It did not help that she seemed to be having trouble holding this vapor-thin garment together. "Katie, move aside and let me set down the tray."

The robe slipped open a bit farther. "Oh, of course. You startled me. I expected Mrs. Crisp."

"I know," he said, trying to sound calm as fireworks exploded behind his eyeballs and threatened to erupt lower. "She commanded me to bring this up for you while she finished preparing our meal. I may be the Earl of Alnwick, but she's firmly in charge. I answer to her, not the other way around."

Katie emitted a trill of laughter. "I knew I adored the woman for a reason."

"Well, it seems she adores you, too." He grinned as he turned away to set the tray down on a small side table by the

window.

He purposely kept his back to her, afraid to look at her. He was a Wicked Earl, even had a stick pin in the shape of a 'W' to denote his membership in the elite club. But he would never fall so low as to take advantage of Katie.

“Thank you for bringing me the pot of tea. It is just the thing. I am a bit chilled.”

“I know...I mean, I expected so.” He'd noticed the proof of it while gawking at her breasts. Lord, he'd fallen so low.

“Niall, I think we have a problem.”

He busied himself pouring a cup of tea for her because he was still too cowardly to face her. “What sort of problem?”

“Phillipa's clothes won't fit me. She's taller than I am and built quite differently. I'd have to alter her gowns and it wouldn't be right. I'd ruin them for her.” She came around to face him and took the offered cup from his hand. “Does she have any clothes from her younger days?”

“I don't think so. She didn't visit much when she was younger and her parents were alive.” He'd been appointed Phillipa's guardian even though he was only a few years older. Her father had named him in his testament and some idiot judge had upheld it.

Him?

A trustworthy guardian?

Well, he'd done his best to look out for his cousin.

“What shall I do? I don't have anything else to wear and I cannot order my own gowns brought over from next door or my father's staff will know I'm here. Their loyalty is to my father, not me.”

He raked a hand through his hair as he gave the matter consideration.

The only idea he could come up with in the moment was not very clever. Indeed, it was almost absurd. “I'll give you some of my childhood clothes. Phillipa keeps nothing here

other than the gowns and accessories in this wardrobe. Would you mind wearing a pair of boy's breeches?"

She gasped and cast him an endearing smile. "I would love that! I was always made to dress in bows and lace and forced to wear delicate slippers that were good for nothing but sitting politely. I couldn't run in them. Or go outdoors without getting them soaked. All I ever wanted to do was toss them aside and climb the apple trees in our orchard."

"You did?" He was genuinely surprised. She'd always seemed so smugly content, sitting quietly and looking like a doll on display in her starched, white gown, matching white gloves, big white bow in her dark hair, and strand of pearls glistening at her throat. "Well, that is something we will have to attend to before you leave Alnwick."

He had no idea she'd been feeling so confined and unhappy.

Her eyes were as big as emerald moons. "Seriously? You would do this for me?"

"It will be my pleasure." All the adults had frowned at him and called him a heathen while he ran around wildly, scraping his knee, tearing his breeches, and always dirtying his clothes. Meanwhile, poor Katie had been tortured by watching him have fun and never being able to participate.

He was going to remedy this. "I'll give you one of my caps to hide your hair when I take you to the orchard tomorrow. We'll steal your father's apples and bring them home for Mrs. Crisp to bake in a pie."

Her eyes could not contain their sparkle. In truth, the entire room seemed to suddenly shimmer with their light. "Hurrah! That sounds perfectly wicked. I've never stolen anything before in my life."

He caressed her cheek, quite charmed by her enthusiasm. "Katie, you are a Pringle. These are your apples. I'd be stealing them. You wouldn't be."

He laughed at the look of disappointment washing over her face. "But I'm sure your parents would be horrified to learn

that you were dressed as a boy and climbing trees. Not to mention abetting me while I stole your apples.”

He cupped her pert chin in his hand and gave it a gentle tweak.

The beautiful smile returned to her face. “Well, that’s all right then.”

He cleared his throat and released her before he did the unthinkable and kissed her. “I’ll be back shortly with your tub. Drink your tea. You need to warm up.”

And he needed to be iced down.

He returned downstairs to the kitchen, intending to lean over the sink and pump cold water over his head, but Mrs. Crisp and her husband were already waiting for him. He and Mr. Crisp carried the tub upstairs instead.

His heart began to pump harder now that he was back at her door. She’d left it ajar. “Katie, make yourself presentable. We’re here with the tub.”

She pattered to the door in her bare feet and held it wide for them. He was relieved to see that she’d done a better job of wrapping the robe around herself, although she still looked irresistibly delicious. “How lovely to see you again, Mr. Crisp. How have you been?”

“Can’t complain, dearie. But you’ve certainly set London on its ear.”

She blushed. “It is rather a mess.”

“Never you worry. It’ll all work out. You’re safe here for as long as you wish.” They set the tub beside the hearth. “His lordship will never tattle. Nor will the missus and I.”

“I appreciate your kindness more than words can say.”

“We’ll be back in a trice with the bath water,” Mr. Crisp assured, striding back out.

Niall lagged behind a moment. “I’ll help Mr. Crisp bring up the buckets then search the old trunks for my boyhood clothes.”



He turned away and strode out the door before she could reply.

But it was little reprieve, for he was in and out of her bedchamber another three times, carting in buckets of water that were as steaming hot as the blood coursing through his veins. Once the chore was completed, he marched to his own chamber and stripped out of his clothes. Since he'd already washed in the river, he merely changed out of the dirty work clothes and put on clean ones.

He did not bother dressing like a gentleman.

It seemed a waste of time since Katie was going to be sitting beside him in breeches anyway. Once changed, he ran upstairs to the nursery and began to rummage through the old trunks. All his boyhood clothes were in there. Well, at least the ones he hadn't managed to destroy.

He grinned, imagining what Katie would look like in them.

He drew out several shirts, knickers, vests, and jackets. Then he grabbed some socks and boots, and finally, two caps. Feeling quite proud of himself, he strode down to her bedchamber and knocked lightly at her door. "Katie, it's me. Are you decent?"

"No! I'm in the tub." He heard the soft splash of water as she obviously panicked and tried to sink down low enough to cover her body should he ignore her warning and march in.

A man's brain was a shameless thing. Instantly, it sank low as well. He wasn't purposely trying to think of her naked.

Nor would he open that door.

But how was he to hand her the clothes?

Mrs. Crisp angrily poked her head out a crack and grabbed the clothes out of his hands. By the fierceness of her scowl, she was obviously aware of the depraved workings of his mind. "Do not dare come in here," she warned before shutting the door in his face.

"I wasn't going to ravage the girl." Outright lie and Mrs. Crisp knew it. "Fat lot of thanks I get for trying to be helpful."

He heard Katie giggle. “Thank you, Alnwick. I appreciate your thoughtfulness. Now go away. I’ll join you for supper shortly.”

“And do not disturb us again,” Mrs. Crisp added with a grumble.

The harridan was not going to guard the girl day and night, was she?

Besides, why should he care?

These stirrings of desire he was suddenly having for Katie were merely an aberration. He’d return to his senses in a moment. Indeed, he was already not thinking about Katie soaping her body or how beautiful she would look with water glistening off her breasts.

He made his way downstairs and went to the stables to check on Templar to make certain the valiant steed was properly curried and fed.

Katie was just coming downstairs to join him in the dining room when he strode back inside about twenty minutes later.

She looked too delicious for words.

He grinned as he held out his arm to escort her to supper. “My clothes fit you.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I’m still getting used to them, but I love how they feel on me. Quite liberating.”

Her hair was damp and had merely been brushed back off her extraordinarily pretty face. Her hair was longer than he’d realized and those dark curls were spilling down past her hips, covering much of her shapely bottom.

He tried to ignore the effect she was having on him.

Why should she be special? He’d bedded plenty of young ladies with long, dark hair, and even some with emerald eyes.

But Katie’s eyes held starlight.

He’d also kissed many a young lady’s soft, pink lips...and soft, pink breasts, if he wanted to be crude about it. He shook

out of that low thought, because he was never going to kiss this girl's breasts.

He wasn't going to kiss her anywhere on her body, not even innocently on her lips.

His body was a roiling mess by the time he led her to her seat at the table. Mrs. Crisp had placed her beside him, obviously deciding to keep them close. Of course, it made sense. They weren't going to shout at each other from opposite sides of the long table. Besides, he would never see her over the enormous, silver epergne sitting decoratively in the center.

But seated so close to her felt uncomfortably intimate.

Why did she have to be so pretty?

Her scent was nice, too. Like orange blossoms. And now his clothes would carry her scent. Well, he hadn't fit into those boyhood garments in ages. They'd go back in the trunk once she was done with them.

He said nothing as Mrs. Crisp served them their stew and placed a loaf of freshly baked bread beside their plates. Mr. Crisp poured him an ale and her a glass of cider. Then the couple disappeared into the kitchen, leaving him alone with Katie.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. "I am going to gobble this meal down."

He smiled at her. "Go ahead. Slop it up with the bread, too. That's what it's there for. I'm sorry it isn't fancy, but—"

"It's perfect." She inhaled again and this time turned glittering eyes on him. "Do you wish to know a secret?"

He arched an eyebrow, wondering what possible secret this innocent girl could have. She had never misbehaved in her life, never even stolen so much as an apple off a tree. "Yes, aching to know."

"This is how I always dreamed my life to be."

He shifted uncomfortably. "What do you mean?"

“Quiet. Pleasant. Nothing fancy. Just like now. A perfect meal and good company. I’ve always been an embarrassment to my parents. They’ve worked so hard to make me elegant, a Diamond of the *ton*. But I’m not. I never will be. I was born with an inelegant soul. Well, I don’t mean inelegant, exactly. Perhaps humble soul is a better description. I dislike ostentation. I’d be happiest leading a simple, country life.”

“That is a dire secret, indeed.” He cast her a teasing smile. “But you are wrong about yourself, Katie. You are an incomparable diamond. You are not cut like all the others. Nor do you have their same polish. But that is not a failing, that is your strength.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your parents are wrong to mold you like all the other young ladies out in society. Most of them are vapid and dull. But you...well, you are radiant. You...are unique.”

“Is that your polite way of saying I am odd?”

“Not at all. You are like no one else. You are cut like no other gem and your shine has hidden depths. You are no mere bauble with outward polish. Your sparkle comes from within. It is intricate and magical.”

She said nothing, but he knew she was affected. The little apple in her throat bobbed. “Did you just give me a compliment?”

“Yes.” He leaned closer. “Any man with a sensible brain will appreciate your worth. Forget about Yardsley. He’s an arrogant boor. And you’re right. He won’t want you once he realizes you’ll stand up to him. But let’s have this conversation later. You must be starved. Eat up while the stew’s still hot.”

Nodding, she dipped her fork into her plate and began to poke at her food.

“I’m sorry it isn’t finer fare,” he said, watching her out of the corner of his eye. “But I’m alone here and usually tired after a hard day’s work. This sort of meal suits me better than—”

“Oh, I quite agree. Nothing to apologize for,” she said, hastily swallowing the dainty dollop she’d stuck into her mouth. “This is perfect. I can’t tell you how deadly dull I find all those sophisticated dinner parties and the endless courses we must sit through. I’m often seated at the low end of the table because of my lack of rank. You have no idea how boorish some of my dinner partners have been.”

“Even if the host and hostess seated you beside dukes and earls, you’d likely find the conversation stifling.” He swallowed a mouthful, vowing to increase Mrs. Crisp’s wages once he had two shillings to rub together. The stew was delicious. “The titled despise successful commoners like your father, believing him unworthy of his wealth. Yet, they covet it and will hold their noses to marry into it.”

“Or pile it onto their own wealth as Yardsley meant to do.” She set down her fork and studied him. “Why have you never married? Don’t you wish to find yourself an heiress?”

“I suppose. I’ve never made a secret of my intention to marry into a fortune. It would certainly make life easier for me.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. I just haven’t gotten around to making the commitment yet.”

“I suppose you’ve been having too much fun as a bachelor.” She stared into her plate. “How much of a commitment does it need to be?”

“None, I suppose. Other than an agreement to be discreet in my extramarital pursuits. My father and grandfather before him couldn’t even manage that. I expect they hurt their wives. I know my father’s antics hurt my mother.” He frowned. “Katie, eat up. Is something wrong with your food? Because mine is delicious.”

“No, but I just realized...” She cast him a thoughtful look. “The men my father sent to look for me will probably catch up to me in a couple of days. I’m sure he’s offered an obscenely large reward for my safe return.”

“Yes, it is likely.” He took a sip of his ale while waiting for her to explain.

She dabbed her lips with her table linen and cleared her throat. “What if you were the one to return me safely to London? Then the reward would be yours. It would go a long way toward putting your estate in order, wouldn’t it?”

His frown deepened. “It would, depending on how large it is. But I’m not going to deliver you back to your family if they’re going to insist on your marrying Yardsley. I’ve told you, you deserve better than that oaf.”

She appeared surprised. “Why do you care what happens to me after you collect your reward? I thought you didn’t like me.”

“I thought I didn’t, either,” he grumbled. “But not liking you is not the same as despising you enough to participate in ruining your life.”

She chuckled. “That is quite noble of you.”

He set his elbows on the table and stared at her. “We both know it isn’t.”

“Well, give my proposal some consideration. I’m not likely to escape whatever fate my parents have in mind for me. It would all seem pointless and wasteful if nothing good came out of it. I mean it, Niall. Don’t be so quick to dismiss me. Alnwick Hall is a beautiful house and deserves to be restored to its former glory.”

“Yes, it does.” He nodded. “But not on the back of your misery.”

“I’ve just told you, I’m going to be miserable no matter what is decided for me. However, why should something good not come out of it? My fate would be more bearable if I knew your home, your tenant farms, and the other Alnwick holdings were given the chance to flourish because of me. Think of it this way, you’d be doing me the favor.”

“Katie, no.”

She looked like a wounded bird. “So you will allow my entire life to be a waste?” “You are awfully young to be giving up on your future. No matter what happens, your life is not going to be a waste.”

“It is, Niall. There’s no need to be polite about it.” She bowed her head, no doubt trying to hold back tears.

*Bloody nuisance.* How could she think he’d ever enrich himself on her unhappiness?

“Just consider it. Promise me you will. After all, someone will eventually find me and take me back to London. Why shouldn’t it be you?”

“What if your father insists on your marrying Yardsley? And who’s to say Yardsley will refuse? I could be wrong about him. He may decide he likes you with a little fire in your belly.”

“No, I assure you. He wants a mouse for a wife. Give it some consideration. I am willing to help you. There is no need for both of us to be denied our happiness.”

“Fine. I will consider it.” But he wouldn’t really. He supposed he was the worst fortune hunter ever to exist. Who ever heard of a fortune hunter with a conscience?

But he could not take money for delivering Katie into an unhappy marriage. Even if Yardsley begged out, who would her father seek out next?

Never him.

The Pringles detested him, mostly because his father and grandfather had been rude to them and always behaved like flaming arses, especially around her father. They considered him to be a lowly tradesman. Therefore, he was to be treated as unworthy of their notice.

No matter how hard the Pringle family had tried to be good, welcoming neighbors, the Jameson men had ridiculed and rebuffed them.

Instead of giving up and moving away, Katie’s father had doubled the family efforts to be accepted. In doing so, he and his wife had tied poor Katie in knots, making her live up to an impossible standard because his idiot forebears would never accept her as one of their own.

Fortunately, the local gentry were better behaved than the Jameson earls. They adored Katie and treated her with the respect due a proper young lady.

At least there was that.

He must have hurt her so badly, he suddenly realized. His careless behavior had only added to the legacy of Jameson arses.

He'd showed up drunk to her birthday party.

And she still wished to be kind to him?

Not even he liked himself very much at the moment.



## CHAPTER FOUR

NIALL LEFT EARLY the following morning to meet his laborers at the Hobson family tenant farm to make repairs to their roof and barn. Daniel Hobson and his sons were his best farmers, and he was thinking of engaging the younger son, Henry, to oversee the other farms on Alnwick land. Although barely above twenty years of age, the lad had a solid maturity about him that had quickly earned him the respect of others.

His calm manner also went over well with the older, more experienced farmers. It was a good fit, because Hobson's elder son was going to take over the farm when his father grew too old to keep it up, and there was not likely to be a place for Henry. Certainly not once he took a wife and started to raise his own family.

Appointing young Hobson as Alnwick's estate manager was an excellent solution for both of them.

He glanced up at the sky, noting the height of the sun.

He was scheduled to spend all day with his workers but was worried about leaving Katie alone for too long. What if her father's hired men came looking for her? He could have dozens searching for her by now.

He turned to Henry. "Willing to take over for me? I have some business to finish up at the manor house. Do you think you can manage here on your own?"

Henry beamed. "I'll do my best, my lord. I won't let ye down."

“Good. Summon me if you encounter any problems.” With that, he rode back to Alnwick.

It was just noon by the time he arrived.

Mr. Crisp hurried out and took Templar’s reins. “Miss Katie is in the kitchen with m’wife.”

“Thank you,” he muttered, wanting to tell him that he did not care where she was or what she was doing, but not even he would have believed himself.

Katie looked up and smiled as he strode in. “Mrs. Crisp is teaching me how to bake bread.”

“That’s useful.” He eyed the loaf cooling on the windowsill, taking care to study it and not Katie, because his housekeeper was watching him like a hawk. He wanted to keep his thoughts about the girl to himself.

No one’s business.

She looked beautiful.

This did not surprise him.

He hadn’t needed more than a glimpse of her in his boyhood clothes to get his heart racing again. Her hair was bound back in a braid, but he supposed it was safer that way, especially with fires going, and boiling pots and steaming kettles all around.

He walked over to the sill. “Is this the loaf you baked, Katie?”

She followed him over and scrunched her nose. “Yes, my first attempt. Take a small bite. I wouldn’t want to make you ill if it turns out to be awful.”

“I’m sure it is delicious.” He pulled off a chunk and took a cautious bite. His eyes widened in surprise. “This is good. *Mmmm*. Very good, actually. What did you do to it?”

She beamed with pride. “I merely followed Mrs. Crisp’s instructions. But I suggested tossing in a few raisins. I remember how much you always liked the raisin pudding we had at our Christmas parties. Is it all right then?”

“More than all right.” He ripped off another chunk and ate it.

You’d think he’d just anointed her empress of the realm, she was so obviously pleased.

“Did you sleep well?” he mumbled with his mouth full. “Your eyes are clearer.” *As in, they are bright and gorgeous.* “No dark circles under them.”

She nodded. “Yes, very well. Phillipa’s bed was quite comfortable. Thank you.”

“Let’s have our midday meal and then I’ll take you apple picking. How’s that?”

“Sounds perfect.” She turned to Mrs. Crisp. “We’ll grab enough to make several pies and perhaps enough to make cider. The apples might still be a little tart though. They won’t be fully ripe and at their prime for picking for another two or three weeks.”

“You just bring them to me and I’ll sweeten them, never ye worry,” Mrs. Crisp said with a nod of satisfaction. “I’ll add a little sugar and cinnamon and they’ll taste just grand.”

Niall led Katie into the dining room where place settings were already laid out for them. “Have a seat,” he said and held out a chair for her when she seemed to look bemused. “What’s wrong?”

She settled in the chair. “I was just wondering...where would you eat if I was not here?”

He shrugged and settled in his. “I’d probably still be with my workers, having lunch with them.”

“What about for supper?”

He wasn’t certain why she cared, but he supposed she had been a bit of a mother hen even when younger, always wondering what he and her brothers were up to and worrying they might get hurt.

Of course, her brothers often did come home with minor injuries because boys did not play gently. “Mrs. Crisp usually brings a tray up to my bedchamber for me. I’m often

exhausted by the end of the day. Then up at dawn the next morning. Of course, we use the dining room when Phillipa is around or when friends pay a call.”

She toyed with the stem of her empty glass. “Do many friends visit you here?”

“No, and I don’t encourage it. I see enough of them when I’m in London.” He watched while she nibbled her lip. She was fretting, although he did not know why. Then the reason struck him like a bucket of bricks falling atop his head.

Katie, this sweet girl he’d ignored and dismissed for most of her life, worried that he was lonely.

*Because she’d been so lonely all of her life.*

To prove his point, she cast him an endearingly sympathetic smile. “Do you have no friends around here?”

He laughed. “I have more than enough. I don’t mind the solitude, you little snoop. Indeed, I savor it. How else am I to get my work done?”

He reached for her hand and gave it a light squeeze, amazed that of all people, Katie should be the one to think of him and worry about his wellbeing. “It does not bother me to eat alone.”

This was not merely about his daily routine. This was about all the enjoyment she’d been deprived of while being molded into someone elegant despite her common heritage. She had never had a playmate deemed suitable for her when she was younger.

She could not even play with her brothers because they were always running off with him, leaving her behind to her tedious lessons.

Her eyes filled with trepidation as she continued to ask him questions. “Do you plan to go back to London anytime soon?”

“Perhaps around Christmas. Katie, truly. I am not unhappy being alone here. I’ve made good progress on restoring the estate, and there’s lots to keep me busy, especially with the

harvest coming up soon.” He leaned back in his chair and studied her. “My turn to ask questions.”

She nodded. “I suppose it is only fair.”

“Why did you run to Pringle Grange? There must have been easier places to which you could have escaped. Your father has several beautiful estates in England, at least two that I know of near London.”

She nodded. “I’m not sure why. Perhaps because this place always felt most like home to me.”

“Truly? Why? You only spent summers here.”

Her cheeks turned pink. “The truth?”

“Yes, always.”

She sighed and continued. “Because of you.”

“Me?” This was a revelation.

“I always found you entertaining. Usually because you were making an ass of yourself, but you always made me laugh. Your jests and antics were never cruel, just silly. My brothers liked you, too. They looked forward to seeing you, even though you were always a bad influence on them.”

He arched an eyebrow and grinned. “They never complained.”

“Why would they?” She cast him a charming smile. “They had fun misbehaving with you, even if you did give my father fits.”

Niall winced. “He never liked me.”

“Can you blame him? Your father and grandfather always treated him abysmally. And you...well, you were the bane of his existence. But you always raised my spirits. I’d see you riding up and would immediately start laughing. I thought of you as a dust devil. You know, one of those whirlwinds that tear through one’s home and leaves a mess in its wake.”

She shook her head, looking mirthful for the first time. “You were a good friend to my brothers. Ralph is now married and settled in Boston. Michael travels all the time since he’s

being groomed to take over the Pringle businesses. He's too busy to marry, or so he tells me, even though he's the eldest. Jordan is in Scotland building Pringle ships, and when he's not doing that, he's at his stud farm breeding the finest racehorses. He's also married."

"They might all be coming up here to look for you then. I hope so. You'll be safest returning to London with them."

"No, they won't be coming for me. They weren't in London for my wedding. They cannot have heard yet about my running off. Perhaps Jordan has by now, but he will not leave his wife because they're expecting their first child any moment. I don't know where in the world Michael is right now. Ralph is off in Boston and happily settled there. He's not going to run home to search for me when I'll likely be found before he ever receives word."

"I see." Niall's responsibility was clear. He owed it to her brothers to protect her. "Perhaps we had better not go apple picking."

She shot to her feet, shooting daggers at him with her gaze. "Why ever not? Don't tell me you are suddenly feeling brotherly protective toward me? I will not allow it. I want my adventure and no one will deprive me of it. I'll go by myself if you will not take me."

He grabbed her hand. "Sit down, Katie. You ought to know me better than that by now. Of course, I'll lead you astray. Never you worry. It is what I do best."

She grumbled her thanks and sat back down as Mrs. Crisp came in to serve their food, a game pie smothered in gravy.

They spoke no more, each too busy devouring the tasty meal. But Niall's thoughts were madly whirling in his brain. Taking the girl to pick apples was not nearly enough. Yes, he would give her that small adventure, but he would also have to be the one to escort her to London.

He could not trust anyone else to keep her safe.

"This is delicious, Mrs. Crisp," she said when his housekeeper returned to clear their plates. "Thank you for a

wonderful meal.”

“You are most welcome, Miss Katie.” The woman beamed.

Niall’s heart twisted. Why had he thought he disliked this girl? She did not have a haughty bone in her body. “Come on,” he said with a wink, “let’s go steal some apples.”

He took her hand as though it was the most natural thing in the world for him to do. Only once they’d reached the front door did he realize what he had done.

*Blessed saints.*

Why did holding onto her feel so right?

Everything about her felt right.

He paused to properly tuck her hair under the cap he used to wear when he was a boy. He hoped this disguise would fool anyone who came looking for her. “Let me inspect you before we head outside.”

Big eyes stared back at him.

No one would ever mistake her for a boy. She had the biggest eyes, framed by endlessly long, dark lashes. Her lips were too soft and pretty ever to be mistaken for a man’s lips. Her cheeks were as soft as peaches.

He sighed. “Come on, let’s go.”

He stepped back to allow her to walk out ahead of him, the gentlemanly courtesy ingrained in him. He realized his mistake at once. Katie was supposed to be a boy and he should not be paying this ‘lad’ any particular deference or respect. In truth, if pressed, he would say this boy was a grandson of the Crisps, deaf and mute.

It was all he could think of to keep strangers from looking too closely or trying to talk to her.

Katie would kill him for that lie.

It could not be helped.

Did she have a better idea?

There was another reason she could not be allowed to walk ahead of him. She had an exquisite bottom that wiggled delightfully every time she took a step. She was temptation itself. He was going to crash into trees if he did not stop ogling her and start watching where he was going.

She hurried down the front steps, then turned to face him when he did not immediately follow. “What’s wrong? Aren’t you coming?”

“Yes.” He certainly was, and she could take that response any way she liked. She would take it innocently, of course. Meanwhile, he was fighting a ridiculously molten desire to carry her back to his bedchamber and run his hands everywhere along her body.

He truly was an arse.

He’d never liked her.

Why couldn’t he remember this?

They walked in silence across the meadow and over the stone bridge that spanned the river. It led from his estate to hers, down a long drive to the Pringle family manor. One could not see the Pringle house from the bridge because the orchard covered much of their grounds.

Most of the apples were not ripe yet, but he caught their fragrant scent on the breeze and knew several trees might have fruit ready for picking.

“Here’s a good spot to start,” he said, drawing her off the road and into the outer edges of the orchard where the trees got the most sun.

He took a moment to scout out the best one, then made a foothold with his hands and hoisted her onto one of the lower branches. “Niall, we did not think to bring a basket or a pouch. How are we going to get the apples back to Alnwick?”

“We don’t need anything. You are going to stuff them down the front of your shirt.”

She peered down at him through the thick growth of leaves. “You cannot be serious!”



“I am.” He reached up to tweak her nose. “Where’s your sense of adventure? Come on, be quick about it. I think I hear your father’s gardeners coming. Grab a dozen and let’s go.”

She gave a soft squeal and got to work.

He watched, trying not to burst out laughing as she hurriedly stuffed apples down her front, creating a sort of slide for them between her breasts. In truth, he had brought along a soft pouch that was now neatly folded in his back pocket.

But watching Katie was too rich to pass up. Besides, she wanted to feel naughty, and this was so much better than merely sticking apples in a pouch. Was it not?

He certainly thought so.

She looked so earnest as she grabbed each apple and hurriedly crammed it down her shirt front.

“Careful,” he said, desperate not to burst out laughing. “Don’t rip the buttons.”

It was harmless fun. Surprisingly intimate and exhilarating.

Katie wanted to be wicked.

He was merely providing her this innocent pleasure.

“Are you done? Quick, the gardeners are almost upon us.” It was an exaggeration. Well, an outright lie, actually. There was no one around. He would never have allowed her to climb this tree and pluck those apples if there was the slightest chance she would be discovered. “Here, let me help you—”

She slipped off the branch, emitted a soft cry, and tumbled into his arms.

As she fell atop him, he felt the hard lumps that were the apples stuffed down her bosom. But he also felt the softness of her breasts. An inferno of heat ravaged through him as he wrapped his arms around her to hold her steady. “Katie, are you hurt?”

“No,” she said with a shaky laugh, scrambling to her feet. “Let’s go.”

She took off at a run, waddling mostly because those apples were rolling around her shirt and she was trying to clutch them like a woman carrying a babe in her belly.

He easily kept pace beside her, hanging back a little and keeping alert. No gardeners would be chasing them, but he wanted to be sure no strangers sent up from London to track her down were hiding close by either.

“Is anyone following us?” she asked breathlessly, glancing up at him with vibrant eyes.

He’d never seen this girl so alive before.

“Nobody behind us, but keep going until we’re safely over the hedgerows in my meadow.” He lifted her in his arms and hauled her over that natural fence of bushes as soon as they reached the Alnwick property line.

He thought she’d pause to catch her breath, but she immediately took off to race through the meadow toward the house. “Katie, slow down. We don’t need to run any more. You’re safe.”

“But we are out in the open here.” She gestured toward where his sheep were grazing.

“So what? This is my land. And you are the Crisp’s grandson, should anyone ask. Just keep the cap on your head, keep your eyes down, and do not say a word if ever we are stopped. Got it? You are to say nothing if anyone attempts to question you. Pretend you are mute. But they won’t get near you because I won’t let them.”

“What is my name to be? I must have a boy’s name.”

“I suppose.” They kept walking quickly toward the house. Even with a jacket that fell below her bottom to hide its shapely curve, he could still tell she was a girl. She moved like one. He’d have to teach her how to walk like a proper boy. “How’s Bartholomew? Bartholomew Crisp. It has a nice ring to it.”

“No. I need something closer to my name so I’ll remember to respond to it.”

He frowned. “You had better be mute *and* hard of hearing.”

“Fine, but I still do not wish to be called Bartholomew.”

They were almost at the kitchen door now. “Caleb. You’ll be Caleb Crisp. Although I’m sure all this subterfuge won’t be necessary. Come on, let’s dump the apples on the table. Mrs. Crisp will be eager to get the pies started.”

Her cheeks were a bright pink and her eyes sparkled like gemstones as they tore into the house laughing like children.

His heart lurched when she stuck her hand down the front of her shirt and began to pull the apples out one by one to set them in a neat row upon the table. “Need help with that?” he asked with a wicked arch of his eyebrow and an even wickeder grin.

Mrs. Crisp tried to hit him with her spoon.

Mr. Crisp walked in and saw Katie taking the last apples out. “M’lord, was there something wrong with the pouch I gave you?”

Katie froze with her hand still down her shirt front. “You gave him a pouch?”

Mr. Crisp regarded him helplessly, not wanting to betray him, but not willing to lie to the girl either. Niall took pity on him. “Yes, he did. But you wanted an adventure, did you not?”

She threw one of the apples at him. “You wretch!”

But she was laughing, so he did not think she was very angry.

“Using a pouch would have been the same as gathering purchases on market day. Dull and ordinary. Admit it, Katie. You had fun. You were behaving badly and enjoyed it.”

She was still laughing as she removed the last of the apples. “I did. But just to be clear, you are an untrustworthy, utterly disreputable and despicable knave.”

“Never denied it.” He grabbed one of the apples and took a bite out of it. “Mmmm. It’s delicious. Try it.” He held it out so

she could take a bite and was pleased when she did so without hesitation. Despite calling him untrustworthy, she actually trusted him.

This pleased him beyond measure.

She had to know he would never do anything to hurt her or ever lead her seriously astray. In fact, he suddenly felt quite protective of her.

She scrunched her face and made a sour expression as she munched on the apple.

“I know. They haven’t ripened yet. But I like them with a little tartness.” Unlike his taste in women. When he took himself a wife, he wanted her soft and sweet. In truth, someone just like Katie was proving to be.

To his own surprise, he’d long since tired of the meaningless relations one could easily find at the Wicked Earls’ Club.

The casual decadence gave him very little pleasure now. He wasn’t sure why, for his father and grandfather before him had never tired of these one-night affairs. Of course, they had never taken much pride in the Alnwick holdings and hardly gave this estate any consideration other than what they could take out of it.

But he had always loved this place and now felt great pride in restoring it to the treasure it was meant to be.

He shrugged out of his musings, distracted by Katie’s beauty as she removed her cap and allowed her long, dark braid to spill down her back.

*Blessed saints.*

*This girl.*

He regarded her thoughtfully.

His father had treated her as though she was slime beneath his boots. He had been little better, providing a terrible example for the Pringle sons. If only he hadn’t driven her father apoplectic every summer they’d come up here.

The man now hated him.

This would be a problem because Katie - heaven help him - was perfect for him. Indeed, the Perfect Miss Pringle appealed to him as no other woman ever had. He wasn't certain what it was about her. Perhaps it was her wonderment at the littlest things. He enjoyed watching her, was fascinated by her expressions, and could not help being swept up in her excitement.

He had not realized quite how much he had been missing until their apple picking excursion this afternoon.

When had he ever had such innocent fun? It was all because of Katie.

She somehow added laughter to his life.

She made the simplest things enjoyable.

However, he refused to make too much of it.

He may have had more fun this afternoon than he'd had in age, but it was still only one afternoon. She would begin to wear on him the more time they spent together.

They were so different, how could she not?

But what if she didn't?

## CHAPTER FIVE

LATER THAT EVENING, Niall stood beside his window and stared up at the moon as it glowed against a celestial canopy of darkest black velvet. After having feasted on the best apple pie he'd eaten in a long while, and having spent a delightful evening listening to Katie chatter about her debut season, he was more confused than ever about the girl.

What was he to do with her?

He could not hide her at Alnwick forever. Neither could he find it in his heart to deliver her to Yardsley. Nor would he deliver her to her father if he merely intended to turn her over to that arrogant cur.

“Any ideas what I should do?” he asked, gazing up at the moon and stars as though they might impart some divine wisdom. “I know I’ve been a wretched heel, but Katie hasn’t. Help her, even if you won’t help me.”

He waited for a sign.

Of course, it would never come. The sky was silent, the moon quite full and beautiful.

Silver moonbeams shone on his garden, illuminating the small fish pond he had restored just last month.

*Bloody hell.*

Also lit by the moon were two shadowy figures skulking across his flower beds.

His heart began to pound.

Had the investigators hired by Katie's father traced her here already?

He hurried out of his room and silently crept into hers. He wasn't sure how to wake her without having her scream and give herself away, so he clamped a hand over her mouth. She woke up terrified and immediately tried to strike him.

"Katie, it's just me." He pinned her down against the mattress. "I'm not trying to hurt you. But you have to get out of bed and hide upstairs. Your father's men are here."

The fight died out of her.

Gone was her sleepy haze, replaced by a look of utter fright.

She eased his hand off her mouth. "Already? Niall, what shall I do? Where shall I go?"

"There's a little niche off the nursery. It isn't easily noticed, and I'm not going to let them search much up there. But first, you have to help me make the bed. It has to look as though no one has slept in it."

She nodded. "I can do that."

She scrambled out from under the sheets and immediately began to fluff the pillows while he drew the sheets taut and straightened out the counterpane. It wasn't hard to do. The girl hardly made a dent in the bedding. She obviously did not toss and turn much when she slept.

They were standing so close now that they'd finished the task, he felt the warmth of her slender body next to his. He tried not to think of anything but getting her hidden, but she was wearing one of his shirts as a makeshift nightgown and it only came down to her knees. Not nearly low enough to hide her shapely legs. It was not one of his boyhood shirts. She must have taken it out of his own bureau. "Where did you get that?"

She looked down at herself. "This? Mrs. Crisp gave it to me since my chemise isn't warm enough and nights here can get quite cool."

His heart was pounding again as he began to gather the borrowed clothes she had worn today. The grandson of Mr. and Mrs. Crisp would not be sleeping in one of the family guest chambers. “We need to hide your wedding clothes.”

“Don’t call them that. I don’t want to think about my wedding.” But she scampered around the room to collect those garments while he did the same with his boyhood clothes. The shirt she had worn today now carried the delicate scent of orange blossoms along with the fragrant hint of the apples they’d picked today.

He gathered the last of her borrowed boots and stockings. “Follow me.”

“Wait,” she said in an urgent whisper. “My pearls. Oh, here they are.”

He watched as she put them on, his thoughts now filling with all sorts of improper ideas, most of them concerning Katie in his bed, wearing only that string of pearls.

He was a wretched man.

Truly.

He lit a candle in the hall to guide their way upstairs. Until today, he hadn’t been up to the nursery in years. “Careful. Keep close.”

She nodded. “Sticking to you like a barnacle to a ship.”

He glanced at her to make certain she was all right.

Katie looked pretty by candlelight, her long, dark hair spilling over her shoulders wild and unbound, and her slender body outlined beneath the white linen of his shirt. It suited her quite nicely.

Very nicely.

Too nicely.

He glanced at her full, firm breasts, couldn’t help himself because she was naked beneath his shirt and the candlelight revealed this and more.

“Why are you staring at me?”



“Was I? I hadn’t realized.” Of course, he had been. “Just worried about what else we might have missed.”

They now reached the nursery.

He set the candle down atop one of the little desks and then opened a trunk to stuff the clothes he had taken out of there only a few hours ago back in there.

“What shall I do with these?” she asked, staring down at her own clothes.

“Let’s make sure we have everything.” He began to count the elegant items. “Gown, chemise, stockings. Garters. Shoes. Gloves. Where’s your corset?” He started to head back downstairs, but she stopped him.

“I wasn’t wearing one. Don’t worry. You have everything.”

“No, your hair clasps and ribbons. They must still be on Phillipa’s dressing table. Never mind. Let me get you hidden and then I’ll tuck them in her drawer.” He showed her the hidden niche. “Stay in there and don’t make a sound until I come back up for you. Do not come out until I open the door and confirm it is safe. If these are your father’s investigators, they’ll probably insist on searching up here. So don’t be fooled by the sound of my voice. I will get you out once they are gone.”

He considered tossing in a blanket for her, but the room seemed warm enough. Besides, he did not intend to let these men turn Alnwick Hall inside out, should they decide to knock at his door and request to search. “Niall, be careful.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Stay hidden.”

In all likelihood these oafs sought to break in like thieves in the night, quietly search for Katie and abduct her if they found her. He wasn’t about to let that happen. However, he did want them to search and not find her.

He went downstairs and woke Mr. Crisp. “M’lord, what’s wrong?”

“Prowlers.” He quickly told him of his suspicions. “I don’t know if they’re carrying weapons. I assume they are. Bring

your rifle on the chance they mean to cause trouble.”

“Where’s Miss Katie?”

“Safely hidden in the nursery niche. We restored Lady Phillipa’s room. It will appear as though no one has been in there.”

He heard the tinkle of shattering glass. “Damn it,” he muttered, adding the broken panes to his list of repairs. “Pringle’s going to pay for that.”

He lit a kitchen lamp, grabbed one of the hunting guns so that both he and Mr. Crisp were now armed, then headed to the summer parlor where he had heard the glass break.

Two men were now climbing in through the window they had managed to unlatch after breaking the pane. They were whispering to each other to be quiet when Niall raised his lamp. “Give me one reason why I should not shoot you gentlemen where you stand.”

His caretaker also pointed his rifle at the intruders.

“Hold there, m’lord,” one of them said, raising his arms in surrender. “We mean ye no harm. I’m Charles Digby and this is my young associate, Harlan Standish. We’re Bow Street runners here on official business.”

“Official business? Of what nature? I cannot imagine any that requires you to break into an earl’s home in the middle of the night.”

“No, m’lord. I will admit we went about it shamefully.” Digby rubbed a hand nervously across the back of his neck. “Ye’d be within yer rights to have us locked up, but we beg ye to show us mercy.”

“Why should I do that?”

“We’re on a very important assignment, searching for a young lady. We need to find her before she comes to harm. Miss Katharine Pringle. She’s yer neighbor’s missing daughter. We’ve been hired by her father to bring her home safely.”

He arched an eyebrow, pretending surprise. “And you think she’s here?”

“Yes. In the vicinity, m’lord. We believe she planned to hide out at Pringle Grange.”

“Then why aren’t you searching there?”

“We have,” said Digby, “but she never arrived. There ain’t much between here and St. Michael’s Priory where the mail coach dropped her off two days ago. We’ve been to the other homes in the area and also made inquiries in the village. No one has seen her.”

“And now you’ve come to Alnwick Hall. You think I’m hiding her here?” Niall laughed. “That’s rich. Obviously, you do not know my history with the Pringles. I can assure you, if ever a Pringle came to me for help, I’d turn them away. Miss Pringle would not dare step foot on my property. And by the way, I’m sending the bill for the broken window to her father. Let him know that I will shoot out every one of his fancy windows if he thinks to stiff me.”

“He’ll pay handsomely, I can assure ye, m’lord. But are ye certain ye have not seen the girl?”

“Do I look like I’m entertaining a woman in my home? But I’ll be on the lookout for her now. What is she doing here? Isn’t she supposed to be marrying the Marquess of Yardsley in London? Good riddance to bad rubbish, if you ask me.”

Digby shrugged. “She must have had wedding jitters, I suppose. We’ll be in the area for the next few days, staying at the White Stag Inn. Would ye be so kind as to send word to us if ye find her? The father’s quite broken up about her disappearance. He had a word or two to say about ye as well, m’lord. But surely ye can feel a parent’s worry for his child. We just want to return her to him before she comes to harm.”

“So you risked your lives to break in here? I could have shot you and been fully within my rights. Why risk it? A reward?”

“A handsome one,” the younger man said, and received a poke in the ribs from his companion. “Well, he’s paid us

handsome to find her. That's all."

"Don't lie to me. Pringle's probably got every Bow Street man in London on the job, and a fat bonus for the one who finds her."

Digby nodded. "More of them will be up here soon. We cannot be the only ones who've picked up her trail."

Niall sighed. "Put down your weapon Mr. Crisp. I think I must let these gentlemen search Alnwick or we'll be swarmed with these miscreants."

He gestured for the intruders to follow him. "Look where you like, but if you break anything or steal so much as a spoon, I shall shoot you dead."

"Understood, m'lord."

He followed the pair from room to room, as did Mr. Crisp and his trusty rifle. "Is it possible she's run off with another man? Perhaps she met him near St. Michael's and they're now on their way to Scotland to elope."

"It is possible," the younger man said.

He led them upstairs. "As you can see, the rooms are untouched save for mine. I can assure you, Miss Pringle has not stepped foot in my bedchamber. Search there, if you like. She believes I am a depraved oaf...which I am," he said with a smirk. "As I've said before. She will not come anywhere near my home."

Digby completed his search of the bedchambers and nodded. "We'll check the barn and then leave ye in peace, m'lord. Our sincerest apologies. But her father is desperate, so we must leave no stone unturned."

He waited for the Bow Street men to leave, then turned to Mr. Crisp. "I have to get Katie away from here. They'll keep coming back. If not these men, there'll be others."

"Where will you take her, m'lord?"

"Back to London. I must. Otherwise, she'll be chased across England and not necessarily by Bow Street runners. Others will come after her, hoping to claim the father's

reward. They might not be so kind to her.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I cannot leave her to the wolves. Much as I disapprove of her father’s aspirations for her, in truth he is a good man. She is safest brought back to him.”

“Aye, m’lord. I agree. The sooner you get her away, the better for her.”

“Henry Hobson will be bringing supplies to your wife tomorrow morning. He’ll be coming here with a loaded cart. As he unloads the sacks of flour and grain, we’ll slip her out. Katie’s a little thing and can easily hide under a few burlap sacks. Once we are certain no one is watching, I’ll borrow a horse for her from Hobson, and we’ll set off.”

The man nodded. “It is a decent plan.”

“She’ll have to stay in disguise as a boy.” It was the only way they had a chance of her going unnoticed since every searcher would be looking for a young woman. Also, as a boy, she could share his room wherever they stopped for the evening. He did not dare leave her alone. A room to herself was not a possibility. They’d deal with the repercussions once they reached London.

“I’ll have my wife pack a pouch of your boyhood clothes for her.”

Niall grinned. “I think she rather likes wearing breeches. Far less confining than her elegant gowns. I had better go up and let her out of the nursery. Mr. Crisp, would you be so kind as to keep watch tonight. I don’t trust those men to leave us alone. They’ll likely not attempt to break in again, but they’re going to keep their eyes on the house. As they said, there’s little other than Alnwick between the Pringle home and St. Michael’s. They know she has to be close by.”

“Never you worry, those men will not get near our Miss Katie.”

As his caretaker began to patrol, Niall ran up to the nursery. He opened the door to the hidden niche. Katie hadn’t moved from her spot. “It’s safe for tonight. Those men are gone.”

“I heard them searching the bedchambers.”

Niall nodded. “I had to let them do it or they would have been watching this house closely. They might still be, but I’ve devised a plan to get you away.” He quickly told her what he and Mr. Crisp had discussed.

He thought she would offer protest, but she merely nodded. “Yes, it’s time for me to go home. But you must promise me...”

“What, Katie?”

“You have to claim the reward. I mentioned it earlier, but now I must insist on it. Do it for me, if not for yourself.”

He helped her up. “We’ll argue about it on the road to London.”

She laughed lightly. “You really are an abject failure as a fortune hunter. I’ve never met a man less willing to sell his soul for wealth and comfort. You had better be careful or others might realize just how honorable you really are.”

“Perish the thought,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “I am not honorable in the least. And by the way, you’ll be sharing a room with me on our journey.”

She gasped. “How can I? It will mean my ruin if word gets out.”

“You are already ruined. You’ve run off on your own. The *ton* will imagine the worst. But stay calm, for we will only be sharing the room, not the bed.”

She eyed him warily. “Oh, is that so? I suppose you’ll get the bed since you’re the earl and I’ll get the floor?”

He grinned. “The privilege of rank.”

He would not let her sleep on the floor, of course. But she was already beginning to think of him as worthy and redeemable, and he truly wasn’t. She needed to keep her guard up around him at all times.

Although he made it a rule never to prey on innocents, she was far too tempting a morsel to resist. And he was never all

that good at following rules. “You cannot return to Phillipa’s room. They’ll be watching for any activity in one of these supposedly empty bedchambers. So, we’re going to share a room starting now.”

She came to an abrupt halt on the stairs and frowned at him. “Did I say you were honorable? You are a wretched man. Why should I not sleep in my own bed when you have a dozen to spare?”

He took her hand and led her toward the elegant earl’s quarters. “I just told you. They are going to watch for signs of you in the house. That Digby is an experienced Bow Street man. He got on your trail easily enough.”

“But you managed to distract him.”

“Maybe. So we have to take every precaution. He and his companion will expect me to be moving around my bedchamber, but the rest of the family wing must remain dark and empty.”

She tried to jerk her hand away.

He held on tighter. “Katie, if I am to get you safely back to London, you’re going to have to start trusting me. What difference does it make if we start sharing a room now or tomorrow? We’ll never make it out of Alnwick unnoticed if you do not cooperate.”

“But what will Mr. and Mrs. Crisp say?”

“Not a word to anyone. Not ever. Besides, they’ll see the evidence of my sleeping on the floor.”

She regarded him in confusion. “You’re going to take the floor?”

He sighed. “Of course. Did you really think I would stick you on a pallet instead of giving you my bed?”

“But what about when we travel? The inns?”

“Same rules apply there. I take the pallet. You take the bed. I was jesting before.”

“Niall,” she said softly, a broad smile on her face. “You really are a gentleman.”

In truth, he had no idea why he was behaving admirably toward her.

“No, I’m not. Don’t be fooled by a few kind gestures.” He did not like this sudden spurt of nobility one bit. “Wait in the hall.”

He doused the candle, set it on his desk, and then crossed to his window to peer into the garden where he’d first spotted the Bow Street men. They were still out there, believing themselves hidden amid the overgrown foliage.

*Fools.*

Their dark shapes were easily spotted under the moon’s glow. “Katie, stay low and don’t go near the windows. Those men haven’t gone away.”

“All right.” She stood in the hallway a moment longer, nibbling her lip. “Set up a pallet for me. Let me sleep on the floor tonight. I cannot move about freely anyway. One of us might as well get a good night’s sleep. It is more important that you do.”

“No, Katie. I won’t hear of it.”

“I’ll take you up on the offer tomorrow night. We’ll take turns as we travel. How’s that for a compromise?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“No more argument, Niall. We need to be smart about this. Don’t be a prideful arse.”

He frowned, but ultimately relented since it served no purpose to remain bickering over this inconsequential matter. He quickly prepared the pallet for her by the hearth, giving her his best pillow and a soft blanket. The day had been warm, and even though the night air was considerably cooler, it did not necessitate a fire to heat his quarters. She would be comfortable enough, he supposed.

He tucked her in, still feeling wretched that he was giving her the floor. But she seemed to take it as another adventure.



Her big eyes and broad smile were all he saw peeking out from under the blanket. “Sweet dreams, Niall.”

“Good night, Katie. Be ready to leave first thing in the morning.”

“I will be,” she assured him. “You’ll have not a moment’s bother from me.”

Was she serious?

She had already turned his life upside down, first tumbling into the river and almost drowning, and now he had strangers skulking about the Alnwick grounds just waiting for the opportunity to abduct her.

Right, not a moment’s bother.

And he was going to spend the next ten days sharing a bedchamber with her, forced to keep his hands off her sinfully hot, little body as they rode from Alnwick to London avoiding all the Bow Street men on their trail?

Jamesons were renowned wastrels.

How long before she wound up sharing his bed?

## CHAPTER SIX

KATIE AWOKE JUST before dawn but dared not make a sound since Niall was not yet stirring. She had caused him enough problems last night by bringing those two unsavory Bow Street runners to his door. Unfortunately, nature called and she needed to attend to it. He would be angry, but she could not very well take care of the necessaries in front of him.

What if he awoke?

Emitting a soft sigh, she rose and crept to Phillipa's bedchamber, doing her best to be as quiet and unobtrusive as possible on her way out of Niall's quarters. She checked the hall to make certain these men had not broken in again, and remained ever on alert, careful to stay away from any windows and even making certain to avoid the thinnest rays of sunlight.

She moved like a wraith, unseen. Unheard. Leaving not the slightest shadow.

Entering Phillipa's room, she wasted no time in doing what she had to do.

However, she did not rush back to the earl's quarters.

What harm would there be in washing up? The ewer of fresh water and empty basin were just sitting there on the bureau beckoning her. Next to the ewer was a fresh washcloth and Phillipa's favorite soap. Katie picked it up and inhaled the delightfully refreshing and delicate mix of orange blossoms and exotic oils.

She would have to buy this very soap once they reached London. She'd used it in yesterday's bath and loved it. Adding

exotic oils was a brilliant idea. Her skin had never felt as smooth or silken.

She quickly washed her hands and face, then could not resist applying it to her entire body.

Was it too much?

Would Niall think she smelled like an orange rind?

Why should she care what he thought? He'd been quite heroic and wonderful these past two days, but she'd known him for years and had not been particularly impressed by his valor before.

Once done, she meant to return to the earl's quarters, but found herself padding silently down the hall to the stairs leading up to the nursery.

She paused on the first step.

Truly, she ought to return to the earl's quarters.

But she was naked beneath Niall's borrowed shirt that she was using as a nightgown. Naked and smelled like a ripe orange.

She had to get dressed.

Feeling the soft, white lawn of his shirt against her skin was most unsettling.

Besides, it did not fit her well at all. She was not very big, almost lost in his shirt. It would fit him like a second skin, of course, for he was muscled and brawny.

She was very much aware that it belonged to him. In truth, the knowledge that his skin had touched the fabric and his divine, male scent had woven itself into the threads, did odd things to her insides.

Truly, it brought out the strangest sensations, this feeling as though *his* body was wrapped around hers.

She shook off the ridiculous thought and crept up to the nursery.

It took her no time to find the breeches, shirt and jacket, and other items of Niall's boyhood clothing she'd worn yesterday. She knew exactly where they had been placed last night to hide them from the Bow Street men.

She opened the trunk where the clothes were stored, took out the ones she needed, and also drew out an old sheet that must have been used in his crib. Using the sheet, she fashioned a binding to wrap around her breasts in order to better hide their fullness.

Unfortunately, it required her to rip the sheet apart. But Niall would understand and certainly approve. Once properly bound, she quickly donned his old clothes and boots.

It was early yet, so she decided to pack a travel pouch with more of his clothing since she could not wear the same shirt and breeches the entire journey. Mrs. Crisp had left the travel pouch beside the trunk, obviously intending to take care of the chore herself when she awoke.

The poor woman had plenty to do just getting the kettle on to boil and preparing their breakfast, not to mention whatever other morning tasks awaited her.

Proud of her efficiency, Katie quietly made her way down from the nursery and was about to sneak back into the earl's quarters when she was suddenly grabbed from behind, spun around, and pinned to the wall.

All she saw was golden skin and massive muscles.

The scream she was about to release froze in her throat. "Niall! Oh, thank goodness it's you! You didn't have to scare the wits out of me. I was on my way back to your room."

"You little fool," he said with a low growl that sent tingles through her body. "Why did you leave in the first place?" He released a groaning breath and rested his forehead against hers. "I thought they'd taken you."

Did he actually care about losing her?

"I was merely responding to the call of nature. Then after washing up, I thought it was safe to grab my clothes and dress for the day...your clothes, really. I packed more clothes for

our journey but left the travel pouch in the nursery for now. I'll retrieve it later."

"I'll bring it down when we're ready to leave."

"All right." She cast him a tentative smile. "Um, are you planning on dressing now? You really ought to get dressed. Do you think we might have breakfast before we head out? And I suppose we ought to carry extra food with us in case we get hungry later. Or will we be stopping at coaching inns to dine? We ought to—"

"Are you always this annoyingly talkative in the morning?"

"Yes, I suppose I am. My brothers often complained about it. Also, your body has me unsettled. It's big and hot and much too close."

He grinned but did not move away.

She cleared her throat. "I had better brush my hair and pin it up so it fits under that cap." She glanced at the boy's hat on the ground at her feet. She'd dropped it when he had scared her just now.

He released her finally and bent to scoop it up. "Do not go off on your own again, no matter the reason. Wake me first."

He handed it back to her but did not move away.

She took it, all the while staring into his magnificent eyes. "All right. I am sorry I alarmed you."

*Merciful heavens.*

The man was utterly splendid.

Heat radiated off his body, smoldering and manly. Or was it her insides turning fiery?

He'd slept in his breeches but had not bothered to don a shirt. Up close, his bulging muscles appeared huge and hard as granite.

Even his stomach was hard and flat. Lightly rippled, too. Like a washboard.

She wanted to touch him.

Of course, she never would dare.

But she was starting to understand why he was such a successful womanizer. Who could resist him? He was awfully nice looking for a dissolute, wicked earl.

His skin was beautifully tanned, unmarred save for a wicked scar that stretched along one shoulder to the back of his neck. It looked like a burn scar. Healed now, but still noticeable.

Otherwise, his body was exquisite. Perfect and golden. He must have removed his shirt while toiling in the fields...under the sun...which he probably had done. "Are you going to keep me trapped against the wall?"

She wasn't scared, just filled with this unaccustomed desire to touch his body. She'd never felt anything like it with Yardsley, which was convenient since Yardsley considered her a mouse and meant to tuck her away in a mouse hole while he cavorted in London.

"Yes, stay right there," he ordered.

In the next moment, he turned away to walk back into his bedchamber.

"Wait." This was most confusing. Was she being punished? Made to stand in a corner for disobeying him? "Where are you going?"

He paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Into my bedchamber, obviously."

"Yes, but why? And why must I stand out here?"

He entered and shut the door behind him, leaving her alone in the hall with her mouth agape.

Had he gone back to sleep?

No, not even he could be that boorish.

How were they going to get along during their time on the road if he behaved this way? In truth, she did not know how they were going to manage their daily routines. He could not

toss her out of their room every morning and leave her to stand like an idiot outside his door waiting for him to wash and dress.

The coaching inns they would stop at would be quite busy. They always were. Someone would notice her standing in the hall. What if that someone recognized her?

She and Niall would figure it out, she supposed.

His door opened suddenly.

“Are you—” She yelped when he merely stuck out a hand and unceremoniously drew her inside. “You needn’t grab me as though I were a sack of oats.”

“And you do not ever leave my side again without letting me know. Agreed?”

She nodded. “And you might have mentioned that you were keeping me out so that you could wash and dress. I thought you’d gone back to sleep.”

His lips twitched upward in a grin.

Oh, he was devastatingly handsome when he smiled.

Simply devastating in every way. She inhaled the scent of sandalwood soap on his skin and noticed that his hair was wet. He must have taken a moment to wash it. Men had that luxury since their hair was short and required little fuss.

Hers was too long, practically requiring a ceremony to properly wash it and brush it out so that it dried with just the right amount of curl and lushness to the long strands. It mattered little what she did with it now since she was going to keep it tightly pinned and hidden under the boy’s cap anyway.

She took a deep breath, once again reminded of his arousing scent. Clean. Male. Utterly beguiling. What did he think of hers?

Not that it mattered.

Or ought to matter.

She had a mind of her own and did not need his approval for anything. She liked Phillipa’s soap and the silky way it left

her skin. She adored that hint of orange blossoms. If he did not like it, that was his problem, not hers.

He ran a comb through his wet hair.

She stifled a sigh.

Truly, he was indecently handsome.

“Here, do whatever you need to do with your hair.” He handed her the comb. “Do you need help pinning it up?”

She did not want to admit she might need his assistance. After all, she’d just had an entire conversation in her head about standing on her own and not relying on him. “No, I can manage.”

Was that a flicker of disappointment in his eyes?

No, couldn’t be.

But he was done with his morning preparations and seemed to have nothing better to do than to watch her drag the comb through her dark strands. She made a bit of a show of it. Perhaps it was naughty on her part, but her hair was one of her finer features, and she liked to show it off.

Her lady’s maid used to tell her how beautiful it was and how men would fall at her feet if ever she left it long and loose.

She glimpsed Niall’s expression reflected in the mirror.

His gaze was steamy.

“Stop dawdling,” he said, his voice raspy. “Hobson will be here soon and we have to sneak you onto his cart.”

“Fine. Give me a moment to do it up in a tight braid. I cannot have it merely loosely braided. It’s a little more intricate to work and I’m not used to styling it that way. It’s trickier than—”

“I’ll do it.”

“You?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Don’t you trust me?”

She snorted. “No.”



“Sit still and be quiet.” To her surprise, his fingers began to expertly weave their way through her mane, his touch gentle. Intimate. Also quite possessive.

It felt odd.

It felt wonderful.

“Done. Open your eyes, Katie.”

She’d closed them while absorbing the wonderment of his touch. She now stared at herself in the mirror, turning her head this way and that to inspect the result. “I’m impressed.”

He’d done an excellent job, much better than she would have managed.

Of course, he had years of practice with women and obviously acquired talents beyond merely undressing them.

The thought saddened her, she refused to think about why.

Perhaps because she hoped this was one thing no woman had ever shared with him.

She was mistaken.

Obviously, she was nothing special to him. “I’ll take care of pinning it up.”

“No, let me do it.” He sounded impatient. “It’ll be faster.”

“All right.” She handed him the hairpins.

Once again, he worked with magnificent expertise. “How is this? Secure enough?” He handed her the cap.

She shook her head and patted it. “Job well done, Niall.”

He gave a courtly bow. “I aim to please.”

Yes, he was quite efficient at pleasing women.

He placed the cap on her head and tucked it low over her brow. “Keep your gaze down whenever we are around strangers. One look at your eyes and they’ll know you are a girl. Your lips are a giveaway as well.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I don’t know if this is going to work. Even if you keep your face hidden, anyone looking closely will know you’re a girl the moment you walk.”

She frowned. “How can they tell?”

“By the way your bottom wiggles.”

“Doesn’t everyone’s?”

He emitted a pained chuckle. “Lord, no. Certainly not like yours.”

“All right, it seems this requires practice. Give me a moment. How hard can it be to walk like a man?” She tried an arrogant strut.

He grinned. “Is this how you think men walk? Like pompous arses?”

“I’ll tone it down a little.” She tried again, this time keeping her stride more purposeful. “Now?”

“Much better. Try not to be so...intense.”

She took a deep breath and let it out softly, then tried again. Her stride was still purposeful, but slower. More casual.

“Try shuffling a little. Don’t forget, you are Caleb Crisp, the mute and slightly deaf grandson of my caretakers. Since I was headed to London anyway, I agreed to escort you back to your parents who live in King’s Cross. Give it another go.”

She kept her stride slow, dragged her feet a little, and kept her head down. But she looked up at him after a moment, curious as to his response. “How was that?”

He turned away and hurried out the door.

She had to double her steps to keep up with him. “Niall, stop. Why won’t you answer me?”

“I hear the wagon.”

“Liar. You couldn’t possibly have heard it rattling up the drive since your bedchamber overlooks the garden.”

She was out of breath by the time they reached the kitchen.

Mrs. Crisp was already poaching eggs for them and had slices of bread browning in butter in a pan. She must have tossed a pinch of cinnamon on the bread, for the aroma was heavenly.

Katie hovered over the pan and inhaled deeply. “That smells divine.”

When she eased away and turned back to Niall, he cast her a triumphant smirk. “Look over there.”

She followed his gaze toward the open side door. Sure enough, Mr. Hobson’s wagon had just pulled up at the servants’ entrance. “You cannot possibly have heard it,” she griped. “This was just a fortunate coincidence for you.”

He frowned at her, his smirk now gone and his expression suddenly fierce. “Do you realize you look at the people you are talking to?”

“Yes, I know. Isn’t it the polite thing to do?”

“But it will give you away when we travel.”

“That’s different. I’ll be wary once we’re on the road.”

He folded his arms across his chest, still frowning. “Talk to Mr. Crisp without looking at him. He’s just walked in.”

She tried. “Good morning, Mr. Crisp.”

“And a lovely good morning to you, Miss Katie. I see you are all set for your adventure.”

“Yes, I—” She looked at the kindly caretaker and smiled, then hastily glanced down again.

But it was too late. Niall had noticed. “You won’t last an hour on the road,” he said, grunting in disgust. “This will never do.”

She stared at him in dismay. “I know. I’ll do better next time.”

“Your eyes are huge and they sparkle. Clearly, they are female eyes. *Beautiful* female eyes. You must never look up. Not ever. Do you understand? Stare at your feet. Do not ever look a man straight in the eyes.”

“Got it.”

“Obviously not. You are still looking at me.”

“But it’s you. I wouldn’t look at any other man this way. Or any woman, either.”

He gave a low growl that shot tingles through her. “Others may be watching you as you talk to me. You are to keep your head down at *all* times. What do you not understand about this?”

“Don’t yell at me.”

“I am not yelling at you.”

“Yes, you are. At the very least you are sounding quite angry.”

Mr. Crisp chortled and Mrs. Crisp smothered a chuckle as they hurried out to greet Mr. Hobson, and left them alone in the kitchen for the moment.

Niall took her hands in his. “Katie, I am trying to keep you safe. The slightest slip and you’ll be stolen away from me. How do you think that will make me feel?”

“Relieved?”

He growled again, that low, beastly growl that made her blood turn fiery and her skin tingle.

“Sorry. I know you will feel terrible about it. You’ll worry for my safety and believe you’ve let me down. But I know that you will have done nothing wrong. If I am captured, the blame falls squarely on my shoulders.”

“That isn’t my point. I don’t care who is to blame.”

“You don’t?” She stared straight at him, unable to look away from this stunning man who was obviously eating his guts out to protect her. “Then what is your point?”

If she did not know better, she’d think he was about to kiss her.

Heavens! That would be utterly delightful. Kissed by a Wicked Earl? She was not going to resist.

She closed her eyes and kept her head tipped upward, praying very hard for his mouth to crush down on hers.

But all she felt was his soft breath tickling her lips.

Since he wouldn't take that wee, small smidgeon of a next step closer, she tried to lift up on her tiptoes to meet his lips.

But she couldn't do it, for he'd taken hold of her shoulders and gently held her down.

"Katie," he said in a husky murmur that made fireworks explode throughout her body, "what in blazes are you doing?"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*BLESSED SAINTS!*

Katie was waiting for him to kiss her, Niall realized as her eyes popped open wide and a hot pink blush shot up her cheeks. “I am not doing anything. What did you think I was doing?”

Had the girl taken leave of her senses?

More to the point, had he taken leave of his?

Yes, he wanted to kiss her.

Desperately, if he wished to be honest about it.

He had no intention of giving her the slightest encouragement. Not for her sake, but for his. The girl was a rampant attack to his heart. She aroused his senses, turned him mindless. His body was in fits and spasms. He was losing control...and he hadn't even had his breakfast yet.

Those big eyes of hers.

Had they always been this beautiful?

And those soft, heavenly lips that - yes - were made to be kissed by him.

What was wrong with him?

He was not some human pendulum to swing back and forth wildly.

How could he go from not liking this girl to being utterly beguiled and fascinated with her? And why was he suddenly

terrified of kissing her?

He was a Wicked Earl. He kissed women all the time. He was quite expert at it. Kissing was among the least wicked things in his repertoire. Harmless, really, if one were kissing the sort of woman he usually kissed.

But Katie was achingly innocent.

If he kissed her, it would be the most wantonly exciting thing she had ever experienced.

This was the problem.

After he kissed her, she would look up at him with that magical sense of wonderment.

How could any man resist her after that?

The Crisps and young Hobson marched back into the kitchen. The elder Mr. Hobson was also with them.

“Good morning, Henry,” he said to the burly young man who was now bringing in supplies from the wagon, carrying in two at a time on his big shoulders as though they weighed no more than feathers.

He nodded in greeting to his father as well. “Thank you for riding over with your son. Those Bow Street men will think twice about stopping the wagon if there’s two of you on it. Did you notice anyone hanging about Alnwick Hall on the way over here?”

“Aye, m’lord. Two unsavory characters, just as you warned. We pretended not to notice them, although they were not trying particularly hard to hide themselves away.” The elder Hobson cleared his gravelly throat, and then cast a glance at Katie. “The sooner you get Miss Katie away from here, the better.”

Henry nodded. “We’ll do our best to lead them astray. Da’s spread the word among the other tenant farmers to be on the lookout for more strangers.”

Mrs. Crisp gave a nod of approval. “Aye, and if we’re approached again by those scoundrels, we’re going to tell them you headed north to Scotland to elope with Miss Katie. If

any more of those knaves come sniffing about, we'll tell them the same thing."

Katie smiled at his housekeeper and the Hobsons. "Thank you. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the kindness you've all shown me. I apologize heartily for requiring you to lie on my behalf. No matter what happens to me after this, I shall never forget any of you or all you've done to help me."

Niall groaned inwardly.

The Crisps and the Hobsons had beaming smiles on their faces, utterly charmed by the girl. Young Hobson's eyes suddenly turned watery.

*Bollocks.*

What's this?

"It is the least we can do, Miss Katie. My da and I have never forgotten how kind you were to me the year you and your family remained up here through apple picking season."

His father gave a grunting nod.

Henry, the big, hulking bull of a lad, wiped his eyes before proceeding. "I was but a boy when I fell off a ladder in your orchard. I was pulling the apples off the higher branches, lost my footing, and tumbled. My da carried me to the Grange seeking help to fix my broken arm. You must have heard his shouts, for there you suddenly were."

"A proper little lady," his father interjected.

"Aye, dressed in your elegant lace and silk, taking hold of my hand all the while Pringle Grange's caretaker worked on me."

"Mr. Bevins was a good man," said Mr. Crisp, also feeling the need to interject a comment.

Henry was still teary-eyed. "Then you insisted on having Mrs. Simms pack a basket of food for me and my family since we were now down a worker for the month."

"I remember," Katie said gently. "You were a very brave boy. Never howled or wailed the entire time Mr. Bevins tended



to you. I marveled at your fortitude.”

“And you insisted on sending over a proper doctor to check on my lad afterward,” his father added. “Then you came to visit us. I still remember the sour look on your governess’s face. But you had the smile of an angel.”

Henry nodded. “We never forgot your generosity. It took courage for a little thing like you to stand up to your elders. You could not have been more than nine or ten years old at the time. Same as me.” He grinned inanely. “But you held firm, insisting that you were lady of the house in your mother’s absence. I think she and your father had gone to York for a few days. No matter, I suppose. You did them proud. You were a grand, little lady.”

Katie laughed. “I assure you, I was nothing more than a stubborn child.”

But young Hobson’s eyes were still watering. “No, it’s as my da said. You were our angel.”

*Bloody hell.*

One would think the girl wore a halo on her head and had sprouted wings.

Now the elder Hobson’s eyes were tearing. “My family will never forget you, nor will we ever betray you. No one in these parts ever will. They know what you did for my boy. You’re the angel of Pringle Grange. That’s how we all think of you.”

Niall groaned again.

This girl he’d grown up teasing and tormenting was a bleeding saint.

Obviously, he had been an unmitigated idiot not to notice the kindness in her heart.

He stayed silent while they all sat around the kitchen table and polished off the delicious breakfast Mrs. Crisp had prepared for them.

Then, it was time to leave.

Katie pursed her lips. “How am I to get into the wagon unnoticed?”

Niall pointed to several sacks filled with table linens. “In one of these. Henry’s mother does sewing for many of the grand homes around here. We’ll just stick you in one of these empty sacks and young Hobson will hoist you over his shoulder and carry you out with the rest of cloths that need sewing.”

“Oh, I see. What about my travel pouch?”

“It’ll be up front with us,” Henry’s father said. “Same for his lordship’s pouch.”

Niall nodded. “About an hour later, I’ll ride off as though merely riding into town. The Hobson farm is along the way. That’s where I’ll pick you up. Mr. Hobson will have a horse for you. We’ll leave from there.”

Katie’s lips remained pursed. “Isn’t it an awful lot of bother? If they suspect I’m with you, they’ll just follow you wherever you go.”

He shrugged. “It is a risk we’ll have to take. But I’ll be riding out as though dressed for field labor, and Mrs. Crisp is going to leave her famous pies cooling on the windowsill.”

Katie laughed. “Brilliant. Those men must be starved by now.”

Mrs. Crisp clucked like a mother hen. “I wish I could pack you up some decent meals for your journey. You’ll fade away to nothing by the time you reach London.”

Niall tossed her a wink. “I’ll take care of Miss Pringle. She’ll be plump as a Christmas goose by the time we reach town.”

Now Mrs. Crisp was crying.

He cast her husband a warning scowl. “Don’t you start bawling, too.” But he soon relented and grinned at Katie. “They never cried over me. Then again, I’m no angel.”

“That’s right!” Mrs. Crisp smacked him lightly with her spoon. “Ye had better treat her like a lady. I want your oath

that you'll behave like a proper gentleman. None of that bad behavior you and your rascal ancestors are known for."

He arched an eyebrow, not really angry with the woman who'd been more of a mother to him than his own. He'd loved his own mother, of course. But she had always been a weak and tender thing, hiding away and waiting to die after his father broke her heart. "You do realize you've just struck an earl."

She wasn't in the least remorseful. "I've struck a naughty boy. One who enjoys my cooking too much to ever be rid of me. But I need you to behave like an honorable earl and protect our angel, even from yourself."

"Especially from yourself," Mr. Hobson muttered, casting him a warning glance.

He sighed. "You have my oath. You did not need to ask for it. I know Miss Pringle's worth. Not even I could behave fiendishly toward her."

Katie turned to him in amazement.

He saw the puzzled look in her beautiful eyes. *Is this why you didn't kiss me?* He knew this was the question on her mind.

He turned away and slapped his hands on the table. "Time to get going."

He tried to remain calm and not pace like a caged beast as Katie was loaded onto the wagon and driven in the sack to the Hobson farm.

He remained in the kitchen while Mrs. Crisp baked her pies.

Mr. Crisp settled himself on a crate just outside the kitchen door and whittled something out of wood.

Finally, the hour - which had felt like an entire year - was up. He strode out of the house toward the stable. Mr. Crisp set aside his wood carving, tucked his knife back in its sheath at his hip, and joined him in the stable to saddle Templar for him.

"See you for supper, my lord," he said casually.

Niall nodded in acknowledgment.

He noticed the pair now lurking closer to Alnwick Hall, knowing they'd been taken in by the ruse. However, he also kept alert for newcomers to the area. This would be his greatest concern until they rode further south where he was not as well known.

He stopped at the Hobson farm to pick up Katie, his heart beating faster as she emerged from the barn leading one of their horses by the reins. Her travel pouch had already been fastened to the saddle. He casually studied her, ready to give advice on how to improve her disguise.

However, she did a remarkably capable job. The cap was low on her head and shaded her eyes. Instead of looking up at him, her gaze remained firmly trained at her feet. She walked out with a slow gait, her feet slightly shuffling.

The elder Hobson brought over his own travel pouch while his wife came running out of their home to give him a small sack. "It isn't anything fancy. Just some bread and cheese to hold you over should you get hungry before reaching the first coaching inn."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hobson. It is much appreciated." He turned to her husband. "I'll be leaving Templar and your horse at the Sparrows Inn at Morpeth. Send one of your boys down for them in a couple of days."

"We won't be riding all the way?" Katie asked, sounding quite surprised.

"No. We'll travel faster by private hired coach since we'll only need to stop long enough to change teams and be off again. We may even be able to travel by night along the better maintained roadways once we are further south. There'll be torches lit to mark the way and the moon will be full for the next few days. We ought to take advantage."

She nodded. "Very well. I suppose it makes sense."

"But do not ever let down your guard. You are to stay in disguise even while we are in the coach. There's no trusting any of these drivers or ostlers."

“I understand.”

They said their farewells to the Hobsons and rode off at a fast clip. Katie was an excellent horsewoman and easily kept up with him. If riding in a private carriage proved too slow, he could always hire horses for them and simply ride the rest of the way. No need to make decisions about that now.

He'd reconsider once they reached York. They'd be safer once there. It would be easy for them to get lost in the crowd.

But that would be several days from now.

He had to concentrate on making it through these next few hours. The towns they had to pass were smaller and he was well known. Katie's family was also known in the area even though they were usually here only in the summers. One year, as Henry had mentioned, they'd stayed through harvest time. Another year, they'd come up here for the Christmas holidays.

But Pringle Grange was always their summer home.

And a wealthy family in the area was always a thing of note. Even if they had rarely come up here, they would have been known to all for miles around.

Another thought crossed his mind as they rode. “Katie, do you recall the inns where your family always stop on the way up here and back again to London?”

“Yes, of course.”

“We'll have to avoid those. You'll be familiar to the staff and we cannot risk someone recognizing you.”

She nodded. “We always stayed at the finest inns. We should be all right if we keep to the less elegant ones. I'm sure they'll still be comfortable and the meals good, even if they aren't as fancy as those I'm used to.”

They rode in silence the rest of the way, stopping only to rest and water their horses. By early afternoon, they were both hungry, so when they paused again to rest their mounts, they also ate the bread and cheese Mrs. Hobson had packed for them.

The day was cooler than usual and the wind gustier. Katie was a little thing and Niall worried that she'd be blown away. But she had no trouble handling the wind or her mare, and they continued to make good time. In cool weather, their horses could travel greater distances without tiring.

Also working in their favor was the condition of the roads. The sun was shining and roads were dry, allowing for better progress than if they had to slog through mud and pouring rain.

"We'll reach Morpeth just before nightfall," he said, deciding to review their plans, especially this first night when traveling together was new to both of them. "Once we arrive at the Sparrows Inn, I want you to wait in the stables with the horses until I can secure a room for us. Make yourself look useful, as though it is your duty to feed and water our horses. You'll attract less attention if you look like you belong there."

She made no protest, so he continued. "I'll come back for you as fast as I can. Do not blush as we're led up to our room. Remember that you are Caleb Crisp, my caretaker's grandson. You are in my charge, and therefore my ward during the journey to London. It will not appear odd that you and I occupy the same chamber, especially since you are mute and partly deaf which means you require extra tending."

"I won't blush. I know what to expect now that I've already seen you naked."

He eyed her curiously. "You mean partially naked. I've only ever removed my shirt in front of you." He frowned. "And that day by the river, I took care not to climb out of the water before you'd closed your eyes."

She cleared her throat.

He burst out laughing. "Why, Miss Pringle! You peeked while I was dressing behind the bushes."

"I...accidentally...well, I was distraught."

"And did not realize I was swimming without clothes? Hah! You knew exactly what you were doing, you naughty thing. Well, what do you think? Did you like what you saw?"

She tipped her head up. “No. I blotted the sight of your thin and pasty body out of my mind.”

“First of all, my body is glorious. All the women tell me so. Second of all, you are a terrible liar. Your blush always gives you away.” He held up a hand when she opened her mouth to protest. “I fully intend to follow up on this conversation at a later time. For now, let’s concentrate on getting you in and out of Morpeth safely. We’ll take our meals in our room. I’ll stay with you as much as possible, but I also must make arrangements for a hired coach to pick us up first thing in the morning. I’ll leave you with a pistol with which to defend yourself if ever I’m not with you. Do you know how to handle one?”

“No.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “Well, it isn’t difficult. You just point it straight at the assailant’s chest and fire.”

“But I’ll kill him if I aim at his chest.”

“You’ve never shot at anyone before. It is unlikely you will hit him anywhere near his heart. Hopefully, you’ll just wing him.”

“Hopefully, no one will come into the room when you’re not there. Better yet, I’ll keep it latched and pretend I don’t hear anyone knocking. Don’t give me a pistol. If I cannot find it in myself to shoot him, then he will simply wrest the weapon out of my hand, and then I’ll have it pointed at me. I will keep a fire iron close by. I won’t be so reluctant to hit someone with it since I won’t be worried about the blow killing him.”

He agreed, mostly because the men who would come for her were likely to be Bow Street runners, not a criminal element. However, depending on the size of the reward her father had offered, there could be all manner of men hunting for her. “That reminds me, I had better pick up a newspaper. Yardsley’s runaway bride is likely to be a front page story.”

“Assuming they aren’t paying the papers to suppress the news.”

“They won’t be able to bury the story for long. It’s too juicy. The entire Bow Street community knows by now you’ve run away. Especially if there is a reward offered for your safe return, as I am sure there is. The details of that reward will also be headline news.”

“A reward which you must claim, Niall.”

He frowned.

She frowned back at him. “We’ve been over this. You have to claim it. This is no small thing you are doing for me. You’ve left important work undone at Alnwick Hall, not to mention put your life at risk for me. I shall hunt you down and shove the pound notes down your throat if you don’t claim them.”

“Katie, let’s not fight over this now. We don’t even know how much of a reward either Yardsley or your father is offering.”

She tipped her chin up in the air. “I am my father’s precious jewel. He will offer a king’s ransom to have me safely back. As for Yardsley, who knows? He never wanted me, but he’ll offer a matching reward just to save face. It is pocket change to him.”

He packed away the remaining food and rose to collect the horses who’d been left untethered to drink from the nearby stream and munch on the gorse and sweet grass along its bank.

It was well past twilight by the time they rode into Morpeth and down its High Street toward the inn. Most of the shops were already closed or about to close for the night. The Sparrows Inn appeared quiet, but that was not surprising. Most travelers would have arrived by now and settled in for the evening.

Of course, there would be a few late arrivals, such as he and Katie.

The scent of honeyed ham filtered in the air to his nostrils. The innkeeper and his staff were already busy serving supper to their patrons. Niall glanced at Katie. She was tense in the saddle, already dreading her first test as a boy.



He was tense as well, worried about a criminal element hunting for the girl. Such men could not be relied upon to return her to her father. They could hold her hostage and demand ten times the reward.

He dismounted and pointed to the stable. "Caleb, take the horses to the ostler. Wait there for me."

She kept her eyes on the ground and merely nodded.

The ostler recognized him and walked over to greet him. "Welcome, my lord. I'll take good care of yer horses."

"I know you will, Angus. The boy with me is Caleb Crisp, my caretaker's grandson. He is mute and does not hear well. Be gentle with him. Let him water our horses to keep him occupied. I'll be back for him in a few minutes." He tossed the man a shilling. "Make sure the other boys keep away from him. I don't want him teased or abused."

"I'll box the ears of any lad who tries it!" He strode back to the stable with a warning glower for the young stable hands who were already beginning to gather around Katie. "Get away from his lordship's ward, ye wicked heathens. Anyone touches a hair on the lad and it'll be the whip for ye."

Angus then filled a bucket with water and handed it to Katie. "Here ye go, lad," he shouted in her ear and then patted her on the head. "No one will bother ye."

Niall bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling as Katie shuffled away with the obviously heavy bucket in her hand. Water spilled over the lip and dripped onto her boots. He wanted so badly to help her out, but knew it would raise too many questions if he did.

Instead, he strode into the inn, signed for a room, and ordered two meals brought up immediately. "Our horses will be picked up by one of the Hobson boys before the end of the week. I'd like to hire a private coach to take me and the boy to London. Can you arrange that Mr. Gray?"

The inn's proprietor nodded. "Yes, m'lord. When would you like the coach brought around?"

“Shortly after dawn. The days are getting shorter now and we must take advantage of the daylight while we can. I have important meetings in London that I cannot miss.”

Mr. Gray glanced toward the stable. “And I’m sure that boy is slowing you down. Forgive me, m’lord. But I heard what you were telling Angus. Never you worry, we’ll get you on your way first thing tomorrow.”

“I am ever in your debt, Mr. Gray.” He strolled back to the stable to fetch Katie, taking her by the elbow and speaking loudly in her face. “Come with me, Caleb. Food. Sleep.” He made gestures to convey eating and sleeping.

“You are an arse,” she whispered, all the while keeping her eyes down. “Don’t overdo it.”

He kept hold of her arm as they entered the inn and Mrs. Gray showed them upstairs. “Call upon me if there is anything you need. Your food will be brought up in a few minutes. Do you need a bath brought up?”

“Yes, for me. The boy will make do with soap and a wash cloth. Mrs. Crisp is the only one who’s ever bathed the lad. He’ll just have to wait until I can deliver him to his parents. But he’s capable enough and knows how to tend to himself. He’ll manage fine with his own grooming. Nothing special required for him.”

“Well, you let us know if you need any help. What a sweet face he has.”

Niall’s heart shot into his throat. “Yes, a peaches and cream complexion is what Mrs. Crisp says. Unlike my face,” he said, scrubbing the bristles of his new growth of beard as he tossed the proprietress a wink. “I’m sure he’ll turn into a veritable ape like the rest of us within a few years.”

He waited patiently for the woman to show them to their guest quarters. The best rooms were already taken, and although Mr. Gray had offered to remove the occupants from one of these finer rooms, Niall had refused. “Any chamber with two beds, if possible, will do.”

The one they were shown was perfect for their needs. It happened to have two small beds. Neither he nor Katie would have to sleep on the floor.

Once Mrs. Gray left them, Niall bolted the door. He then crossed to the window to close the shutters while Katie lit the lamp atop the one bureau in the neatly appointed room. He motioned for her to keep silent.

She obeyed, but pursed her lips in obvious frustration. She began to pantomime her displeasure, gesturing about the bath.

He laughed. "Oh, it isn't only for me. I intend to get you into it first, *Caleb*."

She threw down her cap in outrage. "I am not taking off my clothes in front of you," she said in a frustrated whisper.

Her eyes were big and sparkling, this time with fury. It was probably stupid of him to goad her, but he'd been tense riding beside her all day. Behaving himself with Katie was proving hard to do. Not that he would ever break his vow to Mrs. Crisp. But surely, having a little fun was to be allowed. "I'll have a drink downstairs while you soak. The common room is decent enough. Besides, the innkeeper loves to chatter. I'll find out what he knows about those Bow Street men who approached me at Alnwick Hall."

"They may not be the only ones."

He nodded. "Indeed not. I mean to ask him about anyone else who looks suspicious. Ten minutes is what I'll give you, then I'll come back up and have my soak."

"But it's too dangerous for me to go downstairs while you bathe."

"Who said you had to leave? You're the one who's bashful. I'm not."

She groaned. "You are such an arse."

He tweaked her nose. "I know. But you like me anyway."

She turned away to pick up her cap, which had the unintended effect of showing off her perfectly rounded bottom.

It took her a moment to realize why he was grinning.

She sighed. "Can you not be insufferable even for five minutes?"

He folded his arms over his chest. "Admit it, Katie. You are having fun with me and enjoying this adventure."

"I am not having fun. This is your problem, Niall. You take everything as a lark. Well, I don't. I am scared to death of being discovered and taken from you before I am safely back home."

He stepped to her side and gave her cheek a light caress. "Of course, I know this is serious. But it doesn't mean we have to spend the next ten days living in constant fear. We're taking precautions. And anyone who tries to take you will have to kill me first."

Her eyes widened. "Don't say that! I don't ever want to see you hurt."

"Nor do I, but I'm not afraid of it. Especially not after what you just said."

"What did I just say? Oh, that I don't want to see you hurt?"

He caressed her cheek again. "No, you said that you did not wish to be taken from me. Do you mean it, Katie?"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

KATIE WAS SPARED HAVING to respond to Niall's question by a knock at the door. The attentive staff, all of whom recognized Niall and were eager to please him, trekked in with tub, water buckets, and trays of food.

She could tell by the heavenly aroma now wafting through the room that under the lid of the silver tray was a fresh lamb stew and a full basket of hot biscuits.

Her stomach growled.

Niall, being uniquely annoying, patted her on the head and then turned away to toss a flirtatious remark at one of the maids. She was a pretty girl, a few years older than herself, she would guess, and quite buxom.

Katie always thought of herself as moderately well endowed, but this woman's breasts were the size of water buffaloes.

Well, perhaps she was being unkind.

Niall said something stupid about tasting her biscuits, to which the girl replied with a giggle and a suggestive lick of her lips, "Any time, m'lord. They'll always be hot and ready for you."

While he jested with the men and flirted some more with all of the maids, Katie stood quietly in the corner, the cap pulled down over her eyes, and her head bent to stare at the floor. She was all but forgotten amid the fuss everyone was making over him.

When he turned on the charm, he could be quite devastating.

Everyone adored him.

Being Earl of Alnwick alone would have garnered him attention. But to be an earl, and also handsome and charming, had everyone tripping over themselves to please him. But it was also more than that.

She could see the inn's staff truly liked his jovial and engaging manner. Despite his flirtations, he actually treated the innkeeper and his staff with respect. In turn, they went out of their way to accommodate him in many little ways. With a heftier portion of stew for their meal, a generous tankard of ale for him and cider for her, a scented soap instead of the plain, lye soap, and spare blankets should the night turn chill.

Several of the younger maids tossed inviting glances his way, obviously eager to offer their favors. He was quite adept at warding them off, but she knew it was only because of her presence. The Jameson men were known to enjoy the company of women. This was their weakness.

Could Niall ever be faithful to just one woman?

Not that she cared.

It was merely idle musing.

As soon as the inn's staff had left them to themselves, Niall turned to her. "What's it to be? Eat first or bathe first?"

"I'm starved. May we eat first?"

He raised the lid on the small pot of lamb stew and inhaled. "Excellent suggestion. Dig in, Caleb." He ladled some of the meat onto a plate and handed it to her. "Here, dunk the biscuits in the drippings. Give me your cup. I'll pour you some cider."

"Thank you," she said as he filled it, and then watched as he served himself as well.

They ate in silence, both of them apparently ravenous after their long ride. When they were done, Niall carried the tray of empty plates out of the room and set it in the hall by their door.

“One of the maids will take it without having to disturb us. Now, about the bath. I’ll head downstairs for a few minutes. Bolt the door behind me.”

She nodded. “I’ll be quick.”

The water did look tempting, but she knew that she could not soak in it to her heart’s content as she might have done at home. Still, this was wonderful and she appreciated the chance to wash the dirt off her skin. Her clothes were another matter, but there was nothing to be done about them tonight.

The proprietress had offered to take their garments to be freshened and boots to be polished, but Niall had refused. If they had to make a quick escape, they’d need them close at hand.

Katie sighed as she settled in the tub, but did not dawdle. The soap provided was a sandalwood soap, so she used it to scrub herself down. She did not bother with her hair since it was still firmly pinned up and Niall might be back before she had the chance to finish washing it. Also, she could not leave it wet and unbound on the chance anyone happened to peek in.

She had just finished drying off and wrapping the binding around her breasts when someone rapped at the door. Alarmed, she hastily donned the fresh shirt she intended to use as her nightgown and shoved her legs into her boy’s breeches in the event she had to flee.

She was still silently scampering to put on her stockings and boots when the rapping began again. How could she ask who it was when Caleb could not speak?

*Just go away.*

She put her ear to the door and listened for the sound of footsteps walking away. But no such luck. The person was still there.

It was not Niall or he would have identified himself.

As a precaution, she grabbed one of the fire irons.

The door latch suddenly jiggled.

Dear heaven! Was someone attempting to break into their chamber? She grabbed the cap and stuck it on her head, then hastily donned her jacket. She would climb out the window and hide on the roof if she had to.

Her heart was firmly lodged in her throat when the door bolt slowly began to slide to an unlocked position. A feminine voice called out in a whisper, obviously not realizing Niall had gone downstairs. “Yer lordship, will ye be wanting my company this evening?”

Katie shoved the bolt firmly back into place.

The gall of the woman! What did she think Niall would do with her while a little boy slept in the bed right next to them? Of course, she was that little boy.

Then she heard Niall’s deep voice beside their door. “Sally, what are you doing here?”

“I thought ye might like me to service ye this evening.”

“No, your services are not required, nor were they requested. Who sent you up here?” He did not sound pleased.

“No one, m’lord. I just thought...seeing as ye’re here on yer own.”

“I have a boy with me.”

“Mr. Gray told us about him. But he’s a simple-minded fellow, isn’t he? He won’t understand what—”

“He is mute, that’s all. And a little hard of hearing. But he’s a very clever child and will understand everything. Go away, Sally. Do not presume my needs.”

The maid muffled a sob and scampered back downstairs.

“Blessed saints,” Niall muttered, and then knocked on the door. “Caleb, let me in.”

Katie did not blame him so much as simply despise the casual way he’d led his life and how easily the women flocked around him.

He stepped in and quickly bolted the door again. “I suppose you heard that exchange.”



She nodded. "Every word."

"I didn't ask for her." He sank onto his bed and began to shrug out of his clothes.

"I know." She set the fire iron back in its mounting by the hearth.

"Then why do you look incensed?"

She turned away. "I'm going to bed. The tub is all yours."

He sighed. "I do not make it a practice to accost the serving maids at the inns wherever I stay."

"Oh, I'm sure they are more than willing to warm your bed. A handsome, bachelor earl? I doubt you ever need to force any woman into cooperating. I'm surprised they haven't broken down our door already, hoping to get at you."

He tossed off his boots and walked to her side, now clad only in his trousers. "Are you jealous?"

She huffed. "Certainly not!"

"Then why are you still casting me that prune-faced scowl? I don't owe you an apology or an explanation, especially since I've done nothing wrong. Even if I had misbehaved, what right do you have to admonish me? I am not your husband."

"Thank goodness for that!" She turned away and folded her arms across her chest.

To her surprise, he came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. "Do you hate me that much, Katie?"

"No," she admitted because he had behaved like a gentleman toward her, even now as he had his arms around her. It was a loose embrace and she knew that he would release her if she asked it of him. But his arms felt warm and wonderful.

She liked their closeness.

But she eased out of his arms and turned to face him. "It is such a double standard, isn't it? Were I to take a man to my bed outside of marriage, I'd be ruined forever. But a man may

do as he pleases and he'll be clapped on the back and admired for his prowess."

"Those are society's rules, not mine. However, there is a logical reason for them. I do not think I'd take a wife who was free with her favors. It is a question of trust. How can I know a child is mine unless I trust the woman I marry? Yes, it is an unfair standard. But it is a matter of necessity. Will some other man's son become Earl of Alnwick?" He snorted. "For all the good it will do him. He'll inherit a heavily burdened estate."

"That was the fault of your father's poor management. But you are doing wonders with Alnwick."

"Thank you. I'm trying my best. It helps that I find myself enjoying the hard work." He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face the wall. "Don't peek. I'm about to drop my breeches and take a soak."

She laughed lightly. "Wait. I'll climb into bed and pull the covers over my head." She quickly removed her garments save for her shirt, slipped between the sheets and closed her eyes. "Niall, how was that maid able to maneuver the door bolt? I had it secured, or so I thought."

"Any thin piece of metal can be used to slide through the door at just the right point and move it. I'll prop a chair against the door. We'll hear it topple if anyone attempts to break in during the night. Don't worry about it. I'm a light sleeper. I'll hear the slightest creak of floorboards."

"I hope so."

"Ah, you have such faith in me," he said with unmasked sarcasm, almost sounding disappointed. "Close your eyes. Go to sleep. Sweet dreams, Katie."

"I doubt I shall sleep a wink. Sweet dreams, Niall." She set her head down on the pillow.

The next thing she knew, it was morning and Niall was tickling her nose to wake her. "Oh, bloody murder," she grumbled. "Is it time to get up already?"

He chuckled. "Why Miss Pringle, you have a pirate's foul mouth. The Perfect Miss Pringle is a bear when she wakes up.

Who ever suspected?"

"Only when I get up too early." She groaned. "I think I was asleep before my head hit the pillow. And I shall hit you if you insist on remaining as chirpy as a morning sparrow."

He nudged her to a sitting position. "Ah, foul mouthed and violent. This is a revelation."

She opened one eye. "You're dressed. And the tub is gone. When was it rolled out?"

"Last night. You were snoring not so delicately when Mr. Gray and one of his lads came for it. I drew the covers over your head. Horses could have stampeded through our chamber and you wouldn't have heard a single hoofbeat." He cast her an affectionate smile. "You must have been exhausted. But we still have a long way to go. I've had my breakfast."

"Just turn away and I'll change out of my nightshirt. Will I have time to eat a bite?"

"No, Mrs. Gray wrapped up a small basket of muffins for you to have along the way. The hired carriage is waiting for us downstairs. Let's go, Katie. Get dressed. I'd like to be off before others awaken." He leaned closer and inhaled. "Lord, you smell delicious. You don't even smell like a boy."

"But I used the sandalwood soap."

"Yes, but it absorbs differently into your skin. You smell like a blossoming rose petal. Light. Sweet. Irresistible. It's nice. If I allowed myself to be wicked with you, I'd be kissing every inch of your lovely neck."

"Oh." She frowned at him. "Is this what you say to all the women who wake up in your bedchamber?"

"No. Nor do women remain in my bedchamber after we've...done the deed."

"Well, that doesn't sound nice at all. You kick them out once they've...er, satisfied you?"

"It's by mutual agreement. All the more reason I never involve myself with innocents such as yourself." He knelt beside her to assist her in buttoning the falls of her breeches

and then crossed to the hearth to fetch her boots. “You’d expect the world if you and I ever did...you know. In any event, I’d feel honor bound to marry you if *that* ever happened.”

“What makes you think I’d want to marry you?”

He shoved her foot into her boot. “Katie, if you ever gave yourself to me it would be because you loved me with all your heart. That’s the sort of girl you are. You would never give your delectable body to a man you did not love. Therefore, if I ever took you to my bed, I’d understand the rules and act accordingly. If I bedded you, I would have to marry you.”

He took her other boot. “Give me your foot.”

Still yawning, she stuck it out for him.

“You are quite a lump in the morning, aren’t you?”

His smile was aching affectionate, so she could not be angry with him. She laughed softly. “Apparently so. I’m usually an early riser and quite cheerful, but not when awakened this early.”

He turned away while she quickly changed shirts. Once she was done, he stuck the cap on her head, then gathered up the two travel pouches and slung them over his shoulder. “Come along, Caleb.”

He held out his hand and she simply slipped hers into it without thinking. It felt so natural and right. Heaven help her! She had to be sleep deprived if she ever thought holding Niall’s hand felt right.

But it did.

His grasp was warm and comforting, and quite protective in the way his fingers entwined with hers.

“Katie, stop fretting. No one will think twice about it,” he said, glancing at their clasped hands. “They all believe you are a simpleton and will expect me to keep hold of you.”

“Fine, but if you shout in my face and make those stupid gestures again,” she said, mimicking the gestures he’d made yesterday when indicating food and sleep, “I vow I will kick

you until your shins bleed. You are having far too much fun at my expense.”

He arched an eyebrow, casting her that deliciously wicked smile of his again. “Are you always this much of a growling bear in the morning?”

“You bring out the worst in me.” She said nothing more as he opened the door to their bedchamber and led her downstairs to their waiting carriage. She felt their driver’s eyes on her, but dared not look up at him for fear of giving herself away.

Perhaps she was merely imagining the shiftiness of his gaze. She would mention it to Niall once they were on their way. In any event, they would be changing horses several times throughout the day. Why not change drivers as well?

Riding in the coach was certainly more convenient, but not more comfortable. The springs were worn and probably had not been very good to begin with even when this conveyance was new. However, to engage a fancier one would attract too much attention. Few people would notice a man and a young boy riding in a careworn carriage.

The rest of the day went smoothly, for the weather held up and the roadways remained dry. They passed through Newcastle without incident and stopped for the night just outside of town at another of the commonly used coaching inns, The Swan and Maiden. It was not among the finest, but their driver had mentioned it was a convenient place to stop for the night.

To Katie, it appeared to be at the lower end of respectability, a little too run down for her liking.

Since it was the coach driver’s job to attend to the carriage horses, Katie walked in with Niall, but made sure to remain standing just behind him so that no one had a clear look at her face.

“I’d like a private room,” Niall said to the proprietor, striding in as though he owned the place. She supposed this was the manner of all noblemen since they seemed to be

privileged in this regard, always getting their way. “It’s just me and the boy. We’ll also want supper brought up.”

She felt the proprietor’s gaze on her. “What’s wrong with him, my lord?”

Niall remained remarkably calm. “Nothing. Why? He’s mute and a little hard of hearing. That’s all. This is why he’s shy. You’ll frighten him if you come near him. He’s afraid of strangers, as you can well understand. They often treat him poorly. He is under my protection now and I will not allow him to be taunted or ridiculed.”

“Yes, m’lord. But I still must be sure he has no fever. We had a bloke in just yesterday trying to pass off a sick child.”

“And you sent them away?” Niall remarked, his anger barely leashed.

“I have an establishment to run. What do you think would happen if all my guests suddenly took ill? Who knows what diseases that child was carrying?” He thumped the guest register closed and came around his desk toward them.

Katie’s heart began to pound. What would she do if he ripped off her cap? Or made her look into his eyes?

But Niall seemed not at all concerned, or perhaps he was better at keeping his wits about him than she was.

“Hold on, Mr. Swann,” he said to the innkeeper whose name was clearly marked upon a slate board behind his desk.

Katie wondered whether this was really his name or everyone had merely taken to calling him that since the inn’s name was The Swan and Maiden.

“As I said,” Niall continued, his voice casual and steady, “you’ll scare the lad. Let me handle it.” He turned to face Katie. “Caleb,” he said loudly in her ear, “give me your hand.”

Katie held it out tenuously.

“The proprietor is going to feel your skin. Don’t be scared. I’m right here with you. He isn’t going to hurt you.”

Katie silently swore she was going to poke Niall in the nose once they were safely up in their guest chamber. She would indeed be deaf if he kept shouting in her ear. But for now, she did as he asked and held out a trembling hand.

“There,” Niall said more gently. “Caleb’s skin would be burning if he had a fever. Is that not so, Mr. Swann?”

The proprietor harrumphed. “I suppose. The lad has soft hands.”

“He’s young still and cannot do much. But he is dear to us and I will be most displeased if anyone here treats him ill. Now, may we have the room?”

“Aye, m’lord. Let me show ye the way up.” He turned to summon one of the lads working behind the bar in the common room.

Niall stopped him. “I’ve got our travel bags. No need to disturb your staff. Just show us to our chamber.”

The room had only the one bed, a surprisingly large and comfortable looking one.

Katie tried not to respond with alarm since she would be making a pallet on the floor for herself anyway. Thankfully, no bath was ordered, just food. She crossed the room and pretended to gaze out the window while Mr. Swann spoke to Niall.

She knew the moment Niall tipped the man an extra shilling or two, for his manner suddenly turned obsequious and he could not do enough for them. “And here’s a little extra to take care of our coachman.”

The man bowed and scraped his way out.

Katie turned to Niall the moment the door closed behind the innkeeper. “Do you think he suspects?”

Niall tossed the travel pouches down on the table. “No. Even if he did, he’ll keep his mouth shut for the few extra coins tossed his way. I noticed a newspaper on his desk when we first entered. It’s likely several days old, but it had nothing about a runaway bride on the front page.”

“Thank goodness. Perhaps only the Bow Street runners know of my disappearance and most of them will be searching in the wrong places.”

“Let’s hope so.”

He removed his jacket and strode to the basin to pour water in it and wash up. But he stopped her when she came over to do the same. “Keep your cap on, Katie. Your jacket, too. One of the inn’s staff will be delivering our food. Pretend to still be staring out the window when they walk in. I don’t like this place. The coach driver and proprietor have something going on.”

“I felt it, too. What do you think they are up to?”

“I’m not sure yet.” He moved the lamp off the table and set it on the bureau, intending to keep her away from the glare of illumination. “In any event, they aren’t likely to try anything with me. Few people would ever dare incur the wrath of an earl.”

“Let’s hope so.” She was dusty and itchy, wishing she could clean up as he was doing now. But he was right. She could not chance being noticed. “Why did you give the innkeeper a little extra for our driver if you don’t trust either of them?”

“It never hurts to spread a little coin here and there.”

Although Niall had kept his manner calm when speaking to her, she sensed he was anything but. Her eyes rounded in alarm when he withdrew the pistol he kept hidden in the lip of his boot and checked it before putting it back in place. “We ought to make Thirsk by late tomorrow evening. I know the innkeeper at the Mablethorpe Inn quite well. He’ll quietly arrange transportation for us to York.”

“Leaving this coachman behind?”

He nodded. “He won’t know we’ve gone until hours later, and he’ll believe we’ve taken the road through Leeds since it’s fastest to London.”

“Then why shouldn’t we take that route?”



“I dare not risk it. That’s where the Bow Street runners will be concentrating their efforts. There’ll be men watching for us at each coaching inn along the way. We’ll head to York instead and lose ourselves in the city for the night. From there, we’ll divert our route to a little town on the North Sea called Mablethorpe. It will cause us to lose a day in reaching London, but it’s safer than attempting the more direct route.”

“Mablethorpe?” She eyed him curiously. “Same name as the inn at Thirsk?”

He nodded. “The innkeeper and his family are from there. His nephews are coach drivers and completely trustworthy. They’ll take us to London, keeping to the quieter coast roads.”

She cautiously peered out the window to the empty street below. “Are you sure they can be trusted?”

“Yes.”

She let out a breath, watching the vapor form against the window pane. “So we just have to get through tonight.”

“You can take the bed. I’m not going to sleep.”

Now he was scaring her. What had they gotten themselves into? “Not at all? You think they’re up to something bad? Why don’t we just leave now?”

“No horses or carriages available. It’s too late in the evening.” He said nothing more, turning to the door when he heard a knock. The proprietor announced he’d brought up their food. “Ah, thank you, Mr. Swann.”

The man seemed in no hurry to leave. “What’s the lad doing? Doesn’t he wish to take off his cap and jacket?”

The man was too nosy by far. Katie feared the trouble was about to start now. But Niall seemed to take it all in stride. “He’ll get around to it in his own good time,” he said with a good-natured chuckle. “This place is new to Caleb and it will take him some time to settle in. He will soon, never you worry. I’m sure he’ll enjoy the meal. Good night, Mr. Swann. Make certain our coach is ready to leave at daybreak.”

The innkeeper ignored the dismissal and started to approach Katie, but Niall blocked him. “What is your interest in the boy?” he asked, all pretense at joviality suddenly gone.

“Why, nothing, m’lord.”

Even she noticed the uneasy edge to the man’s voice, but she simply did not understand what his purpose was.

Niall’s voice suddenly turned cold as ice. “If I see you anywhere near Caleb,” he said, his tone lethal, “I shall beat you to a bloody pulp and haul your carcass to the local magistrate. Do you understand me?”

The man held up his hands in mock surrender. “I mean him no harm, m’lord. Just trying to be friendly.”

“He doesn’t need your friendship. Keep away from him. Get out and don’t come in here again.” He slammed the door shut and latched it, then lifted the bureau and placed it against the door.

“Niall?” She wasn’t certain what was happening, only that the innkeeper made her quite uncomfortable. Perhaps they ought to have sought out one of the finer inns even if the risk was greater. “What is going on?”

“You are drawing too much attention.”

She groaned. “I knew it. The innkeeper suspects I’m a girl.”

“No, Katie. He believes you are a boy. The coachman, too.”

“Then where’s the problem?”

“I’ll explain it to you once we are away from here. Have your supper.”

She sat down at the small table and picked up a fork, but her stomach was in too much of a roil to settle down. She ignored the meat pasty and simply ate a little of the bread to hold her over until morning. “I don’t have much of an appetite.”

Niall strode to her side. “Nor do I. Let’s get some sleep. I’ll make a pallet for myself beside the hearth.”

She swallowed hard. “No, don’t bother. Who knows what might crawl over you while you sleep? Take the bed.”

“And let you sleep on the floor?” He frowned. “That isn’t going to happen, so don’t bother arguing about it.”

“I won’t.” She took a deep breath. “We’ll share the bed.”

Niall appeared to stop breathing.

“It is the only sensible thing to do. And we’ll both stay fully dressed. Besides, the bed is big enough to accommodate two. We’ll easily fit without having to lay on top of each other. Just keep to your side and I’ll keep to mine.”

“That is a very bad idea.”

“What? Keeping to our own sides? Or sharing the bed?” She sighed and shook her head. “Don’t you turn priggish on me. As you’ve pointed out, I’ve already ruined myself by running off. Now I am traveling to London alone with you. Sharing the bed will add nothing more to the damage I’ve done to myself. Just keep your hands off me and we’ll be fine.”

He ignored her and made a pallet for himself on the floor.

“I see,” she said in a broken whisper, realizing their developing friendship was all in her imagination. She’d thought it was turning into something more than friendship, to be truthful. But he did not feel the same.

This wicked earl, who had the reputation of never turning a woman away from his bed, had just openly and firmly refused her. It was humiliating. She wasn’t even asking for them to do anything more than sleep.

Why did he dislike her so much?

## CHAPTER NINE

BETWEEN HIS BODY'S savage desire for Katie, and his uneasiness about the innkeeper and the coachman, Niall did not manage a wink of sleep the entire night. It mattered little since he'd make up for it later in the coach, but he was riled and exhausted, and those were not a good combination.

He needed to keep his wits about him, at least until they were safely on the road again.

"Katie," he whispered, shaking her gently to wake her. The sky had turned gray with the approaching dawn and he did not wish to lose another moment of time.

"It cannot be dawn yet."

"It is, love." *Bollocks*. He hadn't meant to use the endearment. For all his lecturing about her keeping to her Caleb disguise, he was the one who needed the reminder most.

She snuffled, obviously having fallen back to sleep.

He shook her again, trying to ignore the heat shooting through his body as he put his hands on her warm, little body. Her sweet face was peeking out from under the covers. He did not think a more beautiful girl existed.

What was happening to him?

She'd gone to bed last night believing he did not like her.

Hah! That pendulum had swung hard in the opposite direction. He used to think of her as an irritatingly priggish miss who always showed him up with her perfect manners and perfectly complacent ways. But now?

Yes, she was still perfect. Lovely and engaging, compassionate and clever. He knew exactly what was happening to him.

He was falling in love with Katie.

Not merely falling, but tumbling, careening, diving headlong into love with her.

It was a frightening feeling.

He'd never felt so out of control before, so desperately famished for any woman or so afraid of losing his heart.

What a jest, a Jameson desiring a deep and committed lifetime love.

But how could he be certain these feelings he had for Katie would last? After all, he came from a long bloodline of cads and heels. What if he returned to his womanizing ways?

Katie was the last person on earth he would ever wish to destroy.

He was distracted from his musings by the sound of their coach being brought around to the front. He left Katie's side to peer out the window and saw the coachman speaking to the innkeeper, Swann. By their intense manner, they seemed to be plotting something, not merely holding idle conversation.

When they both looked up at his window, he knew what they meant to do. He'd drawn back before they noticed him, but this did not give him much advantage. "Katie, get up. *Now.*"

The urgency in his voice finally roused her. She shot out of bed and hastily donned her boots, jacket and cap. "What's wrong?"

"You do not leave my side even for a moment. Got it?"

She nodded. "I suppose that means I cannot kick you out of here while I use..." She glanced toward the chamber pot.

He sighed. "I'll turn around. Be quick about it."

He returned to staring out the window. Once she had finished and washed up, he gathered their pouches, took her

hand, and led her downstairs. The innkeeper was waiting for them by the door. "My lord, may I have just a moment of your time? It won't take long. The lad can wait in the coach."

"No, Mr. Swann." He held fast to Katie, knowing his grip was tight. But no one was going to pry her away from him. "I know what your game is. If you or the coachman set a hand on the boy, I shall see you both hanged."

He then turned to the coachman who was standing beside their coach. "Step away."

"What do ye mean, m'lord?"

"You are not driving us anywhere. Hitch a ride on the next coach heading south. You will find your coach and horses waiting for you at the next inn on the route."

"Now see here! That's thievery!"

He grabbed the man by the lapels and tossed him toward the innkeeper. "There is no theft involved. I've paid you for coach transportation to Thirsk. I've paid you for your services as driver, as well. Obviously, I cannot allow you to continue. If anything, you owe me my money back. Caleb, climb up in the driver's seat." He shoved Katie up there none too gently and climbed up beside her. "Good day, gentlemen."

Katie said nothing, merely stared at him with mouth agape until they were out of sight of the inn. "Will you now tell me what that was about?"

"No."

She gave a startled laugh. "Why ever not?"

"Because it is an ugly business." Lord, he was still angry over the encounter. Seething, actually. It was one thing for consenting adults to do as they wished between themselves, but to take advantage of a child? This is what these men had wanted to do with Katie, believing her to be a simple-minded boy who would not be able to understand what those friendly pats and other touches were about. Nor would a mute boy be able to shout for help even if he did understand.

Such things happened all the time. Worse things happened to unprotected children, girls sold to rookeries, boys doing whatever they needed to survive on the streets. Too often, those in power would do nothing to prevent it, sometimes even offering protection for those who ran these sordid establishments.

But to dare attempt this on a child under an earl's protection? It made no sense, unless...

Oh, lord! They'd thought he was one of them!

Katie cried out as the coach sped over a particularly rough patch of terrain. "Niall! The coach is going to tip over if you drive these horses any faster. What is wrong with you?"

It took him another long moment to calm down, but his ire finally began to subside and he slowed the horses to a more moderate pace. He was still too agitated to talk about her close call with those fiends calmly, so he ignored the question when she asked it again.

He knew he was behaving like an arse, but she seemed to sense his turmoil and take it with remarkable patience. "I can't yet, Katie. We'll talk about it once we're settled in our room at Thirsk, all right?"

She nodded.

They rode on in silence.

The weather was turning cool and damp, the sign of an approaching storm. He could smell it in the salty air, for storms had a slightly acrid, metallic scent to them, especially the more violent ones, as he feared this one would be.

He hoped they would reach Thirsk before the deluge came upon them.

They stopped briefly at the next coaching inn along the route, just long enough to have a quick bite, drop off the horses and coach, and pick up fresh horses for themselves. It would be faster if they rode on horseback to Thirsk rather than hire another coach.

They did make good time, but were caught in the downpour on the outskirts of town and soaked to the bone by the time they reached the Mablethorpe Inn. Mr. Mablethorpe was standing at the porticoed entrance as they rode up. “Lord Jameson! We did not expect to see you.”

“Nor did I expect to be here again so soon. We are drenched and in need of a room, your finest if it is available,” he said, dismounting and attempting to shake the excess water off him, like a dog after a swim in a lake.

“Yes, of course.” He whistled for one of his stable hands to grab the horses. “And who is this fine lad?”

Katie was still seated upon her horse, still hesitant to climb down.

Niall was reluctant to lie to the innkeeper, for he was an excellent man and could be trusted with the secret of her identity. But he was not going to reveal the truth to him while out in the open and guests milling about in the entry hall. “His name is Caleb. He is mute and slightly hard of hearing. A grandson of the Crisps. Do you recall my caretaker and his wife? I’m delivering him back to his parents in London.”

“Yes, lovely people.” He waved to Katie and cast her a friendly smile. “Hello there, little fellow! Oh, the poor lad appears exhausted.”

“We’ve had a long ride.” He helped Katie dismount, frowning when he felt her legs begin to buckle.

“The lad seems awfully timid, almost scared.”

“Yes, we hit a spot of trouble at The Swan and Maiden last night.” He kept hold of Katie, worried that he’d pushed her too hard. They’d left at dawn and it was now well after sundown. They’d had another difficult day and they were both drenched.

Mr. Mablethorpe muttered an oath. “That filthy place? How did ye end up there?” He studied Katie and frowned. “Ye didn’t leave the boy alone with—”

“No, I quickly saw what they were about. I see you have a fire going in the common room.” He would carry Katie inside if he had to, the hell with deception. But she recovered quickly



and turned away to busy herself by unbuckling their travel pouches.

She attempted to sling them over her shoulder as she'd seen him do, but her shoulders were quite slender and the pouches were heavier than she expected. The weight of them knocked her backward as she tossed them over her shoulder. Niall caught her in time to keep her from tumbling. "Let me have them, Caleb."

But Katie was not giving them up. When she recovered her balance and finally got them on her shoulder, they slipped right off.

"The lad's not too bright in the head, is he, yer lordship?" the innkeeper said in a whisper, obviously not realizing Katie could hear every word.

"He's a good lad. He tries his best." Chuckling, Niall took the pouches from her, tossed them over his shoulder with no effort at all, and returned his attention to the innkeeper. "We'll need food brought up to our chamber. Neither of us has eaten much today."

"At once, m'lord." He smiled at Katie, who was trying to hide herself behind Niall's broad back. But Mr. Mablethorpe was determined to be kind to her. "Food!" he cried, shouting in poor Katie's ear and patting his hand in a circle on his own stomach to assure her it would be delicious. "And a warm bath!" He danced around, mimicking washing his body with a sponge.

Niall was not sure how much longer Katie could keep up the pretense. Her lips were twitching and all would be lost if she broke out in laughter. Well, there would be little harm done. The man and his family were to be trusted.

Indeed, Niall should have revealed the truth and asked for separate quarters. But he could not bring himself to be separated from Katie.

As she'd said often enough, she was ruined anyway. Sleeping apart would not restore her reputation. Nor would he

catch a wink of sleep worrying about her if she was not in sight of him.

They went inside while one of the stable hands took their horses to be fed and properly tended. Niall tossed the lad a coin for his efforts.

“What a difference from one inn to the other,” Katie whispered while the friendly Mr. Mablethorpe ran inside ahead of them, shouting orders to his staff. The place was well maintained and spotless. The guests were also of a higher class, families traveling with children. Gentlemen discussing business transactions over glasses of brandy.

The aroma of fresh coffee and warm pie filled the air.

The innkeeper’s wife rushed out of the kitchen and, clucking like a mother hen, nudged them toward the warming fire in the common room.

“Ye poor lad,” she said to Katie, who was clutching her cap and holding it down before the well-meaning proprietress could take it off her.

“The boy is shy,” Niall said, not liking to lie to the amiable woman. But there were other diners in the common room and he could not risk Katie’s identity being discovered here. “Let him be. I’ll take care of him once we are shown to our room.”

“Boy? My arse,” the woman said, obviously shocking Katie. But she had the sense to keep her voice down and not say another word until they were taken up to their guest chamber. Then, the proprietress closed the door and folded her beefy arms across her ample chest. “Yer lordship, with all due respect, we are running a reputable establishment here.”

Niall rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “Nor will I give you cause to regret giving this room to me and...Caleb.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Who are ye, lass?”

Niall did not allow Katie to answer. “Bring up the latest newspaper, Mrs. Mablethorpe, and I shall tell you. I must also beg you and your husband not to give us away, or you’ll put the lass in grave danger.”

“Danger?” She lumbered to Katie and tucked a finger under her chin to raise Katie’s gaze to hers. “What a sweet thing ye are. Who would want to harm an angel like yerself?” She gave a tsk and hurried out to fetch the paper, returning with it and Mr. Mablethorpe at her heels.

“Yer food and bath will be brought up shortly,” he said, closing the door before he went to the hearth to light the fire. “What’s all this about, yer lordship?”

Niall took a moment to look at the front page and saw the news had finally made the headlines. He cast Katie a grim smile. “Word is now out. Ten thousand pounds reward offered by your father. An equal sum to be matched by Yardsley.”

“Oh, no.” She came to his side and read over his arm. “Twenty thousand pounds? Everyone in England will be looking for me now.”

Mr. Mablethorpe glanced up in surprise. “The boy speaks? I thought ye said he was mute.”

His wife rapped him on the head. “Idiot, does she look like a boy? Ye’re looking at Miss Pringle.”

His eyes widened in understanding. “The runaway bride?”

Katie took the wet cap off her head. “Yes, but I will never marry Lord Yardsley now. He is a horrible, wretched man.”

“Aren’t they all?” intoned Mrs. Mablethorpe. “But Lord Jameson’s right nice. Ye like him, don’t ye? Is this why ye ran off? Ye realized yer heart was bound to him and not Yardsley?”

Niall grimaced. “Not like that at all. Katie, may I tell them?”

She nodded. “Why not? I’m sure all my friends suspect what happened anyway. I was the only fool who remained blind to their deceit.”

“She caught Yardsley, the bastard, doing the deed with her best friend moments before they were to marry.”

“In the church, no less,” Katie added, as though it made a difference where the pair cheated.

“The unfaithful wretch!” Mrs. Mablethorpe was aghast.

“So I ran off. I’d made it as far as Alnwick when I almost drowned in a river. Lord Jameson rescued me and he is now trying to return me safely to my father. But with this reward... everyone will be out hunting for me. The more desperate ones will think nothing of harming Lord Jameson or anyone else who gets in their way.”

“This is why Miss Pringle needs to remain in disguise.” Niall cleared his throat. “And she also needs to remain with me so I may continue to protect her.”

“And claim the reward,” the innkeeper interjected.

Katie gasped. “No, he doesn’t want it. Although I’ve told him not to be stupid and take every last ha’penny of it. Whatever my fate, it would not hurt so much if I knew that a fine man such as Lord Jameson had come out ahead in this sad affair. Don’t you think he ought to take it, Mrs. Mablethorpe? Surely you can understand why I would be distressed if he did not.”

The woman glanced from Katie to him and smiled. “Oh, I understand.” She lumbered to Katie’s side and patted her hand. “We’re not going to give ye away, m’darling.”

“Thank you,” Katie said, her smile stealing Niall’s breath away.

Mrs. Mablethorpe patted her hand once more before starting for the door. “Ye just make yerselves comfortable while we bring up yer meal and bath. Ye can hang yer wet clothes on the pegs along the mantel. They’ll dry quick enough as the room warms.”

She was still chattering instructions as she and her husband walked out.

Niall closed the door and securely latched it. Not that there was cause for worry here. The innkeeper’s wife was hopelessly romantic, perhaps even more so than Katie. The husband was more pragmatic. He’d pay the man a share of the reward, assuming he decided to claim it, if it was necessary to buy his silence. He did not think it would be, for his wife

would do the man bodily harm if he dared ask for so much as a shilling from him.

Years ago he'd saved the life of one of their sons when their stable had caught fire. A frightened horse had kicked over the lamp the boy had set too close on the ground. Being young himself, he'd never considered his own mortality, and went running in upon hearing the boy's screams.

While he had been busy saving young Douglas Mablethorpe and the horse he had been tending, the other stable hands had managed to get the other horses out in time. The incident had left him with a slight burn scar on his left shoulder that was hardly noticeable now.

"Come stand by the hearth, Katie. Give me your cap and jacket. I'll hang them up."

She did as he asked, remaining beside him as they held their hands close to the flames to warm them. "Do you think they might have robes for us to borrow? Everything we're wearing is soaked. So are the clothes in the pouches. I had better hang them up to dry, too."

"I'll help you." Because if he did not keep busy, he was going to kiss her. There was something exquisite about this girl. The way she was put together. Big eyes. Softest lips. Pert nose and pink cheeks. Dark hair. Stunning body. Even when soaking wet and obviously bedraggled, she looked beautiful.

They made quick work of hanging up the clothes from the pouch, but they could not take off more than their boots and stockings. The boots were left beside the fire. He placed her stockings on a peg beside the cap and jacket she had earlier removed and put to dry above the mantel.

He would have preferred for them not to remain in their wet shirts and breeches, but they could not stand naked beside each other. Well, he could. He did not care.

But Katie was modest.

Biblical plagues would fall upon them before Katie ever stripped for him and strutted about the chamber without any clothes on.

Oddly, that modesty made her all the more tempting to him.

“May I unpin my hair?” she asked. “I’ve been wearing it tightly done up and it’s hurting my head.”

“Yes, of course. No need for deception now. Let me help you.” He felt her shiver as his fingers grazed her neck. His hands were cold, but not that cold. He knew she was responding to the pleasure of his touch. He was no less immune to her, and in fact was probably in great danger of doing something foolish. The intimacy between them felt particularly intense after the ugliness of last night’s lodgings and this morning’s confrontation.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice soft and shaking as he took out the last of the hair pins.

He moved away to place them atop the bureau and regain control of his pounding heart.

How was he going to get through the night without kissing her? He wanted to do more, of course. Mere kisses would never be enough.

“This guest chamber is so lovely. Don’t you think so Niall?” She shook her hair out, not realizing the effect it was having on him as it tumbled down her back like a waterfall of dark silk.

“Yes, charming. Stay by the fire. I don’t want you to catch a chill.” Or be anywhere near him while his heart was untamed and on a rampage of desire.

The room was well appointed and far too cozy for his liking. The heat from the fire now chased the dampness from the air. It made for a romantic atmosphere. But he supposed being anywhere with Katie would make him feel this way.

Her eyes were closed, and she looked beautiful beyond imagination. “I wish they’d bring the food up. I’m starved. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, Katie. You have no idea how famished I am.” He was speaking of her, of course. Nothing was going to satisfy that hunger.

She laughed, a soft, musical trill. “Although I think I’d much rather have the bath first. I stink of horse sweat and saddle leather.”

“You? Never. You are a rose blossom.”

She opened her eyes and smiled at him. “And I think you are delirious.”

After a moment, she began to nibble her lip. “Niall, what are we going to do for clothes? Ours are all wet and Mrs. Mablethorpe did not mention providing any for us while ours dry. We ought to have mentioned it to her while she was in here.”

Was Katie just realizing it now? He’d been thinking of nothing else for the past few minutes. “We’ll say something about it when she or her husband returns.”

He did not require clothes, just a drying cloth or spare sheet to tuck around his waist for the sake of Katie’s modesty.

Otherwise, he would not care who saw him undressed.

But Katie was going to bite through her lip, she was that appalled by the situation. She would never agree to toss a sheet around her luscious body.

Blessed saints! He’d be lost if she ever did.

How would he resist such a sight? Katie gift wrapped for him, those big eyes of hers looking up at him, her long hair tumbling over her bare shoulders. Hound that he was, he’d have her naked in a trice.

The way she had been looking at him lately, he did not think she would resist.

This was bad.

Fiery desire had been building between them since she’d arrived at Alnwick. Merely a simmer, at first. But over the past few days it had been bubbling. Brewing. Tonight, it would spill over and burn the both of them.

Were it any other woman, he would already be taking advantage. Of course, the women who ended up in his bed - or

he in theirs - were never virgins. They were elegant courtesans, sophisticated women, wealthy widows, or married noblewomen whose husbands cared little what their wives did so long as they were discreet about it.

But Katie was different.

She was an angel.

If he touched her, he would have to marry her. And if he married her, he would have to take his wedding vows seriously, be faithful to her, love and protect her to his dying breath. She deserved no less.

He turned away to dig into his travel pouch and remove his comb. "Here. You'll need to brush out your hair."

But he dared not remain beside her beyond handing her the comb because his fingers were itching to slide through those silken strands.

He crossed to the window and stared into oblivion.

Rain pelted the panes and the wind howled against them, causing them to rattle violently. After several minutes, he drew over a stool and sank onto it, resting his elbows on his thighs and staring at the floor.

Anything to avoid looking at Katie.

Her beauty overwhelmed him.

His desire for her was as fierce as the storm raging outside.

"Niall, what's wrong?"

He gave a mirthless laugh. "Nothing."

He felt her silence, just as he had felt hers.

He also felt the force of her gaze on him. He glanced up and saw she was still watching him, her expression thoughtful. He arched an eyebrow. "What?"

"Nothing," she said, tossing the word back at him.

"Truly, Katie. What is it? I know you have something on your mind. You look troubled."



“We both seem to be, don’t we?” But she nodded and did not press him further. “I’m not troubled so much as confused. I’m trying to make sense of it, but the answer escapes me. Perhaps the answer is obvious, but it is hurtful, so I don’t want to accept it.”

“Tell me what has you bedeviled.” He meant it sincerely, for he never wanted Katie to be afraid to share her feelings with him.

Her expression turned pained. “It concerns you.”

He crossed to her side, knowing he should not get anywhere near this girl who was so dangerous to his heart. “All the more reason you should confide in me.”

Tears formed in her eyes. “Why would you not share the bed with me last night?”

## CHAPTER TEN

NIALL DID NOT KNOW whether to laugh or groan at Katie's question. "Share a bed? Do you hear yourself? What a question to ask a renowned rake. Why do you think I refused?"

The breath caught in her throat and her lovely lips began to quiver. "Because you do not find me attractive."

He heard the little catch of heartbreak in her voice, and it tore him to pieces. Is this truly what she believed?

"Shows what you know about men," he grumbled, wishing they were not engaging in this conversation. Where were the Mablethorpes when he needed them? And the food? Or the bath?

"What do you mean?"

"If I did not like you, I would have you out of your clothes and romping in that bed with me right now."

"You would have me...if you did not like me?" She frowned. "That makes no sense whatsoever."

"It makes perfect sense. You are not any man's plaything, Katie. Taking you to bed would have to be a declaration of love on my part."

She nodded. "And you do not love me."

"Don't put words in my mouth. All I'm saying is that I could never bed you and then leave you. My conscience would not allow it. Yet, it is not in my nature to remain faithful to one woman."

“Because you are a Jameson bee and this is what they do?”

He regarded her, confused. “A what?”

“A Jameson bee. Like your father and grandfather before you.”

“I still have no clue what you are talking about.”

“You flit from flower to flower, steal their pollen, and then move on to the next flower and steal her pollen.”

“I am not a damn bee.”

“The point is, what you are telling me is that you won’t touch me because I am the foolish sort of girl who requires a lifetime commitment, and you are the sort of man who is incapable of giving it.”

“I—” A knock at their door interrupted their conversation. It was probably for the best. He was moments away from declaring his love for her and that would be an enormous mistake. As she had just said, Jamesons were flitting bees who did not know how to be faithful to one flower.

He strode to the door. “Who’s there?”

“Mr. Mablethorpe, m’lord.”

Niall opened it and allowed the innkeeper to march in with a rolling cart laden with food, ale, and a pitcher of mulled wine. By the heavenly scents, he knew they were in for one of Mrs. Mablethorpe’s finest meals. “Is that roast beef she’s made for us?”

“Yes, m’lord.” His eyes sought Katie who had tucked herself behind the open door on the chance others were in the hall. “Oh, there ye are Miss—”

“Caleb,” Niall blurted, frowning at the man. In truth, his wife was the brains in that marriage. Mablethorpe was not nearly as sharp.

Niall hoped he had not made a mistake in confiding in the man.

“Right! My mistake, m’lord. I’ll leave ye to it and I’ll bring up the tub in half an hour. Perhaps *Caleb* can tuck

himself in bed at that time,” he said with an exaggerated wink. “I’ll require help from some of my lads and we don’t want them taking too close a look at...*Caleb*. Does that suit ye?”

Niall sighed. “Yes, thank you for the warning.”

He nudged the man out of the room and latched the door behind him. “I’m sorry, Katie. I hope he shuts up about us.”

“Nothing we can do about it now. It was bound to happen sooner or later. His wife caught on at once. Hopefully, no one else noticed.”

He set out their plates and piled roast beef, a mash of onions and potatoes, and a Yorkshire pudding onto both. “Most of the other guests have turned in for the night,” he said, pouring an ale for himself and a cup of the mulled wine for her. “Mablethorpe will have no one to blab to but his wife.”

“And his staff, those not yet retired for the evening.”

“His wife will make sure he and their workers keep their mouths shut. This is a family run operation. The few on the staff who are outsiders would have gone home by now. Those who are on duty this evening and might have seen us will be Mablethorpe relations. They will never betray us.” He set out a chair for her. “Come have a bite.”

She sank into the chair and immediately reached for her cup of mulled wine. She must have been very thirsty, for she gulped down the entire contents. “Katie! Don’t drink it so fast.”

“This is remarkably good.” She held out her cup so he could pour more into it.

He frowned when she cast him a tipsy looking smile, knowing it had already gone to her head. Well, her nerves were frayed and she thought he did not like her. She was overset. But he would watch her and make certain she did not imbibe too much. He refused to consider what might happen with her inhibitions loosened.

He made sure she ate something before he refilled her cup which was already empty again. Was she purposely trying to

make herself drunk? Not that he blamed her. He'd been on the run with her for a couple of days. She'd been on the run for over a week now.

The wear on her senses, especially for someone as sheltered as she had always been, must be something awful.

She had just stuffed a spoonful of the onion and potato mash in her mouth when she suddenly groaned. "Oh, no."

"What is it, Katie?" She looked like a very sad kitten.

"We forgot to ask for clothes." She let out her breath in another groan. "What are we going to do?"

He'd been so concerned about keeping Mablethorpe in line he'd completely forgotten about requesting them. But the man would be back soon to retrieve the empty plates and bring up their bath. The oversight was nothing dire.

But Katie had imbibed too much and was not thinking clearly.

The look of dismay on her face had him grinning. "Oh, dear. What a coil. This is a disaster of catastrophic proportions."

"It is. You have no idea." She poured herself more mulled wine and took a healthy swig that would have made a sailor proud. "What I think..." She hiccupped. "Obviously, the only sensible thing..."

He stopped her when she reached for more. "I think you've had enough."

She tossed her table linen at him. "This is my adventure, not yours."

He nodded. "But we don't want you getting too adventurous and regretting it later, do we?"

She looked down at her clasped hands.

He took hold of them, lightly caressing them with the soft swirl of his thumbs. "Katie, are you all right?"

"No, I'm not." Her eyes began to tear. "My feelings are in such turmoil. Now I'm going to make an utter cake of myself."

But I don't care. I've made myself too drunk to care. Anyway, it cannot be worse than the ruined laughingstock everyone in London already believes me to be." She took a deep, shattered breath. "We've been found out and my adventure will soon be over. This is the most fun I've had in my entire life. No one has ever made me as happy as you do."

"Oh, Katie..."

"But it is more than that. You act like a rogue, but this is not who you truly are. You are brave and caring."

He snorted. "No one's ever called me that."

She tossed him an endearingly lopsided smile. "They've never had the pleasure of being on the run with you as I have. I feel safe with you. And do not deny that you are brave because I won't believe otherwise. I'm not sure what was going on with those nasty men at last night's inn, but you knew they were up to something unsavory and protected me."

He would have killed them if they'd ever laid a hand on her.

"But it isn't just about your valor. You also know how to enjoy life, to laugh and be silly, to find pleasure in everything you do. You've always been this way and I've always loved watching you. Finally, I got to share in the fun with you and I've treasured every moment."

She overwhelmed him, demolished each and every one of his defenses. "As I have with you, Katie. I want you to know this."

"You are merely being polite. I'm so pathetic, not even a wicked earl like you will have me in his bed."

He stared at her with his mouth agape. "I've told you why. It isn't about not wanting you."

"I know. It's about not wanting me permanently." She nodded. "Much as I've tried, I have not drunk myself into oblivion yet. So I understand perfectly what is going on. But you do not seem to be getting my point."

It was hard to pay attention to her words when all he wanted to do was kiss her daintily pursed lips.

Were sweeter lips ever created?

Or a more beautiful face?

The wine had turned her nose and cheeks a bright pink. Her eyes were glistening. Her lips were cherry red and her expression resembled something between a sensual pout and a lopsided grin. He found it surprisingly seductive. “And what is your point?”

He was struggling not to devour her.

But she ravaged his senses and left him famished, starved for the littlest morsel of her.

She eased out of his grasp and drank more of her mulled wine. “I am setting no terms. I want to be like the others. I do not wish to remain the untouchable Perfect Miss Pringle. I wish to be touched.” She paused and scratched her head. “I’m not sure that came out right. What I am trying to tell you, rather inelegantly, is that I am just a woman with an aching heart who wants to spend one night with you. No continuing responsibilities on your part.”

He stopped her when she tried to pour herself more wine. “You are going to pass out if you don’t stop this nonsense.”

She folded her arms on the table, buried her face in them, and began to cry. A few strands of her hair fell into her mash of potatoes. He said nothing for the longest moment, then threw his head back and laughed.

She thought he was being cruel, but he was not.

This is what it took for him to realize what a fool he’d been. He was nothing like the other Jameson men. He was never going to stray. He loved Katie, utterly and irrevocably. How could he possibly ever love anyone else?

He bent on one knee. “Katie, look at me.”

“No, you are laughing at me. I’ve made a fool of myself. I thought I was drunk enough not to care, but it seems I am not.”

“Please, love. Look at me.” He intended to propose to her...never mind about Yardsley, he’d deal with that hound later. But he’d have to take Katie north to Scotland in order to elope with her. And here they’d spent the past few days riding hard southward. He ought to have listened to his heart sooner and proposed to her from the first.

She was too busy crying to notice what he was doing. “Katie, will you—”

A sharp banging at their door startled both of them.

*Hell and damnation.*

Was Mablethorpe back already?

He wanted to shout at him to leave the tub and buckets, and go away, but this was no gentle pounding.

Nor had anyone called out to identify themselves.

Whoever was at their door could not be Mablethorpe.

Niall shot to his feet and crossed the room to withdraw the pistol from his boot. He then shoved his feet into the boots, grabbed hers along with the garments drying by the fire, and then hurried back to her side. “Quick, Katie. Put these on.”

She wiped her tears with the table linen and hurried to do as he asked. He noticed she’d grabbed her eating knife and now had it grasped in her hand. But he knew she was too softhearted to ever use it.

“Lord Jameson, we know you have her! Open up!”

“Bloody hell, it’s those Bow Street men who were watching for you at Alnwick. Digby and Standish. They’ve caught up to us. Now they’ve alerted the entire inn.” He opened the window, ignoring the blast of cold air and pelting rain that struck him. “We’ll have to climb out. Be careful, the roof will be slippery. Stay close and keep hold of me. I won’t let you fall.”

She hiccupped.

Oh, lord. She was drunk. Even her shirt and jacket were buttoned wrong, but there was no time to fix them now.



“Never mind. I’ll hold on to you. Just try not to pass out.”

“Why would I pass out?”

“Cold air can do that to you. It ferments in your system.” He grabbed her by the waist, climbed out the window, and prayed she would not scream as they slid down the roof. He angled his body so that if he fell as they landed on the rain-soaked ground, she would safely fall atop him and not the other way around.

Fortunately, they managed to land without either of them falling or twisting an ankle. Since the rain was coming down too hard to talk over it, he simply hauled her over his shoulder and ran to the stables. “Katie, climb up to the loft.”

“Why?”

“For pity’s sake, don’t ask questions. Just do it. Here, I’ll help you.” He lifted her up, giving her backside a shove upward to set her safely in the loft. She kicked some loosely strewn hay down on his head as she scrambled to hide.

“Sorry,” she called down, her face peeking out from behind a bale of hay while she watched him grab their two horses and lead them out of their stalls. He gave each of them a slap on the rump just as an angry roar thundered overhead and a clap of lightning caused the ground to sizzle beneath his boots.

The beasts took off in panic.

He expected they would eventually return to the stable or just gallop to the next coaching inn, for they were used to the route. But he wasted no time speculating. Instead, he hoisted himself into the loft and pulled Katie down next to him just as the Bow Street men ran in.

The older Bow Street man, Charles Digby, kicked the wooden slats in one of the stalls. “Damn, their horses are gone.”

“I told you I saw them ride off,” said the younger runner, Harlan Standish. “What do we do now?”

“We follow them, of course,” Digby said, emitting a string of curses as he led their skittish horses out of the stable and into the pouring rain. Their beasts had not yet been unsaddled, so they merely climbed on and hurried away.

Niall listened for the clop of hooves to fade away to be sure the Bow Street men were truly gone.

He was not a praying man, but he was praying hard right now that he’d succeeded in leading them on a wild and fruitless chase. “I think it’s safe now, Katie. Let me help you down.”

She waited for him to swing down and then she lowered herself so he could catch her. “We’re soaking wet again,” she muttered as he held her in his arms.

“It appears so. And may I say, the look suits you.” He tried to concentrate on their next plan and not on her delectable body which really was impossibly distracting.

“What do we do now, Niall?”

“We return to the inn. It ought to be safe enough since the Bow Street men think we’ve run off. The Mablethorpes will give us another room. Obviously, we cannot go back to the fine one we had. A pity, it was quite nice.”

“I feel terrible about what happened. Those awful men broke down the door. Who knows what else they destroyed while chasing us?”

“The Mablethorpes know I will make it right. Don’t fret, Katie. They’ll hide us elsewhere.”

“You’ll make it right? No, this is my fault.” Her eyes rounded in surprise. “And what makes you think they won’t be furious and turn us away?”

“In this storm? They won’t. They wouldn’t do it even if the day was sunny and warm.”

“You’re awfully sure of them. Why do you trust them as you do?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Another long story? I am keeping track. You’ll have lots to tell me when we have the chance to talk. When do you think that might be?”

“Later.” He kept his arm around her as they ran toward the servants’ entrance. The door was unlatched, as he hoped it would be.

Mrs. Mablethorpe was waiting for them with a shotgun aimed at the door when they entered. She set it down as soon as she recognized them. “Ye poor lass. Is this what ye’ve been dealing with since running off?”

Katie nodded. “I’m so sorry for the damage. I’ll repay you for all of it. The room, the meal, the broken door. The trouble I’ve caused.”

Niall frowned at her. “Mrs. Mablethorpe will not accept it. The payment will come from me.”

Katie scowled at him. “You? Haven’t you sacrificed enough for me?”

“Not nearly enough.” He pulled her inside and shut the door behind them. “Is there someplace you can hide us, Mrs. Mablethorpe? Katie is exhausted. So am I.”

“And our clothes are soaked again,” Katie said, wringing water from her shirt into a nearby bucket.

“I have just the spot. Follow me, my loves.” She took them up the back stairs used by her staff and led them to what appeared to be nothing but a wall. “The inn has been around a long time. This secret room was something of a necessity during more turbulent times. We’ve hidden Yorkist sympathizers and Lancastrians as well. Spies. Smugglers. Royalists. Reformists. Even a queen once, I’ve been told. It’s always kept at the ready.”

As she spoke, she moved a small table containing a vase with a large floral display. Niall helped her set it aside. Then she slid her hand behind a nearby wall sconce, and a part of the wall suddenly opened up with a soft *whoosh*. A hidden door. “We cannot roll a tub in here, but I expect you’ve taken in quite enough water tonight. I’ll grab the ewer and basin

from the other room for ye. The soap and wash cloths, too. Do ye need any more food?”

“I don’t think so, Mrs. Mablethorpe,” Katie said, looking to him for approval. “We had just finished our delicious meal when those Bow Street men started pounding on our door.”

Niall considered asking for dry clothes, but something stopped him. Perhaps it was the knowledge that he was about to pledge his heart and soul to Katie. He wanted to be left alone with her already.

No more fuss.

No more delays.

He kept silent as the proprietress lit several candles in the room.

He quickly inspected their surroundings, noting the shutters sealed tight and the neatly made up bed designed to fit two people in it. There was a fireplace and wood in a bin beside it. “May I light a fire?”

“Oh, yes. It’s quite safe to do so, m’lord. I’ll see if I can scrounge up some dry clothes for ye. Let me gather some items and sneak back here before others are alerted to your presence.”

“Haven’t they been already?” Katie asked. “I mean, surely those Bow Street men created quite an uproar. Everyone will have heard them.”

She waved her hand in dismissal. “If a guest asks, we’ll give him a drink on the house and apologize for the disruption of those rowdy guests. We’ll explain it was all a mistake and the bounders are now gone. No names mentioned. Not yours or theirs. No one will ever know you were here or are still here. One of my sons is a coachman. He’ll stop by tomorrow evening and drive you the rest of the way to London. He’s a good boy. Size of an ox. No one is going to get the better of him. He can be trusted. He’s the one you rescued years ago, m’lord.”

“Douglas?” Niall nodded. “Sounds perfect. I had planned on diverting our route and riding to the town of Mablethorpe

to engage one of your relations for just this purpose. This will save us the trip.”

“Glad we can be of help. I’ll bring ye up what items ye’ll need for tonight. When ye wake up tomorrow morning, just tug on this rope and one of us will bring up yer breakfast. Never ye worry, I’ll not leave ye to starve.”

She skittered out of the room, returning several minutes later with ewer and basin in hand, and an enormous robe that would easily wrap four times around Katie. “Well, that should do it. Good evening, my lord.” She nodded toward Katie and smiled. “And to ye, my lady.”

Niall grinned once they were finally left to themselves.

Katie shook her head. “Why did she address me as ‘my lady’ when she must know I’m only Miss Pringle?”

“You’ll soon be a lady, she expects.”

She frowned. “Never! I am not going to marry Yardsley and no one can ever make me.”

“She wasn’t referring to Yardsley.” He strode to the hearth, began to place logs one atop the other, and then placed kindling beneath the piled logs in order to start the blaze. They were soaked to the skin again and dripping everywhere.

Since he was starting to feel the cold, he knew Katie had to be freezing. Yet, she hadn’t complained. In truth, she hadn’t complained about anything the entire journey.

How had he been such an arse about her all these years?

He waited to be sure the wood caught flame before setting aside the fire iron and striding to her side.

He could see the little pulse at the base of her neck rapidly beating. She looked up at him with big, hopeful eyes. “Who does she think I am going to marry?”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

NIALL WAS astounded by how unaware Katie was of her allure. “Mrs. Mablethorpe thinks you are going to marry me, of course.”

“Why would she think that?” Her eyes grew wide. “Would you ever have me? You never liked me.”

“The young Niall Jameson was too much of an idiot ever to appreciate you. But I like to think I’ve grown wiser with age. Much wiser.” He caressed her cheek. “I love you, Katie Pringle. I think you are the only one who hasn’t realized it yet.”

*Bollocks.*

She was going to cry again.

She turned away with a sob and buried her hands in her face. “Don’t say it unless you mean it, Niall. If I allow myself to fall in love with you, I’ll never be able to stop loving you. Not even when you leave me for those fast women in London. I’ll pine for you and wither like a dying flower on a vine.”

He rolled his eyes. “I am never going to stop loving you.”

He wanted to punch Yardsley for beating her down so badly, and would berate her parents for caring so much what others thought, that they’d almost crushed the spirit out of her. Nor could he ever forgive himself for behaving like an utter braying donkey around her all these years.

“How can you be certain you will always love me?” She turned to look at him with her big, beautiful eyes.

“Because your nose turns bright pink when you are drunk. And you still have a bit of potato in your hair. Wet hay, too.” He removed a few blades of hay as he brushed the soaked strands of hair off her face. “And no one stuffs apples down their chest like you do.”

She tried hard not to laugh but failed. “I ought to kick you for that mean trick, you wretched man. I don’t know how you did not fall to the ground hysterical, you must have been silently laughing so hard.”

“Perhaps there was a little chuckle at your expense, but mostly the jest was on me. I watched you and never felt so at peace and happy as in that moment. I knew I was falling in love with you. I’ve done nothing but worry about how and when and *if* to ever tell you because I was afraid of one day breaking your heart. But I know now that it will never happen.”

“How are you so sure?”

“Because my heart always knew you were the perfect one for me. It would not let me love anyone else. Nor would it ever allow me to marry anyone else. I had to wait for you.”

“I’d always wondered about that. Marriage rumors were always swirling about you and some heiress or other, but nothing ever came to pass.”

“You always got in the way.”

“It’s hard to believe. I am far from perfect. My behavior has been less than sterling. I ran off and almost drowned. I have every Bow Street runner in London searching for me. I’ve put you in danger and disrupted your life completely. If that isn’t enough, I drank too much mulled wine and stuck my head in my supper dish. I’ve made an utter fool of myself.”

He laughed. “Katie, are you serious? Was there ever a bigger fool born than I? And I would not consider marrying you if you were truly foolish. I cringe at the thought of the idiot children we would raise if that were so. If they turn out clever, it will be your doing. If they turn out beautiful, it will

also be your doing. Same if they turn out warm, loving, and compassionate.”

“What about your virtues?”

He rolled his eyes. “I have none, except that I have excellent taste in choosing my wife. I am wildly in love with you, and I don’t see that changing anytime ever.”

She threw her arms around him and hugged him fiercely. “Niall, I love you so much. I always have. Even when I did not like you.”

“That is quite a recommendation.” He wrapped his arms around her and drew her up against his body. The moment was not quite as romantic as he hoped it would be, for they were both soaking wet and Katie was now shivering.

Perhaps she was shivering a little from desire, but mostly she was cold. He had to get those clothes off her. But first this. “Kiss me, Katie.”

She reached up on tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.

He took over from there, crushing his mouth to hers and allowing every ounce of love he felt for her to flow into their kiss. He plundered her lips, devoured the cherry sweetness of them, and claimed possession of her heart.

She had no choice but to surrender.

But she was not the only one conquered.

She had vanquished him long ago.

And now he was kissing his Perfect Miss Pringle.

In all his years of experience, there had never been a kiss more beautiful than hers. There had never been any as right and heartfelt as hers. But this was Katie. The kisses they shared would always be pure and innocent and joyful, given only to him, as his would only ever be given to her from this day forward.

He’d wanted to make their first kiss special and romantic, but they were both dripping water on the floor and their boots were squishing whenever they moved...another reason why he



loved Katie. For someone as proper as she'd always been, she managed to get herself into the most improper situations. Mostly with him, of course. But she never seemed to mind being led astray when he was the one leading her.

She trusted him.

He would never betray her trust.

He deepened the kiss, drew her firmly up against him so that her wet shirt pasted to his chest. Water seeped into his clammy skin. It was the most uncomfortable kiss he'd ever given or received, and it was still the best.

Katie began to shiver from cold.

He ended the kiss and eased her out of his arms. "I'm going to help you out of your wet clothes now, Katie."

"You're going to undress me?" Her smile was as bright as a sunbeam.

He was trying to be serious and she looked like an excited child just given the best gift ever. "Do you mind?"

She shook her head and laughed. "Do I look like I mind? I've been dreaming of this moment for years. I never believed it would happen."

"Nor did I," he muttered. "Katie, that's all I'm going to do with you. I will get you out of your clothes and then wrap you in Mrs. Mablethorpe's robe. There will be no wicked night of sex for us until we exchange marriage vows."

She could not hide her surprise. "Why does it matter? I've accepted to marry you. You did offer, didn't you?"

"Yes. But your father hasn't accepted me yet. And let us not forget Yardsley."

"Oh, him. Kindly do not remind me of that oaf." Her smile faded. "Niall, this may be the last night we have to spend together. Once we are on the road, we'll likely ride straight through to London. Will you not give me one night of pleasure in your arms?"

He glanced toward the bed. "I'll share it with you. But that is all. It's for your own protection." She would be put through enough shame once they arrived in town, he refused to make it worse for her.

Her family would likely require her to be examined by a physician to ascertain her state of innocence or lack thereof. To be put through this ordeal would be humiliating enough. He was not going to add to her burden by claiming her maidenhead tonight.

The scandal of being a runaway bride was bad enough. Yardsley would crush her if she returned unchaste.

Katie did not deserve to be treated this way.

He tugged the shirt out of her waistband and drew it over her head. Her bosom was still wrapped in the binding she'd used to hide her breasts, but this did not stop his heart from pounding a hole through his chest.

Katie's body was glorious.

His hands shook as he nudged her into a chair and bent to remove her boots and stockings.

He took a deep breath and moved away from her temptation to set the boots and stockings out to dry, then did the same with his, removing all of his garments except for his breeches.

He returned to Katie's side and knelt in front of her. She hadn't moved from her spot, sitting still as a statue, her hands in a death grip holding onto the sides of her chair and her eyes as wide as saucers.

Smiling, he leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

She responded with aching sweetness, her mouth soft and giving as he pressed his lips to hers. He felt her love, felt it in the innocent warmth of her kiss.

Surely, he did not deserve her.

He slowly unfastened the binding that hid her lovely bosom, giving her the opportunity to change her mind. But she

had no doubts, not even the flicker of hesitation as he peeled the fabric away to reveal the creamy fullness hidden beneath.

“Blessed saints,” he said in a ragged whisper, trying to slow the fire raging through his already taut body.

He loved the softness of her skin and the silken length of her hair that now cascaded over her breasts because she was shy and was trying to hide her attributes. “Don’t, sweetheart.” He cupped the soft mounds in his hands and eased back to look at her.

She was so achingly beautiful...every inch of her.

When he drew his hands away, she immediately tried to cover herself again.

“Katie, let me look at you.” Her breasts were round and firm and lovely in their fullness. Their tips were a soft, rose pink.

He moved closer and took one of those rosebud tips in his mouth, gently suckling it. She responded like a little volcano, almost leaping out of her seat, which she would have done had he not put his hands around her waist to steady her.

She clutched his hair and tugged on it, but she was tugging him toward her, not trying to push him away. “Niall!”

Still, this was new to her and he should have gone slower...shouldn’t have touched her at all. But his resolve seemed to have washed away with the pounding rain. He drew his mouth away. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No...I...” She blushed. “Could you move on to the other breast?”

He laughed. “Yes, ma’am. Ever your dutiful servant.”

He drew its already straining bud into his mouth, licking it lightly with his tongue before closing his mouth over it and teasing it between his lips. At the same time, he ran the rough pad of his thumb over the other creamy mound.

“Oh, my heaven,” she said in a breathy whisper, now squirming in her seat. “I never knew what all the fuss was about. I never dreamed it would be like this.”

He undressed her the rest of the way, his heart about to blow a hole in his chest as her glorious perfection was revealed.

Indeed, she was the Perfect Miss Pringle.

Hadn't he always said so?

"Katie, you're so beautiful," he whispered, closing his mouth over hers to kiss her long and hard. He had meant to be gentle, but she aroused such depths of feeling in him, he feared all his good intentions had been shot to hell.

She tasted of roast beef and mulled wine.

She felt like silk.

Her body was pink and cream except for the patch of dark curls at the junction of her thighs and the long, tumbling curls of her hair.

He carried her to bed and tucked her under the covers while he finished undressing and setting the rest of their clothes to dry. When he climbed in with her, he took her in his arms so that her body nestled against his. "Katie, we ought to sleep."

She laughed softly. "Not a chance, my wicked earl. I want to soak up every precious moment of my time with you. I almost drank myself into a stupor trying to work up the courage to seduce you...not that I would know how. I don't even recall what I said to you, probably something inept and embarrassing."

"You decided to give yourself to me without terms or restrictions."

"Sounds like something I would say."

"I refused. I want those terms and restrictions. I want to marry you and honor you for as many years together as we are granted."

"So do I. But I still love this, Niall. Being in your arms, baring my heart and body to you. I should feel wanton and ashamed, but I don't."

He turned on his side to face her, taking a moment to watch the play of firelight on her face. The warmth of the fire's glow reflected in her eyes. Truly, she looked like an angel. His angel. "I need to kiss you again, Katie."

"Yes, please do. And don't hesitate to take up where you left off before you finished undressing me."

He shouldn't. It would be a mistake to savor her body and arouse the passion that had lain dormant within her until tonight.

"I'm only going to kiss you," he said with utter conviction, hoping to force himself to hold to the resolution if he spoke it aloud.

It took him under five minutes to break it, for that was as long as it took for him to plant a sweet, safe kiss on her lips, then feather a trail of sweet, but less safe kisses along her neck, stop to lightly nibble the throbbing pulse by her throat, then kiss her breasts, and suckle and tease them to evoke her exquisitely torrid, soft gasps of pleasure.

He knew then that kissing her was no longer enough.

He wanted her to know a woman's pleasure.

Her body was already hot for him. She was on the edge of her first release and he wanted very badly to send her tumbling. So he touched her at her most intimate spot, knowing she had to be slick and ready for him. He used his fingers because - heaven help him - he dared not use his mouth.

He would turn into a mindless, devouring beast the moment he tasted her nectar.

Besides, he did not wish to tear his gaze away from her beautiful face. Or her eyes that shimmered with wonderment over her newest adventure. Being Katie, she held back nothing as he slowly stroked her sensitive nub.

She sighed and cooed, and revealed her heart.

He was fascinated by her delight, knew her moment was near as she gripped the sheet and held fast, moaning. She

arched as the pressure built inside of her, and then she finally shattered into a thousand noisy points of starlight.

He kissed her on the mouth, partly because he wanted to kiss her anyway. He kissed her because he loved her, for he'd never loved anyone or anything as much as her in his life.

But he also kissed her because he did not want anyone to hear her and start hunting for ghosts behind the walls.

She cast him an endearing smile as she began to calm. "I had no idea this is what I was missing."

He was not in the least calm, wanting to bury himself inside her, conquer her and claim her as she'd wholly claimed him. But he dared not, so he tucked his arms around her and drew her against his body, stifling a groan as her breasts pillowed against his chest. "There's more."

She nodded. "I know. It is obvious your needs have not been addressed."

"Nor will they be tonight," he growled and almost shot off the bed when she touched his arousal. "Katie, don't."

She quickly drew her hand away as though she'd touched it to a flame. "I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. It's just that...this is something that will have to wait for our exchange of vows."

"Why?"

"Because it is important to me."

"Very well." She smiled at him again. "Who ever thought you'd be the prude? But I'm glad you decided not to hold back on all of it."

He caressed her cheek. "I meant to. Shows you how weak my resolve is when it comes to you. Only with you, Katie. I want you to know this."

"I do know." She leaned over and softly kissed his chest over the spot of his heart. "I always knew you were wonderful. You just managed to hide it very well for a very long time."

He kissed her on the forehead. "Get some sleep. We both need it badly."

"Will you wake me in the morning with a kiss?"

"Yes, love. With a dozen of them...and other things that come to mind."

She was asleep within minutes, but he still had a fire raging through his loins - which he dared not address while Katie's soft body was pasted to his - so it took him longer to calm down and drift off.

He awoke a few hours later to an unaccustomed obstruction in his bed. It took him a moment to realize he was in bed with Katie, his arms wrapped around her waist, and he was using her body as a pillow.

Oh, lord! Had he crushed her?

Was she breathing?

He watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

Lord help him!

He wanted her with such an agonizing ache.

He groaned softly and rolled back against his pillow. She scooted against him, her body seeking the warmth of his. He ought to have insisted she sleep in the borrowed robe, but Katie could be stubborn when she wanted to something badly enough.

And she wanted this night of nakedly sleeping in his arms.

*Her wicked adventure.*

He ran his hand lightly over her hair, frowning when he realized it was still damp. No wonder she was clamoring for his heat. He held her against him, trying to surround her in his warmth, and made certain to tuck the covers securely around her. "I love you, Katie," he muttered and fell back to sleep.

At dawn, he was awakened by Katie's shivers.

He turned worriedly and pressed a hand to her forehead, alarmed to find her burning up.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

NIALL IMMEDIATELY TOSSED MORE logs onto the fire to heat the room and chase the dampness from it. He took a quick moment to open the shutter just a crack, enough to peer out the window. He knew it was morning, although the sky was too dark to tell the hour, for the rain was still coming down in buckets. The wind was so strong, it drove the rain at a slant across the window panes, pelting them with an unrelenting *pickety-pok*.

He turned back to Katie. “Love, I’m going to dress you.”

“I’ll do it,” she said and tried to rise, but she was as weak as a newborn lamb.

He returned to her side. “Lie back. You have a fever.”

She nodded. “My skin feels as though it is burning, but my insides are so cold.”

Fortunately, her clothes had dried overnight and so had his. He dressed her in one of his shirts, then helped her to don her stockings, and wrapped her in the borrowed robe that was merely a sturdy linen and would not provide all that much warmth. He hoped it would be enough once he swaddled her in the blanket for added measure.

He then dipped some water from the ewer onto one of the washcloths, wrung it out, and placed it over Katie’s brow. He added his pillow to hers to prop her up because he did not want her sleeping flat. If this was a lung infection, she would need to sleep almost sitting up so the liquid did not collect in her lungs.



He settled her as best as he could and then dressed himself, intending to seek out Mrs. Mablethorpe. There was a risk he'd be seen, hopefully only by the loyal staff if he took the back stairs directly into the kitchen.

But first, he had to figure out a way to get through the door of the hidden room without knocking over the vase of flowers or the decorative, small table upon which the vase rested. Mrs. Mablethorpe would have put them back in place when she'd left them last night in order to hide the opening in the wall.

Just as he was puzzling it out, the door opened and the woman herself lumbered in with breakfast tray in hand. Niall took it from her. "Thank you. I was coming to find you. Katie has a fever."

"Oh, the poor lass. Well, there's tea here for her, some scones, honey, and marmalade jam. Oatmeal, too. That ought to hold her for now. I'll bring up some broth and soft bread later. An apple as well, but cut away the peel before ye give it to her."

"May I trouble you for another blanket and some more pillows?"

The kindly woman glanced at Katie who had fallen back asleep. "Yes, I'll fetch those right away. Anything else ye might need?"

"Some books and a deck of cards for me. The latest newspaper when it arrives." He lifted the lid over one of the plates to reveal a hearty portion of eggs and sausages. The other plate, obviously intended for Katie, held the same. However, Niall did not think she could handle it in her condition. She was safest eating the lighter fare of scones with jam. "Looks delicious, Mrs. Mablethorpe. I cannot thank you enough for your hospitality."

"We aim to please, m'lord. We'll do our best to get your young lady better again. The weather's so bad, I doubt my Douglas and his coach will arrive for another day or two yet. Then he'll have to wait for the roads to dry a bit before venturing out again. The delay will give her time to mend before you continue to London."

He nodded. "Indeed, she'll need all her strength for the battle to come once we're back in London. I'll do what I can, but I have not endeared myself to her father over the years."

"True love always finds a way, m'lord. That sweet girl will be fighting for ye as hard as ye will fight for her. It is refreshing to see a love match among the upper class. So many pass this way, husbands and wives who married for all sorts of reasons, nothing to do with love. Ye see the unhappiness in their eyes. Ye see the sadness in their children." She sighed and hurried off to fetch the pillows and blanket.

She returned soon with those items along with the cards and newspaper he'd requested. "That ought to hold ye for now, m'lord. I'll bring up some books with yer midday meal. Mr. Mablethorpe just told me that your horses returned. I hope it doesn't mean those wretched men will return as well."

"Hide the horses elsewhere. We'll figure out what to do if they come back here and persist in sticking around." He gave the woman a kiss on the cheek. "Truly, we are grateful for your kindness."

She blushed and hurried away.

When the wall slipped back in place, he strode to Katie's side and added the additional pillows beneath her and tucked the extra blanket around her slight, shivering body. The fire had taken hold and the room was too hot for him, but Katie needed the heat.

Fortunately, despite the rain, the air in the room was no longer damp.

He replaced the wet cloth on her brow with a fresh one, then settled himself at the table beside the shuttered window and ate his breakfast. Katie was sleeping comfortably. He saw no reason to disturb her when she did not appear to be in any distress. Most important, her chest appeared to be clear, no wheeze or shortness of breath.

He held out hope it was no more than a fever that would run its course in a matter of a day or two. They were trapped here anyway for the next few days.

“Katie, how do you feel?” he asked when she began to stir. He went to her side and sat beside her on the bed to feel her forehead. The damp cloth had dried somewhat from the heat of her brow, but it had done the trick. Her fever had subsided quite a bit.

“Much better than a little while ago. I’m not shivering anymore.” She noticed the sweat beaded on his brow. “The room’s too warm for you.”

He nodded. “It doesn’t matter. You’re the one who needs to heal. Would you care for some tea and a bite to eat?”

She nodded.

He served her tea and a marmalade scone which she nibbled at and left most of it unfinished. But she drank most of the tea which he’d sweetened with honey. It was enough for now. A half hour later, she had some apple slices also dipped in honey.

“Niall, you are a man of many talents,” she said, her smile quite affectionate. “I don’t think I’ve ever been tended as well as this. I marvel at this compassionate and caring side of you hidden all these years.”

“No, I’m basically an arse.” He caressed her cheek. “You manage to bring out the best in me.”

She sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees, grinning impertinently. “And I am proud to say you bring out the worst in me. It feels good to finally be myself. Oh, I know I’m not really bad at all, but neither am I the buttoned-up mouse everyone tried to make of me.”

He kissed her on the nose. “You certainly were not that last night.”

She blushed, obviously thinking of her discovery of passion. “No wonder women are so easily led to ruin. It was most enjoyable. I’m sorry I’ve fallen sick.”

“It isn’t your fault. Anyway, I wasn’t going to ruin you worse than I already did. I hadn’t meant to go that far. Truly, Katie. You are something rare and precious. I was afraid to kiss you because I knew where it would lead.”

“I’m glad you have no resolve and succumbed to my allure.”

She was jesting, but he wanted to be serious for a moment. “You are alluring. You’re the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld. Not just outwardly, but inside as well. This is why I want us married before I claim you. I don’t know how else to show you how important you are to me and how much I admire and respect you. You deserve to experience our bonding as my wife, nothing less.”

“Very well, since it seems quite important to you. But you are showing me your respect in everything you do for me. No man has ever cared for me the way you have. I’m no more than a bank account to Yardsley or any of the others who have courted me. Well, they’ve courted my bank account.” She laughed softly. “It’s ironic that my father sees you as a fortune hunter when you’re the only one who ever bothered to know the real me.”

“But it took me this long to come around. Rather pathetic, don’t you think?”

She shook her head in denial. “You had your own growing up to do, finding out who you were. Your parents were not the best example of adult responsibility.”

He winced. “That is true enough.”

“But I am sure we shall be wonderful parents and our children will adore and worship us.”

“Ah, Katie. They will love their mother for certain.” He kissed her on the cheek, then drew away before he sought more. “Care to play cards? We’re trapped here anyway until the rainstorm subsides.”

“Do I dare play with you?” she asked when he grabbed the deck and began to shuffle it with the expertise of a cardsharp.

“Of course, I’ll go easy on you since it is just for fun. We can play the less complicated games. Snip, Snap, Snorem? Or Battle? Or My Sow’s Pigg’d? Bezique? Vingt-Un?” He continued to mix the deck, his hands working the cards like a

magician so that he seemed able to pull out whatever card or suit he desired at will.

“I see how you spent your time in London at your clubs.”

“It became a necessity as my father’s health was failing and he seemed determined to destroy my inheritance with his reckless wagers. I made it a point to win back as much as he had lost, or at least stem the tide of his losses.”

Her gaze grew troubled. “I’m so sorry.”

“Wasn’t your fault.” He shrugged. “Since you happen to be flat broke, I suggest we play for something other than money.”

She tipped her head up in mock indignation. “I have plenty of money. I’m an heiress. I just don’t happen to have any of it on me at the moment.”

“We shall play for kisses,” he said with a chuckle. “If I lose, I must kiss you.”

“And if I lose?”

“You must kiss me.”

A gleam of mirth sprang into her eyes. “I’m sure there is a flaw in your logic. I have a fever, so I do not think kissing on the lips is a very good idea.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Then I shall kiss you elsewhere on your person. There are two prominent possibilities I have my eye on right now.”

She smacked him playfully. “Do not stare at my chest!”

“Shows what a wicked mind you have. I was speaking of your hands.”

She laughed softly. “Teach me how to play *Vingt-Un*. My brothers sometimes played it after supper. It did not look difficult. And being a tradesman’s daughter, I ought to be able to figure out the odds easily enough.”

They played for half an hour until Katie began to yawn and he put a halt to the game. “Get some rest, love. We’ll resume later if you’re feeling up to it.”

Niall, having lost - Katie accused him of losing on purpose, which he had - gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek.

The rest of the day passed without incident, Katie sleeping for most of the time. She woke on occasion to eat or play another round of cards with him. He also read to her, but the drone of his voice always put her quickly back to sleep, so he read mostly to himself.

She hadn't asked about the latest newspaper accounts of her disappearance. There was nothing new. Same reward offered. Same speculation as to where she might have run off. Essex. Hertfordshire. Kent. Surrey. Or perhaps she had never left the city of London. Few believed she had made it all the way up to Northumberland on her own.

But those two Bow Street runners had gotten on her trail fairly quickly. The young one, Standish, was no threat. He did not know how to think on his own, merely followed the more experienced man.

But Digby, the older one, was no fool.

Niall worried that Digby was going to double back to the inn and sniff about for sign of them. Mr. Mablethorpe was the weak link and he doubted it would take this experienced Bow Street runner much time to figure this out.

They were well hidden here and not about to come out anytime soon. Assuming no one accidentally tattled, they would work out a plan when the time came to sneak Katie into the carriage.

The Bow Street men knew what he looked like, but they hadn't set eyes on her. At best, they had a general description of her given by her parents. Perhaps they were shown a portrait, but it would have been done several years ago, before she had filled out in her womanly curves.

He also noticed an item of interest in the society pages. Yardsley had already taken up with some other heiress.

Good.

One less problem to deal with.

Yardsley and Katie's father must have formally severed the betrothal ties. If the unfaithful cur was free to pursue another 'mouse' then Katie was free as well. He set aside the newspaper and watched her as she slept.

Even when ill, she looked splendid.

He touched her forehead.

The fever was already subsiding. He hoped she would shake it given another day of rest. The broth and soft bread were the most she could manage, but she did finish them. To his relief, the fever did not spike upward at night.

She spent the night sleeping in his arms.

He told himself it was the best way for him to monitor her fever. But holding her through the night was a balm to his heart. He was completely lost to her. No, not lost. Belonged. It was the first time in his life he ever felt he belonged to someone. It was also the first time he felt responsible for someone.

He liked the feeling very much, even though it was a stark reminder of how empty his life had been before Katie had dramatically reappeared in it.

His parents were not terrible people and had loved him in their own way, to the extent they were capable of it. They did not beat him, nor did he ever lack for material needs. But they were so caught up in their own misery, they could not see beyond themselves to properly care for anyone else. His father had lived a reckless life and his mother had spent her entire life in mourning for a husband who was never coming back to her.

Perhaps if she had been stronger, shown more spirit and chased him down to London, made him face up to his responsibilities as a husband and father. But it was too late now. They'd both passed on several years ago.

He would never, ever repeat his father's mistakes with Katie. Nor was Katie the mouse everyone had tried to shape her to be.

She was going to be formidable once she gained confidence in herself.

He couldn't wait to see her become the person she was meant to be.

By the next morning, the sun was shining and Katie's strength was returning. "What is that great yellow ball in the sky?" she asked, shading her eyes against the glare when he opened the shutter to peek out.

"Good morning, Miss Pringle. I trust you had a pleasant sleep."

She cast him a glowing smile. "A most excellent sleep. I had the most comfortable pillow. Who knew hard muscle made the best head rest?"

He walked over to the bed and kissed her brow. "And I had the prettiest, snoring lump at my side."

"Oh, no!" She covered her face with her hands. "Do I snore?"

"Delightfully."

She lowered her hands and sighed. "Does this mean we will have separate chambers once we marry?"

"Not a chance. I want you in my bed. I don't care if you snore like a foghorn. I don't care if you take all the covers or kick me in my sleep. I don't care if you curl up against me or push me off the bed. I want you there. Always."

She nodded. "I will be. I promise you."

He kissed her again.

She still had a light fever but was much improved since yesterday. He would not be as worried now if they had to go back on the run. It would not happen today, for the ground was still flooded and too muddy for the carriages to manage. Another day would do it, then they would get back on the road to London.

"Niall, you are pacing like a caged tiger."



“I don’t mean to be. I’m eager to be done with this chase and return to town. Your father isn’t going to accept your marrying me. I’m just trying to figure out how to make it happen without having to take you on the run again.”

He picked up the newspaper and turned to the society page where he’d seen the article about Yardsley. “But you won’t have to worry about your betrothed. He’s a man about town again. I think he and your father must have mutually agreed to rescind the marriage contract.”

“Let’s hope so. That would be one less hurdle to overcome.”

He returned to peek out the shuttered window while she perused the paper. The inn was quiet today, few guests arriving or leaving because of the road conditions. But two obviously weary riders did stop at the inn. “Bollocks. Digby and Standish have returned.”

“Mrs. Mablethorpe has hidden us well. We ought to be safe.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “It’s her husband I’m worried about. Digby is clever and knows how to get people to talk, as any good Bow Street runner would. Mr. Mablethorpe might let something slip. Let’s hope his wife makes sure to keep them apart for the rest of the day. We should be out of here by tomorrow morning.”

Katie eyed him with grim determination. “Unless we have to go on the run tonight.”

“No, you still have a fever. I am not dragging you out of here until our morning coach is ready.”

“Hopefully, there will be no need. I’m not going to let them catch us. I will allow no one but you to return me to my father.”

“For the reward? Damn it, Katie. I don’t want your father’s money or Yardsley’s. All I want is you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Honestly, how did you ever earn the reputation as a fortune hunter? You are quite miserable at it.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALTHOUGH KATIE WOULD HAVE PREFERRED a quiet ride back to London, she had to admit that dodging the Bow Street runners was quite a bit of fun. Niall had it all planned out, as she knew he would, for his brain was plotting their escape the entire time they ate their supper.

He had left the room to explore the inn earlier in the day and knew Digby and Standish were still there, just waiting for one of them to show their face. “Digby’s certain we are here. He keeps trying to talk to Mr. Mablethorpe, but his wife must have threatened him with death if he gives us away. He’s closed up tighter than a clam shell.”

“Poor man,” she said with a laugh after hastily swallowing a spoonful of her broth. “Well, we will soon be gone from here and then he can chatter to his heart’s content.”

They were both seated at the small table beside the window, talking as they ate the meal brought in by Mrs. Mablethorpe.

Katie had felt well enough to climb out of bed, although her appetite had not fully returned. It would eventually. The fever had turned into more of a head cold, so even though she was hungry, she could not handle anything heartier than a broth.

Her eyes were watery, throat scratchy, and her nose was red from having to blow it constantly.

Her ears were stuffed, too.

And yet, Niall looked at her as though she was the most beautiful woman he had ever beheld in his entire life.

She had never dreamed a man could feel this way about her.

Of all men, why this wicked earl?

She could hardly believe it herself.

The London odds makers would be kept busy placing bets on them. Or rather, betting against them. How long before Alnwick is unfaithful to his wife?

One night?

One week?

One month?

It made her sad to think she was the only one who'd wager he never would be.

Niall was digging into his shepherd's pie with gusto. "The innkeeper's son arrived an hour ago with his coach," he said, talking between bites. "We'll be off tomorrow morning. But we won't leave at dawn. Digby will be expecting that and watching for us. We are going to wait until the inn gets busier, around ten o'clock in the morning."

She had been delicately sipping the broth but set her spoon aside and paid closer attention to the planning. "Hoping to get lost amid the carriages pulling in with new guests and most of this evening's guests riding out?"

"Yes, partly." He drank some of his ale.

"But he'll recognize you, Niall. Then he'll know I must be nearby. He knows I was in disguise as Caleb. He'll be looking for any boy with his cap pulled down over his ears who climbs into the same coach as you."

"True, if he and Standish were here to see us."

She frowned. "Where would they be?"

"You forget the damage they did to the inn's property when they tried to catch us last time. Do you recall the door

they broke down?”

She nodded. “The inn’s finest guest room. I loved that room. But it is out of commission until that door is repaired. We offered to pay for it.”

“Yes, and *I* shall. I brought you here. It is my responsibility to make it right.” He cast her a warning glance when she opened her mouth to protest. “However, we did not break that door. Digby and Standish did. They ran off after us without paying for the damage.”

“But Mr. Mablethorpe must have demanded it of them when they returned.”

Niall shrugged. “I’m sure he did. I expect they reluctantly coughed up whatever they owed. But their actions were still criminal. Mrs. Mablethorpe has arranged for the magistrate to come by and haul them away tomorrow morning around ten o’clock.”

Katie liked the plan.

It was remarkably simple.

He cast her a smug smile. “They’ll be busy explaining their way out of their vandalism charge to the magistrate as we ride away. Magistrate Mablethorpe is going to hold them for a day or two before releasing them.”

“The magistrate is a Mablethorpe?” She burst out laughing. “You are diabolical.”

“No, just well connected.”

“How many more Mablethorpes are there in Thirsk? You seem acquainted with all of them. Indeed, the Mablethorpes treat you as though you are a long-lost son. There is nothing they would not do for you. What is the reason?”

He drank a little more of his ale. “I happened to be here many years ago when their stable accidentally caught fire and their son, Douglas—”

“The one who is going to drive us to London?”

Niall nodded. “Yes. He was a boy at the time. I wasn’t all that much older. Just starting university, but I was on my way to Alnwick during one of the term breaks. I had stopped here merely to rest my horse and grab something to eat before riding on. Meanwhile, a particularly skittish horse Douglas was tending to kicked over a lantern. The hay burst into flames and those flames quickly spread along the wooden beams. Within moments, the stable was on fire and Douglas was trapped inside. I ran in, got him and the horse out while the other stable hands got the rest of the horses free. They lost the stable, but nothing else.”

She reached out and touched him lightly on the shoulder. “I wondered about that scar. No wonder they will do anything for you. Douglas would have perished if not for you. Why did you never tell us?”

He shrugged. “Should I have?”

“Yes, it was a very brave thing you did.”

She saw his eyes fill with pain, but it lasted only a moment before his usual carefree manner returned. “I tried to tell my parents. They were too lost in their own concerns to care. When I arrived at Alnwick and boasted of it to my mother, she remarked that it was my father’s fault this happened, because everything was his fault in her eyes. When I returned to London a few weeks later and mentioned it to my father, he asked if my horse had been injured. My *horse*. It never crossed his mind to ask about me even though I was still nursing my burns at the time.”

Katie felt a tug to her heart. “I wish you had told me when I came up to Pringle Grange that summer. I would have repeated the story to everyone and remarked how brave you were. I was already infatuated with you, even though I wasn’t certain I liked you. But this would have won me over. I would have even boasted about you to my kittens. I confided everything in them. They never gave away my secrets.”

He chuckled, the flicker of pain now gone. “I’ll make certain to come to you first next time I do something valiant. But we may both be old and gray before that happens again.”

“I’m sure you do something brave and extraordinary every day.”

He tweaked her chin. “I do not, although you bring out the best in me, as I’ve said before. Who knows? Anything is possible when I’m with you.”

She toyed with her spoon, realizing they hadn’t talked about the Swan and Maiden Inn. She asked him about it now.

All warmth fled his handsome features. “It is an ugly business.”

“I gathered as much.”

He sighed. “They *befriend* young boys.”

“Say no more.” She clenched her fists. “I suspected as much but could not imagine they would dare any such thing to a boy in the care of an earl.”

“In truth, I did not either. But I’d had the bright idea to let on that you were mute and deaf, thinking myself very clever to make it a part of your disguise. They thought to approach you for this very reason. They did not believe you could tell me what they had done to you or even understand what they were doing and shout for help.”

“Despicable fiends. I did not think I could ever shoot anyone, but those two would have proved me wrong. Is there anything that can be done about them?”

“I don’t know, but I intend to look into the matter after I deliver you home to your family. Likely they are being protected by someone powerful in the area. What they do is common knowledge, yet no one has shut that inn down or imprisoned those men.” He rose and stretched his strained muscles that were stiff from being in cramped quarters these past few days. “Let’s deal with one problem at a time.”

He leaned over and kissed her brow. “You safe first.”

Later that evening, after the supper plates had been cleared away, she thought he would set up a pallet for himself on the floor. She was still constantly blowing her nose. But he settled in bed beside her and took her in his arms.

It felt wonderful, but also made her ache so badly.

They would be parted soon.

To be without him even for an hour seemed agonizing.

She nestled against his chest, fretting about what would happen once they reached London, but there was something quite soothing about being in his embrace and she quickly fell asleep to the steady rise and fall of his chest.

They awoke shortly after dawn to wash, dress, and pack their meager belongings in wait for their moment to escape. The opportunity suddenly came up, the magistrate arriving at the same time their coach drew up in front of the inn.

A moment later, Mr. Mablethorpe appeared and led them down the back stairs. “How are ye feeling, Miss Katie? Ye gave us all a good scare, falling sick as ye did.”

She smiled at him. “I am much better, thank you. I’m sure it was your wife’s excellent broth that did the trick.”

She turned the collar up on her jacket and tamped the cap down over her eyes as she resorted to her Caleb disguise. Niall kept hold of her hand while they made their way to the inn’s entrance hall that was now filled with departing guests.

They angled their way through the crowd and were almost at the coach when she heard one of the Bow Street runners shout, “There!”

Niall hoisted her into the coach and was about to climb in after her when the runners grabbed him. They gave him a shove to move him aside and reached inside to grab her. She punched Standish in the nose, but connecting her fist to his nose proved painful for her, too. “Ouch!”

She’d never thrown a punch before.

Someone ought to have warned her it bruised one’s hand.

She was about to throw another punch when the fight suddenly stopped. It was over as quickly as it had started. Then she noticed the reason why. The magistrate had brought some of his men along to assist him with the arrest. They now had Digby and Standish subdued. “Add attempted abduction to

the charges,” she heard the magistrate intone. “And assaulting an earl.”

Digby was desperately trying to explain who he was, but the magistrate refused to listen. “No! You don’t understand! I’m a Bow Street runner! Don’t let them get away!”

The magistrate did not appear at all moved. “My good man, I am not going to interrupt the Earl of Alnwick’s travels without good reason. Unless he murdered your mother, I am going to send him off with my apologies for this disturbance.”

Katie thought Digby would now expose her true identity, but he held silent and cast Standish a warning glance to hold his tongue as well.

Both Bow Street men were fuming as they were hauled away. “You fools! You—”

“Ah, another charge to add to your list of offenses,” the magistrate said. “Insulting an officer of the law.”

Digby paled. “But—”

“You can explain it in my office.”

Niall was chuckling as he climbed in beside her. “You look confused, Katie.”

The coach started rolling with a jounce as soon as Niall closed the door. She fell against his solid frame, but quickly sat up and stared at him. “I thought for sure Digby would tell him who I was.”

He stretched his long legs before him and settled comfortably against the squabs. “Never. He’s going to bargain to get out of there as soon as possible and ride to London as though the devil were on his tail. He’ll try to catch up to us before we reach your father. He only needs to snatch you away at the last moment and be the one to deliver you to your dear papa. Then the enormous reward will be his.”

“Poor man. He’s earned it, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure your father gave him a generous allowance to search for you. Your father and Yardsley should never have put up that damn reward. Men kill for far less. Who knows



what Digby would have done if he'd caught you? Probably bound you up and stuffed you in a trunk to haul you back to London. I shudder to think what might have happened if others had caught on."

"Well, none of it happened and we'll be in London soon."

"I won't rest easy until the newspapers splash the news of your safe return across their banner headlines."

She stared at him.

He sighed. "I'm not taking the reward, Katie. Your tossing me that scowl will not change my mind."

"They are going to toss you out of the Fortune Hunter's Society."

He grinned. "I've been thrown out of worse places."

He put his legs up on the opposite seat, leaned his shoulder against side wall, and closed his eyes. She supposed this was his not so subtle hint warning he was not going to talk about the subject any longer. Since he was obviously hoping to sleep, she simply stared out the window to watch the passing landscape.

They did not stop except to change teams of horses and grab a quick bite. Niall and Douglas took turns driving the coach, each of them sleeping in shifts, so there was no stopping overnight at any inns along the way. Fortunately, the skies remained clear, and the moon was still in its full phase, casting its silver light upon the ground.

The further south they rode, the more congested the roads became. But this also worked to their advantage, for these important main roads were lit by torches to mark the way for those traveling by night.

They arrived in London in the wee hours of the morning, their coach the only one clattering along the Thames embankment at this late hour.

Katie's heart skipped beats, her tension increasing when they finally turned onto her street in fashionable Mayfair. The Pringles were considered upstarts and had not been welcomed

to the elegant square of homes that were all quite imposing and grand.

Her father, thumbing his nose at the *ton* elite, had purchased the largest and grandest of them all.

Niall helped her down from the coach when it drew up in front of the impressive townhouse. He kept hold of her hand as he walked her to the door and rang the night bell. She noticed the pistol he'd discretely withdrawn from his boot and now held in his other hand.

They'd made incredibly fast time from Thirsk to London. Digby and Standish could not have caught up to them. But others might have thought of watching the house and abducting her before she had the chance to enter. Really, that was all some enterprising scoundrel needed to do, grab her at the last moment and claim the reward.

She breathed a sigh of relief when a light appeared in the entry hall. In the next moment, their head butler opened the door. "Weston, let Father know I'm home," she said, removing her cap so he could see her face. "We'll wait for him in his study."

The dear man almost fainted. "Oh, Miss Katie! We were all so worried! Heaven be praised, you're safe!"

He stepped aside to allow them both in, then shut the door, handed them a lit candle, and hurried off to wake her parents.

Niall set the candle down on her father's desk and took her in his arms as soon as they entered the study. He gave her a fierce hug. "I may not have the chance to hold you like this again, at least not for a while. I love you, Katie."

She returned his embrace with equal ferocity. "I won't let anyone keep us apart."

"Nor will I. But give your father a little time to calm down before you make demands on him. He won't be thinking clearly just yet. He'll refuse anything you ask of him, especially if it has anything to do with me."

They said no more to each other while waiting for her parents.

They heard her father emit a roar followed by a thump of footsteps on the stairs. Her mother's softer cries could also be heard as she ran down behind her father. "Katie! Katie" they were both shouting as they hurried into the study.

She rushed to her parents and hugged them. "I'm so sorry I frightened you, but I couldn't marry Yardsley. I couldn't go through with the ceremony. I had to run."

"Don't ever put us through this again," her father growled as he hugged her and began to weep.

Her mother was already weeping.

Katie soon found herself in tears, too.

After a moment, her father noticed Niall. He'd been standing aside quietly while they reunited. "Alnwick! You? I might have known. What was your involvement in my daughter's sudden disappearance?"

Katie gasped. "Nothing! He saved my life and brought me safely back home, at great risk and inconvenience to himself, I might add."

Her father cast her a dubious look. "We'll see about that."

She frowned at him. "There is no question of his sacrifice on my behalf. He's earned the reward. Don't you dare renege on offering it to him."

"Now, Katie," they both said at the same time, then scowled at each other.

*Typical stubborn men.*

"This is not the time to speak of it," Niall said. "I'll come by in the morning at ten o'clock and we'll talk further. Does that suit you, Mr. Pringle?"

"Yes, it suits him," Katie answered before her father could refuse.

"Good, then I'll be off."

"Where will you go?" She realized he must be exhausted, for he and Douglas had only grabbed snatches of sleep over

the last few days. “How thoughtless of me. We’ll have rooms made up for you and Douglas right now. I’ll—”

Niall held up a hand. “No, Katie. It isn’t necessary. Douglas and I will return to my club. I keep a room there for when I’m in town.”

Her father snorted in disdain.

She clenched her fists to stem her outrage as she turned to her father. “Don’t you dare—”

Niall cut her off again. “Katie, it’s all right. We’ll talk tomorrow. Get a good night’s rest. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He nodded to her parents and strode out.

She heard the front door close behind him and it felt as though her own heart had closed. “I love him,” she murmured, knowing it was not the wisest comment to make just now. But she was not going to hide her feelings.

Her father turned apoplectic. “Katie Pringle, you don’t know what you are talking about. That young man is a no-good, fortune hunting wastrel.”

Her mother took her arm to lead her up to bed. “Katie, listen to your father. You’ve always been enamored of him, but you cannot trust him. He’s a Jameson. Oh, dear! Has he... taken liberties?”

Her father emitted an agonized cry. “Sweet mercy! What has he done to you, child?”

“Other than behave like a complete gentleman? He has done nothing untoward.” Well, she certainly was not going to mention her first intimate experience which was no one’s business but her own and Niall’s. “If by liberties you mean has he taken my innocence? No, he has not.”

Her parents exchanged looks.

At her mother’s nod, her father said, “I’ll have Dr. Farthingale come over first thing in the morning.”

“Don’t you trust me?” Tears welled in Katie’s eyes.

“Of course, we do,” her mother said, giving her an affectionate squeeze. “It is Alnwick we do not trust.”

Katie’s heart lurched in misery. Niall had known this would happen. This is why he had refused to engage in further intimacy. He did not want to see her put through this very shame. “I’m not the one you should be examining. Yardsley is the cheater, not me. He’s the one who was unfaithful. Why do you think I ran off? I caught him...doing *that* with Sybil.”

She studied their faces. “Oh, I see Yardsley did not bother to tell you. Nor would Sybil ever confess her role in humiliating me. I caught them together in the clerestory moments before our wedding was to take place. He did not have enough respect for me to wait even one day before making a mockery of our wedding vows. Not that I care anymore. I will never marry him. But there is one thing I would like to know before I retire to bed.”

“And what is that?” her mother asked.

“Did he end our betrothal contract?”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NIALL STRODE out of the Wicked Earls' Club the following morning and climbed into the waiting coach Douglas Mablethorpe had brought around to the front. "You don't need to remain in London for my sake, Douglas. I know you have plenty of work to keep you occupied back home. I can easily have the club steward hail a hack for me."

He grinned and shook his head. "My mother will box my ears if I dare leave you now. I am at your service, my lord. Even if it means taking you and Miss Pringle north to Gretna Green."

"Hopefully, that will not be necessary." But it could not be ruled out, especially if Katie's betrothal contract had not been terminated.

He climbed in, giving thought to what he would say to Katie's father. He was also curious to find out what she had told her parents, if anything yet.

There was another carriage in front of the Pringle townhouse when they drew up. He knew it was not Yardsley's for there was no crest on the carriage door, and Yardsley never went anywhere without evidence of his rank and overly inflated importance.

He was admitted in by the head butler and immediately shown into the study to await Katie and her parents. It wasn't long before he heard voices in the entry hall and noticed someone leaving.

The sound of Katie's voice, pained and tearful, had him walking out of the study to see what was going on. She ran into his arms the moment she spotted him. "Katie, what's happened?"

"They brought a doctor to..."

She did not need to say anything more. He'd recognized the man who was walking out. Dr. George Farthingale. Had it been anyone else, he would have ripped the man apart. But he knew the doctor and had tremendous respect for him. He also knew Katie would have been treated as gently as possible by him, without judgement or condescension. "Dr. Farthingale."

"Good morning, Lord Alnwick," the man said, eyeing him with remorse. "I'm truly sorry for putting Miss Pringle through...well, there's no doubt she was telling her parents the truth. Take care of her."

"I will." He held Katie as he watched the doctor stride out and climb into his carriage.

Still, that her parents had insisted on this examination left him feeling sickened. Katie, the sweet innocent, had been forced to endure this humiliation and it had upset her.

He frowned at them. "Time for us to talk seriously."

He led Katie into the study and waited for her parents to follow. She sank onto the settee and her mother did the same, settling beside her. Her father took his chair behind the large desk that dominated the room, as though this would give him greater authority.

Of course, Niall had never had much respect for authority and was never one to be intimidated anyway.

Besides, he was the earl and therefore the one in charge. He remained standing and immediately took control of the conversation. "You now know your daughter is innocent. Shame on both of you for ever doubting her. Has she told you why she ran off?"

"I did," Katie said, scowling at both her parents. "And I also related most of our adventures, starting with my falling in the river. But you'll be relieved to know that Yardsley has

decided I am unworthy to be his marchioness and terminated our betrothal in my absence.”

“Typical of that arse.” Niall grinned. “I’ll have to thank him for his lack of judgement. One less problem for us to deal with.”

“Yes, the biggest one we would have had to face,” she agreed. “There is no impediment to our marrying now.”

Her father shot out of his chair. “Katie, let me handle this. There will be no marriage to this bounder, I assure you.”

She leaped out of her seat. “Bounder? How can you call him that after all I’ve told you? He is the only man I trust and the only one I will marry. So put any other plans out of your head at once. I will have no other.”

Her father’s look was one of despair more than anger. “My child, think about what you are saying. He’s a Jameson and will break your heart.”

Her hands curled into fists as she stared down her father. “He will never break my heart. He will love me always because he is *Niall* Jameson and not his father or his grandfather. There is nothing you can say that will alter my opinion.”

Niall’s expression hardened. “Let me assure you, I will marry your daughter. For Katie’s sake, I would appreciate your consent, but I will not be stopped by your refusal to give it.”

“Is that so? We’ll see how long it takes for you to change your tune when I cut her off completely. If you want Katie, then she is all you shall ever have. You will never receive so much as a ha’penny from me. What do you say to that?”

“I accept your terms.”

Her father shook his head. “What?”

“Your terms are accepted. I will take Katie. I love her more than anything in this world. You can keep your money, every last ha’penny. I’ll obtain the special license today.”

Katie was incensed, as he knew she would be when he declined everything but her. She looked beautiful in her



indignation, but what he loved most was the faith she had in him. A deep, unshakable faith that no one else had ever had in him. “You earned the reward! And what about my dowry? You cannot cut me off, Papa. My dowry is promised to me.”

Niall did not want to engage in this conversation. He wanted to be off to obtain the license and haul a minister back here to conduct the ceremony this very day. “I am refusing the reward, Katie. I told you I would. As for your dowry, I have no intention of ever touching it so do not bother to fight over it. Your father can do with it as he pleases, put it in your name or hold it in trust for you. Or not give it to you at all. I don’t care. I will provide for you.”

“But—”

“No, I can manage without all of it. What I cannot manage without is you.”

She cast him the softest smile and sighed.

“Are we agreed?” Niall did not want her to pursue the matter of the reward. First of all, Yardsley was unlikely to pay up his share without being chased to court. Frankly, he did not want the bastard’s money. He did not ever wish to look upon any improvement to Alnwick and know it was accomplished because of Yardsley’s filthy lucre.

As for her father, the man would spend the rest of his life convinced Niall had married his daughter for her fortune unless he declined all of it. No matter how many times she said he must have it, he knew he would have to refuse.

It was important for Katie’s sake. He wanted her family to know he had married her for love and not to ease his bank account. “You are the most precious thing in the world to me.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “You are quite irritating.”

He grinned affectionately. “Haven’t I always been?”

She laughed despite wanting to remain irate. “Yes.”

“And you’ve always been perfect,” he said with a husky catch to his voice, his manner once again serious. He took her hands in his. “Will you have me, Katie? Life with me will be a

struggle, but I can think of nothing better than to rebuild Alnwick with you by my side as my countess.”

“And I wish to be nowhere else but at your side.” Tears sprang into her eyes. “Yes, I will have you. I will love you and cherish you for all the days of my life.”

“As I will always love and cherish you.” He kissed her lightly on the lips. “Mr. Pringle, will you come with me to obtain the special license? And before you pass comment, I will pay for the license.” He already considered Katie as bound to him just as he was bound to her. The ceremony would only proclaim to society what they already felt in their hearts and to the depths of their souls.

Her father stared at Katie for the longest time.

Her mother finally spoke up. “It is no use, my dear. Our Katie has her mind set on her Earl of Alnwick and there is no talking her out of it. She loves him. She has always loved him. I was wondering when she would finally realize it.”

“But he’s a Jameson,” her father said weakly, knowing he was fighting a losing battle now that his wife had taken sides with his daughter.

“One who has always loved her, although it certainly took him long enough to figure it out,” she said, casting Niall a shame-on-you look. “Almost too long. In truth, I was afraid your father had tainted your outlook on marriage to the point you could no longer recognize love when it slapped you in the face.”

Niall nodded. “I won’t deny he was a terrible influence on me.”

Mrs. Pringle nodded. “All those years passed, all those summers, and you never said a word. My poor Katie gave up on you, deciding to move on and marry Yardsley. I thought she could be happy as his marchioness even though it was not a love match. I was wrong. Her heart is too soft. Only love will do for her. So, you have my blessing, for what it’s worth.”

“But he’s a Jameson,” her father repeated, albeit with less conviction.

Katie came to her father's side and gave him a hug. "Isn't it marvelous? Now you shall have your revenge on his father and grandfather for the shameful way they treated you. Think of it, Papa. What better revenge can you exact on them than to have your daughter marry into their family? I shall be the Countess of Alnwick."

"I never thought of it that way." His eyes lit up at the revelation. "You really want this, Katie?" He gripped her shoulders and regarded her solemnly.

She nodded. "With all my heart."

"Well then..." Her father gave a harrumph. "You never could hide your feelings. You are glowing like an incandescent little lamp."

"How can I not? He's wonderful and we love each other. And I know you are about to give in because you don't want me to be an unhappy spinster living alone in a big house filled with cats, walking around in a frayed lace gown covered in cat hairs and cloying perfume, thinking of nothing but faded memories."

"Katie, you are being ridiculous." Her father tried not to smile, for he was not yet ready to acquiesce to their union. But his lips twitched upward at the corners, and it was only a matter of moments before he gave in.

"Say yes, Papa."

He groaned.

And hemmed and hawed.

Finally, he gave in.

"She's your problem now," he muttered, turning to Niall and holding out his hand. "Seems I have been outvoted on this matter. Welcome to the family, Alnwick."

Niall laughed as he shook his hand. "And I shall return the favor, Mr. Pringle. Welcome to my family. How does it feel to be related to a Jameson?"

"Pretty damn good, if you must know." He clapped Niall on the shoulder. "Come along, son. We have a special license

to obtain.”

Niall turned to Katie and winked. “Ready for your next adventure, my love?”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Do YOU, Niall Jameson, Earl of Alnwick, Viscount Darnelly, Knight of the Garter...” Niall never thought his wedding vows would be anything more than words to spout in order to get through the marriage ritual. They were words to be said without conviction because he never thought he would be marrying for love.

Nor did he believe for a moment that he was deserving of this good fortune. But Katie had been good all her life and apparently her wishes were being answered. He marveled that she would wish for him, but he silently vowed to never make her regret it.

He loved her so much, the feeling sang through his bones.

“You are a Knight of the Garter?” Katie whispered, interrupting the minister’s recital of his titles, both hereditary and ceremonial.

He nodded. “Incredible, isn’t it? Makes you wonder what our country is coming to.”

She smothered a chuckle.

The minister scowled at both to quiet their chatter so he could continue. “Do you take Miss Katharine Pringle...”

“Yes, with all my heart,” he said with enthusiasm, eager to embark on their new life together.

They were exchanging wedding vows in a quiet ceremony in her family’s London townhouse. He held her hands all the while, promised to love, honor, and protect her, and silently

resolved to let her know how much he loved her every day of their lives.

“Where are you taking my daughter?” Katie’s father asked after the wedding breakfast was over.

Niall expected that he and Mr. Pringle would eventually be on excellent terms, but they were not there yet. He could not, absolutely would not, let the man know where he and Katie were going to spend their wedding night. “I’m taking her somewhere she’s always wished to go.”

Katie gasped and her eyes lit up. “Do you mean it?”

He grinned. “Yes, love. I mean it. The arrangements have been made.”

Her father assumed they were going to one of London’s finest hotel establishments and he allowed the man to continue to think so. To know the truth would have sent his heart into spasms requiring medical attention anyway.

Besides, whose business was it but his and Katie’s what they did next?

Douglas Mablethorpe, whose discretion could be relied upon, took them in his coach to Bedford Place and the Wicked Earls’ Club.

Niall would not have chosen this for himself, but he was indulging Katie’s request. She had asked him to sneak her up to his private chamber at the club and he was not about to deny her what she considered an exciting adventure.

In the morning, he would relinquish his membership.

But tonight was Katie’s to do with him as she wished. Besides, he was not going to complain if their surroundings emboldened her to be more adventurous in bed. With him only, of course.

He tried not to grin as they crept upstairs and down the hall to his chamber, for she was wide-eyed and thought she was being terribly naughty when she was not at all. He led her into the simple, but elegantly appointed room, and immediately shut the door. She took in her surroundings, practically inhaled

them with her big eyes and soft, puckered mouth. “Is this where you carried on your depraved and debauched existence?”

He coughed. “Yes, Katie. But that was before I realized I loved you.”

“You are forgiven.”

He hadn’t asked for forgiveness, but he accepted it graciously. “What do you wish to do now? This Wicked Earl is entirely at your service.”

The fire was lit in the hearth. Champagne and a light repast had been set out for them. Fresh bedding. Fresh water in the ewer on his bureau. Other items had been left for them atop the bureau, but he quietly tucked those in a drawer. He hadn’t asked for them, knowing they were a little too adventurous for his Katie. Besides, he did not need anything other than this beautiful girl in his arms to give him a night of unforgettable splendor.

The two of them were already ablaze with desire.

However, he was not going to rush her. They had all night for seduction and he meant to take his time and savor every moment.

Smiling, she walked around the room, sat on the bed to test it out. Bounced on the bed and laughed softly, then returned to his side and into his open arms. “Will you kiss me, Niall?”

Gad, this was her idea of a wild adventure? To sneak in and be kissed by her husband in his club. “Yes, love.”

She gazed at him in raptures. “This will be a wonderful story to tell our grandchildren.”

“Katie, are you mad? We mustn’t breathe a word of this to any of our offspring, no matter how far down the generational ladder.”

“Oh, but we must. *Chicks, did I tell you of the time your dashing grandfather kissed me in his Wicked Earls’ Club?*”

“Just a kiss?” He arched an eyebrow. “Is this all you wish me to do?”

“Heavens, no. But to tell our grandchildren more would utterly corrupt them.” She blushed. “Besides, I’m not sure what to do next. I think you ought to take over after our kiss.”

“My pleasure.” He brought his lips down on hers, meaning to be gentle as he tasted the honey-sweet promise of her kiss. But she overwhelmed him. What was meant to be gentle turned into something hot and crushing.

Lord help him! She turned him so fiery, they would be nothing but cinders by morning.

He struggled to temper himself, not wanting it all to be over in one quick, explosive burst. But he ached with need and she must have felt it as he ground his mouth against hers and felt the soft give of her own.

This was his Katie, soft and loving. Opening her heart to him. Trusting him and responding to his kisses with wholehearted enthusiasm.

He loved her faith in him.

It swelled him with pride and also humbled him that this treasure of a girl valued him.

He ran his tongue lightly along her lips to tease them apart and then dipped his tongue into her mouth to mingle with hers in a slow dance he knew would soon build to a crescendo.

But first, he wanted to give her the chance to explore, to feel each mounting sensation, and understand the secrets held within their bodies. Secrets to be revealed as they surrendered to passion.

They had all night to enjoy each other, to engage in these mating dances that would bind their hearts and souls.

Their kisses grew hotter.

He began to undress her, undoing the laces and buttons designed to thwart any man lusting for her beautiful body. But he’d become fairly adept at this, not a talent he was particularly proud of except that it was useful at this moment.

The gown slipped off her shoulders, gliding down her body with a light *whoosh*. He lifted her up to untangle the pool



of silk at her feet and set it aside. She was now left only in her undergarments.

Blessed saints!

She was so beautiful.

He stared at her perfect body outlined beneath the sheer fabric of her chemise, his gaze fixed upon the dusky tips of her breasts barely hidden and already straining for his touch. He cupped one of those creamy mounds and ran his thumb lightly over the tip, the rough pad of his thumb against the fabric adding to the friction.

She closed her eyes and moaned, her every feeling evident on her expressive face.

He set about removing her remaining garments one by one, softly touching, slowly trailing possessive kisses down her body, for she was now his, bound in heart and in law.

Yet, he was also completely hers. She possessed him. Heart and soul. If there was something beyond, she possessed that, too.

“I love you, Katie.” He ran his hands along her silken skin and repeated the words as he took the pins from her hair, watching the length of curls flow down her back unbound.

He buried his hands in those waves of dark silk and kissed her long and hard.

She responded immediately, her body now flushed and showing all the signs of arousal. He slipped the chemise off her, having left it for last for the sake of her modesty. His beautiful Katie wanted to be wicked and wanton, but she wasn't really. She had an ingrained bashfulness that he found most endearing.

It meant so much more that she was willing to shed her inhibitions for him alone.

He put his lips to her heart, feeling its rapid beat and then suckled her breast lightly before easing away. “Undress me, Katie,” he said in a husky murmur.

She was already grasping at his jacket to tug it off him.

He helped her with the rest of it, allowing her to strip him naked and encouraging her to explore him and kiss him as he was doing with her. “Touch me as you would like me to touch you.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, then she cast him a beautiful smile and ran her tongue lightly over his nipple.

*Blessed saints.*

Fire coursed through his body. He lifted her in his arms and carried her to bed, not bothering to draw aside the covers or settle her properly between the sheets before he settled atop her and began their mating dance in earnest.

She reached hungrily for him.

He meant to keep his resolve, to give her time to get used to him, to have her touch him and absorb the sensations, but they were too wild and desperate for each other. Next time they would take it slow and gentle.

Not this time.

Fiery bursts of pleasure were already rocking through his body.

She licked his nipple again.

“Bollocks, Katie.” He gave a groaning laugh and settled between her legs, positioning her for his entrance. “You’d better not...not yet.”

Her sparkling eyes stared back at him in confusion. “I thought you wanted me to.”

“I do, love. But you’re too tempting and I find I cannot wait.” She was ready for him, he felt her slickness as he slid his hand down, thinking to prepare her.

Lord help him!

Her responsiveness was arousing beyond measure.

She was simply beautiful, her eyes shimmering with love for him and her arms open and inviting.

He thrust in slowly, knowing she would feel some unease when he broke through her barrier. But Katie was never one to complain, nor did she now when after a few careful thrusts he broke through. “Katie, have I hurt you?”

“No. You never could.” She caressed his cheek and whispered that she loved him.

The two of them now became one, lost in each other, lost to the night and all its splendor. Lost in the fiery explosions that came with their release. Two hearts given in love, two promises given that would never be broken.

She was his now, forever his.

He held her tightly, wrapped her hot body in his arms as he spilled his seed inside of her and told her how much he loved her.

Her long, dark hair spilled over the pillows.

Her smile lit up his heart.

Her eyes reflected the silver moonlight.

She looked like a sylph, a faerie maiden out of a dream.

They were both laughing as they slowly calmed in the aftermath. He caressed her body, her soft skin and slender limbs that entwined with his like a graceful vine around an oak. He kissed her lightly on the lips as he pulled out and eased his weight off her. “How do you feel, Katie?”

She nestled atop him, resting her soft breasts against his chest, and grinned at him. “Your Perfect Miss Pringle has shattered into a thousand bursts of starlight. I feel happy. Euphoric. Ready for more adventures.”

He gave a laughing groan. “Already?”

She nodded, then began to nibble her lip fretfully. “Unless this is all you can do tonight. You do look spent. Quite wrung dry.”

He burst out laughing. “Spent? Dried out?”

She nodded again in earnest, apparently unaware that mating could occur more than once in a night.

He rolled her back under him and stroked her silky thigh. “I am ever at your service. I am *always* at your service. Close your eyes, my love.”

He kissed his way down her body and proceeded to live up to his reputation as a Wicked Earl. He would gladly shed this mantle for that of faithful husband.

But for tonight, he was still a Wicked Earl, wicked only with his wife.

# EPILOGUE

*ALNWICK HALL*

*Northumberland, England*

*October, 1821*

NIALL STEPPED DOWN from Douglas Mablethorpe's coach as it rolled to a stop in front of Alnwick Hall. He helped Katie descend and they walked hand in hand toward the house. But they managed no more than a few steps before Mr. Crisp and his wife came running out to greet them. "Miss Katie!" Mrs. Crisp cried and clasped her to her ample bosom. "Is it really you? Saints be praised! He's brought you back to us."

Niall laughed. "She's Lady Katie now and she's here for good. We were married a fortnight ago in London."

"Married? Saints be praised!" she cried again and gave Katie another hug.

Mr. Crisp's eyes began to fill with tears. "It is a miracle."

In a more formal household, such familiarity would be deemed highly improper, but it could never be so at Alnwick Hall. For one, Katie would never allow it. She had the warmest heart, always filled with compassion for others.

Niall watched as the couple continued to fuss over her. "Do I not get a greeting or is my wife already your favorite and I'm to be tossed out into the cold?"

“She’s a lamb and you are a wicked devil.” Mrs. Crisp gave him an affectionate cuff on the shoulder before reaching out to give him a hug. “But you did very well for yourself, m’lord. There isn’t a finer wife to be had. She’s perfect for you. That’s what I told Mr. Crisp the moment I saw the two of you together as children. Did I not say so?”

Her husband nodded.

Katie grinned at Niall. “Seems everyone knew except us.”

He lifted her in his arms. “Fortunately, we figured it out eventually.”

“Yes, I got the earl of my dreams.”

“And I got the heiress of my dreams.” He started to carry her toward the house.

She placed her arms around his neck. “I don’t think you can make that claim when you are still refusing the reward. And now that my father has decided not to disown me, you still won’t take my dowry.”

“I’ve told him to put whatever he wishes in an account for you and our children. As for Yardsley’s portion—”

“I cannot believe he paid up. Perhaps he’s had second thoughts about his behavior and is ready to reform.”

Niall snorted. “Not a chance. But I have powerful friends who shamed him into paying it over. It is for you and your father to do with as you wish. I hope you will give some to those who helped us on the way to London.”

“Of course.”

“Donate the rest as you wish. You are all I want, Katie. And I never want you to doubt it.”

“You really are a discredit to fortune hunting scoundrels all over the world.”

“You are wrong, love. I have found my fortune and intend to hold on to her with all my soul and strength. I knew as I carried you over the threshold the first time, you were the one for me. It felt very right, even though you were a wet, little

lump and looked exhausted. But you also looked beautiful, and I was beguiled.”

She'd run here in her saddest moment. Niall understood now that she had been running to him. Their hearts had always belonged together. He had been too caught up in the Jameson misery to recognize this gift he had almost lost.

He paused after crossing the threshold and gave her a kiss on the lips. “Welcome home, Countess Alnwick.”

He was surprised to find her eyes tearing, for she had been through so much and not once complained or faltered. But he understood the enormity of her feelings and kissed her again.

She smiled at him, her beautifully captivating smile that never failed to leave him breathless. “Thank you, my lord. It is good to finally be home.”

END

ALSO BY MEARA PLATT



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Capturing The Heart Of A Cameron

# EARL OF MORREY

LAUREN SMITH

## CHAPTER ONE

EXCERPT from the *Quizzing Glass Gazette*, September 10, 1822, the Lady Society column:

*MY DARLING LADIES,*

*I have returned to bring you the most delicious gossip. It must be noted that the existence of a certain club has recently reached my attention, one called the Wicked Earls' Club. Only the most wicked of titled earls are said to be members. Naturally, my mind has run away with thoughts of a most dangerous nature. Who belongs to this club, and do you already know them? Is the polite earl you danced with last night at Lady Allerton's ball all that he seems? Is there more to the tall, dark-haired gentleman who tipped his hat as he rode past you in Hyde Park this fall?*

*I AM MIST. I am moonlight. I am the smoke of an extinguished candle. I am the shadow you do not see, but only feel . . .*

Adam Beaumont, the Earl of Morrey, let the words of his private mantra flow over and through him until he believed them to be true. As he moved through the crowded ballroom of Lady Allerton's home, the words worked a subtle magic. They rendered him nearly invisible to the husband-hunting ladies prowling around him, their matchmaking mamas leading the hunt. Given that he was an unmarried, young, and attractive gentleman with a title, that was quite a feat. If the

*ton* knew what sort of man he truly was, those young women and their mothers would not be so eager to snare him.

He swept his gaze over every face in the packed ballroom, seeking that cunning gleam in a pair of eyes or an overly observant glance in his direction. He listened carefully for clever discussions designed to collect information best kept hidden.

A loaded pistol would have been a welcome companion tonight, but he could not conceal such a cumbersome weapon on his person. No, the only friend he carried tonight was the slender dagger pressed flat against his chest beneath his waistcoat. He dared not risk a dance, lest the blade dislodge and become a danger to him.

If only the *ton* knew what sort of man stood in their midst. A man whose job was to end any threat to the Crown. An agent of His Majesty who worked to keep the monarchy safe, as well as to protect the kingdom from foreign threats. He was the knife in the dark that claimed the life of anyone who came here to do his nation harm. It was a burden Adam had never wanted, but he had been given little choice.

Many thought that wars started and ended on the battlefield, but Adam knew the darker truth. Wars began in drawing rooms and ballrooms, where men let down their guard and become targets for spies and assassins. He'd learned that after losing his friend Lord Wilhelm. It had been two years since he'd watched a French spy take the life of his dear friend.

John Wilhelm had struggled with a French assassin on a bridge over the Thames. Adam had been too late to stop the man from plunging a knife into John's back, but John had taken the murderous bastard with him over the bridge and into the dark, swift waters below. Adam had rushed to the spot where his friend had gone and leapt over the side into the water himself. The fall had nearly killed him, and it had been for naught. He'd searched the water for what felt like an eternity before finally crawling up the bank and collapsing in exhaustion.

As he lay gasping for breath, a man Adam had seen once or twice before at social engagements had emerged from the darkness and rushed to help. That was the night Avery Russell, the man who would become London's new spymaster a year later, had recruited Adam to the Court of Shadows.

After the previous spymaster, Hugo Waverly, died last year, Avery had taken control and restructured the spy network. Many of the older spies had retired, and fresh blood like Adam had been brought deeper into the ring. Adam promised himself he would have his revenge upon John's killers, for as Avery had taught him, French agents worked in pairs, a master and his loyal left hand. Adam did not know which one had perished in the river with John, the master or the left hand, but he would someday find out. Becoming a spy was his penance for being too late to save his friend that night.

A quiet voice broke through Adam's dark thoughts. "Morrey?"

James Fordyce, the Earl of Pembroke, his new brother-in-law, came to his side. He was a fellow member of the private Wicked Earls' Club and had recently married Adam's half sister, Gillian. He and James had a passing acquaintance through their membership in the Wicked Earls' Club. There were only a handful of members he'd been close enough to get to know in the last few years.

Adam hadn't been particularly active in the club or pursuing any rakish wickedness of late. He'd been preoccupied with matters of England's security.

But that didn't mean England had been the only matter on his mind. He'd been searching for his long-lost half sister who'd been working as a lady's maid in London, and that had brought him deeper into James's circle of friendship, for which he was grateful. He trusted the man with his secrets in ways he couldn't trust anyone else.

"Pembroke, good to see you," Adam replied.

James had been the only one to notice him tonight. One of the few who were able to see past Adam's ability to disappear into crowds whenever he wished to.

“Is Caroline with you? Gilly was hoping to see her.” A silent question lurked in James’s dark eyes, as if he wanted to ask what had Adam on edge.

“No, not tonight.” He had convinced his sister Caroline that there would be other balls this week to attend. Once he’d informed her that he had a mission to fulfill tonight, she’d understood the dangers and thankfully had remained home.

“Should Gilly, Letty, and I leave?” Pembroke asked as he and Adam stepped deeper into the shadows at the edge of the ballroom.

“Yes, I would if I were you, but be calm about it—let no one suspect anything. Tonight the *devils* are among us.” It was the warning he had devised with Pembroke to let the other man know when danger was close at hand. Pembroke was not a fool. From the time they’d first met, James had sensed that Adam was more than merely a titled lord searching for his long-lost half sister. So without putting James too much at risk, he’d let the man know that he worked for the Home Office in some secretive capacity, though he never went into details unless lives were at stake.

“Right. Well, I see Gillian but not Letty. She must have gone to one of the retiring rooms. I’ll go and fetch her.”

Adam was only partially listening. He’d caught sight of a woman leaving the ballroom, with another woman upon her arm.

Viscount Edwards’s wife, Lady Edwards, the woman he was to protect this evening, was leaving the safety of the ballroom with a dark-haired woman whose face he could not see.

“Find your sister and go, quickly,” he said to James before he slid through the crowds now gathering in rows to begin a dance. The pair of women vanished at the doors on the far end, and Adam’s fear spiked. Lady Edwards was in grave danger. Her husband had lately been an ambassador to France, and Avery had recruited her to be a spy while she was on the Continent, as he and the Home Office worked in connection with the Foreign Office. She had memorized a verbal cypher

that she was to give Avery this very evening, and it was Adam's duty to make sure no one silenced her before she could relay it.

Adam reached the partially open doorway leading out of the ballroom and stepped into a dark corridor. He pressed himself against the wall and moved swiftly from door to door, checking for the presence of Lady Edwards and her unknown companion.

"Hold still. Do not move," a soft, alluring voice said close by. "Be very still, Lady Edwards, lest I prick you. We wouldn't want that."

Christ, he was too late. Some foul French wench likely had a stiletto blade pressed to Lady Edwards's throat.

Adam's hands curled into fists as he moved toward the doorway where he'd last heard the voices. He reached up to undo the first two buttons of his green waistcoat and slid his dagger free. Still concealed by the edge of the doorframe, he drew in slow, steady breaths.

"Be still, I say!" the feminine voice commanded. "I don't wish to hurt you."

Lady Edwards began to beg. "Oh, please, do have mercy on me. I—"

Adam didn't wait another second. He shot around the doorframe and into the room, running straight for the feminine figure in a dark-blue silk ball gown. He caught the woman around her waist with one arm and jerked her back against his chest while he held his dagger to her throat.

"Make a sound and you will not live to regret it," he warned in a harsh whisper. The woman in his arms gasped and went stiff with terror.

"What?" Lady Edwards spun around. Her hands flew to her mouth. "Lord Morrey, what are you doing?" Her blue eyes were wide with fear.

He gave the spy in his hold a tighter squeeze, and she wriggled in his arms. "Saving you, my lady."



“She’s not a spy!” Lady Edwards insisted in a frantic whisper.

“She had you at her mercy—I heard her,” Adam said.

“Don’t be silly. My hair came undone. She was putting the pins back.” Lady Edwards held a pair of jeweled hairpins up for him to see. Diamond-studded pins glittered in muted lamplight as the reality of the situation sank in.

He’d made a grave error.

Still holding the woman captive in his arms, Adam slowly lowered the blade. Her breath quickened as though she’d been too afraid to breathe the last few seconds. As he released her, he caught her wrist to keep the woman from fleeing until this matter was settled, and she was sworn to secrecy. She turned to face him, and this time *he* was the one who forgot to breathe.

Letty Fordyce, James’s little sister, a beauty he had admired—*desired*—from afar these last few months, was his frightened captive. He released her wrist, and she pulled free. She retreated to the safety of Lady Edwards.

“Lady Leticia,” he greeted in a gruff rumble barely above a whisper.

The dark-haired beauty held a hand up to her neck and gazed at him in terror.

“Oh, Letty, I’m so sorry.” Lady Edwards grasped the young woman’s shoulders and tried to soothe her.

“What . . . ?” Letty stared at him. “Why?”

“We haven’t time,” Lady Edwards said to her. “Morrey, have you seen Mr. Russell?”

“I haven’t. I fear something may have happened to him.”

“I must give you the message, then,” Lady Edwards murmured.

“No, not me. I am no messenger,” he reminded her. “I was only meant to protect you.”

He was not one of those spies who played with coded messages and costumes on missions. He was a harbinger of doom, a hand of death for those who tried to harm his country.

“He must be told *tonight*, Morrey,” Lady Edwards said.

“What are you talking about?” Letty had finally found her voice. “Why did he hold a knife to my throat?”

“I’m sorry, Letty, dear—not now. We haven’t time—”

A creak on the wood floor outside the retiring room made Adam spin around. A pistol barrel, half-illuminated, was aimed straight at them.

He launched himself at the two women, tackling them to the ground.

The crack of the pistol made him flinch as he hit the floor with the women beneath him. A moment later, he rolled off them and leapt to his feet, blade at the ready, but whoever had fired upon them had fled. He charged into the corridor, seeking any sign of where the assailant had gone.

The crowd in the distant ballroom soon turned to chaos as someone screamed about a pistol being fired. Half a dozen men ran in his direction, and Adam ducked back into the retiring room. Letty seemed to have collected herself and was assisting Lady Edwards up off the floor. Letty was pale, but she wasn’t weeping or fainting dead away. She was no wilting rose, and for that he was glad.

“Did you catch them?” Lady Edwards asked as she brushed out the wrinkles in her gown.

He shook his head. “A crowd is gathering, searching for whoever fired that pistol. You must go at once, my lady. We cannot be seen together.”

The lady spy nodded and rushed to the open window that led into the gardens outside. Thankfully, they were on the first floor, and Lady Edwards could drop three feet onto the grass outside. She gathered her skirts and slipped through the opening, vanishing into the darkness beyond.

“Godspeed, my lady,” Adam said as he closed the window behind her. Then he turned toward Letty.

“Lord Morrey, what—?”

“Lady Leticia, I’m sorry about this.”

“About what? What just happened? Why did you hold a knife to my throat?”

“I’m sorry about the fact that I have to kiss you now. I cannot be seen in here alone, not if I wish to avoid being connected to that pistol.”

Letty’s eyes widened as the sounds of the men in the corridor grew louder. “Why can’t you be seen alone? Wait . . . kiss?”

He swept Letty into his arms, holding her tightly to him. And he claimed her parted lips with his. She drew in a shocked breath as he kissed her soundly.

Lord, the woman tasted sweet, too sweet. At any other moment he would have gotten drunk on her kiss. But he kept his focus on the closed door, waiting for the moment it would burst open. When it did, he purposely held Letty a moment too long, making sure the men who’d entered the room saw the girl was quite clearly compromised.

“Good God, it’s Morrey!” one man said. Another man called out for Adam to let the girl go.

Adam stepped half a foot back from Letty, his hand still possessively gripping her waist, implying that they had been about to make love. Then he faced the men and dropped his hold on the poor young woman whose reputation he had just put the proverbial bullet through.

“Morrey, what the bloody hell do you think you’re doing with my sister?” James demanded. He started toward Adam, vengeance in his eyes that Adam knew would likely end up with his face a bloody mess if this matter was not resolved.

“I . . .” Adam struggled for words as he pushed Letty behind him, keeping her well out of harm’s way, lest her brother take a swing at him. He’d given Lady Edwards a

chance to escape, but now he was to face an entirely different peril that *he* could not escape.

“We heard a pistol go off,” a man said in confusion. Adam recognized him as Jonathan St. Laurent. “We feared something had happened. We thought it came from this room.”

“I can’t say I heard anything—I was rather preoccupied,” Adam said with a rakish grin. He’d become a good actor in the last two years, showing only what he wished and hiding what he needed to.

“That much is clear,” Jonathan snorted, his gaze fixed on Adam’s chest.

Adam reached up to touch his waistcoat and realized the two buttons he’d undone to free his dagger were still out of their slits. It painted the situation with Letty in an even worse light because it looked as though he’d been in the process of removing his waistcoat.

“We should let Pembroke handle this,” another man in the party said. “She is his sister, after all.”

“Yes, leave him to me,” James growled. “Continue your search.”

The other men left the room, leaving James alone with Adam and Letty.

Pembroke closed the door, trapping Adam in the room with him and Letty. “Morrey, what the bloody hell happened?” James demanded, his eyes straying to his sister, who stood nearly silent behind Adam. “I thought you told me to leave because you were up to something dangerous, and then I find you kissing my sister. I expect there to be a damn good explanation for this.”

Adam saw the hurt and fury in James’s eyes. He had every right to assume the worst. Adam would have, had he been in James’s place.

“There is, but I cannot explain here. It may not be safe,” Adam replied.

James rubbed his closed eyes with his thumb and forefinger. “You’re telling me that what happened tonight was connected to . . . ?”

“Yes.” Adam saw that what he was carefully conveying to James was finally sinking in. “And you know what it means for her.” He nodded his head toward Letty.

“I know . . . but I can help her weather the scandal. It doesn’t have to end the way you expect. I won’t force that upon her, not if she doesn’t want it.”

“Unfortunately, I think you must.” Adam kept his tone quiet. “I’m the only one who can protect her. She’s been seen, James. Before the night is through, she’ll have been made as one of mine, and she will not be safe.”

James’s eyes widened and then narrowed as he looked between his sister and Adam. Yes, the man was finally coming to understand what Morrey was saying.

“Then we must make a few decisions, mustn’t we?”

“We must,” Morrey agreed.

“The sooner the better, I suppose?”

“Yes. I’ll go to the Doctors’ Commons tomorrow. We can tell everyone we had a secret understanding and plan to marry within a few days.”

“It will be enough.” James sighed heavily. His reluctance to agree to this plan was obviously still strong.

“Wait—marriage?” Letty suddenly seemed to realize what they were speaking about.

“Yes, you and Morrey. Immediately.” James glanced at Adam, an apologetic look in his eyes.

“James, you can’t—”

“Letty, after what happened tonight, there are reasons that require you to comply with this decision. You know I would never want to force this, but you must trust me. This is the only way forward that keeps you safe.”

“Safe? Safe from *him*? This man just held a knife to my throat!”

James shot a startled glare at Adam, renewed worry and anger apparent in his expression. “What?”

“A misunderstanding. I thought she was the threat I’d been sensing. Then the real threat revealed itself and fired. That was the pistol you heard from the ballroom. Whoever took that shot, they saw your sister’s face clearly and likely knew that she’d been talking to Lady Edwards.”

“Christ.” James began to pace the floor of the retiring room. Then he looked at his sister again. “Letty, I’ve never asked you to obey me for any reason, but that changes tonight. You must trust me now when I say you *will* marry Morrey. All will be explained to you when it’s safe.”

“James, you cannot ask this of me—please. It isn’t fair. You know what I want, and this isn’t it.” It was such a soft plea, a little sister asking her older brother for his love, his trust, his protection. Adam watched in dread as James had to deny his sister what she needed by a simple shake of his head. No decent brother could form words to deny such a plea, and James was a good brother. All he could do was deny her with his actions.

“Yes, it is unfair,” Adam agreed, turning Letty’s attention away from her brother. “And for that I’m sorry, Lady Leticia, but it must be done. Do not blame your brother for this. It is my fault. I bear the blame for it.”

“No.” She shook her head violently. “How can I marry you? I barely know you!”

“Many couples marry knowing each other for less time than we have,” Adam said, keeping his tone gentle. It was clear Letty was still in shock. “Pembroke, allow me to have a moment with her.”

“I should stay.” James’s overprotectiveness would have amused him at any other time.

“Just a moment is all I need.”

“Very well,” James allowed. “But only a moment. My sister has been through enough tonight. I would like to get her safely home before more daggers or pistols come into play.” He stepped outside.

Adam grasped Letty’s hips again, pulling her toward him. The blue silk of her gown was soft beneath his palms, filling him with desire. Yet she wasn’t affected the same way he was. She was trembling, though he could hardly blame her under the circumstances.

“I will explain all that has happened tonight when I can, when it’s safe. Please know that I’m sorry for how this came about. I will be a good and loyal husband to you. I swear it upon my life.”

Tears gathered in her lovely dark-brown eyes. He reached up and brushed one away.

“Do not cry, please,” he begged. “It will be all right. I promise.”

Then he stole a soft, lingering kiss from her lips. The sort of kiss he wished he’d given her that first time. She went still in his arms, but not stiff with terror as she had been earlier. He nuzzled her cheek and held her close. The poor innocent creature, barely twenty, a full decade younger than him, was to have her life upended all because she’d sought to help Lady Edwards fix her hair. When he moved his face back to look down at her, all he saw was dazed confusion.

“There, there,” he said, his natural need to comfort intensified for this beautiful young woman.

“Do you *wish* to marry me?” she asked him.

“I had no thought to marry. Not in a long while. But I am glad it will be to you.” It was the truth. He had abandoned the idea of such things the night John had perished. But now Letty had need of his protection, and this was the only way he could be there to protect her at all hours. He felt like a bastard for having a small flare of happiness that a beauty with such a soft heart would be his. From the moment he’d laid eyes upon her, he’d had a fleeting rebellious thought that she would have

made him a wonderful countess. Now she *would* be his countess, and he could not shake his sudden excitement and gratitude at the thought.

“Lord Morrey—” Letty began, but the door opened, and her brother came back inside.

“I have your cloak, Letty. We need to leave. I found Gillian. She’s waiting out front.” James held up a cream-colored cloak lined with blue silk that matched her blue-and-gold gown. Letty allowed her brother to slip it over her arms, and she buttoned it up with trembling hands.

“Pay a call on us tomorrow, and we’ll discuss the ceremony and the matter of Letty’s dowry.” James held his hat under one arm and nodded brusquely at Adam.

Adam nodded back and watched the pair leave the retiring room. Once he was alone, he searched the chamber until he spotted the small hole in the wall where the bullet had struck. He retrieved his dagger and dug the bullet from the wall. He chipped at the hole, scratching it until it looked like the damage to the wall had been done by something else.

He searched the room until he found a chair about the right height, and then he pushed the tip of the chair into the hole. Now it looked as if someone had simply shoved the chair into the wall at an angle, causing the damage. The last thing he needed was proof of what had happened in this room. He needed London society to think that he simply had been lost in passion with Letty, not thwarting a French assassin.

He slipped the bullet into the tiny pocket of his waistcoat and left the retiring room.

Given the tight crowd now at the front door, Adam surmised that there had been a mad dash upon the poor grooms to fetch coaches and horses. Lord and Lady Allerton were attempting to oversee the mass exodus from their home.

“I don’t understand it, Henry,” Lady Allerton murmured to her husband. “A pistol? Why would anyone . . .” She trailed off and wrung her hands in her red satin skirts.



Adam slipped between pacing gentlemen and packs of gossiping ladies until he made it to the front of the line. The next groom who rushed up the steps of the Allerton house was breathing hard and caught Adam's summoning wave.

"Bring around my coach. The one with the Morrey crest." He knew all the servants of great households like the Allertons were trained to recognize the crests of the noble houses for occasions such as these.

"Yes, my lord."

Adam moved out of the hot crush of the crowd and waited outside for his coach to be brought forward. He donned his cloak and climbed inside the vehicle once it was in front of the Allerton house. Then he sat back in the darkness for an instant before he realized something was wrong.

He lunged forward, his dagger pressed against the man's throat. He would have laughed in triumph at discovering this hidden man, but he felt a second blade pressed against his own throat.

"Easy, Morrey," a familiar voice chuckled. Adam relaxed, and the weapons were lowered.

"Russell, what the bloody hell are you thinking, sneaking into my coach?" He sat back in his seat and tucked the knife in his waistcoat. Avery Russell did the same. Adam pulled one of the curtains away from the window so that he could better see the spymaster. "Did you find Lady Edwards?"

Avery nodded. "Barely. I saw her escaping from the window after the gunshot. I feared I was too late. We had but a moment to speak in the garden, and I received the message."

"You almost were too late." Adam leaned his head back against the cushioned wall of the coach. "Tonight was a disaster."

"No one was hurt, and Lady Edwards gave me her message," Avery mused.

"No one is hurt, but I'm now to be married."

Avery's eyes widened. "What?"

Adam explained how he'd attacked Letty, and how he'd seen to it that Lady Edwards had the chance to escape safely. Then, to keep suspicion off himself, he'd kissed Letty publicly, making it look as though they'd met for a secret romantic assignation.

Avery fought off a grin. "You're to marry Pembroke's sister?"

"Go ahead and laugh," Adam grumbled.

"I'm not laughing at you, or her. Just the ludicrousness of the situation. Letty is a sweet girl, very intelligent, but not suited to a life of danger," Avery said with more seriousness.

"I know, but what can I do? The spy who fired upon me tonight had a good look at Letty's face. They'll assume she's working with me or Lady Edwards. Pembroke won't be able to guard her as well as I can. She'll be safer being married to me."

Avery was studying him now. "Marriage won't be enough. She'll need you as a protective shadow until we can discover who attacked you at the Allerton ball."

"I plan to be that shadow," Adam agreed. "I only dread knowing Letty will hate me for it."

"I believe Letty is due more credit than you would give her." Avery tapped the roof of the coach with a fist, and it rolled to a stop.

Adam glanced at the darkened street. "You're leaving here?"

"Like you, the shadows are my friends." Avery stepped out into the waiting gloom and soon vanished.

Adam called out to his driver to continue home. He had much to think on and much to plan, including the last thing he'd ever expected to plan—a wedding.

## CHAPTER TWO

“MARRIED,” Letty Fordyce muttered for the tenth time as she, Gillian, and James walked up the steps into their townhouse.

“Letty, perhaps we should have that talk now,” her older brother said.

A footman removed her cloak and took her gloves as she turned to glare at her brother. “Talk? James, what is there to say? I barely know the man! What’s more, he grabbed me from out of the shadows and held a knife to my throat! Then he just kissed me like . . .” Letty couldn’t finish.

“Yes, well, I trust you when you say it happened, I do, but there’s more to discuss than . . . knives and kisses.”

“What could be more important than that?”

At this, Gillian spoke up. “Letty, my brother is involved in matters that require the utmost discretion. Please allow James to have a moment to explain.”

“Yes, that’s all I ask.”

Gillian put her arm through Letty’s in a show of support as James gestured for them to follow him to his study. Once inside, James closed the door and spoke in a low voice.

“We could not speak of this at the Allertons’ house—it was far too dangerous.”

“Speak of *what*? I am tired of all this secrecy and whispers!”

Tonight had been both terrifying and confusing, in turn. All she had done was go to the retiring room to help Lady Edwards with her hair. Then Lord Morrey had gripped her from behind and held a knife to her throat. Letty had been frightened, until she discovered it was Lord Morrey. Then he'd pulled the blade away, yet still held her captive by her wrist. A strange and unexpected flare of heat had begun in her lower belly at still being in his grasp. Before she could even process what any of that meant, the misunderstanding had been followed by a very real attack on them by an unknown assailant.

But she had found herself drawn, *clearly* against her better judgment, to this new and dangerous side of Lord Morrey. She had always thought him undeniably handsome, with his dark hair and flashing gray eyes, and there was such an intense seriousness to him that had been a mystery to her. Letty had seen a different part of him tonight, and she found she liked this new, dark side to the gentleman who had been the focal point of so many of her more stirring dreams at night.

"Morrey is a spy," James said, still using that hushed tone.

"A spy?" Letty echoed the word, still baffled. "If he is a spy, why would you and Gillian know about it? It seems as though that would rather be kept a secret."

"Yes, I quite agree, but when I married Gillian, the man took me into his confidence and told me about it, at least in broad strokes. He did not want me to worry, should something happen to him. He wanted me to know that whatever befell him was in the course of his duty to the Crown. I asked his permission to tell Gillian, and he agreed I could, knowing he could trust his sister with the knowledge of his occupation."

"A spy," Letty muttered. It didn't make sense, his secrecy and veiled discussions with Lady Edwards about messages and the way they'd been attacked. She'd been in such a state of shock that she hadn't yet fully processed what had happened to her this evening.

"His duties are not what you would expect. They are far more dangerous," James added even more quietly.

Letty waited for her brother to continue.

“He removes threats of a human sort.” James seemed to be wording this carefully, and it did take Letty a moment to unravel the meaning behind it.

“You mean he’s an assassin? He kills people?” she uttered in horror.

“If he must, but only those who attempt to harm others, such as the person who tried to harm Lady Edwards,” Gillian added. “Please believe me, Letty—Adam meant you no harm with his actions tonight. I’m not in agreement with James that you should marry him, but I do ask that you believe me when I tell you he wouldn’t have hurt you.”

She now understood why he had grabbed her, how he’d thought she was the threat to Lady Edwards, but it was all too much to take in. Still, against her better judgment, she would give Lord Morrey credit this evening for being the gentleman Gillian insisted he was.

“He did save my life,” she conceded. “When he saw the pistol at the doorframe, he shoved me and Lady Edwards to the floor and shielded us.” Letty would have to make peace with the thought that she was soon to marry a man who took the lives of others, yet had *saved* hers.

“Morrey is a good man. Since Gillian and I married, I’ve come to know him better,” James added. “Marriage to him will protect you.”

“From what? I am not a spy,” Letty argued.

Her brother crossed his arms over his chest. “Whoever fired that pistol has great reason to believe you *are* a spy. You were standing in a room with *two* spies—speaking to them, in fact. It’s not as though you can just disappear to the country for a spell and be safe. You might as well have put your face on every paper and declared yourself working for the Home Office. But if you marry Morrey, he can help keep you safe. He has special skills and talents suited precisely to that duty.”

Letty looked to Gillian, her only supporter in this matter. “But James can keep me safe, can’t he? You know I fear

scandal, but I won't bow to it and wed simply because society dictates it must be so."

Gillian glanced at her husband before replying. "You know I agree, Letty. But James is right—your reputation is nothing compared to the danger you will face if these spies believe you are important to their ends, which I'm sadly certain they will. My brother wouldn't have suggested marriage if he didn't think it was necessary. He never planned on marrying, given the dangers, but now—now he must . . . and you must. Surely marrying Adam isn't such a terrible fate. He is a good man, a kind man, a fair man, and he'll keep you safe." Gillian touched her stomach and looked at James. "If it wasn't for Gabriel, we would do our best to protect you here, but our son could be put in danger if someone intent on harming you came into this house."

A crushing sense of guilt settled on Letty's shoulders. Here she was demanding that James protect her, when she should be thinking of James and Gillian's new babe. Gabriel would indeed be in danger if someone came here looking for her.

"I am a selfish creature," she said, acid eating away at her stomach. "You're right. Gabriel must come first. I am a grown woman. I can take care of myself. James, I will move out of this townhouse tomorrow and find another."

"Nonsense," James said. "I'm not going to simply buy you a home to run away to. I am putting my foot down, Letty. You'll marry Morrey. Do you understand?"

Letty clasped her hands in front of her, staring at the floor. James had never spoken to her like this, like a child needing to be chastised for bad behavior. She wanted to yell and tell him she wouldn't marry anyone unless she chose to, but she also knew he was right.

Marrying Morrey was the intelligent thing to do. The last thing she wanted was to be seen as a fool which meant she must accept the situation. She was going to be married to Lord Morrey.

And it wasn't as if she hadn't daydreamed about that. Ever since they had met, she'd been bewitched by the quiet

intensity of his eyes, the sensuality of his full mouth, and the soft but deep rumble of his voice. The man was a mystery cloaked in an enigma clouded by riddles.

“Please, Letty, you can trust my brother to take care of you. I know this all came about suddenly, but give it time. It might yet be the best thing to happen to the both of you,” Gillian said. Letty saw hope burning in her sister-in-law’s gray eyes, eyes so like Lord Morrey’s.

“Gillian . . . is he the sort of man who could . . . could come to love me?”

Letty had few desires in the world that mattered to her so much as to be loved. She had been blessed with looks and a well-to-do family. Her circumstances had made it possible for her to wait to marry. She was fortunate enough that she could wait to find a gentleman who would, in fact, adore her, and whom she could adore in exchange. It wasn’t so silly as wanting to be loved for the sake of *needing* adoration—it was more complicated than that.

She was a smart woman, and she lived in an age where women were barely above possessions in a man’s eyes. But she clung to the hope that someday her children, especially her daughters, would live in a better time, one where women were equals. Where they would be valued for their thoughts, their knowledge, their education, and not just their looks, money, or birthing abilities. She held her desires for that particular future close to her heart, never letting anyone know.

“He will come to love you.” Gillian clasped her hands, squeezing them. “He knows your value, Letty.”

Gillian had once been a lady’s maid, and she knew better than most that women held value. She understood what Letty had meant.

Letty faced her brother again. “Very well. I will marry Lord Morrey the day after tomorrow.”

James’s shoulders drooped in relief. He came over to her and placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Thank you. I know what this means to you to accept this situation, and I thank you for doing it. It makes me feel like I haven’t failed you, to know that you’ll have the best protection, better than what I can give you.”

This—this was the brother she had grown up with. The man who cared about her, who truly did see her value and believe in her. He was acknowledging that though he’d commanded her to marry, it was still within her power to refuse. Her acceptance had been the right thing to do, and he was proud of her for it. This, above all else, made her want to cry. She was putting away her childish dreams of love and equality with a husband in order to protect her family. It was what women had done for centuries, and she wouldn’t be any different.

“You had better go to bed, my dear. You’ve had a trying evening, and have a long day ahead of you tomorrow.” James kissed her forehead before Letty left the study and headed to her bedchamber. As she climbed the stairs, she tried to arrange the crowded thoughts that tonight’s events had caused. If she was to marry Lord Morrey, she must be a better master of herself, especially her emotions. But tonight—tonight she couldn’t do that. She wished to curl up in her bed and cry like a child, and she hated herself for that weakness.

Her lady’s maid, Mina, was laying out a nightgown and a robe de chambre.

“Good evening, m’lady,” Mina greeted her. Mina was from Scotland and had been her mother’s lady’s maid. Since Letty’s mother had passed away, Mina had become almost like a second mother to her. Her dark hair, now threaded with gray, was pulled back in a comfortable but unfashionable bun.

“Mina,” Letty said, her voice suddenly breaking as fresh tears filled her eyes.

“What’s this now, love?” Mina came around the bed to take Letty into her arms.

“I am to be married in two days,” she said.

“Married? What? To whom?” her maid asked, stunned.



“To Lord Morrey.” Letty sniffed, feeling the damnable tears coming.

“Oh, my poor dear. Let’s sit, and you can tell me all about it.”

Letty and Mina sat at the foot of her bed, and she told the maid all that had transpired at the ball and afterward, even the part about Morrey being a spy.

“But you must keep it all a secret, Mina, please.” Letty knew she shouldn’t be telling servants something like this, but she had to talk with someone about it, someone aside from James and Gillian.

“I have never once betrayed you, my lady, and I won’t start now.” The maid gave her a gentle nudge. “Let’s get you undressed. Shall I bring you a glass of milk and a few biscuits, perhaps one of Cook’s tarts if there is one left?”

“Only if it’s not too much trouble.” The hour was late, and she had heard the clock chime in the corridor. She didn’t want to keep her maid up very late.

“For you? Nothing is ever too much trouble.” Mina clucked her tongue in a motherly way and worked at the laces on the back of Letty’s gown. Once Letty wore only her nightgown, she pulled on the robe de chambre, leaving the floral-patterned robe open, not bothering to do up the tiny pearl buttons. She eased into her bed, the sheets a little cold, but she would soon warm up with the steady fire burning in the hearth across the room. Mina returned with a glass of warm milk, along with a few biscuits and a raspberry tart served on a blue china dish.

“Now, tuck in and rest. We’ll have much to plan for on the morrow.” Mina kissed her forehead, much like she had done when Letty was a child. She hadn’t done that in a very long time. It made Letty want to cry. She’d been a grown woman far earlier than other girls her age, having to care for a mother whose memory had faded until it was no more. And now—now she felt like a very small girl who was facing the world far too soon.

“Good night, Mina,” Letty said softly.

Now left alone with her thoughts, Letty replayed the events of the night over and over, trying to puzzle out her reactions, especially to Lord Morrey. When the man held a knife at her throat, and later when she was nearly shot, she ought to have been terrified. And while she had been afraid, the reason she’d trembled as Lord Morrey held her in his arms was because of something else. It was another sort of fear entirely, which made no sense at all.

Letty finished her milk, licked the sugar from her fingers, and set the plate and glass on the nightstand. She got up and cleaned her teeth before climbing back into bed and blowing out the candle. She watched the smoke coil in the moonlight from the windows. The light and smoke seemed to merge, forming a mist that enthralled her. It made her think of Morrey. He was like mist, smoke, and moonlight, a mysterious dream.

Could a woman marry a man like that and be happy?

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A FEMININE FIGURE dressed in a deep-blue silk gown with a black velvet cape wrapped about her walked down the narrow mews behind Twinings tea shop. She held her breath against the stench that lingered in the still night air around her. The stagnant smells brought back memories of home, far across the English Channel.

She moved quickly through the shadows, careful to keep out of sight. Dangerous men prowled the streets like wild dogs, and while this woman could take care of herself, she was loath to tangle with anyone tonight. Her fingers gripped the hilt of a pistol, ready just in case.

Soon she reached a private room at a certain coaching inn that belonged to the man she’d come to see. She knocked on the door and listened for the command to enter. Only then did she step inside and pull the hood back to show her face.

“My beautiful Camille,” a deep voice purred in delight. “How did you fare in your task this evening?”

Her master, the man she knew only as the Lord of Shadows, sat in a chair by the fire.

“Bonsoir, monsieur.” She curtsied deeply, her eyes cast to the ground.

“That wasn’t an answer.”

“The English lady spy is still alive. I could not get her alone to force the message from her lips. But I did find out her name. It is as you suspected, Lady Edwards.” Camille waited for her master’s wrath. She had failed him as his left hand and would most likely be punished.

“Tell me what happened.”

She took a seat by the fire and told of how she’d gained entry to Lady Allerton’s ball. She explained locating the woman she’d been sent to torture for the message and then dispose of when no one was around.

“You know how these English ladies are—they are *never* alone. They always travel in flocks like twittering little birds. Lady Edwards left the ballroom with another woman. I followed them, but a man came between me and my target.”

“How?”

“I do not know, monsieur. I had memorized all the faces in the ballroom, of course, but I did not recognize him. He seemed to materialize out of the shadows.” Camille was proud of her uncanny memory. She could recall any picture or diagram and could even remember every word ever spoken to her. She’d once been a lowly stage actress in Paris, barely surviving on the coins tossed at her feet after each performance.

But *this* man had been sitting in the front row at her last performance. He had not tossed a coin. He had, with quiet intensity, met her gaze as he left a letter, sealed with wax, at her feet. She had retrieved it and opened it later that night. It had given her instructions, told her how to find him, and he had closed it with the following words: *Someone with your talents can be a master of her own fate.*

She had been afraid to go at first, but she had no future, and in the end, natural curiosity and hope had driven her into this man's arms and his bed. But she had not regretted it. The master was a wonderful lover, and he did indeed see her talents for what they were. He gave her power, a future with money and nice clothes, and a life beyond anything she'd ever imagined. All she had to do was obey him whenever he gave her a mission.

"Tell me more of this man." The Lord of Shadows had risen from his chair by the fire and began to pace.

"He was tall, as tall as you, dark-haired, eyes the color of the sky before a winter storm." Camille thought the man beautiful, perhaps even more beautiful than her master, but she would never admit that.

"You like his eyes?" the monsieur inquired curiously.

"Yes. They are intense, a mixture of violence and gentleness. They confuse me, monsieur."

"Did you notice anything else about this man?"

"He wore fine clothes, and yet until he came between me and my target, I had not seen him at all at the ball. Someone of his appearance should have stood out to me."

"What happened when you went after Lady Edwards?" Her master drew her back to her narration of the events.

"He reached the retiring room first. He attacked the woman who had accompanied Lady Edwards. I think perhaps he thought that second woman was me, but then he released her and spoke to them both in hushed tones. The two ladies seemed to be well acquainted. I believe Lady Edwards's companion may also know the message. They were speaking to each other, and they were there when the man joined them, all of them whispering. I believe Lady Edwards shared the message with them. This other lady must be greatly important."

"What makes you say that?" the master inquired.

"When I fired at them, the man sought to protect both ladies, but he covered this other woman more, shielding her

completely from me. I wonder if she might be the one with the message and Lady Edwards is but a decoy.”

“Interesting. I hadn’t considered that. Avery Russell might be clever enough to try that. It’s entirely possible. I simply hadn’t thought to give Avery enough credit for it. Maybe he is surpassing his own master in talent. Waverly was distracted in his later days by his own personal vendettas. Russell won’t have that same problem. In time, he might become even more cunning than Waverly.”

Camille listened to her master talk as her thoughts drifted to the League of Rogues, the group Hugo Waverly had had a vendetta against. She had seen them many times in the last few months. They were handsome, reckless, and seductive, each of them—though none of them were spies. It puzzled her and her master that the previous English spymaster had spent so much of his time chasing them from the shadows. Worse threats faced England. Threats like her and her master.

“Did you recognize the woman? The one with Lady Edwards?”

“Yes. She is the sister of Lord Pembroke.”

“Oh, yes. I recall the fellow,” her master said and stopped pacing. “Let’s leave Lady Edwards for now. I can have someone else deal with her. This other woman, Pembroke’s sister, warrants closer scrutiny. I need to get her away from her brother and find out what she knows. Then we can arrange an accident.”

“Yes, monsieur,” Camille agreed. “What must I do?”

“Come closer, my dear, and I will tell you.” Her master beckoned her to join him in the shadows.

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IT WAS WELL after midnight when Adam returned to his townhouse on Half Moon Street. But as he expected, Caroline had waited up for him. She rushed down the steps toward him, wearing a robe over her nightgown.

“Oh, Adam, thank God,” she said, embracing him.

He held his sister in his arms for a moment before letting go. Like his trusted butler, Caroline knew of his secret work—he couldn’t keep that from her.

“What happened?” she asked.

It never ceased to amaze him that she could so easily read him, whereas so few others ever could. Perhaps it was because they had both grown up relying upon each other while looking after their mother when they were so young. Other men might have pushed their sisters off on governesses and eventually husbands, but he couldn’t do that to Caroline, not after all she had been through.

“Russell was waylaid, unable to make his rendezvous.”

“How is Lady Edwards?”

“Safe. He found her in the gardens after she made her escape. I’ll never know how that man always ends up in the right place at the right time.” He shrugged out of his cloak and handed it to the butler, Mr. Sturges. The man was a former infantry officer and not much older than Adam. He was as capable as he was trustworthy.

“Avery’s like a cat with nine lives,” Caroline said. “But never mind about him—tell me what happened.”

Adam headed for the drawing room. Caroline followed, after asking Sturges to send in some food and a bit of wine. Collapsing into a chair by the fire, Adam rubbed his face, feeling the weight of all that had happened tonight starting to settle more heavily about him.

“Everything was a bloody mess. I followed Lady Edwards, thinking a French spy had discovered her importance to Avery’s ring, but when I grabbed the woman with her, it turned out to be Pembroke’s sister.”

“Letty was with Lady Edwards?”

“Yes, and that was where everything went wrong. She was merely trying to help the woman fix her hair. I held the poor

girl at knifepoint.” He still couldn’t erase from his mind the look of terror he’d seen in Letty’s eyes.

“Oh, Adam, you didn’t,” Caroline sighed. “She must’ve been very frightened.”

“I’m afraid it gets worse. The real spy was also there and fired upon us, so I tackled both women to the ground. And then I gave chase but couldn’t catch the spy. When I returned, Lady Edwards had to escape, and I had to keep my cover.”

“Oh, heavens. What did you do?” Caroline asked.

Adam didn’t immediately reply, knowing that what he said next would change his life—and in some ways, Caroline’s as well.

“Congratulate me, sister. It seems I am to be married in two days.” Adam tried to smile, but his sister simply stared at him.

“Married? To whom? Lady Edwards is already married.”

He shook his head. “To Letty. I had to kiss her as some men from the ball heard the gunshot and burst into the room.”

“*Had to?*”

“To throw off suspicion as to what was truly happening.”

Caroline raised an eyebrow.

“But . . . I do admit that perhaps I wasn’t thinking as clearly as I should have been when I made my decision.”

“Oh, Adam,” she sighed. “Are you very unhappy?”

“Unhappy? No, not exactly. *Worried* is what I am.” He smiled ruefully. “The fact is, I do like Letty, have since the moment I met her when we were searching for Gillian.”

“You like her?” Caroline’s eyes brightened with a glimmer of joy.

“I do. She is so sweet, so innocent. Yet she is also intelligent and brave. She is what I would have sought in a bride, had it been safe to marry after I started working for the Home Office. But after . . .”

“After John died, you couldn’t put a woman in danger,” Caroline finished, stark pain clear in her eyes. “And now in order to protect a woman, you must marry her.”

“It’s quite the irony, isn’t it?” He sighed heavily.

Adam’s quest for vengeance was not only due to the loss of his dear friend, but also for his sister, who’d been in love with John. The two had planned to marry, but he’d died two months before the ceremony. The shadow of John’s death had turned Caroline into a ghost herself in some ways, and Adam wished he could do something to give his sister her life back. But Caroline’s broken heart would either mend on its own or it would not, and Adam was helpless to do anything but watch.

“If you are to marry Letty, then she must be told . . .”

“She knows part of it already. I will pay a call on her tomorrow, and after I speak with James, I will tell her the rest. I will have no secrets from my wife.”

Caroline bit her lip. “But what if she isn’t strong enough to know about your secret life?”

“I know she is. There were no hysterics after that shot was fired.”

“Well, she may have been a bit shocked. Not everyone reacts the same way to such things. I think when you see her tomorrow, you should ask her if she was well the rest of the night.”

“I suppose you are right. I’ve lived the last two years in such relative danger that I forget how it can be for those unused to it.” He rubbed his temples and let out a long, weary breath.

“You ought to go to bed,” Caroline said. “We have a busy day tomorrow.”

“We do.” He needed to be up early to obtain a special license, and then he ought to see to the wedding arrangements.

“Should we arrange for it to be at St. George’s?” he asked Caroline.



“You could, but might it not be better to take her to Chilgrave?”

“You think I should?” Chilgrave Castle was the ancestral seat of the Morrey family. Adam loved the estate, yet he hardly spent any time there these days. A wedding might be a good reason for him to stay at the castle for a spell. It would be safer for Letty as well.

“The rectory there is very lovely. Quite romantic, I think. If you let me go on ahead tomorrow, I could have it all arranged and the castle ready to host guests.”

“Thank you, Caro.” Adam meant it. His sister was a true gem. It filled him with a deep sorrow that she had not yet found another man to give her heart to after losing John.

They stood and embraced each other. Adam gave her an extra squeeze as he murmured his thanks again.

“Now, off to bed with you. I’ll send some cutlets and wine upstairs,” Caroline said.

Adam exited the drawing room and climbed the stairs, his steps now heavy with weariness.

So, they would open Chilgrave Castle for the wedding. It did sound rather lovely. Part of his staff stayed there, and he had enough money to keep them employed, but they had little work to do. Hopefully, it would cheer them to open the house and shake off the dust and let the masterfully gilded rooms gleam again and be filled with the sounds of life. He could perhaps pretend to have a normal life for a while.

Dudley Helms, his valet, was waiting in Adam’s bedchamber when Adam entered. Sturges followed behind and set a tray of cutlets on the table before bowing and leaving. Adam began to unbutton his waistcoat, while his valet prepared his nightclothes

“And how was your evening, my lord?” Helms asked as he removed the waistcoat and helped Adam with his sleeves.

“Filled with the unexpected, Helms. You’ll be hearing from Sturges tomorrow officially, but I am to be wed in two days.”

“Wed? I assume congratulations and not condolences are in order?” Helms teased.

Adam laughed. “Yes, congratulations, certainly.”

Helms removed the cuff links and Adam’s pocket watch before placing them in their boxes for safekeeping. “And who is the bride-to-be?”

“Lady Leticia Fordyce.”

“Ah, Lord Pembroke’s sister. What a wonderful choice,” Helms replied with warm honesty. “The staff will be quite happy, my lord, if you don’t mind the boldness of my saying that.”

“Not at all. You think they will be happy?”

“They will,” Helms said with a twinkle in his eye. “Mrs. Hadaway has been wanting babes in the nursery for years.”

Mrs. Hadaway, the Chilgrave housekeeper, would indeed be glad. She was a cheery woman and had a genuine smile never far from her face.

Adam bid his valet good night and had a bit of the meat, chasing it down with some wine. Then he forced himself to bed. Tomorrow would be a challenge. His entire life was about to change. Sweet Letty would soon be his wife.

## CHAPTER THREE

LETTY WAS as nervous as a cat during a thunderstorm. Every time a carriage rolled past the townhouse, she flew to the window, expecting to see Lord Morrey heading up the steps toward her door.

“Letty,” Gillian laughed. “Do try to sit down.”

“But it’s nearly ten o’clock,” Letty said. “Half the morning is gone, and he did say he would call in the morning, did he not?”

Gillian rolled her eyes. She sat on a settee, reading a book with one hand and holding her baby, Gabriel, in the crook of her other arm. Like his parents, their baby was utterly perfect and completely well behaved. He slept on, unaware of the two women talking.

“He has to procure the special license first. Give the poor man a bit more time.”

“Time, yes,” Letty murmured, still peeping out the curtains. A coach with the Morrey crest had just stopped in front of the steps.

“He’s here!” She sprang toward the door. “I have to go. I should—”

“Letty,” Gillian said firmly. “Go out into the gardens for a bit, and remember to breathe. We shall come find you once the men have talked all the business of money and other matters.”

“You don’t think *I* should be involved in that?” Letty challenged.

“You know I do, but I think you’re a bit frantic this morning. Breathing the cool, crisp air of the gardens might calm you.”

Gillian was right. Everything about Lord Morrey had Letty feeling edgy and out of sorts. Quite frankly, she didn’t know what to do with herself. She collected her shawl and hastened from the drawing room just as the butler answered the door. She had no time to go outside unseen, so she ducked into the nearest doorway to wait.

From her hiding place, she was able to see Lord Morrey step inside and remove his hat and greatcoat. He wore a dark-blue coat and biscuit-colored trousers, which molded to the masculine perfection of his long, lean legs. She had seen many men wear pantaloons that were skintight, but only the best well-built men were able to carry off such a fashion. Morrey looked even better than the statues in a museum, not that she had ever *officially* seen many of the nudes, which were considered highly improper for a young, unmarried lady to look upon.

Her mind quickly strayed to other thoughts: how he’d gripped her so tightly last night, yet without hurting her; how he’d held that blade to her throat with such skill that she’d been unharmed; how he’d continued to grip her even after he’d put the knife down. She remembered his eyes. Those twin silvery pools had locked on her eyes, holding her captive as easily as his hands had. Her body flashed with a sudden heat, and her heart pounded hard at the memory. This dark and dangerous man was to be her husband in but a handful of days.

It made her wonder if Lord Morrey’s body would be like the statues she’d seen. The male body was both fascinating and confusing at the same time. But as she watched Morrey linger in the hall, his dark hair falling in his eyes, she wondered, *How would he look without his clothes?*

“Adam, thank you for coming.” Gillian joined Morrey in the entryway, carefully embracing him in a hug while still holding Gabriel in one arm. She then showed him into the drawing room. Letty breathed a sigh of relief as she sank deeper into the room she’d escaped into, the library. It was a

better distraction than the garden. She collected a few volumes on economics and tucked herself into a nook at the back of the room. Surprisingly, she managed to lose herself in the texts for a little while. But the sound of voices soon drew her attention.

She recognized the voices of James and Morrey as they entered the library. She started to rise, but then halted as she realized she couldn't slip past the two men unseen. She remained hidden, unable to avoid hearing their discussion.

"I thought it would be a bit nicer to discuss things in here. My office is cluttered at the moment. We'll sign the documents in there when we need to. Do you have the special license?" James asked. The sound of the men settling in chairs accompanied this question.

"Yes," Morrey replied.

"Excellent. Now let us talk finances first. Letty has a dowry of five thousand a year."

"If you recall when you married Gillian, I offered you the same for her." Morrey sounded amused. Letty wished she could see his face.

"I remember, and I only grudgingly accepted, which means you will too."

Morrey chuckled. "Well played, Pembroke. I will accept, but those funds will be entirely within Letty's control, for her use and pleasure."

Letty's heart gave a leap at hearing that. She hadn't been sure before what sort of man Morrey was, and if he would allow her any independence, especially financial.

"Very good," James replied. "Now about the wedding . . ."

"I think I'd like it to be in the small church by Chilgrave Castle."

"Not St. George's?" Her brother sounded surprised.

"No. Too open, too dangerous. Chilgrave is off the beaten path. It's safer. Besides, I have a personal connection to the place."

“So now we come to the heart of this matter. What the *devil* happened last night, Morrey? I know you cannot tell me about the mission itself, but you must explain how Letty became entangled in this mess.”

There was a heavy silence, then a long, weary sigh.

“I was to protect Lady Edwards last night while she waited to deliver a message. I had been warned that French agents might try to silence her. The message was only in her head, not upon paper. Had she been killed, she would’ve died with that precious intelligence trapped inside her.” Morrey paused, and Letty realized she had stopped breathing as he spoke. “The French are clever. They use female spies to their advantage, far better than we do, at least until Russell took over from Waverly. I saw a woman walking with Lady Edwards away from the crowd and feared the worst. I realized too late it was your sister. As Lady Edwards and I sorted out the mess, the real French agent fired upon us. Lady Edwards was able to escape out the window, where she eventually met her contact, but while she escaped I needed to maintain my cover. I did the only thing I could think of.”

“By kissing my sister . . .”

There was an uncomfortable pause. Letty could only imagine the looks being exchanged.

“I admit, my judgment was . . . clouded. But in the moment, it seemed the wisest course.”

“Yes. I understand the logic. You countered one outrageous act with another. No one there would have imagined that the two events were connected. I must say, however, that I’m still displeased.”

“I quite understand, James. Your sister deserves to be wooed by a gentleman who is mad about her. I could not woo her, but the truth is I am quite mad for her.”

Letty covered her mouth to keep the sound of her gasp from escaping. He was *mad* for her? That forbidden flutter of excitement filled her lower belly again.

“Oh? Are you?” James sounded surprised. “I had no idea you had a tendre for Letty.”

Morrey gave a soft chuckle, and Letty desperately wished she could see his face again. She clutched a book to her chest as she strained to hear his response.

“From the moment I first saw her, I was captivated, but in my line of work it is unwise to marry. It is simply too dangerous. Either her life is threatened, or she faces a future where her husband does not come home and she may have to live forever with a lie about the circumstances of my death. I couldn’t do that to a woman. So I closed off that part of my life and buried any affections I felt for any woman I was interested in.”

“Until last night,” James asserted.

“Yes. Last night forced my hand, but I won’t deny that it does give me joy. But now Letty faces a danger that never should have been placed upon her shoulders.”

“What can be done to keep her safe?” James’s voice grew slightly louder, and Letty knew he was moving closer to the bookshelf she hid behind.

“She should remain at Chilgrave for the foreseeable future. My staff, both in London and Chilgrave, were hired for their abilities to deal with the risks my employment creates.”

“Will you stay with her?” James’s tone held a hint of worry and a bit of warning that endeared him to her even more.

“I will be with her as often as I can, but there will be times I must be called away. She will have the utmost protection in those circumstances,” Morrey promised.

Her brother let out a sigh. “I cannot help wishing that I could protect her. After losing our mother, we were both adrift. Gillian has helped me navigate the rivers of my grief, but I worry over Letty being alone.”

“I understand, Pembroke. Believe me, I do. I’m still very much a stranger to Letty, but I will be present for her and give her anything she needs, within my power.”

“Give her love, Morrey. *Give her love*. It is perhaps the most crucial thing of all.”

*Yes, Lord Morrey, give me love*, she thought.

Letty bit her lip as unexpected tears burned her eyes. Now was not the time to turn into a silly watering pot, but James was right. The death of their mother, the cruel fate of watching her memories fade at so young an age, had been awful. It had left scars upon Letty’s heart that would never fully heal.

“Let’s draw up the paperwork, and then you may have a moment with Letty.”

“Thank you.”

She waited a full thirty seconds for them to leave before emerging from her hiding spot. She screeched as a hand suddenly clamped over her mouth and pulled her back.

An instant later, the person holding her cursed. “Not again.”

“Lord Morrey?” Letty mumbled through his fingers.

“Lady Leticia,” Morrey sighed, then uncovered her mouth and turned her around to face him. “What on earth are you doing hiding in here?”

Letty, stunned by the sudden thrill she felt being manhandled by Lord Morrey, could only blink up at him.

“I . . . ,” she stammered as she lost herself in his storm-cloud-gray eyes.

“You mustn’t do that around me—*never* spy upon me. I can feel it, like a tingling at the back of my neck. I feared you were someone else.”

Finally, Letty found her tongue. “Someone like a French spy?”

Morrey’s gaze turned stormier. “Yes, exactly like a French spy. What did you hear from your little hiding place?”

Letty pursed her lips together, refusing to tell him that she’d heard, among many things, his confession that he was mad for her.



A worry line creased his brow, and then he seemed to relax a bit. “Understand me, Letty—my instincts must never be tested. You understand? I usually act automatically. I could have hurt you.”

Morrey still held her waist, their lower bodies pressed together. The contact of his legs against hers through the thin barrier of her skirts left her dizzy and excited.

“Your eyes,” he said softly.

“What about them?” Letty dared to ask.

“Your pupils—they’re quite large.” He cupped her face, his thumb brushing over her lips. “That only happens when one is very frightened or very . . .” He didn’t finish.

“Very what?” she pressed, fascinated by the way his own pupils seemed larger as he leaned close to her.

“Very aroused.” The sensual and completely scandalous word set fresh fire to her blood.

“You mustn’t speak of such things,” Letty whispered, but she actually *did* want him to continue saying such wonderfully exciting things.

Morrey continued to study her. “Well, now. You aren’t what I expected.”

“What did you expect?” she asked, her breath coming a little shallow.

His eyes grew stormy again, but rather than frighten her, it excited her. “I expected you to be unable to understand me. That your fear would be too much to cope with. But a bit of fear arouses you, doesn’t it?”

Shame flooded her face with heat. He was right. She had never been in a position before where she’d been truly afraid like she had been last night. It was as though she was waking from a very dull dream, and she was starting to understand who she truly was.

“Lord Morrey . . . ,” she began, but she failed to say much more.

His eyes focused on her lips, and his gaze stoked the growing fire within her.

“I must be a gentleman,” he said to himself. “At least until we are married.” He gave her waist a small squeeze. “And then, if you wish it, I can teach you all the things I know about pleasure, about the wildness of it, the rough excitement, the games of cat and mouse we might play. I can give you what your eyes tell me you need. Do you understand?”

She could only stare at him blankly. His words didn’t fully sink in.

“You don’t understand, not yet, but I’ll teach you, *my wild one*.” Morrey leaned down that last breathless inch, his warm breath fanning over her face. She could see each of his long dark lashes, and she desperately wished he would seize her for a kiss.

He cupped the back of her head, his fingers twisting in the strands, and her knees buckled at his easy control of her body. She felt helpless, yet she craved it with a hunger she’d never experienced before. Morrey’s heavy-lidded eyes gazed down her body. He made her feel excited and erratic, like a summer storm. How was it possible to want him and yet fear that same wanting?

“Your brother will be waiting for me, wondering where I am, what I’m doing—or more importantly, what I’m *wanting* to do.” His lips barely caressed hers as he spoke, not quite a kiss.

Strangely emboldened by all that he’d said, she breathed in the scent of this beautiful man and tilted her head back. “Then let him wonder.” She hoped he would give her a kiss that satisfied all the teasing he’d done in the last few moments.

He shook his head, his lips brushing over hers again, enough to taunt her, but not satisfy, then stepped back. A breath of cool air swamped her heated body, and she leaned back against the bookcase to regain some of her balance. Morrey leveled her with a dark, intense look. Then, without another word, he left.

Suddenly, she could breathe again. She leaned heavily against the bookshelf, trying to make sense of all that had happened in the last few minutes. Of three things, she was sure:

Lord Morrey was a dangerous man.

He frightened her.

And she desired him.

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ADAM CAREFULLY READ over the marriage agreement while he tried to ignore James's gaze upon him. He finally lifted his eyes to James and arched a brow. "Done."

"You took your time," James replied. He was doing his best not to look worried.

"I met with Letty in the library after you left. I had a word with her before coming to you." There, he'd let James worry about what *that* meant.

James crossed his arms over his chest. His frown deepened. "Did you?"

Picking up the pen nearest him, Adam scrawled his name in the appropriate spot on the marriage settlement, then passed the paper to James, who signed beneath him.

"So, it is done." James blotted the paper, then folded it up. "I will have my solicitor prepare a copy for your records. Then I'll have my banker begin the transfer of funds, to give to Letty at your discretion."

"Thank you. Now, if you have no need of me, I shall leave for Chilgrave so I may have time to prepare for the wedding tomorrow."

"That suits me. I will have Gillian help Letty pack her trousseau. We shall arrive at Chilgrave this evening, if that suits you."

“It does.” Adam shook James’s hand, then paused in the doorway. “Since I’ve already had a brief discussion with Lady Leticia, I will not need to speak to her again until this evening.”

“All right.” James stood and followed him to the door. “Safe travels.”

Adam collected his coat and hat before heading to the waiting coach. Once inside, he let out the breath he’d been holding, and he couldn’t resist replaying that moment in the library with his future bride.

He had suspected someone was listening to him and James. He wasn’t sure who he had expected. He had certainly not expected to tug sweet, innocent Letty into his arms a second time. He also hadn’t expected her reaction to the encounter.

Lord, the fire burning in those lovely brown eyes had driven him half-mad with lust. She had no understanding of her reaction—that was painfully clear. But he could teach her. She was a woman who would enjoy excitement in the bedchamber. She would enjoy playing games and would embrace lovemaking.

He realized now that he was a damned lucky man. But he also knew that he would have to be careful with her. A woman as innocent as Letty could easily become frightened and confused by her own passions.

The coach took him to his townhouse first, where he and Caroline discussed his plans at length. After the wedding, Caroline could return to London if she wished; indeed, he nearly insisted on it, because the farther away she was from Letty the safer she would be. This way, he would only have to worry about protecting one woman.

“Adam, you know I can take care of myself, and it is my duty to protect my future sister-in-law. I adore her, and this must be so frightening for her. Having another woman to confide in would help her.” Caroline had stiffened her spine and raised her shoulders. Yes, he wouldn’t win this argument at all.

“Very well, you may stay and guard my new little wife, Caro.”

His sister’s usually solemn face turned impish. “I am so excited, Adam. Truly, she is so sweet and clever. Your babies will be beautiful.”

Caroline had a fondness for children, and for a moment, Adam was lost in a daydream of what those children would look like, and how completely devoted he would be to them. It was something he had not thought of since John had been murdered.

But perhaps it would be possible. If he could keep Letty safe and protect her, they could have such a future. All that stood in his way was finding and removing the threat against her. He needed to formulate a plan with Avery Russell.

Russell was one of the few spies in England who knew the larger picture when it came to spycraft. Most had only bits and pieces of information, in order to keep their mission as a whole safe. If he had to guess the nature of the French threat, he would wager that the Bonapartist struggles were at the heart of this.

It was a bloody relief that Napoleon Bonaparte had died, but his supporters still gave the French royals plenty of problems. Normally, England was glad to have France preoccupied with its own problems, but Napoleon’s overthrow of the monarchy had ruffled the feathers of every decent Englishman.

Rebellions, uprisings, the killing of kings—England had done it before and had no wish to do it again. A country undergoing rebellion was a country *exposed*, a country that could be easy prey for others. Whether it was France, Spain, or any of the other power-hungry nations of Europe, all would happily prey upon the British Isles if they sensed weakness.

Adam had never been ignorant of politics, but after John’s death he’d been thrust into the forefront of a battle that was fought in the shadows. With whispers, coded messages, and stiletto knives flashing in the dark, everything had become so

tangible, so very real and threatening that Adam had trouble sleeping most nights.

“Adam, are you happy about this? Truly?” Caroline’s question broke through the darkening spiral of his thoughts.

He reached across the drawing room table and touched her hand.

“I believe I will be. There is just so much that weighs upon me. I worry for your safety and Letty’s. I cannot help but wonder which path is safer for her: to be my wife or to send her away somewhere the French cannot find her.”

“There is likely no place to send her where French spies could not find her, Adam.”

“I’m not so sure about that. There are some rather wild and unexplored places in the far north of Scotland where she would be safe.”

Caroline shook her head. “Oh, you cannot mean to take her to see Uncle Tyburn?”

Their uncle, a robust old man, was a Highlander through and through. Although he had been born long after the dreadful events at Culloden, he still held true to the old ways, as dangerous and illegal as that could be.

“Tyburn would be safe. He has an old castle surrounded by flat land that has been cleared of forests. He can see a person coming for miles, as long as it’s daylight or the moonlight is bright enough.”

“Why don’t we put Tyburn as a very last option. Letty is *very* English, and I’m not sure if dragging her through the pitted roads of Scotland to spend time in the fierce, frosty Highlands would be ideal for your honeymoon.”

“You have a point,” Adam conceded, then rose from the table. “I must be off for Chilgrave. Do you wish to come early with me or travel with Letty?”

Caroline seemed to debate this a moment. “I believe I shall come with you. There’s much to do to make it a welcoming place for a bride and for a wedding reception to be achieved

tomorrow. As much as I adore you, Adam, you are still a man and quite incapable of planning a proper wedding.”

Adam laughed. “Very well, I concede on that as well.” He went to seek out his valet, and then it was time to leave. He could not shake the feeling that danger would still come, even to the sanctity of Chilgrave Castle, but he hoped that whatever evil followed he would have the strength to stop.

## CHAPTER FOUR

LETTY AND GILLIAN arrived on Bond Street just as the shops opened. They needed to get what Gillian deemed the necessities for her meager trousseau, and after a spot of lunch that wasn't nearly long enough, they were whisked back home to finalize their packing.

Before Letty could catch her breath, Mina was helping her into her carriage dress, and she was boarding the coach for a two-hour ride to Chilgrave Castle—a place she'd never been before but, by the next night, would be the mistress of.

Was it all real? Was she to see her future home tonight, or was this some fantastical dream? There had been no amorous glances across a roomful of chaperones or flowers delivered to her door; all the things she knew and had come to expect of such moments were absent. She'd longed for a proper courtship. Romantic interludes of the sort her mother had told Letty about when she was just a young child. Most young ladies began their courtship dance at balls or card parties in the assembly rooms. She had begun hers at knifepoint.

Letty's parents' marriage had been a love match, which was not as rare a thing as some made it out, but for her parents it had been unexpected. Because theirs had been a love match, they'd spent their entire marriage sharing a suite of rooms and the same bed. They shared their lives with each other, and rarely had they ever spent time apart. Letty had learned later on as she grew up how rare that was, even for couples who married for love.



As the buildings of London gave way to green fields and trees and idyllic villages, Letty found herself ever more silent as Gillian and James spoke with her. She answered in monosyllables as her mind churned with thoughts of her uncertain future as the Countess of Morrey.

As they reached Chilgrave Castle, she saw it at first from a distance, a square fortress with circular towers at each of the four corners. The design was simple, but the strategy behind it was clever. A wide moat separated the castle from the land surrounding it. A long stone bridge stretched across the water to the castle, which loomed eerily in the fading sunlight. It reminded her of the sort of castle a child might try to build in the sand on Brighton Beach, but this castle could not be washed away by any wave. If any part of the structure were to crumble in some distant future, it would only be because of the long march of time.

“What do you think, Letty?” Gillian asked. “I’ve been here a few times. It seems quite austere outside, but inside, it is a proper home.”

Letty kept her gaze upon the structure. “It is certainly daunting.” The coach drove over the narrow bridge to pass into the courtyard. Castles like this had been built during the time of Edward III, the royal age of castles. But that era of time, like many others, had faded.

“You’ll find it’s quite nice,” Gillian said again. “Most medieval castles were built strictly for military fortification. When the ancient Morreys had this castle built, however, they sought to reconcile the military purpose with the prospect of a lord and lady living comfortably within. The courtyard is not made of stone, but rather full of lush gardens and a fountain. I hope you’ll find it as beautiful as I do.”

Letty was used to a sprawling estate that ambled over rolling hills, a place where she felt able to run free. Despite Gillian’s assurances, Chilgrave felt closed off, a stone cage. She shivered at the thought.

The coach rolled to a stop, and a fleet of footmen met them as the three of them exited the coach. Their valises and trunks

were removed and carried inside after them. Letty watched as her two dark-blue painted trunks were hoisted up between a pair of servants and hauled out of sight.

*My entire life, packed away into two trunks. My silk gowns carefully folded, my jewels blanketed in velvet pouches. My favorite books wrapped in cloth and stacked neatly to one side. Will my small life have a place here in this vast gray structure?*

“Welcome!” Caroline Beaumont came down a narrow stairwell to greet them. “I trust the ride wasn’t too unpleasant?” Caroline rushed to her half sister first. “Gillian!” And the two embraced each other.

Gillian smiled. “Caro, it’s so lovely to see you!”

“How’s my little nephew?”

“Fine, fine. Gabriel is with his nurse while we stay for the wedding. You must come back to London and see him soon.”

“I shall. He’s such a little dear. So beautiful.” Caroline sighed dreamily. Then she turned to Letty, her joy still evident. “Oh, Letty, I’m so happy to see you again!” She hugged Letty with the same enthusiasm.

“You look quite worn out. I imagine today was hectic. Why don’t you come in and freshen up for dinner. Then you can go straight to bed and rest.”

“Thank you, Caroline, we would like that. Letty and Gillian have barely had time to eat all day.” James chuckled. “All that shopping and making preparations.”

“I can imagine.” Caroline squeezed Letty’s hands and gestured toward the stairs. “Follow me.”

Caroline tucked her arm in Letty’s, the warmth of the gesture waking Letty from her maudlin thoughts.

“We have a lovely room all prepared for you,” Caroline said.

Letty walked through the gatehouse that formed the front door for the main part of the castle and up the winding staircase Caroline had come down. Rich tapestries hung from

stone walls, making the medieval castle feel warmer and more welcoming.

“Where is Lord Morrey?” she asked Caroline.

“Adam will be here shortly. He was in his bedchamber, seeing to a few things. He and the housekeeper got a bit dusty when they were up in the attics earlier this afternoon.”

Letty wrinkled her nose in confusion. “The attics?”

“Yes. I believe he was looking for the Morrey coronet. It was our great-grandmother’s. We put it away when she died. It’s perfectly splendid, and you may wish to wear it for tomorrow’s ceremony.”

Letty liked to think that she was above being excited over jewels, but the thought of a coronet did give her a girlish flash of excitement that made her feel extremely foolish. She had graver concerns than pretty diamond coronets. Like the fact that a French spy was likely looking for her.

They entered a wide hall. The stone walls had been covered with wood and papered over with an expensive and lovely emerald wallpaper. Crown moldings painted with gold decorated the ceiling, bordered by Grecian scenes that would have rivaled any Wedgewood china. Between portraits of past Morrey ladies dressed in flowing gowns and dashing men in their bright, brilliant doublets, there were tall mirrors lined with vines covered in gold plating. It was not at all like the outside of the castle. The interior had a gilded, glorious atmosphere, each room exuding a warm decadence. Gillian was right—it was rather lovely.

“James, Gillian, you have the bedchamber here.” Caroline opened a door and showed them into a beautiful bedroom with a dark-red coverlet and red brocade hangings. “I’ll have a footman meet you here in half an hour to escort you to dinner.”

“Thank you,” Gillian said.

“Letty, your room is at the end of the corridor. It’s in the west tower. It has a lovely view. One of the best rooms, in fact.”

The room Letty was to sleep in had painted walls the color of a winter sky. Opposite the bed in the circular room was a bookcase built into the wood-paneled walls. The natural white posts of the bed gleamed in the firelight. It was large for a tower room. The four-poster bed was made from white birch tree wood, roughly hewn. The black knots in the wood were like a dozen eyes staring at her from the pale faces of the posts, but even that was strangely beautiful. The coverlet on the bed and the bed hangings were a shimmering frosty-green color.

“Well? What do you think? Adam thought you might like this room. It will be your own personal room, even after you’re married.”

At this, Letty faced Caroline. “I’m not to share my husband’s room?”

A deep voice came from the doorway. “You certainly may . . .”

Letty and Caroline turned to see Lord Morrey, standing tall and handsome in buff trousers and a burgundy waistcoat. The firelight played with him the way a lover might, caressing his features and illuminating his silver-and-gray eyes.

“Oh, Adam, why don’t you say hello to Letty? I need to run down to the kitchens.” Caroline flashed Letty a knowing smile before hastily leaving the bedroom.

For a second, Letty wavered as she faced the man who had, less than twenty-four hours ago, held a knife to her throat, kissed her, and become engaged to her. The whirlwind that was Adam Beaumont was making her dizzy. She straightened her shoulders, rallied her remaining strength after the trying day she’d had, and met his gaze.

“Good evening, Lord Morrey,” Letty breathed. She still felt nervous around him, especially thinking of that moment in the library and how fear and excitement had mingled together in his presence.

“Adam, please. I cannot have you calling me ‘Lord Morrey,’ even though tomorrow I will become your lord and

master.” There was a sensual teasing to his words that dashed the rebellious retort that flew to her lips.

“Adam,” she said softly, and Adam came deeper into the room.

“Yes?” He reached her, their bodies only a few feet apart now.

“I do like this room. However, my understanding of marital relationships was that we would share a room. My parents shared a bedchamber, as do James and Gillian, and that was my expectation. I acknowledge I do not have a large amount of experience to draw on, and we will be married to each other rather quickly. What do you think our arrangement ought to be?”

“What do *you* wish our arrangement to be?” he countered with a hint of playfulness.

Letty bit her bottom lip. “I want to . . .” She fisted her hands in her skirts as she studied him, and he leaned casually against the doorjamb, blocking her escape. Not that she was sure she wanted to escape.

“Say it. Say what you *desire*. You need never fear telling me what you need. Do you understand?” The playfulness in his tone was gone, and that brooding intensity of his that left her breathless had returned. His stare ensnared her, rooting her in place.

She sensed he was telling her something deeper, something more profoundly intimate, but she didn’t yet quite understand.

“I would like to share a bedchamber with my husband—with *you*.”

“I sense some hesitation,” Adam said as he continued to stare into her eyes. He reminded her of a cat her mother once had, a Russian blue beauty with green eyes that could peer into one’s soul. The cat would stare at her, unblinking, and she had been convinced the feline could read her every thought. Adam shared that same trait.

“Are you surprised? You frighten me a little. The way you held that knife, the way you look at me . . . You must know

I've never been with a man in any intimate way. I have no experience with this. That is why I hesitate." She lowered her voice when she spoke of intimacy, not that anyone could hear her. They were quite alone for the moment.

Adam's gray eyes studied her, unlocking something inside her, something that made her feel weak at the knees, yet she held her ground, even as his gaze seemed to burn her skin as it roved over her body. He reached up to catch a loose curl that fell against her throat. The whisper of his fingers against her skin sent her head spinning, her blood humming.

"I will endeavor to make us friends as well as lovers." He leaned in just enough that she inhaled the scent of him, and her body hummed with a feminine awareness.

Friends and lovers, not merely husband and wife. A marriage, she knew, could have a profound meaning and connection between two people, or it could be a piece of paper and some muttered words that bound two unhappy souls together until one of them died.

"Are you afraid of me?" Adam asked as he lifted her face to his.

"No . . . Not exactly," she said, surprised at the ease with which she could answer him when he spoke in that commanding voice. It was true. She didn't fear him. She was nervous and more than a little anxious, but not afraid. She was worried about what being a wife to him would entail, especially in the bedroom. She had experienced a great range of emotions in the last day, and she'd accepted that the life she'd wanted, the life she'd planned for, was not going to happen. She had longed for marriage, but under such different circumstances.

Yet when she was alone with him, as she was now, he seemed to cloud her thoughts until all she could think was that she wanted him to keep touching her, how the danger and excitement of that touch sent wild thrills through her.

"*My wild one,*" Adam sighed as he cupped her cheek. "You deserve bouquets, boxes of sweets, presents as well as passion. I've given you none of these, but someday I will remedy that.

You can have it all, the gentleman and the rogue at your beck and call.” He stroked his thumb over her bottom lip. She exhaled as she lost herself in gazing at this gorgeous man.

“The gentleman *and* the rogue?” she asked.

He smiled a wolfish smile. “A man who can give you sweetness when you want it.” He threaded his fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck, tugging just enough that she felt completely in his power. “And a rogue’s brazen roughness when you need it.”

Something sharpened inside her, like a sense she hadn’t known she’d possessed. It heightened everything about that moment until she felt something pulse hard between her thighs.

Adam was not a brute, but she could tell that every inch of him was full of power, radiating a raw, primal strength. His face, while almost predatory in his handsomeness, was not without gentleness. Gazing upon her wild lion she knew she could trust him to protect her rather than devour her. He continued to hold her gaze, neither of them speaking. Her thoughts spiraled with dark, carnal images, and she wondered if he was thinking the same, given the way he looked at her with such heat. Then he blinked, breaking the spell, and she drew in a shaky breath.

“We should go to dinner,” he said. “Unless you still need a moment?”

“I . . .” She pulled her thoughts away from him and nodded. “I’m ready to go down.”

He stepped back and offered her his arm. Letty walked with him into the corridor, running her fingertips over the wood panels on the walls.

Adam took her down a different set of stairs, this one made of wood, not stone. Crouching lions sat on the banister, silently roaring at passersby. They were fine heraldic beasts, their front paws clutching shields that bore a unicorn and a Scottish thistle. Evidence of the ancient line of Morreys was everywhere.

The dining room was far more intimate in size than Letty had expected. No grand medieval roughhewn table with a pack of wolfhounds lying by a roaring fire, waiting for meat off a trencher. No, this room was small but elegant.

“It isn’t what you expected, is it?” Adam teased.

“No—I mean, yes. I mean . . .” She ducked her head, too embarrassed to say what she had actually expected. She was still thinking of that moment when he’d grasped her hair and held her captive, and she thought of his promise—to give her the gentleman *and* the rogue, whenever she wished. Letty swallowed hard and did her best to focus on their conversation.

“Most of the older furniture has long since been removed and replaced with modern styles. We do our best, even out here in the country, to keep the castle updated.” His tone was still light, but she heard the pride in his words.

He had every right to be proud. The marble fireplace was vast and exquisitely carved, the table was made of a beautiful mahogany, and the walls were cream accented by gold wainscoting. Mahogany doors leading in and out of the room on both sides were a clear contrast to the pale cream walls. Green velvet backed the chairs surrounding the table, offered a comfortable place of repose, rather than the harsh high-back chairs with no cushions that she was accustomed to in typical dining rooms in London.

Gillian, James, and Caroline had already gathered around the fire and were in quiet conversation.

“Ah, there you are,” Caroline said as they entered. “We wondered if you had gotten lost.”

Letty smiled at Caroline, glad to see Adam’s sister truly was happy that she was here.

“Well, shall we eat before our cook becomes overanxious?” Caroline asked.

Adam chuckled as he seated Letty beside him. “Mrs. Oxley is most particular about her food not going cold.”



“Is she a very good cook?” Letty knew that some old country households with families who didn’t visit that often and did very little entertaining, had cooks who were perfunctory at best, as they often had other duties in addition to cooking fine meals.

“Quite good, actually, but she threatens to quit every Christmas, so be ready for that.”

“She threatens to quit?”

“Yes, she thinks she will retire and go live with her son in London, but then she changes her mind in a matter of days, usually on Christmas Eve, and returns to the kitchens, bellowing out orders. It is rather amusing, once you become acquainted with her. She might seem prickly at first, but you never will find a better cook. I don’t care what our friends in London say about their fancy cooks from France. Mrs. Oxley has them all beat.”

Adam flashed her a smile, and Letty’s stomach flipped in excitement.

“So, shall we talk wedding plans?” Gillian asked the table at large.

“Oh, yes,” Caroline said. The two women began to discuss Letty’s wedding as though she wasn’t even in the room.

She listened to Caroline and Gillian plan her life. She could have interrupted them, demanded things to be done as she wished, but she was tired. The last few days had robbed her of her strength. Right now, she did not feel she could be even remotely active in the planning of her wedding.

“Letty, what do you think?” Adam asked, drawing her out of the thoughts circling in her head. She tried to focus on the soup in front of her, which had gone a bit cold.

“Whatever they decide is fine with me.”

“It is *your* day,” Adam reminded her. “You should make the most of it.”

He met her gaze and held it. She wished she knew what he was thinking behind those fathomless, mercurial eyes. Most of

the young men of her acquaintance were so easy to read, easy to understand. They discussed their lands, their horses, their favorite sports or gambling, and occasionally—when they thought she couldn't hear, of course—their mistresses.

But Morrey—Adam—was nothing like those men. Whatever thoughts ran in his mind would be serious, dangerous, and most likely *fascinating*. He had been right about her—she was drawn to him and excited by the sensual promises he made. The man was clearly knowledgeable about all manner of sins of the flesh, and she was going to be married to this prowling wolf who could likely devour any maiden he liked at his leisure. The thought didn't frighten her, however. Quite the opposite, in fact, if *she* was the maiden to be devoured.

“Letty, I *know* you've thought about this.” James faced Morrey with a soft, brotherly smile. “She's been planning this since she was a child. She used to marry off her dolls.”

“James!” Letty hissed in mortification, her smile wilting and her blood boiling.

“Well, it's true—” James began, but he suddenly winced and glanced under the table. Gillian glared at him, and Letty suspected his wife had kicked him in the shin, though not hard enough, in her opinion.

Morrey caught Letty's gaze again. As he lifted his goblet of wine to his lips, he smiled at her, but this smile was not a sweet expression. It was enticing, seductive, intimate, as though they were together in some private secret.

“James and Adam are right,” Gillian said. “Letty, you must tell us what you wish. Let us start with flowers. Chilgrave has a lovely hothouse.”

“Oh, well, I do like orchids,” she admitted, knowing that orchids were rare and also quite scandalous, given the way they resembled certain parts of a woman's body, but she couldn't deny that she liked them.

“Orchids . . . Well, that is a bit unorthodox,” Caroline said. “But we are having a small country wedding, so perhaps it's

all right to do as we wish.”

“If my bride desires orchids, then my bride will have them,” Morrey said, and she didn’t miss the possessive tone to the way he said “*my bride*.”

This truly was nothing like she’d imagined her wedding would be. As a girl, she’d envisioned a large crowd, hundreds of flowers by the altar, and a handsome young man with laughing eyes and a warm smile waiting for her to come to him. She had not imagined a dark-haired, serious, enigmatic man whose kisses could erase all rational thought.

“Orchids it shall be,” Caroline said. “I assume you brought your trousseau?”

“Yes,” Letty said. Her London modiste, Madame Ella, had worked a veritable miracle in just one day.

Letty relaxed a little more now that she felt she was to be included in the wedding planning. Yet she couldn’t get her mind off Morrey, or his seductive gaze. He watched her for the entire meal, and when it was over, he was there to escort her to her bedchamber. They soon stood alone in the corridor together, just outside her bedroom.

“Thank you, Lord Morrey.”

“You really must start calling me Adam. More importantly, you must learn to stand up for yourself.” He tilted her chin up to face him. “I know there is fire in you. I see it in those lovely, innocent eyes. You must let that fire burn. Do not let it go out. I have no desire for a meek, submissive wife. I want the woman I met at the Allerton ball. You faced danger without fear that night.” When she opened her mouth to protest, he continued. “You were my equal. Never cease to be that version of yourself.”

She looked to him, mystified. He wanted her to be . . . what? She wasn’t quite sure. She bit her lip and would’ve looked away if not for the spell of his gaze.

“Lord Mor—Adam, I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“You will.” He traced the seam of her lips with his thumb and leaned in to whisper, “I shall dream of kissing you

tonight.”

He stepped back and seemed to vanish in the shadowy corridor.

She would dream of him kissing her too, and it left her only that much more confused.

## CHAPTER FIVE

ADAM WAS UP BEFORE DAWN, pacing in his chamber long before his valet arrived to help him dress. He did his best to rein in his thoughts, wondering how he should proceed, not only with a new wife but also with a virgin. The carnal track of his thoughts quickly strayed to those of her general safety and whether the measures he'd taken would be sufficient. He knew how easily a man's throat could be slit in the dark, or how a shadow could slip past and into a place it didn't belong if one was not careful.

A knock on his door halted his pacing. "Come in, Helms."

His valet entered. The two of them shared a bit of small talk, with Helms teasing him about the wedding. The man was a godsend, humorous and lighthearted whenever Adam became too serious. He always seemed to know when Adam's mood needed a bit of lightening up.

Helms ran a brush over Adam's shoulders, removing imaginary specks of dust. "There, my lord. You cut a fine figure today."

"I shan't shame the House of Morrey today, I suppose," he mused, and Helms grinned.

"Certainly not. If you wished to compare who looks finest, I wager you could go a round or two against your ancestors in the portrait gallery and certainly win."

Adam chuckled. The portraits in the gallery had always been a source of jesting between them. Helms was quite insistent on keeping Adam dressed fashionably, while Adam

sought to dress conservatively so as not to attract attention. More than once Helms had reminded him that his forefathers had embraced the bolder modes of fashion.

Once appropriately attired in his wedding clothes, he retrieved the black box he had removed from a trunk in the attic. Inside was a lovely coronet studded with sapphires and diamonds. He opened the box to look at the glorious item again.

The last woman to wear this had been his great-grandmother. His grandmother and mother had dared not wear it. An old family legend said that any woman who wore the coronet must be brave—brave enough to die for love.

Shortly after they had been married and she had first put it on, his great-grandmother had saved his great-grandfather from a deadly stable fire. As a result, Adam's mother and grandmother had been far too superstitious to wear the coronet, not wishing to tempt fate. So the coronet had sat in a trunk gathering dust—until now. But, knowing that Letty had faced death once with him already, Adam felt she could wear it without fear. He wouldn't allow anything to happen to her.

Box firmly in hand, he stepped into the hall and entrusted it to a maid to deliver to his future bride.

James stepped into the corridor just as the maid passed by. He came over to clap Adam on the back. "Ah, there you are. Feeling squeamish?" he joked.

"Not exactly. Just worried."

James frowned slightly. "Not about my sister, I hope?" He fell into step beside Adam as they walked down the corridor toward the stairs.

"No, toward her, I have no doubts, other than concerns about her safety. Spies have a way of turning up around every corner, and the last thing I want is someone shooting my wife on the steps of the church."

James clasped his hands behind his back as they continued on their way. They soon reached the gatehouse door and

waited for the grooms to bring their horses so they could ride to the chapel.

“Get her into the coach quickly. I suppose that’s about the only thing we can do. I understand your worries, but if you wrap her up in blankets and never let her do anything, she’ll lose her joy for life and so will you. You’ll need to find a balance between protection and freedom.”

“Easier said than done.”

He and James rode to the small chapel abutting his estate to see to the last-minute details of the ceremony. A dozen footmen had already arrived and were arranging vases of orchids around the alter. Bouquets of flowers adorned each pew. His staff had done commendable work in such a short amount of time.

It struck Adam that he was about to get married. In the last few days, he hadn’t let the gravity of the situation truly settle upon him. He’d been treating this more as a mission, a problem that needed to be solved, and not yet thinking of how much his life was truly going to change.

This was no temporary arrangement. This would be permanent. He could say he was marrying for his country, and he had even considered ways to escape once the danger had passed, for Letty’s sake.

A vicar could be bought off, a signature signed incorrectly, and an annulment achieved a few months later, so long as the marriage had not been consummated. He would bear the brunt of any scandal, and Letty would be free to continue her life as before.

But the truth was he wanted Letty, and his loyalty to his country had merely given him an excuse to at last claim that which he desired. He only hoped she felt the same way about him. Everything about their private moments together seemed to indicate it.

The vicar met them just inside the entryway. “Welcome, my lord.”

Adam shook the older man's hand. "Everything looks well."

The vicar's spectacled eyes twinkled. "Your servants have been quite dedicated to the decoration of God's house. I believe it will please your bride."

The exotic floral scent of the orchids filled the room. It made him think of Letty. "I certainly hope it will."

"She will love it," James promised. "She adores flowers—but not in the way most women do, mind you. She genuinely enjoys the cultivation of them. She was always in our hothouse, meeting with our gardener to discuss herbology and flowers."

"That is good to know. I too enjoy growing things. I will be sure to take her to the hothouse." Adam would take pleasure in showing her all the plants and rare flowers he cultivated. "James . . . would you stand with me as my groomsman? I had not even thought to select one yet."

James chuckled. "I'd be honored. I'm not a bachelor, though. Isn't that one of the traditional requirements?"

"I suppose it is, but I don't particularly have the urge to chase down a bachelor at the moment. I don't suppose the vicar will mind."

Adam and James helped set up the last few vases of orchids before they heard the guests starting to arrive.

"Are you ready?" James teased, despite the serious nature of the question.

"I suppose so. It's all rather strange, to think that shortly I'm to be leg-shackled. I'm not complaining, mind you. I merely hadn't thought I would ever do it." He had given up on that future two years ago when he'd committed himself to this dangerous path. But now here he was at the altar, ready to swear his heart, body, and soul to a young woman he barely knew in order to protect her.

*I must have faith that this is the right choice.*



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LETTY STOOD STILL, her heart beating fast as Caroline retrieved the Morrey coronet from its box. She bowed her head a little to allow them to nestle the glittering diadem into her artfully styled hair. Gillian, who stood next to Caroline, gave a little gasp.

“What? What’s the matter?” Letty asked in sudden panic.

“Nothing. You look absolutely *beautiful*, Letty. Come see.” Gillian pointed to the tall mirror that stood in the corner of the room.

Caroline beamed at her. “She’s right. Go look.”

Letty stepped up to the mirror and saw a stranger. This woman wore a high-waisted pale-blue gown with a delicately beaded bodice and a long flowing skirt draped over with a sheer silver netting, studded with hundreds of tiny pearls. Two white gloves stretched up to the stranger’s elbows, and a shimmering coronet sparkled atop her head. She looked royal, like a princess of some fairy court.

She did not look like herself.

Gillian placed her hands on Letty’s shoulders. “Are you all right?”

“I feel so strange. Not at all myself.”

“That’s to be expected,” Gillian said. “Marriage is a union of two souls and two bodies. It’s natural to feel displaced. But you will find yourself again. Hold fast to who you are, and you won’t be lost.”

“Were you lost?” she asked Gillian.

Gillian’s gaze was soft and thoughtful as she gave Letty another gentle squeeze of the shoulders. “Not as such, but the feeling of almost losing myself was there. If your brother hadn’t been so steadfast in his love for me and not wanting to change me, I easily could have been drowned by my own doubts and become something I wasn’t.”

“We mustn’t delay too long,” Caroline cut in gently. “The guests will have arrived, and the vicar will be waiting.”

“But . . .” Letty blushed. “I didn’t even have a chance to speak with my mother before she passed. I don’t know what to . . . what to *expect* tonight.”

Caroline and Gillian exchanged looks. “We should wait until after the wedding breakfast to speak of this,” Gillian said. “You have enough to worry about right now with the ceremony.”

“I have a reason to worry? No, *please*. You must tell me now. I cannot wait that long.” She needed to have some idea of what to expect tonight with Lord Morrey. His brief yet incredible kisses had left her overanxious.

“We’ll tell you in the coach,” Caroline said decisively as she ushered Letty from the room.

The morning was crisp, and Letty was thankful to see an enclosed coach waiting for them when they reached the door. Before she had a chance to savor her last moments at Chilgrave as an unwed woman, she was bundled into the coach and driven to the chapel.

Her companions attempted to avoid her gaze as they spoke about the flowers they’d sent over to the chapel with the footmen early that morning. Letty was not to be deterred, however, and was grateful for the privacy of the coach so she could speak freely to the two other women without worrying that anyone might overhear.

“Now, tell me.”

Caroline’s face reddened. “You start, Gilly. I shouldn’t know about any of this.”

“It’s all right.” Gillian covered her half sister’s hand with her own, giving it a comforting squeeze. Letty realized that something must have happened to Caroline, yet she had never breathed a word of what it might be. Gillian seemed to know the secret, but they were siblings, after all. It was only natural that they share such things. By comparison, Letty was practically a stranger to Caroline.

“Right, well, you know that a man’s member is . . . well . . .” Gillian’s face was red now too.

“I’ve seen statues,” Letty assured her.

“Yes, well, a man’s member is not that small when he is interested in a woman. During lovemaking, it increases in size and becomes hard like the shaft of an arrow. Only . . . well, much *wider*, of course.”

Letty drew in a breath at the thought. That was a bit frightening.

“And then, you see, after some preparation, a woman is able to take that shaft into her body. Some men thrust only once or twice, but it usually takes more for them to achieve satisfaction.”

Letty paled. That sounded positively dreadful.

“What she means,” Caroline injected, “is that there is a rhythm a man and a woman can find together if they try. It might hurt a little at first. Some women experience very little pain, but others . . . It can be a bit more, but it does fade. Ask for him to hold still, until the burning between your thighs disappears. But with a bit of practice, our bodies can stretch to accommodate them inside us. You might be sore after the first time, but that is quite normal. If you feel yourself becoming anxious, just kiss him. That’s quite important. You need to focus on how it feels to be *with* him, to kiss and caress him. That’s the only way you can calm yourself that first time and ensure your pleasure.”

Putting aside worries about pain, she focused instead on what she thought was more important. “What is the pleasure like?” She had heard something about what the exquisite power of that final passionate moment between a man and a woman could be like. But she did not see how a body could feel the depth of what she’d heard described in those giggled whispers.

“Your body feels out of control, and the sensations . . . It’s hard to explain, but don’t be frightened by it,” Caroline said. “I thought I might die the first time I felt it.”

“But don’t be fooled by that,” Gillian added. “Embrace it, even if it scares you.”

Letty remembered all too vividly how Lord Morrey had spoken of their coming union and the way that she’d responded to him, how her slight fear of him had played some role in her arousal. No doubt he knew exactly what to do with her tonight. That thought reassured her. It also worried her.

“If you are frightened, you can always have a bit of warm brandy right before,” Caroline suggested. “It soothes one’s nerves.”

Letty took all of this in, more mystified than before as to what to expect. Yet she knew one thing with certainty—she would be having that glass of brandy tonight.

When the coach stopped before the small church, a footman helped Gillian and Caroline out first, then assisted Letty. The two other women would share the role of bridesmaids today. One handed her a small bouquet of lilies and white roses, while the other smoothed out Letty’s veil. Her veil had been attached to the tips of the coronet and trailed down behind her. The lace was sheer, almost as finely spun as a spider’s web.

“There,” Caroline said. “You’re ready.” The two women then walked ahead of Letty into the church to take their seats.

She stood alone at the end of the aisle, staring straight toward the altar where Lord Morrey and her brother stood. She thought for an instant of the embarrassing secret James had shared the other day, of how she used to marry her dolls off as a girl. But to her it had never been about a woman becoming a man’s possession or tying her identity to a man. It was about finding a companion, a partner she could share her secret dreams and innermost thoughts with. The person she would have children with, and they would raise them together. A person who would belong to her as much as she would to him.

And now the time had come for her to live out the first part of her dream. Marriage began upon the wedding day; this was the beginning. Now she was to be married to a man who’d

promised to be what she'd always hoped for in a husband, a man who saw the *real* her.

*I know there is fire in you.*

Letty inhaled slowly, watching Lord Morrey just as he watched her. He cut a rakishly handsome figure in his dark-blue coat and gold waistcoat with white breeches. The lilies and wild orchids around him reminded her of how he'd insisted she would have what she wished for their wedding. It said much about the kind of man he was.

This man would be her husband if she was brave enough to take a leap of faith, and that leap began with the smallest of steps down the aisle.

Just one step.

The step she took was almost a half step, uncertain and hesitant, but the next was stronger. By the time she reached the altar and lifted her face to gaze upon Adam, she was confident of her decision.

His gaze searched hers, as though he sensed the battle she had fought at the entrance of the church. She smiled at him shyly, and the solemn, serious Lord Morrey suddenly winked at her.

The vicar cleared his throat and began the service. Letty was more aware than ever of Lord Morrey's hand touching hers as they spoke their vows and when he slipped the ring on her finger, which matched the coronet resting upon her head. That awkward feeling of having all the eyes of their guests upon her faded a bit as she focused on the singular sensation of Morrey touching her. Not for a moment did she feel his attention lay anywhere but on her, providing a lovely sort of romantic magic she hadn't expected, at least not so soon. It made the weight of her vows that much stronger and that much more meaningful.

"Let no man put asunder what God hath joined together," the vicar continued on.

Letty thought of this enigma of a man who would soon share with her the mysteries of the bedchamber. A spy, a

dangerous man, a man who seemed to understand more about her than she understood about herself. And now he was her husband.

The ceremony ended, and Morrey tucked her arm into his. The possessive husbandly gesture was strangely comforting. At first, she kept her distance, only their arms touching as she came to terms with being married so suddenly. But as the crush of their friends came toward them, she leaned closer to Morrey, relying on his strength as they faced everyone gathered at the front of the church to speak with them.

“Congratulations!” Audrey St. Laurent kissed her cheek and whispered more softly, “Remember, *you* are in control. Do not let your husband think he is in charge.” She winked at Letty, who could only stare at her.

Be in charge of Lord Morrey? It simply wasn’t possible. That man was out of her league when it came to control.

They made their way through the small crowd and over to the Morrey coach that waited outside. Morrey opened the door and grasped her waist, lifting her up. The crowd behind them cheered, and a few of the League of Rogues tossed out suggestive comments about where Morrey should have put his hands, which earned a sharp bark of “Silence!” from James, which only resulted in more hoots and good-humored laughter.

Once inside the coach, they sat opposite each other, both stunned that they had indeed gone through with the whirlwind marriage. Letty could still feel the heat and gentle pressure of his hands on her waist, even though he no longer touched her. Morrey held out a hand to her as the enclosed coach rolled into motion. Letty gazed at the offered hand, that shyness returning. Then with a steadying breath, she accepted his hand, uncertain what it was he desired.

“Come sit by me.” He pulled her gently, and she acquiesced. She pressed against his side as he put an arm around her shoulder, feeling so warm. Her gloved hands turned over fretfully in her cloak before she hesitantly reached for his other hand, which rested on his thigh. He turned his palm up, and his fingers closed around hers, warm, gentle,

firm. Her trembling breaths calmed as she felt blanketed by the safety of this man beside her.

They were silent for most of the drive back to Chilgrave. She wished she had the ability to know what he was thinking. The longer she looked at him, the more he seemed to become aware of her focus.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded, still staring at him.

“What is it?”

“I . . . it’s very silly,” she said, and turned her face away. But he caught her chin and turned her back toward him.

“Tell me.” His voice was commanding, but gentle rather than stern.

“It’s . . . well . . . I wish to know what you are thinking.” She waited for him to laugh at her for such a silly thought.

“You wish to know my thoughts?”

She nodded.

He looked confused for a moment, and then his expression turned to one of amusement. “At the moment they are quite a lot. I’m worried Mrs. Oxley hasn’t had time to prepare the wedding breakfast. I’m thinking of how I must meet with my estate steward this afternoon, and I’m worried about Lady Edwards, as well as the other men and women who work alongside me in London. And last, but certainly not least, I am thinking of you.” He brushed his gloved fingertips over her cheek.

“Me?” Letty was even more curious and a fair bit anxious to know what those thoughts were.

“Yes. I have a wife now. You will take precedence in my mind from now on. I’m occupied with thoughts of caring for you, protecting you, especially from any dangers that may result from the grave error I made at Lady Allerton’s ball.”

At this, Letty put a hand on his knee, silencing him briefly.

“I’ve been thinking about that. I was stunned at first to find myself in a forced marriage, but if you hadn’t come after me, well, whoever fired that pistol would have succeeded in their goal of silencing Lady Edwards, and likely me as well. So you see, if you hadn’t done what you did, I’d be dead rather than married, and I do prefer marriage infinitely more than being deceased.”

At this, Morrey—*Adam*, she reminded herself—chuckled. “Marriage to me is preferable to death? Thank heavens for that.”

Letty, emboldened by his laugh, nudged him in the ribs with an elbow. She had the sudden urge to embroider those words upon a handkerchief for him. She did love to tease and be teased. She hoped, in time, she would discover that Adam had a teasing side as well.

“You know very well what I meant. You also know that I find you . . .” She stalled.

Lust darkened his eyes. “Yes? How do you find me?”

“I . . . I find you quite handsome. Very charming. And more than a little intimidating . . .” Each time she spoke, he shifted closer, and she instinctively retreated each time toward the corner of the coach, until he effectively caged her in with his body. It was done so subtly, yet with such clear purpose that she marveled at how he’d directed her so easily to move where he wished without even touching her. Their new sensual predator and prey position made her blood hum in fevered excitement.

“Do you wish to know how I find you?” he asked, his voice lower now. His laughter had been replaced with a tone of silken seduction that left her with no doubt as to what he planned to say, at least in generalities.

“I find you sweet, innocent and love the way you blush when I touch you. Yet I see that carnal hunger in your eyes, and I get lost in thoughts of all the wicked things I wish to do to you.” He tilted her head up as he lowered himself until their mouths were but inches apart. “I dreamt of you last night, just as I said I would.” His voice softened into a whisper against



her skin, and her mouth ran dry as her lower belly began to fill with a heavy warmth.

In one fluid motion, he pulled her onto his lap so that she sat across his thighs, his hands exploring her lower back, the heat of his palms warming her through the fabric of her wedding gown. She trembled at the feel of being held so tightly in his arms. Their mouths hovered so close, and only when she closed her eyes did his lips press to hers. His kiss was persuasive, coaxing, as he lured her deeper under his sensual spell. His tongue flicked against the seam of her lips, and she hesitantly opened to him.

“That’s it, love—*open to me*,” he whispered against her mouth. He sounded so sinful. So erotic. She pressed closer, and his arms tightened around her. She felt trapped, and she loved the thrill of it. Audrey might have advised her to control her husband, but Letty liked it when Adam was in control. At least in this. She felt safe, even with the hint of fear that accompanied him. It was what made him impossibly alluring.

“You taste sweet. As sweet as can be,” he said before kissing her again.

She arched into him as his hands began to roam over her body. She wanted him to touch her everywhere. Wriggling on his lap, she felt something hard beneath her bottom.

“Easy, sweetheart,” he said, and chuckled as he kissed her throat. “You’ll be the death of me.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Far from it. In fact, I think you should—” The coach stopped, and Adam cursed softly. “Bloody wedding breakfast.”

“Couldn’t we simply tell the coachman to drive around a bit longer?”

At this, her husband laughed. She *loved* the sound. For such a serious man, that simple sound changed him completely.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he said again, the endearment falling easily from his lips. “I am sorely tempted to do just that, but

we've caused enough scandal as it is. Besides, when I claim your body, I would rather not be rushed. And once you understand why, you will be grateful I exercised some measure of restraint at this moment."

He gently set her on the seat beside him, and they smoothed out their clothes.

"Thank heavens I didn't muss your hair," he said as he opened the door. A flustered footman assisted her down. It must have been clear to the young man what had been going on inside, and that was why he hadn't dared to open the door.

Adam and Letty now entered their home for the first time as husband and wife. She had hoped to feel suddenly in command of Chilgrave, yet it didn't feel as though anything had changed inside of her. She still felt like a guest who would eventually be asked to pack up her valise and leave. But that wasn't going to happen. She was here to stay. This was her new home. She and Adam had a few moments to collect themselves in an adjoining drawing room, where she hastily sipped from a glass of champagne before they entered the dining room to greet their arriving guests.

The dining room was decorated with lilies and orchids, lending the feel of a garden to the beautiful dining room. The table was laden with a dozen small bridecakes, and the scent of oranges filled the air. Mrs. Oxley had outdone herself, offering a host of other dishes for the guests and champagne poured into slender flutes.

"Heavens," Letty whispered at the sight of the festive spread.

Adam smiled fondly. "Though she can be grumpy, Mrs. Oxley does love weddings. I can only imagine how thrilled she was to finally be the head cook at one. Usually she volunteers to cook for the villagers nearby when weddings occur there."

"That's lovely." It delighted her to know that the servants in her new home were so caring and kind.

Adam retrieved one of the bridecakes and cut out a tiny piece. He held it out with his fingertips.

“I wouldn’t want you to miss this,” he said. The intimate gesture made a low heat burn in her belly as he placed a small bite of cake between her lips.

“It’s quite good,” she said as she swallowed the sugary bite. “You should have some too.” She reached for the cake, but the sound of guests arriving halted her. Adam offered her a soft smile when he saw her disappointment.

“We’ll have plenty of time for that later.” They met their guests, and she did her best to embrace her new role as Countess of Morrey. As Adam’s wife.

She and Adam split apart to better greet the guests. She still snuck glances at him every few minutes, and she was delighted and a little shocked to see that he was watching her with the same interest.

At one point, Adam was surrounded by a group of tall, rakish men. She knew them to be the League of Rogues, and she giggled at the sight of him. Whatever the men were telling him must have shocked him to his core. He looked suddenly as though he’d lost his footing and ran a hand through his hair, murmuring a reply to the group that made them all burst out laughing.

Audrey and Gillian now stood next to Letty. “What the devil do you think they are talking about?”

“I’m afraid to know,” Gillian replied as she noticed her husband was among them.

Audrey sighed in disappointment. “It makes one very angry that one cannot simply transform into a potted plant so that one could sit close by and listen unobserved.”

Gillian, who’d been taking a drink, and Letty, who’d been about to take another bite of bridecake, stared at her before both women started laughing. The bit of cake on Letty’s fork dropped to the carpet between her slippered feet.

Gillian pressed two gloved fingers against her nose and looked as though she might sneeze. “Heavens, some champagne just went up my nose.”

“And now I’ve ruined the carpet. Poor Mrs. Hadaway—she’ll have to have it scrubbed.”

By the time the guests had all departed, only Caroline remained behind with them in the dining room. Even James and Gillian had to return to little Gabriel.

“Letty, would you like to rest a bit? I’m sure you could use a bit of food and drink too. You scarcely had a moment to breathe, let alone eat,” Caroline observed. “What do you say? I can have Mrs. Oxley send a tray to your room.”

It sounded heavenly, but Letty sought to catch Adam’s eye, wondering what he might prefer. It was half past three in the afternoon, and she remembered he had mentioned he needed to meet with his steward.

“My lord—Adam,” she corrected herself. “Are you still intending to meet with your steward today?”

Her husband sighed. “I’m afraid I must. Now that I’m to live at Chilgrave for the foreseeable future, there are some changes that need to be made to the estate.”

“Should I go with you?” Letty suggested. She wished to be a part of his life, and especially to be involved as Chilgrave’s new mistress. Not all men allowed their wives into the sanctum of estate stewardship, and she hoped Adam wasn’t one of those.

“You look tired. Rest today, but next time you’ll come with me to meet Walpole.”

“Promise?” Letty reached out to touch his hand.

His silver-and-gray eyes softened again. “I promise. We are partners from now on.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” Letty admitted. “I wasn’t sure if you were the sort of man who would allow his wife to be involved in estate matters.”

“If you know nothing else about me, know that I believe a wife is her husband’s equal, no matter what the laws of England say.” There was no hint of deception in his voice, only honesty.

“Well, you had better go if you plan to be back in time for dinner,” Caroline said.

“You’re right—I must go. And you must rest.” Adam headed for the front door, still wearing his wedding clothes. Letty followed behind, a sudden sense of concern for her husband forming a pit in her stomach.

“Adam, you’ll be careful?”

“Yes, I will. As will you,” he reminded her, and she nodded, wanting desperately to say something or do something more before he left.

Adam pulled Letty to him and kissed her hard before letting her go. “I will be back as soon as I can.”

With a whirl of his cloak, he left to mount his horse before the front steps and then rode away from her on their wedding day.

## CHAPTER SIX

ADAM DISMOUNTED outside the village of Hemsley and took a moment to stretch his legs as he made his way to the office of his steward, Henry Walpole. It gave him a moment to once again reflect upon the new direction his life had taken.

*I'm married.*

He smiled at the memory of Letty standing beside him at the altar. She'd looked so dazed, as dazed as he'd felt on the inside, that he'd felt compelled to flash her a wink to get her to smile. Then he'd lost his control in the coach on the way back to Chilgrave, but knowing she was his, finally, a bride of his own—he'd gone a bit mad to kiss her and hold her. Then he'd seen the way she'd responded to his more commanding side, the way she'd let him give chase to her, and how her pulse had beat and her eyes had been wide and full of an excitement that matched his own.

*I'm a bloody blessed man to have a wife who embraces passion as she does.*

A sudden tightness in his breeches made him wince. The hour-long ride to Hemsley had done little to ease his amorous thoughts. He ought not to be thinking of bedding his wife, not when he still had business to settle. The sooner he was done here, the sooner he could get back to properly bed her.

Adam passed the reins of his horse off to a waiting groom and approached the small stone building that served as Henry's office.

A man of Adam's age got to his feet, shoving aside a stack of papers he'd been sorting on his desk. "My lord!"

"Henry, how are you?" Adam asked.

"Excellent, quite excellent. I wish you congratulations. The village has been abuzz with the news of the new Lady Morrey."

"Thank you. I'm sorry you could not come."

"As am I. But the urgent missives from London kept me away."

Adam took a seat opposite Henry as the man pulled a stack of letters out of a pile and handed them to him. Underneath the letters from Adam's bankers and solicitors in London were other messages of a more serious nature.

Henry was not only his steward for the Chilgrave estate, but was also his contact with Avery Russell whenever he was here. Henry had proved trustworthy, and Adam had brought him in to work with the Home Office two years ago.

Adam reviewed the documents and cursed. There had been another attempt upon Lady Edwards's life. The reins of the horses on her private coach had been cut, and she and Lord Edwards had nearly perished in a carriage crash. The letter relayed that Avery had sent the pair of them to take refuge in Ireland in order to hide them on an Irish estate until it was safe to bring them home. French spies rarely visited Ireland. The distrust toward foreigners there extended not only to the British but also to the French, and the French were far easier to notice.

"I'm beginning to believe Lady Edwards, like Avery Russell, has nine lives," he told Henry. It was something Caroline had always said of Avery, and now he was quite certain it applied to the daring lady spy as well. He could only imagine the shock on Lord Edwards's face when he'd learned of his wife's activities in France.

"I quite agree. Thankfully, Lady Edwards has the devil's own luck." Henry settled into his desk chair and folded his hands over his stomach while he waited for Adam to finish

reviewing his estate correspondence, as well as the missives from London from both the Home Office and Whitehall.

“I need you to send a message to Avery. Tell him I’m increasing security at Chilgrave. If he plans any unexpected visits, have him come to you first.”

“Of course. And what are these new security arrangements?”

“I wish for you to find some local able-bodied and sound-minded men who will be loyal to the House of Morrey. Men who won’t drink themselves into a stupor or fall asleep while on duty. I want regular patrols in the forest around the edge of the estate, and double them at night and just before dawn.”

“Anything else?” Henry inquired.

“I also want more grooms in the Chilgrave stables and increased pay for the staff. Anyone who believes they aren’t making enough may be willing to sell information, perhaps even access to my wife.”

“You truly think she’s in danger?”

Adam nodded.

Henry sighed. “Bloody French. Can’t even have a proper honeymoon without worrying some French fellow will stab you in the back.”

“Yes, you’d think a country of romantics would have more respect for such matters. However, we have enough to worry about.” Adam tapped the letter from Whitehall on his knee. “Thistlewood is back in play.”

Arthur Thistlewood was a man determined to overthrow Parliament. He was an anarchist who believed the government and the Crown were only out to oppress. If he could not overthrow Parliament, he would attack it with everything he possessed.

“Christ, will we never be rid of that fellow? What has the Home Office to say?”

“Well, Edward Shengoe has infiltrated the group. Apparently, the conspirators have formed a group called the



British Patriotic Benevolent Association.”

“Charming of them to throw the word *benevolent* in there.”

Adam smirked. “I thought the same. Mr. Shengoe sent the Home Office a copy of the group’s rules and their statements and sentiments. They are meeting mainly in various pubs in Spitalfields, Bermondsey, and West Smithfield.”

“That’s rather provident of them. They’re being more cautious this time,” Henry mused.

“Yes, well, most of them have spent a great deal of time in a jail cell. No one wants to end up on the gallows like Jeremiah Brandreth and his men for their revolutionary antics.”

Adam had not been employed by the Home Office in 1817, but he remembered that awful day at Friar Gate jail in Derby when the hanging of Jeremiah Brandreth and his comrades had occurred. Several thousand people had packed the streets outside the jail. Adam had struggled to get his horse through the crowds and had finally given up. He’d caught sight of the scaffolds, and as if drawn by some hand of fate, he had moved closer, not knowing that the men who were to die that day would change his fate.

A group of sheriff’s officials sat on horseback, armed with javelins, protecting the back of the scaffold to prevent any last-minute rescue attempt. Jeremiah Brandreth, the so-called Nottingham Captain, was the first to climb the steps to stand beneath the trio of nooses. His cool stare upon the crowd unnerved Adam.

“God be with you all, and Lord Castlereagh too!” Jeremiah called out, standing resolute. The executioner removed a black silk handkerchief around his neck and replaced it with a noose.

The next man, William Turner, was less accepting of his fate. He cried out, “This is all Oliver and the government. The Lord have mercy on my soul!” The prison chaplain, in an attempt to disrupt this, placed himself between the two prisoners and the crowd.

The last man, Isaac Ludlam, climbed the steps, his lips moving over and over in fervent prayer, but the chaplain prayed louder, drowning out the doomed man's voice. The Lord's Prayer was recited, and then the executioner placed a cap over each man's head.

At half past, the lever was pulled, and the three traitors dropped. Brandreth and Turner died quickly, but Ludlam kicked and struggled for several minutes. Adam's stomach knotted, and he covered his mouth at the horrific sight.

"It is a dark day when a man's voice is silenced simply because he disagrees with those in power," a man standing beside Adam said.

"I agree," Adam replied. "They were traitors, no question, but when a country loses its ability to have discourse, it drives men to commit treasonous acts. Who then is at fault? The man or the country who silenced him?"

"Indeed, that's the difficulty we face," the man replied solemnly, then held out a hand and introduced himself. "John Wilhelm."

Adam shook his hand. "Adam Beaumont."

Adam had had no way of knowing then that this first meeting with John would change his life. The easy friendship between them had only deepened over the next few years as John had fallen in love with Adam's sister, Caroline. John had been murdered just a few months before they were to be married.

So often, Adam replayed that first meeting in Derby. Had John known then that his work at the Home Office would cause his death and compel Adam to follow in that same line of work? Would it have made a difference if Adam could step back through time and warn his friend of what lay waiting for him on that lonely bridge at midnight?

Adam gave a shake of his head, clearing his mind. The past needed to stay in the past.

"Henry, keep me informed as to your progress in finding men to patrol Chilgrave and let me know if Avery Russell

intends to visit.”

“Yes, my lord.” Henry collected the papers of a dangerous nature, now that Adam had reviewed them, and tossed them into the nearby lit fireplace. The flames soon consumed the documents completely. If anyone were to break into this room now, it would simply appear to belong to an estate steward.

“Congratulations again, my lord. Do try to enjoy your honeymoon.” Henry’s tone was once again teasing.

Collecting his hat, Adam stood and headed for the door. “I will endeavor to do just that.”

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“Do you remember that childhood game girls used to play with cherry stones or flower petals?” Letty asked. She and Caroline had just finished dining. The dinner table had felt empty with only the two of them there, so they’d chosen to sit close together by the tall fireplace.

Caroline grinned. “It’s been ages since I thought of that. My nanny taught it to me. How does it go again?”

“Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief,” Letty recited. How often had she tossed cherry stones and counted them with these words? Little girls used to predict their future husbands this way. It was a silly child’s game, but for some reason it came back to her today.

Caroline rested her chin in her hand, a bemused smile on her lips. “Whatever made you think of that?”

“Well, it seems that I want to keep changing the lyrics to *Tinker, tailor, soldier, spy* . . .”

Caroline winced at Letty’s replacement word. “He didn’t choose this life, you know,” she said quietly. She had dismissed the footman a short while ago. There was no chance of their hushed conversation being overheard.

“How did it happen?” Letty asked. “I need to know. I need to understand.”

Caroline played with her wineglass. “I suppose I can tell you. It’s almost as much my story as it is Adam’s.”

Letty took a gulp of wine and waited.

“In 1817, Adam was passing through Derby, and he witnessed three traitors being hung. It was there that he met Viscount Wilhelm . . . John.” She paused as she used the man’s given name.

“They formed a fast friendship, but unbeknownst to Adam, it was John who had exposed the three traitors and had them arrested. He worked for the Home Office, you see. John continued in his secret labors, but he and Adam continued to be the best of friends. Adam has always been reserved, even before working for the Crown. He does not easily let people into his circle. But once you win Adam’s trust, he is loyal to you beyond measure.”

“Lord Wilhelm . . . The name sounds familiar.” Letty couldn’t quite place it, but she knew she’d seen or heard it somewhere before.

“Two years ago, John and Adam were to meet for dinner, but John never arrived. Adam went in search of him and found John fighting for his life on a bridge with another man.” Caroline’s voice grew tremulous, and her grip on her wineglass made her knuckles turn white.

“What happened?” Letty whispered.

“Adam witnessed John’s murder. John fell into the river and never resurfaced. Adam dove in after him, but the effort nearly killed him. John’s body was never found.” Pain flashed in Caroline’s eyes.

Letty put a hand on her sister-in-law’s arm. “Oh, Caroline. Was Lord Wilhelm the man you had an understanding with?”

“Yes. I loved him more than anything.” She touched her abdomen and turned anguished eyes upon Letty. “I was carrying his child when Adam told me he was gone. My grief was so great that I became ill and lost the baby, a girl. She was so small, but I held her in my arms. She was the only thing I had left of him, and then she was gone too.”

“And Adam?”

“Adam was never the same. He was broken. When the Home Office came to interview him about that night, something happened. I’m not sure whether they recruited him or he volunteered, but the next I knew he was working for them.”

Letty gave Caroline’s arm another squeeze. “I’m so sorry about the baby. If I had known, I would never have asked.”

“It’s all right,” Caroline assured her. “You’re family now, and I do want you to know us better, even sad matters of the past.” She looked away toward the fire.

“This is a crusade for him, isn’t it? To find John’s killer? That’s why he continues to do this work.”

Caroline nodded. “I know James probably told you that Adam has a more lethal position with the Home Office, but that doesn’t mean he’s a ruthless killer. He’s more of a guardian than an assassin, but unfortunately that means claiming the life of an enemy sometimes. It weighs upon him greatly.”

Letty couldn’t begin to imagine the gravity of such a burden.

“He takes much upon himself, so you must give him time to open up,” Caroline advised. “But he will. I know he cares about you.”

“He said he does, but I wonder how that can be when we’ve known each other so short a time.” Letty leaned in, a new excitement replacing her sorrow at the story of John Wilhelm, at least partly.

“Yes, he told me himself that he liked you the first moment he laid eyes upon you.”

“And I was there trying to discredit Gillian. How could he have possibly liked me then?”

“You weren’t there to discredit Gillian. You simply wanted answers. You did not know who she was, and so you sought to protect your brother. Trust me, I know the sentiment well.”

They both fell into silence. Letty finished her wine and blushed. “Caroline, I’m still anxious about tonight . . .”

“You need not be. Why don’t you go on upstairs and have the servants prepare a bath?”

“That isn’t a terrible idea,” Letty conceded and bid Caroline good night.

Half an hour later, she was sinking into a large copper tub, the hot water enveloping her. She giggled a little, then hiccupped. She’d had far too much wine at dinner tonight. It was not at all what she had intended.

No, that wasn’t true. She had intended to be a little freer with her libations in preparation for her wedding night. The prospect of pain terrified her, and she wasn’t sure she would be up to her wifely duties after all.

She reached up to touch her hair and giggled again as she realized she was still wearing the extravagant coronet from her wedding. In all of her troubles today, she’d gotten quite used to the weight of the jeweled headpiece and had forgotten it was still on her head.

Letty sat up in the bathtub and started to remove it, but a deep voice stopped her.

“Good evening, lady wife.”

She glanced over her shoulder and went rigid as she realized her husband was standing in her bedchamber, and she was not a dozen feet from him, completely naked. She could feel his eyes upon her in such an exposed and vulnerable state, and it sent her pulse racing.

“Er . . . ,” she stuttered. “Would you mind terribly averting your eyes while I remove myself from my bath?”

“You’ve turned shy now?” Adam teased as he drew closer.

“Oh, please, you mustn’t tease me,” she said in mortification.

“She says this to me while wearing nothing but a coronet and a blush before her husband.” Adam gave a long-suffering sigh, but his eyes were bright with teasing.

“I was waiting for you,” she said, trying not to giggle.

Adam knelt by the tub, his eyes fixed on her face. “Well then, I have arrived, and you need not wait any longer. Stand and I will help you put this on,” He held up her robe. The glint in his eyes had softened, and she felt a warmth in her chest that made her giddy with joy.

Her face was on fire as she rose and he slipped the robe about her arms, then over her shoulders. Before the fabric could touch the water, he grasped her hips and raised her out of the copper tub, setting her down on her feet next to him.

“I rather like this,” he said. “My countess wearing nothing but her coronet. The diamonds make your eyes sparkle.” He brushed a damp lock of her hair back from her cheek.

“I quite forgot I was wearing it. I’m so sorry.”

“Tut, tut. What’s this now? No apologies. As I said, there is something quite wonderful about you wearing nothing but your skin and my diamonds. You’re quite spoiling me on our wedding night.”

“Oh, but—” Another hiccup escaped her, and she clapped her hands over her mouth in mortification.

“Have you had much to drink?” he asked more seriously.

“A bit,” she admitted, then hiccupped again.

With a sigh, Adam moved away from her and poured her a glass of water. “Drink this. Slowly.”

She did, and the hiccups soon vanished. “I’m terribly sorry, Adam. I was so fretfully nervous.”

“Nervous?” He rubbed her shoulders. “Whatever could make you nervous?”

“Well, *you* do, of course,” she said. “I mean, the thought of sharing a bed with you, that is . . .”

“You’re afraid of the marriage bed?”

Her robe slipped off one shoulder as she took another drink of water. Adam reached up and gently pulled the robe back up over her shoulder rather than down, for which she was

grateful. Her breasts felt strange and tingly, and her nipples had pebbled in the chilly air. She would be embarrassed for him to see that.

“It’s silly, I know, but Gillian and Caroline said it might hurt, and I’m really not so brave as you think I am. But I will do my duty.” She lifted her chin, wanting to make him proud that she was ready for whatever came next.

Adam had been smiling until she said *duty*. Then his open, soft expression faded, and he grew reserved once more.

“There will be no *duties* fulfilled tonight. You need not fear me—for now, at least.”

He swept her up into his arms and carried her to bed. Then he pulled her covers back and laid her down beneath the sheets.

He bent his head and kissed her forehead. “Sleep well, lady wife.”

The wine was taking its toll upon her, but she reached out and caught his hand as she settled deeper beneath the bedsheets.

“Adam,” she sighed.

“Yes?”

“Stay. Please . . .”

She wanted to feel his body close to hers, to see what it was like to share such an intimate space with him throughout the night, to feel protected and cherished in his arms as she slept.

“You truly wish that?” he asked.

She nodded and yawned.

“Very well, lady wife. I see that *you* are the one who must be obeyed.” If he hadn’t said this with a chuckle, she might have been worried she’d somehow upset him. The bed dipped as he removed his waistcoat, boots, and stockings, and then he lay down beside her.



She moved closer to him after a moment, wanting to know what it felt like to sleep with a man. As she nestled into his side, she decided that it was quite nice to lie peacefully with one's husband.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

ADAM WAS awake before the sun, and he held his wife in his arms for a long while. He was bemused as much as disappointed that he had not been able to bed her. Last night, when he'd found her in her bath wearing nothing but her coronet, he'd been overwhelmed with his desire. But the fear and surprise in her eyes had given him some measure of control. He was determined to protect her, shelter her, even from himself.

He had tucked her into bed, but he hadn't expected her to ask him to stay. As muddled as she was by the wine, which she'd clearly had too much of, she still wanted him to stay with her. It had been years since he'd had a mistress. Ever since John's death, he had done his best to keep intimate relationships out of his life. Now he had a wife, and it felt quite splendid to have her warm, soft, curvy body lying against his. His little Letty.

He brushed some loose curls away from her face and took his time examining her features in the pale predawn light that filtered in through the windows. He thought of how she'd called making love her wifely *duty*. That had wounded him, but he reminded himself that a woman's first time often came with pain, and he could not begrudge her that natural fear of the unknown. She had no knowledge of the pleasure that came after. Once he had her trust, he would escort her through that first time and hold her until the pain passed.

He realized that he was going to have to seduce his wife, something he'd expected to have to do before marriage, not

after. At least he had ample time and opportunity while they remained at Chilgrave.

Adam eased out of bed before tucking the blankets back around Letty. He then exited her bedchamber and returned to his own. He hadn't removed his clothes from last evening, and now his shirt was rumpled. He'd just stripped out of his clothes when his valet entered.

"Good morning, my lord." Helms's genial smile greeted him as he bent to retrieve Adam's trousers and shirt from the floor.

"Good morning." Adam next set about shaving and then dressed in fresh clothes.

"Did you have a pleasant night, sir?" Helms asked.

"Well enough, though not as well as a man would hope for his wedding night." He had always been open with his valet, and by his reaction Adam could tell the man had something to say. He nodded, letting him know he could speak freely.

"Mrs. Oxley was concerned, as was Mrs. Hadaway. It seems Lady Caroline and Lady Morrey got a bit deep in their cups last night."

"Yes, I discovered as much last night," Morrey sighed theatrically. "Wish me better luck today in wooing my tender bride."

Helms gave an amused look. "Luck be with you, my lord."

Adam ate breakfast alone, reviewing some letters Mrs. Hadaway had placed on a tray near his seat. As he was about to leave, Caroline slid into the dining room, shielding her eyes from the bright morning sun streaming through the windows. She winced as he quite purposefully dropped a fork on his plate.

"Helms was right. Both you and Letty had too much wine."

"It was my mistake. We were talking, and the matters being discussed were of such a nature that I feared I needed a

bit more than usual to wash away the memory of our talk. Not that it succeeded.”

Adam sat up straighter. “What did you talk about that so upset you?”

“I told her about John. She needed to know the truth, all of it. I know that you planned to tell her yourself, but part of his story is mine to share.”

“Of course, Caro. You’re quite right. You have as much right to share the story as I do. In many ways, he was more a part of your world than mine.”

His sister’s face grew pale. “Was Letty very frightened by what I told her? I woke up this morning feeling guilty, wondering whether or not she thinks differently of you now.” Caroline sank gracelessly into a chair opposite him.

“I don’t believe she thought very much about that last night. She was rather more concerned about the marriage bed.”

“Oh . . . Adam, you didn’t do anything, did you? She wasn’t herself last night.”

“Of course I didn’t. You know I would never behave so boorishly.”

“I didn’t believe you would *knowingly*, but I wasn’t sure if you could tell. The drink snuck up on me an hour before I went to sleep, and I feared it might have been the same with her.”

He smiled a little. “She was hiccupping when I went to see her. That told me plain enough that the woman was not herself.”

“Hiccupping? Oh dear.” Caroline rose and collected a plate from the sideboard, then explored the foods still hot inside their chafing dishes.

“I think I’m going to go riding,” Adam said. “If you see Letty, ask her if she would like to go fishing with me this afternoon.”

His sister stared at him. “Fishing? You want to take her fishing?”

He grinned mischievously. "Yes."

"It has clearly been a long time since you last wooed a woman. Most women don't want to be taken fishing. She'd rather have you read her sonnets while you picnic on some lovely hill. You are mad," Caroline said.

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in it," he replied.

"Do not quote Shakespeare to me this early in the morning."

He bent to kiss her forehead. "Very well, I shall wait until luncheon."

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LETTY STIRRED AWAKE SLOWLY, her mind fuzzy. Had she gotten married yesterday? It all seemed so fantastical that for a moment she thought it had been a dream, but it did not take long to realize she was not in her home, but at Chilgrave Castle. She pulled the blankets off her body and saw no blood upon her thighs or the sheets.

Her eyes fell to the coronet on the bedside table, and it all came back in a rush. Sitting in her bath with that diadem on her head, giggling and hiccupping when her husband had walked in on her. Him lifting her up and putting her to bed. And he had stayed . . . but now her bed was empty. She slipped out of bed and went to the windows that overlooked the land beyond the castle walls. A figure riding a white horse was barely visible in the distance. She sensed that it was Adam, though she could not be sure.

"Morning, my lady," Mina greeted as she entered the bedchamber.

Letty greeted her lady's maid before turning her gaze back to the window. The figure was gone now, having vanished into the woods.

"His lordship had breakfast and rode out. You may dine at your leisure, my lady."

So it *had* been Adam. She wished she had gone with him. She enjoyed riding immensely, and it was not so easy to ride in London, where sidesaddles were required and ladies could only move at a sedate pace. Out in the country, she was free to ride as she liked. With her father dead and her mother ill, Letty had had no one to check her wilder impulses for many of her formative years. James had no issue with her riding astride or riding fast.

“Mina, could you have my riding habit set out? I should like to catch up to my husband.”

“Certainly.” Her lady’s maid helped her dress in her dark-red riding habit, a lovely gown that had a loose train but also split skirts. These skirts would allow her to ride astride rather than sidesaddle. Madame Ella had raised a brow at the unique request when Letty had ordered it, but she had complied with the change in design.

Letty hurried downstairs, stopping only to grab a few biscuits to nibble on while the groom settled a horse for her.

Caroline emerged from the drawing room. “Letty? Are you going out? I believe Adam assumed you would sleep in after last night. He said to tell you that he wished to take you fishing.”

“Well, I’m still tired, but I couldn’t stay in bed. Fishing, did you say?” That was unexpected, but she wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to be outside while the weather was so fine. Once the cold set in, she could cuddle up all winter and read books by the fire. “I saw Adam riding, and I thought I would join him.”

“He rides quite far, sometimes several miles,” Caroline said, her eyes clouded with concern. “Perhaps you would like to wait for him to show you around the grounds?”

“Nonsense. I have an excellent sense of direction.” She hugged Caroline and rushed out the door to meet the groom a footman had summoned for her. He held the reins of a lovely black mare with dainty ankles. A proper saddle, not a side saddle, had been prepared per her request.

“This is Lizzie, my lady. Short for Elizabeth. She’s the queen of the Morrey stables.” The young groom beamed with pride as he stroked the horse’s neck.

“Oh, she’s lovely. What’s your name?”

“I’m Robbie, my lady.” He offered his cupped hands, and she placed one booted foot in them as he hoisted her up.

“Thank you, Robbie.”

She wielded her crop gently, tapping Lizzie’s flank so that the black mare trotted down the bridge across the water. Once she was across, she steered her horse in the direction she had seen Adam riding. She did have a natural sense of direction, so she had no trouble discerning that he had ridden almost straight north. She followed the natural paths, noting where the grass was trampled across the field, and once certain of her course, she sent the horse into a gallop.

Letty laughed in joy as the wind rushed through her hair. There was nothing more freeing than being on the back of a galloping horse. No one could stop her, no one could see her, judge her, or cage her. She was free.

A dozen minutes later, she slowed her horse to a canter and then a trot as she spotted Adam ahead of her. He was galloping his horse across a distant hill almost perpendicular to her path. She pulled back on the reins and watched him for a moment, admiring the way he controlled his beast, urging it to turn sharply, then suddenly skid to a stop. A thought occurred to her. Was he practicing this type of horsemanship for fun—or for reasons related to his life as a spy? It would no doubt come in handy to be able to halt a horse that quickly and turn so sharply.

Letty urged Lizzie closer as he took off in another sprint. She gave chase, deciding she wanted to test her skill against his. Adam’s black cloak flew out behind him. He was halfway down the hill when he glanced over his shoulder and saw her in pursuit. He halted so abruptly that she shot past him, laughing at the expression of shock on his face as she surged by.

She looked over her shoulder and saw that he was now chasing her. The white stallion he rode thundered like an old medieval charger a gallant knight might ride. Letty kicked Lizzie's sides and leaned forward, reducing the wind resistance. Lizzie was indeed a fast creature.

"Come on, my lovely." She urged the horse onward, and they fled in delight at the thrill of being pursued by their male counterparts.

They sprinted down the rest of the hill and through a wooded glen with tall oaks that created a shimmery canopy. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Adam had gained enough ground to come up alongside her, though he was not close enough to grab her. She kept riding, refusing to stop, and when she stole a look at him, he seemed equally minded to beat her. In the distance, the woods opened up into a field, and there were tall hedges in parts of the field.

"Letty, stop!" Adam called out.

Unbeknownst to him, Letty was a master jumper. "Catch me if you dare!" she challenged before taking the first hedge. She cleared it with ease. A moment later, Adam followed.

The field proved a dangerous set of jumps, but Letty crossed each hurdle with natural expertise. As she reached the end of the field, she halted Lizzie almost as sharply as Adam had halted his mount. But somehow he and his white stallion now stood at the end of the field, directly in front of her.

*How the devil . . . ?*

He looked furious. Was it because she hadn't stopped when he'd ordered her to?

Adam started his horse toward her. "Letty," he called out gruffly.

"Adam, I'm sorry. I was having too much fun. You saw that I had no issues jumping—"

He grasped her reins when he reached her and held her horse still as he glared at her.



“That’s not the point. When I say stop, *stop* for God’s sake. You don’t know the land here, not yet. You could have run straight into the marshes. Lizzie would have broken her legs and rolled over and crushed you.”

“Oh . . .” Letty bit her lip for a moment before speaking. “I’ve had that happen before.”

Adam stared at her in horror. “What?”

“I was thirteen. My new pony was spooked by a barn cat in the yard. He reared back and fell on top of me. He didn’t break his legs, thankfully.” The memory was not a happy one. The pony had been uninjured, but she had broken her ankle and suffered the pain of having it set in plaster. She’d been miserable in bed for a full week until James and one of the carpenters in the village had made some crutches for her. Then she was able to hobble about the house a bit until the plaster was finally removed.

Adam continued to chide her. “Then you must know the danger of running a horse over ground you aren’t familiar with.”

“You forget, my lord, that even ground you believe you know can change with a single rainstorm. And no horse is ever safe, or perfect.”

For a moment the two of them stared at each other, one stern, the other defiant.

“And there is that fire,” Adam said as he cupped her cheek. She was still astride Lizzie, and he was upon his white beast, but for a moment Letty felt as though she were leaning up against him, all of the inner parts of her soul touching his. Then the spell was broken as the white stallion nipped playfully at her horse’s neck. Lizzie shied away, and the horses moved farther apart, forcing Adam’s hand to drop from her.

“Follow me.” Adam waved as he nudged his horse into a walk.

Letty followed. They rode in a companionable silence for a long while, allowing the trees in the woods to whisper to them as the breeze played in their branches. The morning mist was

now slowly fading as the sun began to burn away the clouds. The effect left sunlight rippling across their path, illuminating patches of mist, which glittered like diamond dust scattered on the wind.

Adam paused his horse at the edge of the woods. They were facing the field again.

“You see the land there, at the end of the distant hill? How the grass darkens?”

She nodded.

“Those are the marshes.” He turned to her, as though needing to see that she understood the danger. She did. “Do not go there, no matter what.”

She took her time studying the landscape, learning the patterns of the native meadowlands before they turned to marshes.

“Adam, why were you halting your horse so abruptly in the field?” She positioned Lizzie beside his horse again. “Before the chase?”

“I often practice maneuvers that help me to be better prepared.”

“For your work.”

He sighed. “Yes.” He was silent a moment before adding, “I sometimes run into dangerous situations. I quickly learned that a man’s skill on a horse could save his life and the lives of others. Being able to stop my horse where I need to, even at a full gallop, can be very useful.”

She toyed with Lizzie’s reins and stared at him hopefully. “Would you teach me?”

“I don’t think—”

“Please. This marriage was to protect me because you believe I am in danger. You must realize the necessity.”

“I plan to be your veritable shadow.”

Letty arched a brow. “Even shadows fade when night falls. You must acknowledge that I should have some skills of my

own. Isn't that a more intelligent course of action? If we are separated, wouldn't you prefer me to have some sense of how to deal with my enemies? If nothing else, it would allow you more time to hone your own skills."

Adam looked heavenward. "Am I ever going to win any arguments with you?"

With a devilish grin, Letty trotted past him into the field. "Probably not. But you can win *other* things." She had no desire to control him when it came to everything, especially those things she sensed he would control very well—like the marriage bed.

"Very well, I will teach you what I was practicing."

For the next half hour, Letty became more comfortable in the saddle than she ever had been before and was easily able to train Lizzie to slide to a stop. When she felt she had practiced enough, she slid off Lizzie's back and walked along the edge of the woods. Adam dismounted and tied their horses nearby to graze before joining her.

Letty circled around a large tree, unable to keep her eyes off Adam as he came behind her. His hands were behind his back, and his lean legs moved in a gentle rhythm as he watched her playfully hide from him behind the tree. Adam came around one side of it, and she turned, putting her back to the tree as he cornered her against it.

"I am sorry about last night," she said.

He braced a hand against the bark beside her, and his other hand settled on her hip. A flare of heat filled her lower belly, and a faint throbbing pulse came to life between her thighs.

Adam's grip over her hips tightened ever so slightly. "I was sorry too."

"Perhaps we can try again tonight?" she offered, both nervous and excited at the thought. He took a step closer, his body now pressing against hers. She was suddenly afraid, though of what she wasn't sure, so she attempted to move away. He caught her waist and pushed her back against the

tree, deftly capturing her wrists with one of his large hands, pinning them above her head.

“Adam—what—?”

“Hush, lady wife. I have caught you, and now you are *mine*.” His words sent that faint throbbing deep in her belly into a more frantic pounding within her. He lowered his lips to hers, but he didn’t kiss her. His lips brushed over hers, moving along her jaw down to her throat, where he nipped the sensitive flesh. She cried out, her hips arching away from the tree. All because of what he’d done to her neck. She was a terrible, wanton creature, yet at that moment she couldn’t find it in herself to care.

Adam’s other hand parted her split riding skirts, gripping one of her thighs. He slid his hand between her legs, his strong fingers questing through layers of undergarments until he found her. She shrieked in shock as he stroked the folds of her sex.

“Hush, pet,” he purred, and all she could envision was how a dangerous tomcat would pounce upon a trembling mouse and gently bat at it with its paw.

One of his fingers moved up and sank into her, pressing tight inside that secret part of her. Wetness flooded between her thighs, and she wriggled, unable and unwilling to escape. He kissed the shell of her ear as he pushed that finger in and out of her.

“This is a taste of what I will teach you, this dark yearning for something more. The *need* you feel to be chased and caught. To have me master your body.” His words, carnal and wicked, confused and excited her.

“I don’t—I shouldn’t—”

“Don’t lie to me, or yourself. There is nothing wrong with wanting this. You are my wife, and I your husband. We may explore this together.” Adam kissed her now, a ruthless, violent kiss that matched the sudden thrust of his finger.

Something was building within her, something wild and uncontrollable. It felt as though her body was changing, as

though whatever was coming, once it came, would leave a mark upon her that would never go away.

“Keep touching me,” she demanded, needing his skin upon her skin in whatever way she could get it.

“Let go,” he urged between his hungry kisses. “Surrender yourself to me.” His hold on her wrists tightened as he inserted a second finger inside her, stretching her to the point where it was nearly painful.

“Christ, you’re tight,” he groaned against her mouth.

She was tight, and upon hearing him say it, it was like a curse and a blessing broke whatever had been holding her together. She simply came apart, and a frightening, powerful pleasure rippled through her. She screamed, but the sound was drowned out as he covered her mouth with his.

Letty was consumed by him, their bodies pressed tight, her will and his bound by this dark, exciting energy that his wicked touch created. He kept thrusting his fingers until she was begging for him to stop, not because it hurt, but because she could not take any more pleasure. He slowed down, his hand stilling as he cupped her sex. Then he brushed a finger over the bud of her arousal, and she flinched at its oversensitivity. He rested his head against hers, their panting breaths mingling.

“That’s it. Ride it out with me,” Adam encouraged. “Don’t fight it.”

She melted, unaware that she had been holding herself rigid as her mind and body tried to process what had happened. As she relaxed, little aftershocks of pleasure came more freely.

“There now,” he soothed her as he pulled his hand from beneath her skirts. She was embarrassed at the wetness coating his fingertips but gasped as she watched him slip them between his own lips and lick them clean. It made the throbbing between her legs return.

“You taste sweet, lady wife, and your eyes . . .” His voice was soothing as he gazed down upon her. He still held her

wrists trapped in his hand, and she couldn't find it in herself to care. She was safe like this, safe in his arms and his control.

"I thought . . . I thought I might fall apart and I would never be put back together again. It was frightening," she admitted in a small voice.

His silvery eyes held hers. "That is the beauty of embracing your passion. You can fall apart, and I will always be there to hold you together."

"Is this . . . Is this how it always feels?"

He nuzzled her cheek and kissed her forehead. "No, not always. Not for everyone. But a good man should always do his best to make his bed partner feel this way. It is only lazy men who do not." He released her hands then and gently rubbed her wrists, massaging them. "You and I are lucky. We have something many husbands and wives do not."

"What is that?"

"I understand your desires, what you need to 'fall apart,' as you call it. To reach your peak. And your needs are not like those of other women."

"They're not?" She attempted to move, but her legs buckled. Adam caught her and swung her up in his arms as he started back to the spot where they'd left their horses.

"You mustn't be ashamed, lady wife. Many men and women have relations only in a certain way, the woman lying on her back and the man on top, but that is only one way. There are *many* ways to make love, and I plan to show you all of them."

At this pronouncement, Letty fell silent, wondering what all those ways might be. Adam carried her to the horses and only set her down next to Lizzie long enough to help her up onto the horse. When she sat astride, his brows rose.

"I was raised to ride this way. I assure you, I am far safer seated like this. Do you wish to make me ride sidesaddle?"

"Not at all. It is indeed much safer and better for your back. I was only surprised that I hadn't noticed it earlier." He

smiled wickedly at her. “I was focused on other things, I suppose.”

“I use my skirts to hide how I sit.” She showed him how the riding habit fell to one side, covering one of her legs and making it look as though she were sitting sidesaddle.

Adam eyed her appreciatively. “That’s a clever design.”

“Thank you.” She waited for him to mount, then grinned at him. “Race you back?”

She took off before he had a chance to respond, and she heard his laughter as he chased after her.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“PLEASE, YOU MUSTN’T KILL IT,” Letty begged Adam.

Adam’s curved silver fishhook paused before it could pierce the wriggling worm. His wife gazed at him from the other end of the boat where they floated on the water of the moat that surrounded Chilgrave Castle.

“I fear that I must,” he chuckled. “You realize that even if I don’t hook him, he shall still be eaten by a fish?”

Letty sighed. “Then do it, but know that I am saddened.”

Adam had to work not to laugh at her adorable, childish pout. He hastily prepared the worm and then cast the line far away into the water before handing the pole to her. She accepted it, and while he focused on his hook, he could sense her studying him. He pretended not to notice.

“Why did you want to take me fishing?” she asked.

“Why?” He cast his line out parallel to hers in the moat.

“Yes. It’s not exactly the sort of thing a woman expects to do the first day she’s married.”

He leaned back comfortably in the boat, his fishing pole held in one hand. “Oh? And what did you expect?”

“I suppose I thought I’d be meeting with Mrs. Oxley, Mrs. Hadaway, Mr. Sturges, and the rest of the staff. Then I would start to familiarize myself with the account books, menus, and any other things that the mistress of an estate like Chilgrave should know.” She said this with an air of confidence, as though she thought that was exactly what she ought to be



doing instead of lounging about in a boat with him. Adam knew she had been raised for those duties, but she was still rather young to have that thrust upon her.

“There is plenty of time for that. I wanted you and I to have time to learn about one another.”

“That is a good idea. We do barely know each other,” Letty said. “I don’t even know how you take your tea.”

“With one lump of sugar. I like a hint of sweetness.” He winked at her and was satisfied by the deep blush that claimed her features. She was sensual yet so wonderfully innocent too. She was no jaded courtesan faking coquettish smiles in a mercenary fashion.

“What about you?” Adam asked. “How do you take your tea?”

“With enough milk and sugar that you barely taste the tea.” Her impish reply had him laughing. “But I do need to know more about you. The serious things, I mean,” Letty insisted.

“And what do you consider serious things?”

“Well . . . Your family, to start with.”

“Ah, the paterfamilias and such. Well, the late earl wasn’t a bad man. He was a decent sort, but my mother died young, just after Caroline turned four, and Father turned to her lady’s maid for comfort.”

Letty nodded in understanding. “Gillian’s mother.”

“Yes. Caroline and I loved Gillian’s mother, but when she became pregnant, she left. I didn’t realize until I was much older that Father had sent her away. He paid for her and Gillian to live comfortably, but he feared my finding out about them.”

“Why?”

“He assumed—wrongly, as it turned out—that I would be upset. I wish he had married Gillian’s mother, to be honest. Society be damned. I would have liked for her to have been raised alongside Caroline and me. But my father discovered this truth too late. On his deathbed, he begged me to find them.

By then, Gillian's mother was dead, and my father's solicitor had lost track of Gillian." Adam paused, his voice softening a little. "I found my sister, only to learn that I had already lost her to your brother."

Letty scooted closer to him in the boat. "She loves you, even only knowing you such a short time. She sings your praises."

He smiled, his melancholy thoughts retreating a bit. "I wish I could say I deserved any such praise."

"Well, she believes you do, and Gillian is not a person to put her faith in someone undeserving."

"And what about you? What of the noble house of Pembroke?"

"Much the same as yours, I suppose. Father died when I was very young, and my mama . . . Well, she did not die young, but her mind faded away only a year or two after Father passed. In a way, James and I raised each other. That's what I like about you, that you and Caroline have a bond the way James and I do." There was a bittersweet ache to her words. Their lives were similar in so many ways.

"I think a sibling is a blessing and a comfort. I am fortunate to have two sisters now." He gave a gentle pull on his fishing rod, testing what he thought might have been a nibble on his line, but found no resistance.

"May I ask a more serious and sensitive question?" she asked, her tone carefully neutral.

"I am, in most ways, an open book for you."

That blush returned. "Have you had many mistresses?"

That question was entirely unexpected. "Well . . . Not many by certain standards. I've had four in the last ten years."

"Four," she said, and he wished he could read her tone. Was she upset? Jealous? Worried?

"I promise you that, as your husband, I belong to you now. I haven't had a mistress in the last two years, and I will not take one ever again." He braced his pole on the edge of the

boat and leaned over to take one of her hands in his. Holding someone's hand was incredibly intimate. In some ways, even more so than what they had done in the woods this morning. Hands were the way people connected to the world around them, and holding those hands, linking them like this, forged a bond with her that he didn't wish to break.

She didn't pull away, but she didn't meet his gaze either.

"I feel rather silly and unworldly," she said at last. "Do I disappoint you?"

Adam had to bite his lip not to laugh. "I would prefer you to be exactly who you are. No wilting maiden, nor some seductive courtesan. I wish for you to be *you*, lady wife. I find an abundance of delight in who you are—the wild Amazon creature who rides astride better than most men, yet succumbs to passion in my arms, whose surrender drives me to fresh heights of madness. You need never worry whether I am disappointed. I'm quite far from that particular emotion when it comes to you."

Letty smiled, and Adam's heart fluttered as it never had before. It wouldn't have surprised him to realize he was in very real danger of falling in love with his wife. He was not complaining about it either.

"Now, will you permit me a similar question?" Adam asked.

Letty looked like a doomed criminal on a scaffold. "I suppose I must."

"How many men caught your eye before you married me? Any former beaux who might track me down and challenge me to a duel for you?" he asked.

She relaxed. "Only a few, but I doubt any would challenge you to a duel." She nibbled her bottom lip in a way that reminded him of their glorious moment of passion in the woods.

"Tell me about these men."

"There was Silas Wilson, the son of a doctor near our country estate. He was three years older than me. I thought

him quite handsome.” She shook her head. “He never looked my way. I was but thirteen, a child to him. I caught him in the stables with a maid from our house. They were kissing quite seriously. It hurt to see him like that. I remember running back up to the house, and I tripped, skinning both my knees. The doctor was seeing to our mother, and he took a moment to patch me up, asking what had caused a young lady to run so frantically as to trip. I remember just wanting to die of embarrassment. I couldn’t tell him about his son. I still have the scars.” She raised her skirts to show her knees, unfastened the ribbons holding one stocking up, and rolled the stocking down. She seemed entirely unaware of what she’d done at first, then gasped and flung her skirts back down.

“Heavens, I don’t know why I did that.”

Adam moved closer and put his palm on the bright-green gown covering her knee. “We are becoming more comfortable together. There is nothing embarrassing about that.” He removed his cravat and pulled part of his shirt down to expose his throat. He traced a raised line near his collarbone. “You see this scar?”

She leaned forward, tracing the scar with her gentle fingers. “How did you get it?”

“I was determined to improve my fencing skills while at university. We had been practicing with protective-tipped foils. Another boy challenged me to fight with an unguarded blade. Thinking that the danger would heighten my senses and reflexes, I agreed. My presumption was *very* wrong. The other boy caught me with a thrust, and I bled quite terribly. One boy even fainted, much to the embarrassment of our fencing master, who returned in time to see this happen. We were both tossed out of fencing school. My father had to hire a private fencing master to teach me.”

“Oh heavens, it is a fierce scar,” she agreed, still tracing the spot. Adam caught her wrist in his hands, holding her close to him.

“Are you less shy of me now?” he asked, smiling.

She smiled back and nodded. “Yes. I keep thinking of what happened in the woods as well. I fear I get a little silly whenever you touch me.”

“I like hearing that,” he said as he pulled her onto his lap. She gasped and wobbled until she settled across his thighs, her hands gripping his shoulders.

“The beauty of being so close in this boat means we can do whatever we please.”

He dipped his head to steal a kiss. Her petal-soft lips parted beneath his, and he thrust his tongue boldly against hers. She was shy at first as she learned to match him and his actions. The need to have her, to dip her back in the boat and toss up her skirts, was strong enough that it made his hands shake. But her first time was not going to be here in a boat. He would control himself . . . eventually.

A sudden clattering disrupted their kiss, and they turned to see Letty’s fishing pole tilting over the side as something tugged sharply on the line.

“Oh no!” She flung herself off Adam’s lap and lunged forward to catch the pole before it went over.

“Letty, wait!” Adam shouted. The boat rocked sharply, and both the pole and his wife tumbled into the water.

There was a heartbeat where he froze, expecting her to come sputtering back up to the surface. When she didn’t, he flung himself over the side after her, plunging into the greenish-brown depths, reaching blindly about the water for her.

Could she swim? He hadn’t even thought to ask that before taking her in the boat. The moat was nearly twenty feet deep in some places. Not to mention the gown she wore would drag her down with its weight, and her skirts would make it hard to kick her way up to the surface. Terror spiked inside him, choking out what breath was still in his lungs. He kicked back to the surface and gasped for air, then plunged back down again. He wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t give up. He couldn’t lose her, not when he’d only just found her.

He surfaced again, kicking his legs and staring at the surface of the water near the boat. No sign of Letty anywhere.

A second later, a hand shot out of the water, holding the fishing pole aloft like it was Excalibur. Letty's face came up shortly after. She spit out water and sputtered as she looked around for the boat, then, realizing he wasn't in it, swirled about in the water looking for him.

He stared at her, mouth agape. He had been so certain she was dead. Flashes of that night at the river had filled his mind—of Adam screaming John's name, searching the dark waters until he had lost all strength.

“Adam . . .” Letty spoke his name with concern.

“I didn't know if you could swim,” he said. “You didn't come up.”

Letty tread water, watching him with greater distress. “Well, I can. You don't need to worry.”

“Don't need to worry? Letty, my dearest friend in the world died in a river. I watched him vanish. I can't do that ever again.” He kicked toward the boat and grasped the side. Then he hauled himself up and over.

She reached the boat and held the fishing pole out. He grabbed it and angrily tossed it into the boat before putting his hands under her arms and heaving her aboard. He was furious, he was frightened—he was a hundred different things at that moment as he curled his arms around her and held her to him. She didn't fight him, didn't pull away. She stilled and tucked her head under his chin.

“Never do that again. Never,” he warned in her ear. “Please, God, never again.”

She breathed and placed a kiss to his chest. “I'm sorry.”

Adam held her for what felt like an age, not wanting to open his eyes. It was only when he felt the chill of the water settling on both of them that he came back to himself with an inward curse.

“We should get inside and change, or you’ll catch your death.” He reluctantly set her back on the bench so he could row them to shore.

She curled her arms around herself as the cotton dress clung to her. As terrified as he had been just moments ago, he had to admit how adorable his wife was, dripping wet like a kitten. But he couldn’t shake the anxiety he felt over nearly losing her. As they reached the shore, he hopped onto the bank and heaved the tip of the boat up onto the grass before helping her out. She started to reach for the poles, but he shook his head.

“Leave them.” He put an arm around her shoulders and kept her close as he walked her up the long stone bridge over the water back to Chilgrave Castle. By the time they reached the castle’s main gate, Letty was shivering.

“Heavens, I don’t think I realized how cold the water was.”

“It’s a deep moat. The water is quite cold, except in the summer months. Even then, the deeper one goes the colder it becomes.”

“I reached the bottom. That blasted pole was resting in the silt. I had to feel around to find it.”

Adam stopped them just at the gate and made her face him. “No fishing pole is worth dying for. I don’t care if that blasted diamond coronet falls in—you will not go after it.” He wasn’t teasing anymore. He was still angry and frightened.

“I—I understand. I’m sorry, Adam. James taught me to swim ages ago, and I just didn’t think.”

“Protecting you is my responsibility. Please do not make it harder for me to do that.”

Letty’s face flashed a dozen emotions that he could barely trace before she nodded. “I won’t do it again, my lord.”

She started to turn away from him. This was a pivotal moment between them, and he knew he had to make the right decision or lose her growing trust. He caught her by the waist and spun her back into his arms. She sucked in a breath as her hands braced themselves against his chest.

“Never shut me out, Letty. We are in this together, and I do not want to treat you like a child. All I’m asking is that you trust me. Talk to me. No more leaping headlong into danger.”

Her pained look faded as she offered him a tremulous smile. “I didn’t think a moat qualified as danger.”

“You would be surprised.” He rubbed his hands up and down her back. “Quite a few dangers abound on Chilgrave lands, even for me. And I grew up here.”

“I understand.”

Adam lifted her chin so he could gaze into her warm brown eyes. “Are you angry with me?” he asked.

“No,” she replied honestly. “Are you angry with *me*?”

“No. I’m angry with myself. You needed my protection, and I wasn’t prepared. And now you’re trembling, and I’m neglecting my duty to take care of you. We need to get you warmed up.”

The main door opened, and Mr. Sturges met them.

“My lord!” The butler’s eyes widened. He better than most knew that Adam’s occupation came with many dangers, and he clearly thought something sinister had befallen them.

“It was just a little boat accident, Sturges. Not to worry. Please have a bath drawn in my chamber. My wife and I need to warm up.”

“Of course.” The butler rushed away, while Adam escorted Letty to her room.

“Collect a robe and a chemise.”

She turned innocent eyes upon him. “Am I not to bathe?”

“Not here. Not alone.” Adam’s voice was a little rougher than he meant it to be, but he was still fighting off his concerns and his desire for her at the same time.

How did other men cope when they married attractive strangers? Was he wrong to want to bed her so soon? He felt half-mad knowing he could take her in the bloody bath if she gave him any sign of approval. But he wouldn’t. As his



countess, she deserved to have a romantic setting for her first time. He owed it to her to make their first time as honorable and pleasant as possible.

“*Oh . . .*” That single syllable held the weight of a thousand unsaid words. She collected her robe and chemise and followed him to his chamber.

“Here, sit by the fire.” Adam set her in the comfortable worn armchair he favored. He was glad Helms had thought to have a fire already going. September in England could be cold, and the lake water didn’t help matters.

She sat, and Adam placed her robe and chemise on the bed before he draped a heavy woolen blanket about her shoulders. A parade of footmen arrived, carrying steaming buckets of water to the deep copper tub until it was full and steam curled up from its surface.

Once they were alone, Adam gently pulled Letty to her feet. “Come, let’s get you warmed up.”

“I suppose you’ve had much practice at undressing women?” Letty asked, her teeth chattering a bit.

“A bit, I confess, but this feels different. My hands are almost clumsy when I touch you. It’s as though I must learn it all anew,” Adam murmured.

“The cold water, no doubt,” said his wife. His fingers did seem to be lacking their usual deftness as he fumbled with her laces. “First you must loosen the tied knot at the bottom, then work your way up.” Her voice was a little breathless, but at least her teeth had stopped chattering.

As he drew the laces out, he let his fingers linger in places, touching her through the thin layer of the wet chemise she wore as he exposed her bit by bit while undressing her.

She stayed quiet as he undressed her. Both of them barely breathed now as pieces of her gown draped about her body and then fell away. Every bit of him seemed locked in those powerful moments where his heartbeat and hers seemed to match, the dampness of his hands touching her chilled body as he lifted the chemise off her. She was warming up now, a

blush heating her pale face, and he wanted to bury his lips against her throat and inhale her scent, but she needed to be even warmer than she was now.

When at last she was fully naked and he had a chance to admire her lovely body, he nodded toward the tub.

“Get in.” His voice was hoarse as he reminded himself that she was cold, and still a virgin. He was not a ravenous beast who would fall upon his wife like a wolf, no matter how much the baser part of him wanted to.

“You should bathe too,” Letty said as she sank into the hot bath. “Before it becomes too cold.” There was a subtle hint of seduction to her words, as though she was beginning to learn this game they were playing. He knew by the flushed look upon her face that she was feeling heady with desire. Seeing his sweet, feisty wife, wet in the hot bath just a few feet away, inviting him in, was too much for him to bear. His cock hardened, and his mouth ran dry.

“I’m not sure I can remain a gentleman,” he warned.

“I don’t recall asking you to be one.” Her little wicked smile only made it that much harder to stay away. For a second, his mouth parted, but no words came out as he tried to think of a rational response to keep himself at a distance.

“Your first time with me should not be in a bathing tub.”

Letty’s adorable face was just visible over the tall side of the tub.

“Husband, you will strip out of those wet clothes and join me. *Now.*” She splashed a hand in the water. “There is room enough for two, *if* you don’t mind being close to me.”

*Little spitfire.* Adam stared at his wife in shock. Oh, how he adored her at this moment. With a grin, he began to undress.

“Very well, but you may get the rogue yet.”

## CHAPTER NINE

LETTY HELD her breath as Adam began to remove his clothes. In that moment, she decided she loved nothing more than the sight of her husband undressing. It was like a performance, a beautiful, seductive one, how he unwound his neckcloth and let it flutter to the ground. He unbuttoned his waistcoat and shouldered it off, then pulled his white shirt out of his trousers and over his head. His bare chest was broad, accented by his muscles. He reached for the placket on his trousers, his arms flexing as he did so.

*Heavens, the man is pure sin, and I cannot look away,* Letty thought. She would finally see what Adam looked like completely bare of all his clothes.

“Oh, right, mustn’t forget these.” He stopped undoing his trousers and bent to remove his boots and stockings. He shot her a teasing look, obviously knowing exactly how he was torturing her with this delay. Letty clenched the edge of the tub as he finally went back to undoing his trousers. He pulled them down and kicked them off, and she stared at *that* part of him. He was not like the statues in the museum. He was far larger, and it was not lying down against his body but pointing toward her. *Dear heavens . . .* Her lips parted in shock as he approached the copper tub.

“Move forward a bit. I’ll slide in behind you.”

She scooted forward, and he stepped into the tub. The water sloshed as he eased down. He parted his legs and gripped her waist.

“Now slide back and lean against me.”

Letty did as he said and closed her eyes, feeling his hard-muscled body behind her. The hair on his calves tickled her legs beneath the water. His breath, warm against her neck, sent shivers of delight through her. Her nipples pebbled, and her thighs clenched together. The once hot water now seemed tepid compared to the burning of her body. His hands stayed on her hips for a long time before they began to slowly explore her, first her inner thighs, then her lower belly, and finally sliding up to cup her breasts.

“You have exquisite breasts,” Adam whispered in her ear.

“Oh?”

“Yes, quite perfect. See how they fill my hands?” He let the weight of them fill his palms before he gently squeezed them. “It gives me wicked ideas.”

“What sort of ideas?” Her breasts turned heavy at his touch.

“I would like to put you on your hands and knees facing the mirror, while I claim you from behind and watch these glorious breasts move freely as I thrust inside you.” Adam’s words painted such a sensual picture in her mind. So sinful. So *exciting*.

“Would you like that?” he asked before he bit the lobe of her ear. Sparks of arousal shot down her spine into her womb.

“You truly are wicked,” she moaned as he pinched her nipples lightly. He then gripped her throat, gentle but possessive, while his other hand cupped her mound. He kissed her ear, followed by her cheek, before he thrust two fingers inside her. Her hips arched up into his touch.

“More, *please*,” she begged, wanting to feel as she had in the woods when he’d pinned her against the tree.

“I’m happy to oblige,” he said and began to move his fingers faster and faster. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the edge of the tub, her body strained by the building rush. But just before she felt she would fall off the edge, he slowed.

She wriggled, splashing water about. “No! Don’t stop . . .”

He chuckled. “Are you ready to come apart again?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

Her wicked husband’s warm breath fanned against her neck as he gave her what he’d promised. He moved his fingers faster, and she arched her back. Ecstasy exploded from her head to her toes. She collapsed back against him, her limbs quivering and her breath shaky.

Adam embraced her as she drifted down from the wild high of her passion. When she came to herself, she turned to see his face.

“And you . . . Does a man feel this way?”

“Oh yes,” he assured her.

“How does one do it for a man? The way you touch me, I mean.”

He laughed and leaned down to brush her cheek with his lips. “Curious creature. I like that. Grip my cock.”

“Your . . .” She tentatively touched his shaft, which was surprisingly stiff, and he groaned. “Am I hurting you?”

He shook his head. “Now, wrap your fingers around it and move your hand up and down. Yes, like that.”

Letty stroked him and followed his commands. Faster. Harder. Slower. He almost seemed to enter a trance, and she felt drunk on the thought that she held him in her power. This moment was bonding them together in the most sinful, wonderful way she could imagine. Then he called out her name, his body stiffening in the water. After a long moment, he relaxed, and she sensed he had found his peak, and she removed her hand from him.

He pulled her to his chest again and nuzzled the crown of her hair. “Let’s get you out of this bath and into bed. You’ve had a most exhausting day.”

Letty played with his chest, letting her fingers circled his flat male nipples and trace the lines of his collarbone. “As

have you.” He was a beautiful specimen of a man, and she felt wildly giddy at the thought that he was hers.

“Come, lady wife.” Adam stood up in the bath and helped her. Then he fetched a cloth to dry them both before he gave her a fresh chemise and robe.

Letty finished dressing and wrapped her warm robe around her. She took her time studying Adam’s bedchamber. Her own room, that lovely circular chamber, held a hint of wild mystery to it. But Adam’s room felt warm and welcoming. The sturdy four-poster bed, the green satin wallpaper, the light walnut paneling of the doors and ceiling accented with gold moldings. This could be her new home. No, this *was* her new home. That other chamber would be a private space for her, but she wanted to enjoy this room as hers and Adam’s.

“I think I shall stay here,” she announced.

Adam pulled his banyan robe closed and eyed her with amusement.

“So you’ve made your decision.”

“Yes. Assuming you’ll have me.”

He came to her, taking her in his arms before he cupped her bottom and squeezed. “I *suppose* I can tolerate your nightly presence,” he sighed dramatically. Then he swatted her *derrière*. “Now get in bed, wife.”

Letty shot him a saucy grin. “Yes, my lord. As you please, my lord.”

As Adam got into bed beside her and pulled her into his arms, he smiled at her with increasing fondness. “Yes . . . You certainly do please me.”

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CAMILLE WAITED PATIENTLY in a private room at a small inn in Spitalfields before she went to the connecting door and knocked lightly upon it. She and her master always timed her entrances perfectly.

“Come in, Camille,” her master bade.

She stepped inside and was immediately surrounded by shadows as the crowd of seven men inside turned her way.

“Who is the woman?” one of the men demanded.

“Be at ease, Mr. Thistlewood. The woman is mine. Her pretty face keeps my temper at bay, does it not, my sweet?” he asked Camille.

She dipped into a curtsy and flashed a beatific smile at him and the men.

“Yes, master.”

“She certainly makes me think of much better things than anger,” one man dared to joke.

Her master silenced him with a look. “Now, if you are ready to discuss what matters . . .”

“We are, Mr. Garland,” the man called Thistlewood said. “Please, speak.”

Her master smiled coldly. “Until now, you’ve all stayed just out of reach of the noose. That is commendable, but at this pace, you will never achieve any results. That is where I should like to assist you. Sending your little rebellious letters to Whitehall is foolish. I want that to cease immediately. The best revolutionaries do not need to feed their sense of self-importance. They leave that for the rhetoricians who rally allies to the public front of their movement. But where sedition and treason are necessary, it must be carried out in the dark.”

“What are you suggesting we do, then? Don’t we need public support?” another man asked. “Rally the people and such? Otherwise, whatever we do won’t matter. It would be like killing the king. Another would simply take his place.”

Her master held a hand to his lips to call for silence. “The French successfully removed their dynasty.”

The man arguing with her master shook his head. “But a loyalist king took the throne after Bonaparte died.”

“And that man no longer has the Sun God status the French once believed their royalty held. He is mortal—he can be deposed or killed, his family and heirs wiped out by Madame Guillotine. The French people know they have the power now, not some man upon a false throne.”

Amidst all this, Camille was not focused on her master. She had a job to do, which was to listen to all that was said and remember the faces of every man present.

“What you need to do is remove the king *and* the system that keeps him in place.”

“How does one do that?” someone asked. “I am not against the idea, merely inquiring how one can achieve it effectively.”

“By doing it all at once.”

“All at once?” Thistlewood stroked his chin, his eyes thoughtful. “How could you ensure that?”

Her master leaned back in his chair. “The House of Lords. Parliament itself.”

The suggestion was met with silence, but judging by their faces, the rebels didn’t seem bothered by it. Rather they were contemplative, trying to see how this one stone could kill two birds.

Camille’s master smiled again. “The king intends to make a speech to Parliament, you see, and when he does, we shall be ready.”

“How do you propose to destroy Parliament? It’s not as though we could march up to it with pistols in our hands. If I recall, Guy Fawkes tried this and failed.”

“He did, but he didn’t have the access to places and people that I do. When it is time, I shall tell you how we will make Whitehall fall.”

Thistlewood glanced around at his fellow rebels. “Very well then. We shall wait for your signal. But we will not wait for long.”

“You will not have to.”



There were murmurs of assent, and Camille, still in the shadows, studied each face, searching for any hint of falsehood to betray a deceiver in their midst. One man seemed more pensive than the others. He sat close to Thistlewood, not speaking as the others, who were now resolved on their course of action and had dissolved into small talk. It could be nerves, of course, but it could be something else . . .

“I will send a summons when we are ready to set the plan in motion,” her master said.

One by one, the men slipped from the room until it was empty except for her master and herself.

“Well, my pet, what did you see tonight?”

She sipped a glass of wine and stole a bit of chicken from the plate her master had left out from his meal before she replied.

“Thistlewood and his men are loyal . . . though one concerns me.”

“Which one?” her master asked.

“The one who never spoke. He sat next to Thistlewood, perhaps to establish an outward show of his commitment. But he said not a word, even when his eyes would sometimes flash at what you said.”

“Well observed—even I missed that.” Her master handed her his glass of wine, and she drank before offering him a smile.

“You are pleased with me?”

“Very pleased,” he assured her. “Are you ready for your next assignment?”

“Yes.”

“You are to find Lord Pembroke’s sister.”

At this, Camille suddenly brightened. “Oh, monsieur, I forgot to tell you.” She rushed into the adjoining chamber and returned with a newspaper that she’d come across that morning. She handed it to him, opened to the society column.

“Lady Society,” he grumbled. “I never did learn who the damned chit was.” He scanned the article. “Lady Leticia was married the day before yesterday?” His eyes narrowed. “To Lord Morrey.” The name was uttered with an intimacy that piqued Camille’s interest.

“You know him, monsieur?”

“I killed his best friend.” The ferocity of his expression shocked her. She’d never seen her master look angered like that before. He fingered one of his cufflinks, a habit he always had when he was upset about something. Someday he’d rub the cufflink’s surface off from doing that too often.

Camille placed a hand on her master’s arm. “Is he like you?”

“Like me? No, he is just another English dandy who sticks his nose in places it doesn’t belong,” her master said calmly, yet Camille saw a strange fire in his eyes—anger that hid a deeper emotion.

“I will go, monsieur—”

“No.” He caught her arm, holding her forcefully. “You’ll stay and ease my temper.” He shoved her toward the bed. She desperately tried to calm him, hoping that he would be gentle if she did not upset him. When he was in a good mood, he was the best of lovers, but when he was not . . .

“Please, monsieur, give me a moment to make you happy.” She offered him her prettiest smile, and the hellish flames behind his brown eyes began to fade.

“Oh, my sweet French flower,” he murmured. “You always know how to soothe my black heart.”

She allowed herself a moment of relief. By God’s grace, she’d escaped bedding the devil tonight.

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CAROLINE TOSSED FITFULLY in her bed, kicking her blankets off until the chill air woke her. She sat up in the darkness,

listening to the wind howl against the windowpanes. Remnants of a dream trickled back to her. She had dreamed of John and the first time she'd met him.

She had been riding in the park with Adam. He had spotted a man astride a lovely brown gelding and had hailed him. She had been struck at once by the man's fair features, as any woman would, but he had none of the condescension in his tone that many men used when speaking with ladies. He engaged her as equally as he did her brother.

That had only been the beginning. Over the next year, he had paid calls upon her, brought her flowers, and walked in the garden with her. He had recited poetry that made her laugh or blush. He was a flirt, but only with her. His gaze never strayed to any other woman. She knew with certainty that she held his heart, just as he did hers. When the day came when he proposed, she accepted, knowing that her life would change forever.

She had simply never guessed that it would be with his murder, rather than their marriage.

She slipped out of bed and went to the vanity table. In one of the drawers, tucked beneath layers of ribbons, silver-handled hairbrushes, and diamond-studded hair combs, she found a gold locket that hung upon a fine chain. She smoothed her thumb over the locket before opening it.

Inside was a portrait of John. He gazed out from the tiny miniature, his solemn features so unlike the happy, smiling man she remembered. She held the portrait up in the moonlight to better view it.

"Why did you have to go out that night?" she asked the man painted in oil. "Why didn't you stay home?"

She placed a palm over her abdomen and drew in a deep breath. She had shared a bed with John only twice, but those nights had been sweet and wonderful. When she had discovered she was pregnant, she'd been overjoyed, but she'd kept it a secret from him, using clever gowns to hide her growing belly. She'd wanted the news to be a surprise on their wedding night. Perhaps if she had told him, he wouldn't have

been so cavalier with his life. He might have thought more of his own safety, for the sake of his future child.

Caroline closed the locket and set it back in the vanity drawer. She went back to her bed and burrowed beneath the covers. This time she dreamt of nothing except hearing that single feeble cry of her newborn babe before it too faded into the dark.

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A FIGURE LOOMED in the darkness toward Adam's bed. His face pale, his clothes dripping with icy water, as though he'd dragged himself from the depths of the Thames.

*"Adam,"* the figure gasped. *"Adam, wake up . . ."*

Adam stirred, fighting the lethargy of sleep. The figure reached cold, wet hands toward him.

*"You must wake. He is coming for you."*

At last Adam surged up, gasping. "John?" But all signs of the ghostly presence were gone.

He steadied his racing heart and covered his face with his hands. Then he looked down at Letty, who lay beside him. She had half buried her face in the pillow, her dark hair billowing out around her. She was still fast asleep, undisturbed by him and the ghost from his past.

He stared at the dark corner of the room where he had imagined the figure of John Wilhelm.

*"He is coming for you,"* John had said.

Adam wondered who his friend had been trying to warn him about. Who was dangerous enough to bring his friend from beyond the grave to deliver a warning?

## CHAPTER TEN

LETTY WAS FINISHING up her breakfast with Adam and Caroline when Mr. Sturges entered the dining room, a silver tray in one hand. He came over to Adam and held it out. There was a letter on top.

“What’s this?” Adam asked.

“It just arrived by royal messenger.” Mr. Sturges’s reply held a hint of concern.

“Royal messenger?” Letty echoed.

“Yes, your ladyship.”

“Thank you, Sturges.” Adam took the letter from the tray, and Letty noted the royal seal upon it.

Adam used his knife to cut the wax from the paper and unfolded the letter and read it silently. Letty exchanged a glance with Caroline, asking her without words if she knew what it was about. Caroline shook her head.

“It’s from His Majesty. He is summoning me back to London. Well, both of us.” He looked toward Letty.

“The king? Why?” Letty couldn’t even begin to imagine why the king would wish to see her.

“It seems that he desires to meet you and is curious about the woman I chose for a bride on such short notice.”

“You are on favorable terms with the king?” Letty knew that most of the influential aristocrats met the royal family from time to time, but a personal invitation was still quite

extraordinary. She'd had her debut a few years ago, but he wouldn't have remembered her from that night, not when it had been filled with dozens of other young women.

“Well, there is a story behind that—one I should tell you once we're on our way to London. We must leave immediately. He wishes to see us this evening for dinner.” Adam cast her a smile, but she saw his thoughts were already distracted, possibly wondering if there was a significant urgency to the king's invitation.

“Tonight?” Caroline gasped. “Letty, we must pack your things at once and see if you have a decent court gown.”

“I don't believe I have anything suitable,” Letty fretted. A court gown was far more splendid than one's normal evening gowns.

“What about the one you wore the night of Lady Allerton's ball?” Adam asked. “Is that suitable?”

Caroline sighed. “Adam, that gown wouldn't do as a court gown. Letty, you and I are close in size—you shall take one of mine.” Caroline rose from the table and the two ladies went to Caroline's bedchamber. “This one should do well.” Caroline opened the tall armoire. She removed a gown and laid it out upon the bed for Letty to see. The crème satin creation was a vision, dusted with pearls like drops of moonlight.

“What do you think? I have not yet worn it, so it will not have been seen by anyone you meet.”

“It's stunning! Oh, Caroline, do you mind? I don't want to take such a gown from you.”

Caroline waved a hand. “It's yours. I do not believe I will be attending court anytime soon. Now, let's have Mina come and pack it up.”

Within the hour, Letty and Adam were bundled up in their traveling coach and heading for London.

“Now, will you tell me why the king summoned you?” Letty was seated across from him—not because she didn't wish to sit beside him, but because it was easier to converse

with him this way. Adam removed his gloves and toyed with them in his lap.

“I was stationed in Brighton a year ago. The king was at the Royal Pavilion. There were rumors of Napoleon escaping from Elba, and we were all on edge. None of us knew then that he would be dead in just a few weeks. There was an attempt made on the king’s life. I did my duty.” He touched his ribs on the left side. “I took a blade here. Not deep, mind you, but in the king’s mind, I was the only one who stood between him and death.”

“I hadn’t heard he’d been threatened last year.” Letty kept herself abreast of the news by reading the *Times*, the *Post*, and even *Ackermann’s Repository of Arts*.

“It was an incident that was kept quiet. There were few witnesses, and those who saw it were convinced to remain quiet. I believe that was the first time the king had ever faced death, at least in such a frightening manner, and it made an impression on him.”

“I imagine it would.” Letty fell into silence for a long while, her mind now filled with worries and concerns. They were headed back to London, a place they shouldn’t go, where her life was more in danger, as was Adam’s. But a king’s command could not be ignored.

Adam was troubled too; she saw it in his distant gaze. After a while, she moved to join him on the seat. He clasped her hand in his, though she sensed his thoughts were miles away.

It was shortly after midday when they reached Adam’s townhouse on Half Moon Street. There they met Mr. Shelton, the underbutler who handled the townhouse while Mr. Sturges was at Chilgrave.

“My lord! We did not expect you back so soon,” Mr. Shelton said. He was close to Sturges in age, in his midforties, and he seemed quite as capable. Letty had not met him officially, but Caroline had told her about him before they’d left.

“I’m sorry, Shelton. It’s quite unexpected. We require a quick luncheon, and Lady Morrey and her maid will need to be settled into their rooms.”

“Yes, my lord.” Shelton bowed and turned to her. “This way, my lady.” He led her up the stairs to Adam’s bedchamber. The servants quickly put away the clothes from Letty and Adam’s valises.

Letty took a minute to familiarize herself with yet another new room. The past few days had been far too much for her in many ways. She had only just started to settle down at Chilgrave, and now she had a new house and new servants as well.

“You look quite exhausted, lady wife,” Adam said as he joined her in the room. Mina and Helms quickly left to give them some privacy.

She sat back on the bed. “I am. It is silly, though.”

Adam closed the door and came over to her at the foot of the bed. He was unbearably handsome just then. She was quite besotted simply looking at him.

“Are you all right? I understand it must be difficult to jump about like this.”

“It is unsettling,” she admitted. “But I am more nervous about meeting the king this evening.”

“You need not be. The man is not perfect, but he is decent as a monarch.” Adam placed his hands on her shoulders and leaned in to whisper, “This evening after dinner, you and I shall finally have time to become better acquainted in our bed.”

“That would be nice,” she murmured.

He leaned in, kissing her in a way that made her head tilt back and her toes curl.

“Now, come down for lunch, and we shall rest a bit before dressing for dinner.”



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ADAM KNEW he was being a little distant. He could sense Letty's concern growing during their lunch, and so he'd sent her to rest for a few hours before they had to leave. It had given him time to think, to plan, and to worry. The king's invitation couldn't have come at a worse time. There were a hundred things that could go wrong.

When she was ready, his wife appeared at the top of the stairs, and the sight of her stole his breath. She wore a gown of creamy pale satin with a gold underskirt and a glittering gold frill collar about her neck. Her capped sleeves were dotted with soft, shimmering pearls, and her bodice matched the gold underskirt. The design was not overly complex, yet the soft cream and bright gold, enhanced with the pearls on her fuller court skirts, had the most stunning effect. Her dark hair was piled atop her head, with a few loose curls escaping to rest against her cheeks and down the back of her neck. And there in the coils of her gleaming hair was the Morrey coronet.

His wife looked like a queen.

Letty paused at the bottom of the stairs. "Do you think His Majesty will approve?" she asked.

Adam swallowed and nodded. "He will. And I shall be glad Princess Charlotte is no longer with us to be envious of you."

"You think perhaps we ought to leave, so we might not miss dinner?"

Adam realized that he had been staring at her for quite some time now. "What? Oh yes." He escorted her to their coach.

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AS CARLTON HOUSE came into view, their coach joined a line of other conveyances that waited to drop their passengers off

in front of the large palace doors. Carlton House was quite the sight when the king chose to entertain. The dozens of windows that faced the south side of Pall Mall were lit, illuminating the area like daylight. The vast structure was indeed a palace in all but name.

Having been here once before, Adam was accustomed to its extravagant opulence, starting with the hexastyle portico of Corinthian columns that led to a foyer. Some of the world's finest works of art hung upon the walls, already drawing admiring looks from other guests who had never been here before.

Letty kept close to him; she linked her arm through his as they followed the stream of guests inside. They entered a suite of rooms with its enfilade opened to allow for a long banquet table. Adam nodded at those he recognized. But when he glimpsed Avery Russell at the far edge of the dining room amongst a cluster of other guests, they barely shared a glance. They dared not acknowledge each other more than that.

“Adam, you devil,” a familiar voice broke in. “How are you?”

Adam turned to see the Duke of Essex with his wife, Emily, at his side. Godric was a towering wall of muscle with dark hair and flashing green eyes that often sparked with a dangerous temper toward fools. It was said the violet-eyed beauty at his side was the only creature in the world who could tame him.

“Godric,” Adam greeted. “We missed you at the wedding.”

“I know. Damned pity to miss it. We were in the country when we heard that you were getting leg-shackled. I offer my belated congratulations.”

Godric bowed his head to Letty. “Lady Morrey, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Your Grace,” she answered with a blush. Her gaze then turned to Emily, and the two women separated themselves from the men to speak.

“So, *married*. Never imagined you would do it,” Godric said. “Pembroke said you weren’t the sort to settle down.”

How thoughtful James was to try to hide the real reason in conversation with others—not that it mattered. A number of titled men remained bachelors all their lives, with no concern as to who would be their heirs. He had not exactly cultivated that reputation, but James apparently thought he needed to, likely in order to protect his cover.

“Yes, well, when the right woman is thrust upon you, it is hard to say no.” He watched his wife and the pretty young duchess, wishing they would stay safely away from the windows and dark corners of the room. Damnation, he was going to see assassins in the wings at every turn until he could end the threat to Letty’s life.

“I agree with that. Marriage was an unexpected surprise for me as well. My little hellion thought she could refuse me too, until I finally convinced her otherwise. Damned curious thing to meet a woman who wanted me for *me* and not my title when she finally agreed to marry me.”

“It’s lucky you kidnapped her when you did, or else Pembroke may have married her rather than you.”

“Do not remind me,” Godric grumbled. “I was never so glad as when he married. The man is a bloody saint, and all the women adore him. If only they knew he was a member of *your* wicked club. They would not think him so saintly then.”

Adam laughed. “Even then, he is still a better man than the rest of us. Imagine how I feel having him as a brother-in-law.”

Godric laughed. “Isn’t that a sobering thought?”

The dinner gong sounded, and everyone began to pair up for dinner. Adam and Godric rejoined their wives and proceeded to the banquet table.

“You are up here.” Adam led Letty toward the head of the table. A tall man in the finest clothes money could buy stood at the head of the table, and Letty gasped at the sight of the king.

King George IV was no longer in his prime at sixty years of age, but he still struck a dashing figure, if a bit rounder at the edges. The king had been raised a handsome, high-spirited boy, always bursting past the bounds of his strict upbringing. The man had spent much of his life alternating between indulging his passions and trying to please his parents.

“Ah, Morrey.” The king beamed at them. “Finally, I meet the lovely woman who stole your heart.”

Letty dipped immediately into a deep curtsy. Adam bowed.

“Your Majesty,” they both replied.

“Thank you for the invitation,” Adam said. “May I introduce my bride, Leticia.”

The king studied Letty intently, missing nothing.

“You chose well, Morrey. Not only is she quite lovely, but there’s a light in her eyes that tells me you do not have a dull life ahead of you.”

Adam nodded and smiled a little. “I am most fortunate.”

“And so am I. Tonight I lay claim to both your wife and Essex’s.” The king nodded toward the Duchess of Essex, who was being escorted to them by Godric.

“Indeed. You will find both of them good conversationalists,” Adam promised and patted Letty’s arm as he helped her into her seat.

The dining room was full of chatter as the courses began to arrive. Adam and Godric sat next to each other at the far end of the table near the hostess of the evening, Maria Fitzherbert, the woman the king had loved his whole life. Adam made polite conversation with Maria but kept his attention subtly trained on the opposite end of the table where Letty spoke to the king. Her face was animated by whatever she was saying. The king and Lady Essex appeared to be listening quite intently.

“I must thank you, Lord Morrey,” Maria said, catching Adam’s attention.

“For what, madam?”

“George told me what you did last year, and he is so happy to meet your bride. You know how he feels about love.”

“Indeed,” Adam replied.

The king had been so in love with Maria that he had married her when he was underage. He was eventually forced to annul the marriage and unite himself with Princess Caroline of Brunswick, yet in his heart he’d always been loyal to Maria. Now that Caroline was dead, the king was living more freely in the open with Maria again.

When the dinner was over, the king relinquished Letty to Adam’s care once more.

“Well done, Morrey, very well done. She’s quite shy until one engages her, but then she flowers most beautifully. She’s clever and brilliant, and if she weren’t so clearly in love with you, I’d steal her from you.”

Adam bowed to the king. “Thank you, Your Majesty.” Adam felt some of the tension inside him ease now that his wife was by his side again.

Adam wondered if the king was right. Was she in love with him? He couldn’t deny the stirrings in his own heart, but he dared not guess whether she felt the same. Indulging in those thoughts now might get them both killed if he were to become too distracted.

“You survived dinner with the king,” Adam praised her.

Letty’s brown eyes glimmered. “Did I?”

“You quite clearly won him over.”

“It was rather frightening, to be honest, but Emily was so calm, and that made everything much easier. The conversation flowed quite freely, and I was glad to have a chance to speak.”

Adam and Letty moved away from the guests still hovering about the dinner table. “And what did you talk to the king about?”

“Politics, mainly. You see, I believe—” Letty began, but her words died as Avery Russell walked past them abruptly,

nearly knocking Letty over. He didn't stop, but kept moving, vanishing into the crowds.

“What the devil . . . ?” Adam was still looking at Avery's vanishing back when Letty slipped something discreetly into his palm. Recognizing the sleight of hand in play, he automatically tucked the slip of paper into his coat sleeve.

“Follow me.” He escorted Letty into a small library off the main dining room. Once he checked to make sure they were alone, he removed the note and unfolded it.

*They are looking for you both. Leave at once. Do not return to Chilgrave.*

Adam cursed softly. Once he had relayed the message to his wife, he strode toward the fire and tossed the letter into the flames. Letty remained at his side, an anxious look marring her features.

“Adam, what are we to do?”

“Exactly what he says. Come, we'll get your cloak and have our coach brought round at once.”

In a matter of minutes, Adam was lifting Letty inside the carriage. As he climbed in after her, he saw a footman's stare linger upon them too long before he turned and headed for the Carlton House stables.

It chilled Adam to the bone to know that even amongst the king's servants there were spies. And not the kind who protected the Crown.

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CAMILLE SMILED and fluttered her fan as she watched the English king laugh and hold court with his subjects. The man enjoyed hosting these simpering fools. No wonder her master wished to destroy him and all those who followed him. They dined while others starved. They laughed and danced, while only a few streets away women sold themselves to feed hungry babies and men worked themselves to death to feed their families.

*“We must defeat the system from the inside out,”* her master had often said. *“We must bring it all down to build something better.”*

The king approached Camille and offered her a rakishly charming grin. “Lady Halsey.” The fool thought her to be English like all the rest. It was far too easy to act and speak like an English lady, and no one had ever questioned her pedigree, not when she acted so perfectly English.

“Your Majesty.” She dipped into a curtsy, allowing the king to see her ample bosom in the dark-purple court gown she wore. It was so easy to distract men.

“A pretty widow. You have your pick of hearts to break tonight.” The king laughed before moving on to greet the next guest.

Camille turned her attention back to a man with reddish-brown hair who wound his way lazily through the crowd. She saw him bump sharply into the very person Camille had come to find—the new Lady Morrey.

Camille flicked her fan up in front of her face to hide her shock as she saw the man holding on to Lady Morrey’s arm. Lord Morrey, the hapless English aristocrat her master had so easily dismissed, was the man who’d foiled her attempt on Lady Edwards’s life.

*So . . . Lord Morrey is a spy.* She gazed at the handsome Lord Morrey and recognized those gray eyes that had so captivated her when she’d glimpsed him briefly as he’d thrown himself between her and her target. He was as tall and well built as her master, an equal match. How had her master not known that this man was a spy? He was the farthest thing from a silly English dandy.

Camille noticed the slight adjustment Lord Morrey made to his sleeve a moment after his wife pressed her hand to his. The man was good, almost perfect, but she missed nothing. He’d received something from the red-haired man and had tucked it into his sleeve. A message.

If Lord Morrey had married Lord Pembroke's sister, it meant she truly was important, so important that Lord Morrey had offered her the protection of his body and his name permanently.

Now that Camille was certain of the woman's importance, she would be even more certain to end her life. Whatever advantage she brought to the English Home Office, Camille would see it erased. It would be difficult now that she knew Lord Morrey stood between her and her prey.

There was only one solution. They would have to be captured so that the information she required could be pried from them. And then they would be disposed of.

Camille motioned for a footman to come to her as Morrey and his wife left the room. The man was one of her agents who had gained employment in Carlton House.

"Yes, my lady?" the servant asked, hiding any hint of knowing her.

"Follow them. Take plenty of men with you. Once they are well away from London, you know what to do. Get me the information, and then take care of them. Make it look like a random attack."

The footman nodded before slipping away into the crowd. Camille returned to the party, smiling as she noticed the red-haired man's gaze sweep across the room, not pausing on her at all. She was as good at blending in as he was. She couldn't help but wonder, was this new spymaster, Avery Russell, the reason her master was acting overly cautious? And if so, she would have to learn all that she could about him.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

LETTY DIDN'T LIKE the tired, worn look in her husband's eyes. They'd returned to the townhouse after the dinner at Carlton House this evening, and now Adam was seated at his desk, writing a few hasty letters while Mr. Helms and Mina packed their trunks again. Letty had changed out of her court gown into a blue velvet carriage dress for the long trip ahead.

"Where are we bound?" she asked Adam.

He finished writing a letter and rubbed the ink to blot it. "We're headed to my uncle's home."

"I wasn't aware you had any uncles."

"Just the one, and he's rather a character." Adam called Shelton, and the underbutler soon entered the study.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Take these. One is for Caroline and the other for Sturges. He is to deliver it to Mr. Walpole himself."

Shelton accepted the messages. "Of course, my lord. The luggage is packed, and the horses are ready to go, sir."

"Thank you." Adam stood and gently ushered Letty toward the door.

"Your cloak, my lady." Mina dropped a red velvet fur-lined cloak over Letty shoulders and gave her a matching muff to keep her hands warm.

"But, Mina, you aren't dressed to travel," Letty said in alarm. Her lady's maid glanced at Adam.

“Mr. Helms and I are to remain here, at his lordship’s request.”

She was to travel without a maid? She was to travel completely unattended? Was that even proper? Did she trust Adam enough to . . . Heavens, she had to, didn’t she? They were married, after all, but she still didn’t understand.

“Adam, why—?”

“I’ll explain once we’re on the road.” Adam nodded at Mina and guided Letty toward the door. As she stepped up into their waiting conveyance, she glanced back at the London townhouse. She’d barely had time to become familiar with anything in her new married life. Not here and not at Chilgrave. Adam joined her a moment later and closed the coach door as he sat down.

Letty waited for him to explain, hands fisted in her skirts.

“I’m sorry to leave them behind, but it is safer. We will be traveling quickly, and it may be dangerous. The less we have to worry about and the less luggage we have, the faster we can travel. My uncle will have a maid to see to you when we reach Scotland.”

“Scotland?” She’d only been to Edinburgh once when she was fourteen.

“Yes. My great-uncle Tyburn is my mother’s uncle. He’s quite young, close to my mother in age. They were very close growing up. He is a hardened Scotsman, but I think you will like him.”

Letty leaned back in her seat to face him. “Adam, how bad is it?” She kept her voice calm, even though her heart was pounding.

“It isn’t good. We were spotted at the king’s dinner party. I had hoped to leave for Ireland, but under the circumstances, I’d rather get us safely to Tyburn’s castle. He lives close to Ben Nevis, one of the tallest mountains in Scotland. We’ll be safe there. French spies will be reluctant to brave the wilds of the north. The landscape is harsh and the people harsher, at

least when it comes to strangers. The castle is even more of a fortress than Chilgrave.”

Letty’s head was spinning. This was no honeymoon—it was yet another desperate flight from danger. Fear settled in her belly, and it took a moment for her to speak. “Adam, will this ever be over? Will we ever be safe? I feel as though I might collapse.”

Adam held her close against him. He brushed his lips over her forehead. “Rest, lady wife. Find sleep for a while.”

Letty didn’t think she could sleep, yet somehow she drifted off. When she woke sometime later, she was uncertain of how much time had passed. The coach had stopped, and she found herself alone.

“Adam?” Her heart leapt into a panicked rhythm as she pushed the coach door open.

Adam stood in the lamplight of a small coaching inn, his cloak billowing out behind him. She drew in a breath of relief at the sight of him.

“Are we stopping?” she asked, raising her voice a little.

Adam returned to the carriage. “Yes. It’s been four hours. The horses need rest. We will spend the night and leave at dawn.”

Letty studied the dark expanse above, which glittered with stars. “What time is it now?”

“After midnight.” Adam caught her by the waist and set her on her feet, then escorted her inside. “Our luggage is already in our room.” They climbed the creaky staircase to their room.

He took her straight to the warm fire in the fireplace and held her chilled hands close to it. Winter was coming early, it seemed. Adam removed his cloak and draped it over a chair. There was a polite knock, and he opened the door to admit a man carrying a tray of food and a pitcher of wine.

“Thank you, Mr. Bristow.” Adam paid the man a handful of coins and locked the door. “Come eat, darling.”

Adam set the tray of food on the table, and Letty eased into one of the chairs. Adam took the other. Mr. Bristow had brought roast beef, leek-and-onion soup, and wine, all of which was excellent. She was relieved to find that she and Adam could be together like this, not feeling the need for talk simply to fill the passing minutes. Not that she minded talking with him. She quite liked it, but it was nice to know she could have a companionable silence with him as well. Letty gazed in exhaustion at the fireplace a long while before she sensed Adam was watching her.

“Did you have enough to eat?” he asked.

Letty nodded. She’d perhaps eaten too much. She felt rather like a wild animal, uncertain of when shelter and food would come again.

Adam held out his hand and leaned forward in his chair. “Give me your foot.”

“My foot?”

He chuckled at her reluctance. “Yes, your foot.”

Letty extended one booted foot. Her suspicion must’ve shown, because he laughed even louder.

“Oh, my darling, you are quite precious in your skepticism.” He caught her foot and set it on his lap, then unlaced her boot. He slid the boot off and took her foot in both of his hands and began to massage it. The sudden pleasurable touch melted every bone in Letty’s body.

“Is that something they teach at the academy for spies?” she asked.

Adam had a wolfish grin on his lips, which sent flutterings deep in her belly. “No, this I learned a long time ago from a friend.”

Letty briefly closed her eyes but soon opened them again. “Do you mean one of your mistresses?”

“Yes, but she was also a friend.”

“Well, I send her my thanks. This is quite wonderful.” Letty closed her eyes again and couldn’t help but moan as

Adam's strong fingers pressed into her tender foot, the tips of her toes, her ankle, and the arch of her foot in the most splendid way. She wondered what else he could do with those hands, where else he might put them upon her.

"Now, your other foot," he said.

Letty placed her other foot in his lap without hesitation, and he repeated the ceremony for her.

"I feel quite certain I would do anything for you just now, my lord," Letty said drowsily.

Adam chuckled. "I shall remember that. But for now, it's time for you to be in bed."

Letty grumbled a little as he removed her feet from his lap. She walked toward the bed.

"Lady wife." Amusement filled those two words.

She yawned. "Yes?"

"You are still dressed."

She glanced down at her gown and nearly groaned. She so desperately wanted to sleep.

"Here, allow me to assist you." Adam came up behind her and started to undo the tiny buttons down the back of her gown with an experienced deftness no doubt also acquired from his previous mistresses. For this, too, she was grateful. Within moments, her gown gaped at the back, and she was able to slide it off with ease and let it drop to the floor. She turned toward him and sat on the edge of the bed as he bent, lifted her chemise, and next removed her stockings.

"Adam, you must think me quite a silly, useless creature," Letty sighed.

He pulled the covers on the bed back, and she slid beneath them.

"Why would I think that?" He started to remove his own clothing.

"Because I cannot seem to stay awake like you can." She burrowed deeper under the blankets and watched her husband

bare his beautiful, muscled body.

“My dear, you’ve been through quite a lot these last few days. Indeed, more than most men could handle. It would be well within your rights to dissolve into hysterics after this nightmare of a honeymoon. Hell, *I* might dissolve into hysterics if *you* don’t.”

The thought made her giggle.

Down to his smallclothes now, Adam joined her under the covers. She slid toward him, feeling more awake now as she realized that perhaps tonight he would finally claim her as a husband would his wife.

She rested her cheek against his chest, the heat of him emanating through to her and his heartbeat steady and slow. “Adam?”

He rubbed her arm, slow and soothing. “Yes?”

“I’m too tired to fall asleep. Will you tell me about your uncle?”

“Of course.” His hand moved to her hair, stroking it.

“Is he frightening?”

“Frightening?” Her husband sounded confused.

“Yes, he is a Highlander? I hear some of them in the far north are still quite brutish.”

“He isn’t frightening, but he is fierce. Show no fear when you meet him, and he will love you in an instant.”

“Will he?”

“I promise.”

“What else can you tell me about him?”

“He has two sons close to my age. Angus and Baird. They resemble him in their height and brawn, but they have their mother’s attractive features.

“Your uncle is married?”

“He was. His wife, Bonnie, died a few years after Baird was born. She was Tyburn’s great love, and he never married

again, though many a Scottish lass has wanted to be in his heart—and in his bed.”

“You visit them often in the Highlands?”

“Not often enough. Caroline and I quite adore Uncle Tyburn. I hope you will too. We could visit him often if you do.”

Adam rolled onto his side to face her. The candles on the bedside table created enough light to illuminate the outline of his body, making him look more of a shadow lover than a man of flesh and blood.

“Adam, I do not think I am so overly tired now. If you wish to . . .” She couldn’t say the rest of the words.

“If I wish to what, my darling?” Adam’s white teeth gleamed in the dim light as he smiled at her. It made her tremble with that balance of fear and anticipation.

“You know . . .”

“Say it. You must say *exactly* what you wish me to do.” He brushed her hair back from her face. The gesture was so tender, yet so at odds with the intensity of his eyes.

Letty was so aware of his strength then, of the massive width of his shoulders, of how easily this man could do whatever he wished with her and how she would be powerless to stop him.

“I wish for you to . . . bed me.” She was glad for the shadows that hid the wild blush on her face.

Without a word, he leaned in and kissed her. She fell onto her back as he moved partially over her. He took his time kissing her softly, and she delighted in the way his kisses created a fever beneath her skin. He unfastened the laces of her chemise and teasingly loosened the top so he could pull it down off her shoulders. He pressed loving kisses to each shoulder, then kissed her collarbones. She arched and gasped as he finally tugged the fabric farther down, exposing her breasts.

He fastened his lips over one nipple, sucking on it until she clawed her hands in his dark hair and writhed. Waves of heat moved from her head to her toes as she tried to focus on the sensation of his mouth at her breast, but she couldn't help but notice that his other hand was creeping up her inner thighs.

"Your skin is so soft," he said as he focused his attention on her other breast. As he sucked, he slid two fingers between her folds and drove deep into her. She squeaked in surprise as her hips shot off the bed.

He paused to look up at her. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, no. It just feels . . . like too much," she confessed.

"Ah, but there are better things still to come," he promised as he bent his head to her breasts again.

Her shaky legs parted for him, and he pushed the covers back on the bed, moving his body down so that he knelt between her thighs.

"Adam, I don't know if . . ."

"Hush, love. You must trust me." He lowered his face to her belly and kissed a path down to her mound. It so shocked her that all she could do was inhale sharply as he reached the hidden pearl at the top of her mound. He looked up at her then, their eyes meeting. "This, too, I learned from an old friend." His chuckle caressed her for but a second before he sucked it between his lips.

An explosion rocked through her, sudden and violent, so much so that she could do nothing but gulp for breath as he licked and sucked at that part of her body. As the sudden climax began to give way, she became aware of his mouth still on her mound, his tongue playing with her in the most sinful way.

"There," he said as he sat up a little. "You are relaxed, are you not?"

"I may never leave this bed," she sighed dreamily.



Adam gently gripped her thighs and pushed them wide as he settled between them and kissed her again, their bodies pressed chest to chest now. The weight of him was surprising, but welcome. She felt strangely safe with his body cradled by hers, yet the hard press of his shaft so close to her core was a little frightening as well. Such a curious thing, she thought, to feel so excited and afraid at the same time.

“I’m sorry, my darling,” he said against her lips as he shifted himself closer to her and his shaft now pressed just at the edge of her folds.

“For what?” she asked a second before he drove into her. Her twitching inner walls vibrated with panic as he breached her maidenhead. She cried out, digging her nails into his shoulder and biting her lip.

“Relax, my darling. Let your body adjust.” He held still, and she felt too full of him, of everything. It was almost hard to breathe.

“Is that the worst of it?”

“Yes, but when I move in a moment it may sting. I’m sorry if it does.” He sounded like he meant it, that he hated hurting her. Something stirred in her chest, something wonderful and full of light at the thought.

Letty tensed as he started to move. He cursed and stilled.

“Letty, sweetheart, if you do not relax, I won’t be able to move.”

“I don’t know how,” she admitted, then looked away in embarrassment.

Adam’s lips came down on hers, kissing her, nibbling at her playfully until she started to giggle and her legs widened and her inner muscles eased their rigid tension.

Now when he began to move, it stung, but not so terribly as she expected. She felt oddly empty as he left her body, but as he drove into her again, his shaft now much like the arrow she’d been warned of, seemed to strike at the heart of her. How was that even possible?

He thrust over and over, the stinging fading away to something else entirely. Her lashes fluttered closed, but Adam commanded her to open her eyes.

“I want to see that sweet fire in your eyes as I take you,” he growled. His domination of her in that moment took her to a frightening new peak. This . . . *this* was the thing he’d been trying to tell her about. The secret battle of wills and pleasures that was sacred between two lovers. It was not something words could ever describe. It was dozens of complex emotions woven into a tapestry of pleasure, domination, and surrender. Of trust on both sides.

In some wild and wondrous way, she was both fully present with him, their flesh becoming one, yet also lost in some land where a shadowy lord claimed her as his own. Adam was both of these male presences, and she was fascinated, addicted to it, and to him.

He drove into her harder, his hips flexing as she moved her hands down his shoulders to his buttocks, gripping him, feeling his raw power as he filled her over and over.

Now she was the one in control as she gazed up at him and thrust her hips up, crashing them together more fiercely. Then something miraculous happened—that blinding pleasure hit her at the same instant it hit him.

He roared her name hard enough that the walls shook. He grew rigid, the tendons in his neck standing out as he gave himself up inside her. She felt him, wet, hot, filling her. They clung to each other in the aftermath, their bodies quaking.

Adam relaxed into her, his weight heavy but not unwelcome. Sweat dewed upon their bodies, and the chilled air of the inn began to cool them. He stirred long enough to pull the covers back up over them, but he remained inside her. He was not as hard as before, which left Letty curious, but she would ask him later to explain the mysteries of the male body.

“Now, I have finally claimed you.” Adam let out a rough chuckle before he kissed her temple and rolled them both over so they still lay fused together on their sides, facing each other.

“Perhaps it is I who have claimed you?” she replied, feeling her body still twitching around his. A thought occurred to her that at first brought joy, then fear.

Adam brushed the backs of his knuckles over her cheek. “What is it?”

“What if . . . What if I have a child from this night?”

Hurt darkened his stormy eyes. “You do not want my child?”

“I do, but I worry about its safety. We cannot run forever, not if we want to raise a child.”

Comprehension lit his eyes. “I wish I could say I would’ve pulled out of you and spilled my seed upon the sheets, but I don’t think the devil himself could’ve stopped me tonight. For that, I am sorry. I can only promise that if we have a child, I will protect it with all that I am, just as I will with you.”

His vow should have made her feel safe, but it didn’t erase the knowledge that they were still in danger, that any child she might carry may also face that danger. Letty burrowed closer to Adam. Her fear for the future would rob her of any decent sleep she might have before dawn.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

ADAM AWOKE as dawn crested the horizon. He tended to wake up exactly when he needed to, no matter how tired he was. It took him a moment to orient himself and remember why he was still holding a mostly naked woman—correction, his *wife*—in his arms. Her chemise was scrunched up around her waist, her lovely breasts on full display.

Adam pushed the covers off as he sat up and dragged his hands through his hair. Letty's virgin blood was on his shaft and thighs. He winced. He should have been tender and slow with her, not like a rutting stag. He had lost himself in her last night in a way he never had before. Deep down he had known it would be like this, that first moment he met her. It was as though part of him had recognized its other half, the part that would make him whole once more. Ever since he'd lost John, he hadn't been himself. Being with Letty was allowing him to recapture that joyous part of himself, the part that thrilled at being alive, and being in love.

She didn't know yet that what they had shared last night was extraordinary. It was truly a gift. Thoughts of their incredible joining soon led to thoughts of its possible consequences, such as a child. He had to find whoever was after Letty and put an end to the threat by any means necessary. He would not have any child of theirs put in danger.

With great reluctance, he dressed and woke his wife. She rubbed her eyes, stretched, and blinked against the pale morning light.

“Adam? Where . . . ? Oh.” She realized then that she was naked and pulled the covers up over her breasts, her cheeks deepening to a rosy hue.

“Good morning.” He sat down on the edge of the bed and cupped her cheek, unable to stop grinning. “How do you feel? Are you sore?”

“Sore?” She tensed and then nodded. “A little. Oh heavens, I’m so embarrassed.” She tried to pull the covers over her head like a child. Adam laughed as he pulled them back down to see her face.

“You were magnificent last night. The best I’ve ever had,” he promised her.

Her eyes grew round. “Truly? The best?”

“Most certainly.” Adam wanted to tell her that the previous night had been more than he had ever dreamed, that it had been magical, but he was afraid such words would make him sound like a foppish schoolboy. “You’ll have time to rest in the coach today. We have a long journey ahead of us.”

Thankfully, a coach wasn’t the best place to make love. He had done it in the past, but it was far from comfortable. The jarring of the road and the sudden unexpected dips in the holes were quite disruptive to moments of passion. Besides, she needed time to heal before he made love to her again.

“I’ll see to the horses and check on our driver while you dress.”

Adam left her to give her time to adjust. He imagined it might be a little jarring for her to wake no longer a virgin, with the remnants of her blood upon her thighs. He should’ve cleaned her last night, but they had been too tired to do much else but collapse. Now she would have some time to herself to adjust and prepare for the day.

The horses and the driver were made ready, and he returned to find Letty finishing the buttons on a day gown that she needed no assistance to put on. It seemed Mina had packed her bags wisely, with gowns that left Letty able to care for

herself. He had hated leaving Helms and Mina behind, but it was safer for the two of them to travel alone.

He leaned against the doorway, watching her finish the last button on her gown, lost for a moment simply relishing that this woman was *his*. Even though they had been brought together under terrible circumstances, he was content. No, more than content—he was happy.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.” She gathered her long hair at the nape of her neck and tied it up with a rose-colored ribbon that matched her gown. She looked so much younger with her hair styled like that. More like a girl of sixteen than a married lady of twenty. It only increased his urge to protect her. She started to lift her valise, but he gently nudged her aside and carried it along with his own down to the coach.

The ride north took another two days as they left England behind. At night, they collapsed into bed at an inn, and despite Adam’s desire, he didn’t have the heart to stir Letty awake simply to satisfy his lust. Instead, he held her in his arms, whispering to her about his life, and she whispered back—sharing of themselves in matters of the heart and mind rather than their bodies. He grew closer to her, reveling in each moment that his wife opened her heart to him.

Letty was a woman who believed in love, the kind that made poets dream and lovers sigh. Yet she was not a silly girl with nonsense in her head. She was a true romantic, but he could tell she had tempered that longing for love some time ago, holding her deepest dreams within. He understood, in a way. The marriage mart was not always seen as a place for love. The very name announced the mercantile or even mercenary intentions some went into marriage with. It wasn’t a place where love matches came often. Perhaps that was why she had passed two seasons without a marriage proposal.

As he watched her sleep in his arms, he brushed his fingertips over the curve of her nose and the winged arches of her eyebrows.

*“Love will find a way through paths where wolves fear to prey.”*

She stirred at his recitation of Lord Byron’s words but didn’t wake. Adam continued.

*“I have great hopes that we shall love each other all our lives as much as if we had never married at all.”*

“Adam?” she asked, her eyes still closed.

“Yes?”

“I do so like Byron. Do not stop.” She moved a hand to rest above his heart, and something sweet and pure caught his breath as he held still. “Please.”

*“Heart on her lips, and soul within her eyes. Soft as her clime, and sunny as her skies.”*

She sighed dreamily. “I like that one. Tell me another.”

*“You are you and I was I; we were two, before our time. I was yours, before I knew; and you have always been mine too.”*

He thought back to the day when she’d first come to see him, to seek answers about Gillian. He had been struck by her then, and not simply for her beauty. There had been something else, as though she was a piece of him that had long ago been parted and had only just in that moment been brought together.

She had looked upon him with the same baffled recognition, but he had done nothing. He had been polite and kept his distance. Love and marriage did not belong upon a path to vengeance.

Adam settled back in the bed, resting his head upon the pillow as he watched the moonlight sweep over the room before the clouds covered it and drowned them in darkness.

*I HAD A DREAM, which was not all a dream.*

*The bright sun was extinguished, and the stars*

*Did wander darkling in the eternal space,*

*Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth  
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;  
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day.*

HIS HEART HAD BEEN CLOAKED in a starless sky, but Letty shone through the heavy clouds, burning away at his harsh need for revenge. He could not hold on to his anger and hate, not when this woman held love out to him.

Someday he would face a choice—her or his duty.

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BY THE THIRD DAY, Letty was thoroughly sick of being in a coach.

“May we stop and stretch our legs soon, Adam? I am going mad being trapped for so long in here.”

Adam nodded. He opened the coach window and told their driver to stop at the next inn which wasn't far. They were traveling roads that were familiar to him now, and Letty was grateful that he knew what stops they would be coming to soon.

“It won't be long. We'll have an early dinner at the Crown and Thistle.”

Letty laid her head back on Adam's shoulder. She replayed the previous night in her mind, a small, secret smile hovering about her lips. To discover that her husband was a romantic at heart, that poetry moved his soul as it did her own, was a true joy. But it was possible he wasn't a man who enjoyed reading. Most rakes memorized bits of poetry to impress ladies; perhaps Adam knew only a few artful lines, rather than being a devoted reader.

“Adam, are you a great reader, or a man who prefers only sports and activities out-of-doors?” She considered herself rather balanced, enjoying the physical pleasures of riding, walking, and even fishing, though certainly not the part of



baiting hooks. She also enjoyed reading books on a great number of subjects. She was not quite a bluestocking, at least compared to some of her friends.

“I enjoy both,” Adam answered. “You did not have a chance to spend much time in Chilgrave’s library, but when we return, I will show you.”

“I would like that.”

“We will be at Tyburn’s home this night, and he has a decent library as well.”

Letty lost herself in daydreams of the wild Scottish wilderness, of her and Adam riding across the heather-covered hills.

The coach stopped at the Crown and Thistle just after dark.

“Let’s go inside and have a bit to eat.” Adam instructed their driver to rest the horses. “We can stay an hour or so and then continue on our way.”

They entered the small inn and found most of the tables were full of men and women, a few eating and drinking despite the early hour.

“Wait here. Let me see if I can arrange a private dining room for us.” Most coaching inns had several rooms strictly for married couples dining alone, since gentle-born people usually did not sit down to dine amongst the lower classes. Letty honestly did not mind either way, but Adam had strode away so quickly that she could not call him back without drawing attention to herself. She already felt a bit on edge once they’d entered Scotland, knowing that the English were unwelcome, especially this far north. The last thing she wanted to do was draw the focus of a roomful of burly Scots.

Adam leaned against the bar and spoke with the innkeeper while Letty stayed put close to the door. The door opened, and several men came in. Pressed against the wall as she was, the men did not see her. They scanned the large taproom before their focus halted on one person—her husband.

Every muscle tensed as she feared they would turn and see her next. These men were here for her and Adam—they had to

be. The group of men, seven in total, began to speak softly with English accents rather than Scottish. They chose one of the few empty tables left in the room. Adam turned and came toward her, surprisingly relaxed. Surely he wouldn't be that calm if he had seen them.

"This way, my darling. There's a room at the back for us." He escorted her past the table of men, with his arm around her shoulders. Letty kept her chin steady, her eyes straight ahead. The second she and Adam were alone, she would tell him what she had seen. They entered a small room with a table and two chairs, which would have been cozy if it weren't for their current circumstances.

"Adam—" she began.

He held a finger to his lips as he locked the door. "Yes, this will be lovely, a nice quiet dinner," Adam said as if everything was fine, but he lifted one of the chairs and wedged it back under the latch. "I know you must be tired from all our travels," Adam continued as he went to the window and eased it open. Then he motioned for her to come over.

"This way," he whispered urgently, just as someone knocked loudly at the door to their room. "I'll boost you. Get outside and wait for me." Adam paused, a sudden fear in his eyes. "If we become separated, steal a horse and ride north on this road. It will take you straight to my uncle's land."

"No!" Letty's eyes burned. She was not going to leave him. The door thudded as something hard collided with it from the other side. Adam braced himself against the chair that held the door shut.

"There's no time to debate this. Go, now!" Adam hissed.

"I cannot leave you." Something inside her, something black and full of despair, feared that she might lose him forever.

"I'm not asking. I am ordering. You swore to me in that meadow by Chilgrave that you would do what I said when it matters. This is one of those times. Now go!" He nodded at the

window as the door rumbled behind him with another resounding impact.

“And leave you to die? I made a vow too, not to part with you until death.”

“And what if you are carrying a life within you, a life *we* created? You must put that life above mine. Do you understand?”

Letty’s hands went to her abdomen. She didn’t know if she was pregnant or not, but he was right—if there was even a chance, that life had to come above all else. It was a choice she had never imagined making—Adam or the child she might be carrying.

“*Please,*” Adam begged as another impact against the door shook him.

She rushed to him, kissing him fast and hard as she whispered, “I love you.” Then she dashed to the window and scrambled through it, dropping to the ground. Almost instantly, hands seized her, one clamping over her mouth.

“Got her!” someone snarled in triumph. Letty screamed against the gloved hand before she was shoved facedown into the earth and the weight of a body crushed her back.

“Bind her hands,” someone snapped.

She felt rope wrap around her wrists, but rather than struggle, Letty stopped fighting and went still. Her sudden lack of movement momentarily confused the men who’d grabbed her.

“You crushed her, you fool. We need information first.”

The weight holding her body down vanished. The sound of men scuffling behind her told her that now was the time to run. She surged to her feet and dashed for the stables a few yards away. The door was open, and she rushed inside. The coach driver was sitting up in a corner, eyes closed as he rested with their horses.

“Mr. Marin?” She seized his shoulder and tried to rouse him, but Mr. Marin’s head fell back, exposing that his throat

had been slit from ear to ear. The dark-blue cloth of his coat had hidden the blood that now coated her hand. His body slumped sideways and fell to the ground with a thud. Letty tripped as she backed up a step and fell on her backside. She stared at the lifeless body. An innocent man had died because of her and Adam.

“Check the stables!” a voice growled from nearby.

Letty leapt to her feet and searched for a hiding place. She climbed up the ladder to the loft, even though she was sure they would check there. One of the flat beams stretched across the middle of the barn just above the loft space. She hoisted herself up and scooted along the massive beam. She was just small enough that if she tucked her dress and cloak tight about her and pinned her arms on either side, she might go unseen from below. She closed her eyes as sounds warned her that the men were searching for her.

“She has to be here. She has nowhere else to go,” one of the men said.

“She’s not.”

“Check the loft and every stall.”

Horses huffed and shifted in their stalls as the men tore through the stables. The ladder leading up to the loft creaked, and Letty held her breath. Her heart pounded loud enough in her ears that she almost couldn’t hear any other sound beyond it.

Keeping her balance on the beam, she dared not open her eyes, lest they see them glimmering in the dark from below. Hay rustled and boards groaned beneath the weight of a man just a few feet below her. She could smell him, a hint of gunpowder and sweat. Her nose tingled, threatening a sneeze.

“Come on down from there, Jordan. She ain’t there. We’ve got him. He’ll know where she ran off to.”

Relief swamped Letty at these words. Adam was still alive. And as long as he was, she wouldn’t give up. She had to get down and steal a horse to find Uncle Tyburn and his sons.

*I will save you, Adam. Hold on.*

The two men searched the stables once more before leaving. Letty stayed still, counting until she felt several minutes had passed before she dared to move. It was far more difficult getting down from the beam than it had been getting up, but she managed to land on a pile of hay with only a small thump. She waited again, ears straining for any sounds of men nearby. She searched the shadows but saw only horses poking their heads out of the stalls.

She chose a small horse, one that looked young and fast. She stroked her hand down its nose. It flared its nostrils and eyed her with defiance before tossing its head.

“You won’t let them catch us, will you?” she asked.

The beast, a dark-brown horse with a white stripe down the length of his nose, huffed as though offended by the question. Letty retrieved a bridle from the peg on his stall and fitted it to the horse. Then she slipped inside and saddled him.

She guided the horse out of the stall and mounted him. The stable door was still wide open, and she didn’t want to take a chance of being grabbed if she walked the horse out before getting on its back.

She leaned over the horse’s neck and whispered, “Run, my darling, *run!*” She kicked his flanks, and the horse shot through the door and barreled into the woods skirting the road.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“THERE SHE IS!”

Letty hissed a curse that would have made Adam blush. She kicked her heels into her horse’s flanks and bent low over the beast. The road was close, and as soon as she reached it, she gave her horse more rein, allowing him to run even faster. The thunder of pursuing hooves behind her was like the rumble of a distant and terrifying storm. If they caught up with her, all would be lost.

Letty studied the road ahead, afraid that her horse would stumble and roll, but she couldn’t slow now, not for anything.

She chanced one look back and saw at least two men on massive horses behind her. Those brutes could keep up with her on an open road, but perhaps not in the woods. It would be a risk to stray from the path on terrain she wasn’t familiar with, but what choice did she have?

“Hyah!” She slapped the loose reins against the horse’s sides as she veered sharply toward the woods on the right of the road.

The dense Scottish forest offered a dark and dangerous path, but Letty and her horse were small and quick. They dodged clumps of thistle bushes and skirted heavy copses of trees. One of the riders got close, his horse heaving alongside hers. Letty’s horse turned and snapped at the bigger horse’s neck, the sound so vicious that it made an audible snap.

“You little—” The man reached for Letty’s arm, but his horse screamed and pulled away.

There was a *crack* as something struck her arm. Letty flinched but didn't take her eyes off the wooded trail.

"Don't slow," she told the horse, hoping that somehow he could understand her.

The woods swallowed up the man behind her, but she didn't slow, didn't stop, didn't look back. She sent out a prayer to any magic that might still linger in the woods that she needed help.

*Show me the way to Tyburn's land.*

Moonlight seemed to illuminate the path ahead, and Letty swore it must be her terror and exhaustion blending into each other because she strangely trusted the light and let her horse follow it.

The woods eventually thinned and soon stopped altogether. Now it was only open land before her. In the distance, the mighty, dark shape of a mountain was black against the moonlit sky.

*It's Ben Nevis.*

Between her and the mountain was a dark stone castle. The horse made it halfway down the drive to the castle before he slowed and stopped. His sides heaved, and foam frothed at his mouth as he struggled to catch his breath. Letty slid out of the saddle. Her numb legs threatened to give out beneath her. She leaned against the horse, tears streaming down her face.

"You did it, my darling thing—you did it." She hugged his neck, soothing the beast until he began to calm.

"I must go on without you." She kissed the stripe on his nose before she raised her skirts and ran toward the distant castle.

Her lungs burned, and her feet felt like shards of glass had pierced the bottoms of her boots, but she didn't stop. She ran up the steps of the castle and pounded her fists against the door.

"Help!" she screamed. "I need help! Please!"

The door opened beneath her fists, and she tumbled inside.

“Ach, what the devil?” the man grumbled. “Some mad *Sassenach* screaming her bloody head off. Ye’ll be raising the dead next.”

Letty struggled to her feet, her eyes adjusting in the dim light.

“Please . . . my husband. Need Tyburn.”

The tall man with reddish-brown hair stared at her. “Ye need Tyburn?”

She nodded. “Adam . . . my husband . . . captured . . .” She was breathing faster now, and her head felt lighter. “Said to . . . find Tyburn . . .”

“Adam Beaumont is yer husband?” the man asked.

“Y—yes.” She wobbled, and the man caught her by the arm to steady her, causing her to screech as pain blossomed in her left arm.

“Christ, lass, ye are bleeding.” The man held up one of his hands. It was soaked in blood.

“Oh . . .” She slumped to the ground and lost consciousness.

Some time later, Letty became aware of voices arguing. She opened her eyes, finding three brooding Scotsmen peering down at her. The face in the middle had hair streaked with silver and more lines around his eyes and mouth.

“Uncle Tyburn?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“Aye, I’m Tyburn. Who are ye, lassie? Angus said ye mentioned my nephew, Adam.”

“He’s my husband.” She tried to sit up on the couch she lay on, and Tyburn pushed her back down.

“Husband?” Tyburn exchanged looks with his two sons. “What happened to ye? Ye are bleeding. Looks like a scratch, thank God.” He nodded at her arm. She glanced down in a daze to see that her gown’s sleeve had been cut off and her upper arm had been lightly bandaged.



“We were coming to you. Adam thought it would be safe, but they found us. Attacked us at the inn . . . Adam told me to escape. Dear God, we don’t have any time. They’ll kill him!”

“Who?” Tyburn demanded, a dark gleam in his silver eyes.

“We haven’t the time. We must go back and rescue him.” She started to rise.

“Ye are no’ going anywhere, lass,” Tyburn said. “Ye lost a bit of blood, and ye canna even stand on your feet.”

Something inside Letty began to burn, an inner fire that was too hot to control. “I’m going back, and you all are coming with me. Now get me my bloody horse!” she shouted.

The three men stared at her for the span of a heartbeat before they leapt into action. The one named Angus rushed from the room, and the other two helped her to her feet.

“Which inn was it, now?” Tyburn asked as they walked toward the entryway.

“The Crown and Thistle. The men who took him were English. There were at least six of them, maybe more.”

The younger man, Baird, grinned. “It’s been a while since I’ve crushed a few *Sassenach* skulls—no offense intended, milady.” He offered her a charming, bashful smile after his rather bloody statement.

“None taken. That is precisely what I expect you to do.” She winced as they stopped on the stairs. Angus came riding into view with three horses behind him.

“Ye are certain ye can keep up?” Tyburn asked her. “There is no shame in staying here. Ye are injured. That was no mere scratch you took getting here. It looks like ye were shot, but the bullet grazed ye.”

She looked up into the older Scotsman’s face. “Adam sacrificed himself for me. When I left, he was still alive, and I will not leave him. Not after . . .” The most important words she had ever wanted to say turned into a sob, which she choked down. She straightened her shoulders. “We must ride—*now*.”

“I dinna know who ye are, lass, but I already like ye.” Tyburn gave her uninjured arm a gentle squeeze and helped her mount her horse. He was a large, fierce creature with a dusting of feathered hairs on his hooves.

“Is he fast?” she asked Angus.

“Aye, milady, fast and mean. Ye’ll be safe atop him. He’ll hold up a mite better than the one ye rode in on. That poor beast is resting in the stables.”

She didn’t care about being safe, only that he could rival the wind in speed. Tyburn and his sons leapt into motion, and she followed behind.

*Please hold on, Adam. We’re coming.*

---

ADAM HELD the door as long as he could, but the moment Letty vanished over the windowsill, the intruders crashed through the door, busting the latch right off. He leapt for the window, but he was dragged back into the room. He allowed his body to go limp, and the men who held him stumbled with his sudden weight. For a brief second, he was free. He rolled up onto his feet and struck out at the nearest man with a punch that would have felled even the fearsome Lord Lonsdale. Adam spun to deal with the other man in a similar fashion, but he stopped short when he saw the pistol in the man’s hand.

Never in his life had he felt more the fool. He was so far north in Scotland, he had dared to relax his guard. He’d assumed they would be safe this close to Tyburn’s land, and he’d left his pistol in their coach. All he had was a small, flat blade tucked in his boot, too far out of reach.

“No sudden moves, eh?” the man warned.

Adam stared at him, not saying a word. The man he’d hit slowly came around as two more men entered the room. None of them held Letty captive, however, so he could only pray that she’d escaped. He studied the men, assessing whether he might be able to take them all on at the right time. They

weren't hired men from rookeries, not entirely. Those men usually tended to be unshaven, gruff, and the smell that came off them would be enough to subdue a man on its own. These men were clean shaven, decently dressed, and were certainly doing well enough in their current line of work to look as they did. That meant whoever they worked for was successful too.

"The woman escaped. Jordan and Derek are searching the stables. She can't have gotten far."

The face of the man who spoke was familiar, but it took Adam a moment to recognize him. With his tall build, light-brown hair, square jaw, and deep-set eyes . . .

"I remember you," he told the man. "Carlton House. Dressed as a footman. Whose lapdog are you?"

The man's black eyes hardened. He flexed his hands menacingly. "Take him to the stables and string him up."

Adam decided to see what sort of men he was dealing with. "You would dare do that to me? I am a peer of the realm, the Earl of Morrey."

The faux footman looked aghast. "My humble apologies, sir. String him up *politely*, lads." None of the men seemed intimidated, so they all knew what kind of business they found themselves in, which didn't bode well for Adam.

Two of the men grabbed Adam by the arms and hauled him through the back door of the inn and out into the night. Luck had abandoned him. If he had been taken through the main taproom, he could have called for those loyal to Tyburn to come to his aid.

Another man rushed out of the barn. "Gent, the woman rode out on a horse a few minutes ago. Sayer and Marley went after her."

"Good, they'll catch her," Gent said.

Adam burned Gent's face into his memory. Though he was clearly in charge, he worked for another. Adam was left with little time to puzzle out who, however, as he was shoved against one of the wooden posts inside the barn, his coat and shirt ripped from him so he was bare from the chest up. His

hands were bound, and the rope was tossed over a beam above his head and pulled tight, stretching him up until he was forced to stand on the tip of his toes. Pain lanced down his body, but he held his scream deep inside.

One of the men pulled a coiled whip off a nail on a nearby post, and Adam closed his eyes. This wasn't going to be easy. But he would hold his tongue for king, country, and most importantly, Letty.

"I don't expect you to tell me where she went," Gent said with a casual menace. "You'll need some convincing first." Gent nodded at the man behind Adam who held the whip.

"Five lashes to start," he ordered.

Adam allowed his body to relax, knowing that any tension in his muscles would only add to the pain. It didn't make the moment any less brutal when he heard the whip whistle through the air a split second before it struck his back. He hissed and arched in pain, waiting for the next strike. The blows seemed to last forever. When the man finally stopped, Adam's mind had grown foggy with pain.

"Now—I think you are ready for some questions." Gent grabbed Adam's head by his hair and jerked his face up from where he'd let it drop against the beam to rest.

Adam blinked, trying to master the pain radiating through him.

"Where's the woman?" Gent asked.

Letty's face appeared so clearly in his mind that it shocked him back into a stronger mental state. He would not yield, not if her life depended on him.

"We won't leave much of a corpse behind for anyone to find if you don't talk, and we'll still get the information we want. Now where's the woman?"

Adam blinked again. Pain radiated from his back in heavy waves. They would probably flay him open by the end. But he tried not to think about that; he forced his mind onto Letty. She must be on Tyburn's land by now, if she had stayed near the

road. He prayed she was safe. So long as the men who'd gone after her didn't return triumphant, he could hold out hope.

"I do like it when someone makes it hard to get what I want." Gent's cold smile made Adam's stomach turn. "Another five lashes. Pain is a special friend of mine." The whip cracked even before Gent finished speaking.

Adam shouted with each blow. The men took turns whipping him, but Gent's frustration was beginning to mount. Adam could see him pacing the length of the barn, growling at his men to strike harder, before finally, annoyed, he called a halt to the lashing. Gent produced a knife and made sure that Adam saw it.

"I warned you." It was all he said before he started carving small lines in Adam's back. Adam hadn't been ready for that. He cried out at the pain. At some point, a flask was pressed to his lips. He tried to turn his head away.

"It's brandy. Drink," Gent commanded. "Drink, or it goes on your back."

*Brandy. God, I could use that.* He drank deeply until the flask was pulled away.

Adam had always been strong, even as a boy, but this was a hell unlike anything he'd experienced before. It was even harder not to think, to blink past the stinging sweat that poured into his eyes. He sagged in his bonds as time seemed to speed away, leaving him in a hellish purgatory as he languished against the post.

Suddenly, a sweet voice intruded upon his listless, drifting thoughts.

"My love . . ." The sweet voice spoke in his ear. "You're safe now."

"Letty," he breathed, hope fluttering weakly. "How . . . ?"

"I created a distraction, let loose their horses. I snuck into the barn to save you. It's all right now. Tell me where we can go to be safe," she pleaded.

His words slurred, and he tried to open his eyes but couldn't. "Not . . . here. Can't . . ." Why couldn't he open his eyes?

"Where can we go to be safe? I can't go on without you. They'll be back any minute. Tell me where I should go."

"Letty . . ."

"Yes?"

He saw her face in his mind, and then he heard his words. "You swore to me that you would do as I said when it matters." *Why did she come back?* "You shouldn't be here."

"But I don't know where to go. Tell me where I should go. Tell me." There was an edge to Letty's voice now. Something felt off.

He struggled to open his eyes again. His lashes fluttered, and he saw the face close to his was not his wife's, but a different young woman. The maid who had been serving drinks at the inn. Fire surged through his veins, and his muscles fluttered. Fear and rage rose within him, tempered only by the drug-addled confusion from the brandy. This wasn't Letty. He wouldn't speak, wouldn't say a word.

"Ask him again." Gent's voice cut through Adam's still-scattered thoughts. The girl caressed Adam's cheek.

"Please, husband, tell me where to go so I can be safe—"

"Gent, this isn't working," someone snapped.

The maid was shoved away. "Take the lass back inside and see that she doesn't tell anyone about this."

Gent loomed large before Adam. Adam stared back at him, quivering with pain and rage as Gent assessed him. Gent finally shrugged and looked at the other men nearby awaiting orders.

"We don't need him anyway. He's only a guardian. We'll find the woman's location some other way. Take him into the woods and finish him."

The rope around Adam's wrists was loosened, and he collapsed, his knees hitting the hay-strewn floor of the stables. Hands jerked him up and dragged him out into the chilly night. The cold Scottish breeze drifted into his face, making him more alert than he had been before. Soon he was released, his body hitting the ground.

"He'll be eaten by scavengers before anyone finds him," one of the men carrying him said with a dark chuckle.

"Still, take no chances. Cut his throat."

A foot pressed down on Adam's back, digging into his wounds. He cried out as the pain finally overtook him, only to hear the sound of an ancient Highland war cry, far enough away that it was perhaps more wind and imagination than reality.

*She found him. Tyburn.* Adam let go, knowing that Letty must be safe. She had a fire that burned in her, and if he believed in nothing else, he believed in that, believed in *her*.

---

LETTY FOLLOWED THE THREE HIGHLANDERS, who wore hooded cloaks as brown as the trees around them. Tyburn had shoved one of the cloaks in her arms when she'd dismounted.

"Use this as a shield. Curl up and cover yer body with it if someone comes. The men will not see ye. It is one of our Highland tricks, ye ken."

She had thrown the cloak about her shoulders and slunk behind them as they headed toward the barn. Angus held her back as the barn door opened. The four of them remained hidden at the edge of the woods to watch. Two men dragged a limp body between them into the forest.

She gasped and covered her mouth as she realized it was Adam.

Tyburn growled softly, the sound covered by the breeze.

“Dinna worry, lass,” Baird said. “We will slay them to the last.”

She didn’t care about that. She cared only about her husband.

“Lass, doona be hasty now. Wait for my signal.” Tyburn slunk off into the woods away from them.

“Stay here, milady. No matter what,” Angus said as he vanished in the opposite direction.

Letty held her breath as she watched the two men drop Adam onto the ground. He did not move until one man put his foot on his back, and then her husband howled. She jerked, instincts demanding she run to him, that she attack the men who were hurting him, but she couldn’t. Tyburn knew this land, and she had to trust him.

One of the men near Adam, the one who held him pinned to the ground, lifted his head, a knife laid against his throat. The sparse moonlight glimmered off the blade.

A sharp cry echoed across the forest, an eerie sound, like an ancient, angry wood spirit who’d been summoned into a flesh-and-blood creature. The cry came now from all around, and the sound turned darker and deeper, into a warlike bellow. That was when the three Highlanders attacked.

She would never forget that sight, their tall, ghostlike forms flying out of the shadows, converging on the two men. Swords sang and blades flashed in the moonlight as they cut through flesh and bone. It was over as quickly as it had begun.

Letty ran to Adam, gasping as she saw the deep marks on his back, the *flayed* flesh. She feared even touching him, lest she add to his pain.

“Laddie, can ye stand?” Tyburn demanded of Adam.

“Uncle,” Adam moaned.

“Aye, lad.” Uncle Tyburn’s voice softened. “Ye canna move, can ye?”

“I can,” Adam said, but even Letty knew that was a lie.



“Angus, Baird, find those bastards in the barn.”

The two brothers vanished into the night. A minute later there were screams, but they were soon silenced before Angus and Baird returned.

“Go tell Aberforth at the inn that we need a wagon and hay.”

Baird nodded and rushed off toward the Crown and Thistle.

“Who is Aberforth?” Letty asked Tyburn.

“The innkeeper is a friend. He owes me, given what happened to Adam under his roof.” Tyburn looked toward Angus. “Help me with him.”

Adam cried out as he was lifted up, and Letty couldn't help but cry as she followed. She felt helpless, useless . . . and Adam was in pain, possibly *dying*. She couldn't let herself think that.

Baird met them outside the barn, a wagon waiting for them. Tyburn and Angus laid Adam facedown in the straw to spare his flayed back. Letty climbed in beside him and clasped one of his hands.

“Adam. *Oh, Adam.*” She placed her hand upon his hair, careful not to touch him anyplace that might hurt. He was unconscious again, but he let out a small sigh.

“Ye ready, lass?” Tyburn asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Hold on. We stop for nothing.”

Tyburn mounted the front of the wagon and slapped the reins over the backs of the two cart horses. Letty lay down in the hay alongside Adam, holding his hand and praying to any god who might listen to save him.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT WAS close to dawn by the time Adam was carried into Tyburn's home. Letty's entire body ached as she stayed crouched in the hay next to her husband. Baird rode for the doctor, leaving Tyburn and Angus to take Adam to a bedchamber on the ground floor.

Letty watched helplessly as the two Scotsmen laid Adam on his stomach and had a servant bring hot water and clean clothes. If only she could take away his pain, make him hearty and whole again.

"Please, let me do something," she begged Tyburn. She sat on the bed as a footman set the clothes and water on a nearby table.

"Aye, lass, if ye can stomach it, we need to clean the wounds so the doctor may see what must be done." Tyburn's voice was soft, a little hoarse, and his gaze was a blend of stoicism and pity—whether the latter was for her or for Adam she wasn't certain.

"I can handle it." Letty bit her lip and dipped a cloth into the water, then began to dab at the drying blood on Adam's back. She'd never seen wounds like these before. The way he'd been hurt . . . cut open . . .

"What did they do to him?" she asked.

"I canna say for sure, but these look like lashes from a whip." He pointed toward the lighter wounds. "And this . . . a knife, maybe?" A dark cloud of rage filled his face as he looked to Letty. "I would kill those men again if I could."

Letty gazed at Adam's face, pale and worn-looking. Thankfully, he remained unconscious through what she was doing. "I'm glad they're dead. God forgive me, but I'm glad." She continued to clean Adam's back. She worked in silence for a long moment, feeling the weight of the older Scotsman's gaze upon her as she worked. But she couldn't stop her actions. If she did, she might break apart.

"Milady, I think it's time you told me everything," Tyburn said.

Letty stared at her husband a long moment before she let out a sigh. She told Adam's uncle as much as she could, but she didn't share the extent of Adam's activities, only that he worked for the government in secret. Even so, she felt she was being too free with her husband's secret life; she wanted now more than ever to protect him, though it seemed it may be too late.

"I ken his secrets, lass. Ye doona have to worry about me, Angus, and Baird."

"This is all my fault, my lord."

Tyburn put a hand over hers, squeezing it gently. "It isn't. And ye are family, lass. Call me *Uncle* or *Tyburn*."

Letty sniffed. It had been a long time since she had felt safe, at least since her life had been turned upside down. Even with Adam injured, she believed that Tyburn could protect them both from anything.

The doctor soon arrived, and Letty waited, heart in her throat, as the old man muttered a number of choice curses while examining his patient.

"The wounds arna deep. If he can survive the next week without his body becoming inflamed, ye mayna lose him."

Letty crumpled into the chair beside Adam's bed, the fire gone out of her. Tyburn quietly escorted the doctor out to give her some time alone.

She stroked Adam's dark hair back from his face, her hand shaking. Whispering soft, silly things to him, she prayed he could hear her, that her words would reach him wherever he

was. It stunned her that this dark, brooding stranger had become her world in such a short period of time. There was no denying it—she'd fallen in love with this man who spoke poetry late at night and carried deep secrets and heartache, yet made love to her with full, wild abandon and held her afterward as though she were the most precious thing he'd ever possessed. She couldn't lose him now. She couldn't.

“Adam, remember your vow,” she whispered over and over until she lost her voice and succumbed to exhaustion.

---

ADAM DWELLED in a twilight world that seemed half fantastical and half memory. He chased the phantoms of his younger self and Caroline through the years of their childhood up until the time that he'd attended university. The world around him flowed like fresh watercolors as he saw himself joining the Wicked Earls' Club after his father had passed. He relived nights spent at gaming tables, laughing with friends and taking women to bed . . . and meeting John Wilhelm.

John entered Adam's dream world, his body almost glowing as he played his part in the charade surrounding him. Only now, Adam saw John in a way he never had before. John's once bright eyes had become weary, and Adam now clearly saw the sorrow in him that before he had missed. John stood on that fateful bridge over the river.

“We failed them,” he said.

“Failed who?” Adam asked. Any moment now, he knew John would be attacked and fall into the depths of the water below.

“A government that destroys the voice of its people is no government at all. It is tyranny.”

It was an argument they had had before. The watercolor world faded, and he was now inside one of the lounges of their gentlemen's club, Berkley's. John cursed and tossed his newspaper on the table between his chair and Adam's.

“What is it?” Adam retrieved the paper and glanced at the article on the main page. Adam recognized the names of the men.

“More sedition discovered. Traitors to be hung in four days.”

“We failed them,” John said. He raised his brandy to his lips and drank deeply.

“Failed who?” Adam set the paper down.

“Those men. They weren’t dangerous; they wanted to talk. They did not pose a real threat. But because they weren’t of the peerage, their philosophical discourses were deemed anarchist and seditious. Now those men will die.” John leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. “It weighs upon me.”

His blond hair gleamed in the lamps in the lounge, and he again had that glow about him, but Adam didn’t know why he saw that now when he hadn’t seen it before. After a moment, John lifted his head and met Adam’s gaze.

“A government that destroys the voice of its people is no government at all. It is tyranny.” Again those words filled the air of his dream like a mantra.

“John, you know that the opposite is true as well. You may dream of democracy, living in a world of equal voices and equal thoughts, but so long as men are men, there will also be good and evil in equal measure. For every dreamer, every philosopher, there are madmen and murderers. For every voice of reason, there is a cry of chaos. Perhaps those men were harmless, but we’ve seen others who are not. When angry men gather to scream their rage at an established force, it doesn’t mean they are right. Not always.”

This was something Adam had struggled with much of his life. He was a man born to a privileged life, while so many others failed to get by. If he gave away his lands and money, all of it, it would not be enough to help everyone. What was the answer? There was no logic in stealing the wealth of some to give to others. It was a temporary solution that faded quickly. No, the answer was more complicated, rooted

somewhere in charity and increased opportunity for the betterment of all men, but they lived in an age where such things were not yet possible.

Perhaps someday things would change. Until then, he would watch and wait and support whatever might push toward that change. And he would also do his best to protect his king and his country without betraying the people of England. He did not always succeed, but he also did not always fail.

“I envy you, Adam,” John said. “You bear the weight of your life easier than I.”

Adam had not known then that John was a spy, or that he was in charge of catching men like this. At the time, Adam had been puzzled by his friend’s concerns.

The memory of that evening began to fade. The last thing Adam could see was John’s face darkening with creeping shadows until John vanished.

Then a soft light appeared, like a distant sunrise on the edge of his horizon.

“Adam?” Letty’s voice seemed so close, but she couldn’t be—she wasn’t in the dark with him. The sound of her voice filled him with a bright, beautiful stirring in his chest. She belonged in the light, not here in the dark with him, not surrounded by death and chaos.

“Adam, please wake up,” Letty begged.

Wake up? Was he asleep? He focused on moving, doing anything he could to wake. It felt as though his body were made of lead, lead that was on *fire*.

A hiss of pain escaped his mouth.

“Easy.” Letty’s fingertips touched his face, gently coasting over his forehead, then his cheek.

“Letty . . .” His voice came out like gravel.

“I’m here. You’re safe at Tyburn’s castle.”

“How?” He pried his eyes open, and a pale light blinded him momentarily. Had they made it? Was he really at his uncle’s castle? Flashes of Gent’s sneering face made his body tense in pain. How had he gotten away?

“We rescued you. Your uncle and cousins killed the men who hurt you.”

He focused his blurry gaze on Letty’s shape close to where he lay. “All of them?”

“Yes. All of them.”

“Good.” His vision began to clear as relief swept through him.

“You should drink something.” Letty’s beautiful face appeared before him as she held a cup to his lips. He drank, but it wasn’t easy.

“How long have I . . . ?”

“A week. Your wounds are almost healed. We’ve been putting salve on them to keep the skin from cracking open. You’ve healed much faster than the doctor thought, and you only suffered a fever in the first few days.”

“My uncle . . .”

“I’m here, laddie. I heard yer wife speaking and thought ye must’ve woken.” Uncle Tyburn’s face appeared as he joined Letty and bent to see Adam better.

“Thank you, Uncle. My wife—”

“Is a damned good lass. Ye chose well. Even injured, she came back with us to fetch ye.”

“Injured?” Adam tried to sit up and gasped in pain for his efforts.

“I’m all right, Adam.” Letty gently eased him back down. “It was only a little scratch.”

“A scratch from a pistol,” Tyburn said. “She’s a tough lass. She didna let me or yer cousins have a say about her coming with us.”

Adam, too weak to move, sighed heavily. “Yes, she has quite a fire in her. One I am more thankful for each passing day.”

“As ye should be.” Tyburn chuckled. “Now, I’ll help ye up, but ye must eat some broth and drink a bit of water.”

Adam nodded, knowing the pain would be great, but he should try to eat. Tyburn lifted him up, and Adam held back a cry as his back burned with invisible flames.

“Here.” Letty scooted closer to him and held up a bowl of soup. She started to lift a spoon to his mouth to feed him as one would a child.

“I can do it.” He took the spoon from her, but in his haste and desperation he knocked it out of her hand. It clattered to the ground.

“Oh, I should fetch a clean one.” Letty’s face turned red as she rushed from the room.

“Well, that was nicely done, ye daft fool,” his uncle said.

“What?” asked Adam.

“The lass wants to help, and ye didna let her.”

“I should let her spoon-feed me like some child? Uncle, if I do that, she will never see me as a man again. The last thing I can do is be weak in front of her.” Letty depended on him to be her protector, and in that regard he was failing.

“Ye are damned lucky I know a bit about marriage. Now listen close. Being wounded is not a weakness in a woman’s eyes, ye ken? But being cold, being cruel—*that* is weakness. Let yer wife feed ye, and then, when ye are healed, ye will be the man she needs, the one who trusted her to take care of ye when ye needed her. Trust me, laddie. *That* matters to women. It should bloody well matter to ye too.”

Adam was silent a long moment. “Perhaps you are right.”

“Of course I am.”

Letty returned then, a clean spoon in her hand. She glanced between the two men before approaching the bed and handing



Adam the spoon.

Adam looked at Tyburn, then turned back to his wife. “Actually, it might be better if you did feed me, if you don’t mind.”

Letty’s unease vanished. She smiled and took the spoon back, as well as the bowl, before she eased down on the bed beside him.

“I’ll be back to check on ye soon,” Tyburn said. “Letty, call if ye need anything.”

Letty blushed again as Tyburn left. “Thank you, Uncle.”

“Uncle?” Adam asked.

“He insisted. It seems I am worthy enough to be considered family.”

“Come closer.” She scooted nearer to him, the spoon still in her hand.

“Do you really wish me to help you?”

“I do. I’ll only end up dropping the thing again, in my state. I appreciate your aid in the matter.”

For the next several minutes, she helped him eat. He put aside his pride and focused on the relief he saw on Letty’s face as he finished the broth. Tyburn was right, damn him. Letty seemed happier that she’d been able to help—not because he was weak, but because she needed to feel useful. And she was. She was *more* than useful. He would have died if she hadn’t been able to reach his uncle and cousins.

“Thank you, Letty.” Adam covered one of her hands in his. “You saved my life.”

She blinked and turned away. He reached up and turned her face back toward him.

“Please, look at me.”

She did, and he saw tears clinging to her lashes like tiny diamonds. “You must be furious with me. I put you in this position. You are in danger because of me.”

“You can be so silly.” He said this teasingly, but she bit her lip, her eyes watering even more. “I was in danger long before I met you.”

He brushed her lips with his thumb. “Letty, *I’m* the reason you were hurt. You are in danger because I put you there, not the other way around.”

“But I followed Lady Edwards,” she insisted.

“That was her decision to let you. She could have stayed in the ballroom and left her hair alone. She chose to risk your safety.”

Letty still didn’t meet his gaze. “But you had to marry me, and—”

“Would you like to hear a confession, darling wife?” he asked.

“A confession?”

“Yes. A dreadful confession. I’m not sure if you can ever forgive me.”

She waited as he drew in a breath.

“I could have said or done anything I wished to avoid marrying you. The men who saw us kissing were friends of mine. No one would have called me out on that, not even your brother. He knows what I am, what I do. And the others—well, they would have let things go as I wished, in whatever direction. Not one of them would have breathed a word about what they had seen. You see, I let the situation justify my secret desire to have you. I was the one who wanted it, wanted *you*. I am the villain, my darling. Do not hate yourself—hate me, if you must.”

“Hate you?” she echoed softly. Her face was so adorable in that instant. “I do not think I could ever hate you, and perhaps that is exactly my problem. I fear I like you far too much.”

“You *love* me far too much,” he reminded her. He hadn’t forgotten what she’d said just before they had parted that awful night at the inn.

“I do.” Her smile sent flutters of excitement through his chest.

“And I love you.”

She finally met his eyes, such hope burning in her gaze. “You do?”

“How could I not? You are everything to me.” He almost told her that she mattered more than his need to avenge John. He wouldn’t deny it, but she didn’t need to know that she had at one point been vying with vengeance in his heart. All she truly needed to know was that he loved her, and she came before all else.

He leaned toward her, his lips brushing over hers as he tried to show her what she meant to him. That delicate kiss stole his breath in a way no kiss ever had before. It was a kiss of love, of undying devotion, and a promise of *always* being there for her, in whatever way she needed.

When he moved back a few inches, he saw her eyes were closed and she was smiling dreamily. He leaned back against the headboard, and fresh pain sparked in him as the spell of that perfect kiss faded. Letty opened her eyes and swept a fretful look over him.

“You should rest.” She helped him back down on his stomach, and then she applied more salve to his wounds. He had to focus his energy on healing as quickly as possible. He had a terrible dread that this was far from over, and he had to be ready to face whatever came next.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LETTY AND TYBURN walked together through the gardens inside the courtyard of his castle.

“Has it really been two weeks?”

“Aye, lass. Some say time passes differently here in Scotland.” He patted her hand where it rested on his arm. “A kind of magic, ye might say.”

They paused as she caught sight of Adam and his cousins standing on an open patch of grass, holding dull practice swords in their hands. Adam was taking turns sparring with both Angus and Baird.

He’d lost much of his weight and still looked far too thin, but his wounds had healed and were now only angry red raised marks. The last few days he’d taken care to work his muscles, and he’d spent much of his time outdoors, walking, riding, and now sparring. Angus and Baird were being careful with him, and she could tell Adam wasn’t pleased.

“You’re hitting like a child, Angus,” Adam shouted.

Angus muttered a curse but didn’t fight back any harder.

“And you, Baird, since when do you fight like a babe?”

“Ye are still healing, ye daft fool!” Baird shot back. “Ye want to end up back in bed?”

Letty tensed as Tyburn gently removed her hold on his arm and then walked toward the trio. He held out a hand to take Angus’s sword, and the two brothers moved back to let their father face Adam. Letty stood next to Angus and Baird and did

her best not to panic. She didn't like Adam trying to fight so soon.

"I willna go easy on ye, laddie," Tyburn promised. "Let's see what ye are made of."

Adam lunged for him, and the two met in a ringing clash of steel. Tyburn pressed on, blow after blow striking Adam's sword until Adam stumbled and fell. Tyburn held the blunt blade to Adam's throat.

"Ye need to give yerself time, laddie." He offered a hand to Adam. Letty noted the look of pained resignation on her husband's face.

"I don't have time, Uncle. You know that." Adam accepted his help, and Tyburn pulled him to his feet.

"A smart man knows 'tis better to heal than to train through pain."

Adam sighed, his shoulders drooping. When he saw Letty, he flinched. She empathized with his reaction. Tyburn had been counseling her on what Adam was going through, how he had suffered and felt so weak, not just in body, but in spirit. Letty hated that he felt that way. All she could see was his strength.

"Baird, Angus, let Adam have some rest. The man should have some time with his wife." Tyburn shot them a knowing look, and the three vanished into the gardens.

Letty stopped next to Adam, who idly swung his dull practice blade at his feet. "How did they do that?"

"Do what?" Adam asked.

"That vanishing thing. I swear it's some sort of Highland magic. They seem to just vanish at will."

Adam chuckled, and the sound warmed her heart. She hadn't heard that sound in quite some time.

"They have trained themselves to move that way, to use their surroundings to hide."

“Well, I would certainly enjoy that talent if I had it,” she said, then put her arm on his shoulder. “You are doing so well, truly. I know you are frustrated, but you mustn’t be.”

He shrugged, his smile vanishing. “Not well enough for my liking.”

“If I had been hurt the way you had, I would likely still be lying in bed and moaning dreadfully.”

“You wouldn’t,” he said quite meaningfully.

“No? How do you know that?” she asked.

Adam gently caught her by the waist with one hand and touched her arm, the one that had its own angry red scar.

“Because you took a bullet and kept riding. I doubt you would have been in bed long.”

Letty reached up, her fingers brushing his where the scar lay beneath her gown’s sleeve. “It was only a scratch. I thought a tree had hit me—”

He was smiling again. “Yet it *was* a bullet, lady wife. Just accept your heroic actions.”

She pretended to grumble at this, but secretly she was delighted at his playful response.

They walked through the gardens in silence until they found their way into a maze of hedgerows at one end of the courtyard. Over the last two weeks, they’d found themselves in a new dynamic as husband and wife. After all that had happened, there had grown a deep foundation of trust between them, a kinship born from shared danger and sacrifice. Each night she had lain beside him in bed, her body pressed close to his, comforted by his presence. But he hadn’t touched her, not in the way a man touches his wife when he wishes to make love to her. He was still healing, of course, but she feared that perhaps something was holding him back. She didn’t want anything between them, not ever again.

“Adam . . . ,” Letty began uncertainly.

“Yes?”

“It’s been three weeks since, well . . . We . . .” Even after all she’d been through with him, she was still too embarrassed to discuss sex.

“Since what?” A soft, knowing light in his eyes coyly mocked her.

“Since we made love.” There, she’d said it. “I know you have been healing and that you still are. I . . . Heavens, I guess what I wish to say is that when you feel better, I am ready to resume such activities.” That didn’t sound nearly so romantic as she had hoped—it sounded practically contractual. She still wasn’t sure how to speak of such things.

He turned her face toward him, and she tilted her head back to look up at him.

“You are a darling, wife. Splendid, delightful, charming, desirable. I don’t think I deserve you. In fact, I *know* I do not.” He kissed her then, a petal-soft kiss that spoke of love and all its many heartfelt yearnings before their mouths broke apart.

“Tonight,” he promised.

“Tonight,” she agreed, shocked and relieved that so important a detail in their lives had been so easily agreed upon. Tonight, she would have her husband back.

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EDWARD SHENGOE ENTERED a small inn on the outskirts of London. The taproom was nearly empty, save for a few drunken regulars. The past few months, Edward had been following Arthur Thistlewood and his rebel band from small inns to pubs as they met to discuss their plans to overthrow the government.

His assignment was to watch, wait, and when necessary, tell those above him what the rebels intended. If the plans were deemed dangerous, the men would be apprehended and tried for their crimes against Crown and country.

Edward removed his coat and hat as he met the bartender’s gaze. The man paused in pouring ale into a mug to nod his

head toward a door that likely led to a back room. Edward nodded in return and went inside. Thistlewood was already there, as were the mysterious Mr. Garland and his female associate.

“Greetings.” Thistlewood gestured for Edward to take a seat. Edward sat near Thistlewood as the other rebels arrived. Edward had a moment to observe Mr. Garland and the woman. They had approached Thistlewood’s group, somehow knowing how to find them. Edward had first wondered if they may be employed by the Home Office like him, but it became clear after that first meeting that whoever Garland was, he was not one of Avery’s Court of Shadows.

Edward hadn’t been a spy for very long. He had been recruited by Avery Russell after the previous spymaster had died, but he knew the look and feel of spies trained by Russell, and Garland was not that.

Avery Russell believed in the purity of their purpose, and he instilled that sense of loyalty to the Crown in his recruits. He was not a man who could be bribed, nor was he a man who would let others use him for their own ends. It was said that the former spymaster had fallen because he had let his private life collide with his work for the Home Office. It seemed Avery was determined not to let that happen to him.

Edward focused back on Garland, who stood, counting the men in the room.

“We have a week before the king addresses the House of Lords,” Garland said.

The woman beside him faced the other rebels, watching them. Her coquettish expression was only there for show, but what a show it was. If Edward hadn’t been good at reading people, he might believe what they wanted him to think, that this woman was Garland’s mistress. But she was so much more than that.

If there was one thing Avery had taught his spies, it was that women could be as dangerous and as effective as men in the world of espionage. Sometimes even more so.



“What exactly is your plan, Garland?” Thistlewood asked. He leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on the table as he listened.

“You all know of Guy Fawkes. We spoke of him at the last meeting.” Garland leveled a gaze at the man who had mentioned Fawkes the first time—he had also implied that the plan to destroy the government was doomed to fail.

“Yes, and I assume that you mean to do what he was unable to?”

The room was thick with anticipation as they all waited for Garland’s response.

“Yes.”

“How will you manage this? The grounds are constantly patrolled, as are the tunnels, I’m sure.” Unlike the others, Thistlewood was not afraid to question Garland. Edward kept his mouth shut. Questioning the plans of rebels was the easiest way to expose oneself, so he stayed silent and listened.

Garland began to pace the length of the floor as he spoke. “I have acquired access to the tunnels to and the tunnels beneath Westminster, I have men on the inside who will help us put gunpowder at the four corners of the foundation beneath the room the king will speak in at seven o’clock, *and* I can time the kegs to blow the moment he begins his speech. Men will need to be there to light the charges.”

“How do you know you won’t be discovered?” someone asked.

Garland smiled. “Unlike Fawkes, I am one of the few who knows of the existence of these *particular* tunnels. No one will see us. No one will stop us.”

Edward had to school his features into an emotionless expression. He had believed—or rather, *hoped*—that when Garland had spoken of destroying the government that it had been more of a boast than a full plan of action. But to kill the king and everyone in the House of Lords? Anarchy would ensue. Edward studied the other men in the room, seeing only

excitement on their faces. The woman, however, watched him the way a cat would a mouse.

*You must be a clever creature, but so am I.* He gazed back at her, letting lust fill his eyes. He wanted her to think that his focus on her was for her beauty and no other reason. A moment later, she blinked, surrendering to him in their battle of stares. She turned her focus to another man.

“I know these are trying times for you all. Good men suffer under the yoke of the rich who oppress you. Now is finally the time when you will have your chance to change that. You will each receive instructions the afternoon of the king’s speech. Follow your instructions exactly, and I assure you, we will succeed.”

Edward and the others stood when the meeting came to an end. There was no time to wait. He had to contact Avery. Edward retrieved his hat and coat and slipped on his gloves. His skin prickled as he felt the stare of the woman as he made to leave.

He’d been marked.

She suspected he was not loyal to Thistlewood’s cause. Fear began to eat away at his usual confidence. If she told Garland anything, Edward knew his days—perhaps even his hours—were numbered. He followed the others into the taproom, careful not to rush away. They spoke quaint, false pleasantries in front of the landlord as if they were all old friends simply meeting for dinner and ale. Then one by one, they said their goodbyes and left.

When he was finally able to walk outside, he mounted his horse and rode like the hounds of hell were upon his heels, because something far worse was on the horizon.

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CAMILLE WAITED until the last man left the private dining room before addressing her master.

“It’s him, monsieur. The one who worried me last time.”

Her master reclined in his chair and watched her. “You are certain?” He appeared relaxed, but that was when he was at his most dangerous—when he was still, when he was studying someone.

“Most certain.”

“Then I shall follow him. When I find his den of spies, I will do what is necessary.”

Of that, she had no doubt. Camille saw the shadow of death in his eyes. Death and something else she didn’t quite understand. Remorse? The devil didn’t have remorse, and this man was more devil than anyone she had met.

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LETTY SIPPED her wine over dinner to hide her laughter as Angus and Baird teased Adam mercilessly. The two Scotsmen were close to Adam in age, and it was clear that their shared history was long and loving. Letty was full of gratitude for that. Her husband and Caroline deserved such a loving family. It was a pity Scotland was so far away from Chilgrave Castle.

“Ye have to listen to this, Lett.” Angus caught her attention.

“No, no, not another tall tale, Angus,” Adam warned with a chuckle.

Angus winked at Letty. “There’s nothing tall about it. Now, Adam was visiting, along with Caro, who was but a wee bairn back then. Baird and I convinced Adam to ride over to see the MacDougals, a few miles west of here.”

“Oh Christ, no,” Adam groaned.

Angus hushed him. “So he rode over to the MacDougal lands—they have a manor house, ye ken.”

Letty leaned forward and nodded, propping her chin on her hands as she listened.

“And old MacDougal had a daughter, a pretty lass with red hair like a winter fire.”

“And a temper to match,” Baird added.

Adam reached for his wineglass and downed a large portion of it.

“Every man within twenty miles was in love with Nellie MacDougal, but she had eyes for no man, at least none who wanted her. It was rumored that she loved a man from the Lennox clan, but the Lennoxes and the MacDougals had a feud at the time.” Angus settled into his chair, smugly enjoying the attention. “So I dared Adam to steal a kiss from her—mayhap more, if he could.”

“You know, this really is not the best story for my *wife* to hear,” Adam warned.

“Do go on, Angus,” Letty encouraged with a grin.

“Well, he rode up to the front door of the MacDougal castle and asked to speak to the fair, fiery Nellie. We all expected him to return home with a black eye or a sore jaw.”

“What happened?”

“He was alone with the lass for nigh on an hour. None of us know what happened, but the next week, Nellie married that Lennox lad, and nine months later the clan feud was ended when their bairn was born. Nellie named the child Adam.” Angus chuckled as Letty stared at him, stunned.

“You mean . . .”

“Aye, lass,” Angus laughed.

Adam drank his wine again and glowered at Angus.

Tyburn cleared his throat. “I think Letty has had enough of yer tales, Angus. The hour is late, and we all ought to be in bed.”

“Agreed.” Baird and his father rose from the table, and then they stared at Angus, who grumbled and stood as well.

“Goodnight, lassie,” Tyburn said to her and nodded at his nephew before Adam and Letty were left alone.

For a long moment, Letty and Adam sat in silence. Then Letty said, “What *really* happened in that hour you spent alone

with Miss MacDougal?”

Her husband took another sip of his wine. “You don’t think that I seduced her and fathered the next laird of the MacDougal clan?”

Letty hesitated, but not because she thought he had. “No, I don’t. It does not seem like something you would do. Not that you aren’t capable of seductions,” she offered. “You’re quite dangerous at it, but I know you. That young woman’s virtue was safe, I am sure of it.”

Adam offered a soft, bittersweet smile. “How well you know me, lady wife. Yes, I went to Nellie’s house that day in order to stop Angus and Baird from teasing me. They can be quite relentless when they set their minds to something.”

“I can see that. Still, they adore you and Caroline,” Letty replied. He needed to know how much he was loved, in case he didn’t feel it clearly himself.

“I forget how blessed I am. Even after all that Caroline and I lost, we are more fortunate than many others.”

“So you went to see Nellie . . . ?” Letty prompted.

“I took tea with her, and we spoke about love, but not in the way she had expected. She had expected me to try to seduce her like the other young men who lived nearby. Instead, I asked her about where her heart lay. She told me about her young man, and how she was afraid to seek her father’s permission to marry him. I then asked for an audience with her father, the laird himself. He had not been aware of my visit with Nellie.”

“What happened?”

“I told him that she wished to marry the Lennox boy. She was right about him—he wouldn’t allow it. I then explained that his entire household had been aware of my rather lengthy, private meeting with Nellie and that it was in her father’s best interest to approve her marriage to the man she loved or else I might let it slip that I had been with Nellie. Of course, should such a thing happen, I would do the honorable thing and marry her.”

Letty was stunned. Adam had risked marriage to a woman he didn't love just to help her marry another? "How did you know that he would agree and not actually make you marry her?"

Adam grinned. "Because Scots will always band together against an Englishman, especially one acting as smug and superior as I was that day. MacDougal would rather have his daughter marry a Lennox than a bloody Englishman."

Letty giggled. "Oh, Adam, how wonderfully clever. You are perfectly splendid. You know that, don't you?" She got up and came around the table to slide onto his lap.

He held her waist and gazed at her. "You think so?" There was a vulnerability in this powerful, brave man, and she loved that he showed that soft side only to her.

"I do. It makes you rather irresistible." Letty massaged his shoulders with care.

"You don't have to do that," he said.

She leaned in to nuzzle his throat and inhale his scent. "Do what?"

"Treat me as though I might break. I'm not fragile." He tightened his hold on her waist until that familiar thrill surged through her. She embraced the rising passion inside her.

"I do not think you are fragile," she promised him as she nibbled on his earlobe. He groaned, the sound momentarily drowning out the crackling fire in the dining room.

"You don't?" he asked.

Letty smirked at him as she slid off his lap. "In fact, I think you're quite ready to catch me." She got up and backed away from him, flirting with a smile as she waited for him to follow.

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ADAM'S BLOOD sang with desire for his wife. He had been afraid these last two weeks that he had lost something, something that he desperately needed. But now, seeing his

wife with hunger and love in her eyes, he wasn't lost—he wasn't broken. His wounds had wrecked his confidence, his value in his own eyes, yet here Letty was, showing him that nothing had changed for her. She didn't see him as weak or damaged. She saw only *him*. It was a revelation.

He caught her before she could escape out the open doors. No doubt she had hoped to toy with him all the way up the stairs, stringing him along, but he would not wait that long. With one swift move, he swept her against the wall beside the door and pinned her there, a smile playing on his lips as he held her waist. Adam jerked her skirts up, and she gripped his shoulders as he freed himself from his trousers. Then he was inside her, relieved to find her ready for him.

She gasped as he sank deep and their joined bodies made a soft *thump* against the wall. She curled her legs around his waist as he braced one hand on the wall beside her head. His other hand covered her mouth. Letty gripped his shoulders tight, clinging to him.

She whimpered in protest, but then he began thrusting into her in earnest, and her cries of pleasure were muffled against his hand. They collided together like two burning fuses glowing in the dark as he claimed her there in the dining room. She closed her eyes, and he continued to pump himself into her, each second more exquisite than the last. She arched her back, her inner walls clamping around his shaft as she reached her climax and he followed her in his own pleasure a second later, his body relaxing against Letty's. They stayed locked together, her legs around his waist for a long moment as they both caught their breath. He removed his hand from her mouth and replaced it with his lips. Her legs started to slide down the backs of his thighs as she relaxed.

She sighed sweetly, and her hands wound into his hair, holding him prisoner for her kiss. God, he had become addicted to this woman in a way he'd never imagined. He wanted to stay inside her forever, to hold her in his arms until they were both old and gray and had lived a full life together. She was his beginning, his end, his everything.

When their mouths broke apart, he pressed his forehead to hers. "I love you, lady wife." He stole another kiss as he gently let her legs drop to the ground and withdrew from her body.

"That was magnificent," she purred as he held her in his arms. "Perhaps you could show me that again in our bedchamber?"

"I would be delighted." Adam fixed his trousers while she dropped her skirts back into place. Then he escorted Letty upstairs, a foolish grin on his face as he took his wife to bed. A long while later, as he lay half-awake, he realized that he had not thought of John or his desire for vengeance even once in the past several days.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EDWARD SHENGOE SLID off his horse and handed the reins to a groom waiting outside a townhouse in Grosvenor Square. With a furtive glance, he rushed up the steps into the house. He didn't bother to knock. This was no normal house, after all. A butler greeted him, and Edward handed the man his hat and coat.

"Evening, Mr. Bradberry."

"Good evening, Mr. Shengoe." The butler nodded. "The others are waiting for you in the library."

"How many are here?" he asked.

"Six, counting you. Mr. Russell has not yet arrived."

"Good. I will speak to them." Edward had sent a summons to all of them within minutes of returning home. He had sat down at his desk and written out a codicil to his will before speaking to his butler and housekeeper. It was perhaps a tad pessimistic to plan for so dark a fate, but something about tonight had warned him that darkness was coming, enough to sweep across the land. He had to be ready for whatever came, even his own end.

Edward paused at the doors to the library, holding his breath. The moment he told the others what he knew, it would make the threat that much more real. At last, he squared his shoulders and opened the door. The tall windows of the library, now dark with nightfall, still glowed from the firelight. During the day, the stained glass would send patterns of brilliant colors upon the floor.

One of the five men in the room turned to greet him. “Evening, Shengoe.”

He nodded at the man who’d spoken. “Jackson.” The five men all stood to face him, each close to his own age, and all somber as he began to speak.

“In less than a week’s time, Thistlewood and his men will attempt to blow up the House of Lords while the king delivers his speech.”

“Tell me you’re joking,” one of the men said.

“I wish I was,” Edward sighed. “To make matters worse, I believe that I was marked this evening.”

“Were you followed?” another asked.

“I could not tell, but it would be safe to assume I was. You are all at risk, and for that I’m sorry. You know now what’s at stake. You had best leave and find safety.”

The men exchanged looks. “If what you say is true, we are needed here. We won’t run.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.” A man’s voice came from behind Edward, and his blood turned to ice. He knew that voice. Garland. “It will make what I must do much easier.”

The tension in the room was thick enough to smother Edward as he slowly turned to face Garland. The man held a pistol. Behind him stood more than half a dozen others. Beyond them, Bradberry’s still body lay on the ground, his blood staining the floor red.

Edward reached for his pistol, tucked in the back of his waistcoat, but Garland had already fired. The report deafened Edward as the pain surged through his shoulder.

The men of the Court of Shadows rushed into action. Edward stumbled out of the way and ducked as Jackson fired over his head. Garland dove to the side, and the bullet felled one of Garland’s men standing right behind him. Edward managed to pull out his pistol and leaned against the wall as he took aim at one of Garland’s men.

It was the end of the Court of Shadows, and Edward was glad Avery was not here. With luck, he would learn the truth in time and stop the fall of Whitehall.

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AVERY WALKED up the steps to the townhouse that he'd purchased through an agent in secret, which then had become a refuge for the spies under his command. While he'd kept their missions separate, the men all knew this was a safe spot, a haven to come to when needed.

So when Avery had received the urgent summons from Shengoe, he had known it had to be something terrible. Avery slipped inside the house without knocking and was surprised to find Bradberry wasn't anywhere near the door. This fact alone instantly put him on guard.

The wall sconces had been doused, and all was quiet and dark. He peered at the darkened staircase that led to the bedchambers upstairs. He should have heard discussions coming from the library or the drawing room. At the very least he should have heard the muted whispers of maids working upstairs. Instead, there was only silence.

He started toward the stairs, but stopped and knelt by the banister at the base of the steps. There was something on the floor. He pressed a gloved fingertip to it, and the tip of his finger came away coated in blood.

A chill of dread crawled up his back. While it was always possible he was wrong, he was already certain of what had happened here. He walked toward the library and eased the door open. He thought he had prepared himself for what he would find, but he was wrong.

His best men, loyal and true, lay dead throughout the library. Brave Jackson was slumped against the leg of a nearby reading table, a pistol resting in his hand. Trevor had collapsed in a window seat, a knife plunged into his chest, though one of his attackers lay dead at his feet.

The rest of Avery's friends were in similar positions. The destruction of the room made a blood-soaked tragedy play out in Avery's mind. He looked toward the fireplace. Shengoe lay inches from it, a trail of blood showing clearly that he had dragged himself toward the fire as he lay dying. Avery gasped in shock as Shengoe twitched, his half-glazed eyes still holding a faint light in them.

"Shengoe, my friend. I'm so sorry . . ." Avery rushed over and crouched down beside him, his throat closing as he struggled to calm himself.

His hand was stretched out, blood-coated fingertips pointed toward something on the floor. Words had been drawn, patterns, clearly by Shengoe with his own blood on the floor.

*Whitehall will fall.* The rest was too smeared to read clearly.

"What's happening?" Avery asked Shengoe. As he listened for Shengoe to respond, he examined the man carefully, assessing his multiple wounds. There was nothing he could do to save him.

"King's . . . speech . . ." Shengoe exhaled, his last breath trickling away in an eerie death rattle. Avery could have sworn Shengoe's last word was "fox." But what could that mean?

*Whitehall will fall . . . King's speech . . . Fox . . .*

Although Whitehall was no longer used for the government, the name still stood for England's ruling bodies. The warning suggested that the current government was in peril. The question was *how*. Whatever was being planned was but a week away. That was when the king would speak before Parliament, particularly before the House of Lords.

Avery could stop the king from speaking, but that meant the plotters would slink back to the shadows, and the next time they made their move they would have no warning. No, the risks were too great. He had to find a way *now* to stop this.

Avery closed Shengoe's eyes with gentle reverence. The weight Avery carried upon his shoulders had grown tenfold.

The embers of the fire were still burning. They glowed a deep orange, and the white bits of charred wood were as pale as bone. Avery reached for the poker and stoked the fire, not even sure why he did except perhaps out of habit. A numbness swept through him as he felt the loss of his men so deeply that it almost killed him.

But the tragedy went much further than the death of his friends; it was the death of all he had worked toward as England's chief spymaster. His reforms and ambitions for the Home Office had been undone in one fell swoop.

Hugo Waverly had to be laughing from his watery grave. While Waverly's hubris and lust for revenge had cost him his life, it had not left the nation in so vulnerable a state as it was right now. The irony was, only Avery and the killers would know that. While his lesser spies and informants would all still be in place, these men had been the linchpins that held his newly remade network together. He couldn't begin to imagine how he was going to rebuild now, or whom he could trust.

It was no wonder that Waverly had kept his men at arm's length. Every man in this room tonight had been a friend, and they were all dead. And who else could he blame for it but himself?

Shengoe's urgent message still echoed in Avery's mind. He'd warned that Arthur Thistlewood was being coaxed into violent action by someone. Until now, Thistlewood and his men had been men of words and little more. Whoever had pushed them toward this had to be the one responsible for what had happened tonight. Avery had to protect Whitehall, or else his friends' terrible sacrifice would have been for nothing.

He twisted the poker in the fire again. The reflection of the white marble fireplace was like polished glass. A shadow of movement flickered in that reflection. Avery had a second to spin around, raising the poker like a sword, ready to defend himself as a blade arced down toward him.

Sparks flew from the clash of metal and iron. A brutishly tall man with dark eyes glared at him from the other side of their crossed weapons. Avery leapt back, swinging the poker at

the man's chest. The man barely dodged out of the way before he swung his sword again.

Like a man possessed, Avery battled him until the old fire poker broke beneath the other man's onslaught. Before the man could regain his footing, Avery shoved one of the bookcases over so that it came crashing down on top of him. The man cried out as the heavy oak shelves filled with books crushed him.

Panting hard, Avery approached the man who lay half-buried and moaning in agony. By the way his face was turning reddish-blue, Avery guessed the man was being suffocated by the weight of the bookcase.

"Who do you work for?" Avery demanded.

The man shook his head, a stubborn set to his features as he contorted, trying to free himself.

"Who?" Avery snarled.

The man shook his head again, still trying to free his arm. Avery saw too late the pistol the man pulled out before he fired. Sharp pain struck his shoulder as he fell back on the ground. He put pressure to the wound and raised his face to the man. Sightless eyes met his, and the pistol fell a few inches to the floor.

Avery's head fell back, and he breathed deeply through his nose as he fought off the pain. He was alone. His most loyal men were all dead. He had no choice but to seek help elsewhere. He needed Adam Beaumont back in London.

"Avery?" A feminine voice cut through his thoughts. He struggled to sit up, just as he heard the woman cry out.

Caroline Beaumont knelt by his side and lifted him up, but her gaze quickly focused on the bodies of his men.

"Lady Caroline...why are you here?" he asked, pain still making it hard to think.

"I saw you on the street and I wished to speak to you about Adam and Letty...and oh... Avery, what's happened?" she cried out, her eyes stark with terror.

Avery shook his head. The last thing he needed to do was involve Lady Caroline in this matter, or tell her of the danger he would soon have her brother face. She'd suffered enough when she'd lost Lord Wilhelm. "I can't—"

"You will. Come on, let me assist you." Caroline put an arm around his waist and helped him stand. "You need a doctor."

Avery allowed her to help him. Lord knew he needed it.

She had a coach waiting outside, and one of the footmen who'd accompanied her leapt off the coach to help them.

"Do you have a horse stabled nearby?" she asked.

"I never ride. Too easy to be seen." He collapsed onto a seat inside the coach. Caroline told her driver to take them home.

"No, not yours. My brother's," Avery insisted. He would need Lucien's help, now more than ever. Horatia and her sister were in Brighton, and they'd taken Horatia and Lucien's little son with them. It would be safe. Lucien could offer Caroline protection if they needed it, and perhaps more.

"Very well." Caroline gave the driver the new address and then closed the coach door. She put pressure on Avery's shoulder using a handkerchief she'd pulled from his waistcoat.

"Avery, tell me what happened."

His hands shook as he tried to remain calm. He was losing blood. His eyelids were too heavy to keep them open. Caroline slapped his face. Hard. Despite the magnitude of everything happening around them, Avery still managed to be offended by this, and he glared at her in shock.

"Talk," Caroline said firmly. "It will help you stay awake."

"One of my men sent me an urgent message. He'd infiltrated a group of men plotting treason. I arrived late to the meeting."

"And they were the ones who . . ." Caroline's voice softened.

“Yes. I’m sorry you had to see that, my lady.” Avery closed his eyes again, but he was in less danger of falling asleep now.

“You believe your man was exposed and followed?”

He nodded. “It is the obvious explanation. Before you arrived, I fought a man who’d stayed behind. They knew I would be coming.”

“You know what the men are planning?” she asked.

“To attack Parliament, the day the king makes his speech to the House of Lords.”

“What sort of attack?” Caroline pressed.

“Whitehall will fall . . . King’s speech . . . Fox . . .” Avery repeated Shengoe’s final clues. “That’s all I know.”

“Fox?” Caroline’s eyes narrowed. “Like the animal?”

Avery puzzled over the possible interpretations. “I don’t know. A fox in the henhouse, perhaps? An inside man? An assassin? But it’s not just the king they’re after. Whitehall will fall . . . Foxes burrow . . . A tunnel?” He shook his head, having hit a dead end.

Suddenly Caroline gasped. “Tunnel. You don’t suppose he must mean Guy Fawkes? F-A-W-K-E-S? The gunpowder plot.”

Avery’s eyes widened. Could it be? He considered the possibilities, then cursed. “Yes, that must be it.”

“How does that poem go again?” he asked her.

*REMEMBER, remember!*

*The fifth of November,*

*The Gunpowder treason and plot;*

*I know of no reason*

*Why the Gunpowder treason*

*Should ever be forgot!*



*Guy Fawkes and his companions  
Did the scheme contrive,  
To blow the King and Parliament  
All up alive.  
Threescore barrels, laid below,  
To prove old England's overthrow.  
But, by God's providence, him they catch,  
With a dark lantern, lighting a match!  
A traitor to the Crown, by his action,  
No Parliament mercy from any faction,  
His just end should be grim . . .*

CAROLINE'S VOICE ended in a whisper. She looked at Avery.  
"They mean to blow up Parliament?"

"It is the only way a small band could kill both the king and the lords at the same time, but how?"

"Are there tunnels beneath Westminster?"

"No doubt, but they would be secured, patrolled, even sealed off."

"Perhaps there is a fox in the henhouse after all?" Caroline suggested.

"So we must assume they have access, regardless." Avery was speaking more to himself than to her.

"Do you know of anyone who might have the architectural plans of Westminster?"

"Actually, yes," Avery said as the coach stopped in front of Lucien's townhouse. "My brother. He enjoys architecture, and I know he has a copy of the plans for it."

"The same brother whose house we just arrived at?" Caroline straightened as her footman opened the coach door and helped her out. She and the footman then braced Avery on

either side as they helped him up the steps to Lucien's townhouse. When the butler answered, he took one look at Avery and cried out.

The butler shouted up the stairs, "My lord, come quickly!" He then called for one of Lucien's footmen to go fetch the doctor.

"What is it?" Lucien appeared at the top of the stairs nearby.

"Evening, brother." Avery chuckled.

The blood drained from Lucien's face.

"Avery? What the devil?" Lucien met them at the bottom of the stairs and relieved Caroline of her burden. "Follow me," Lucien urged the footman who held Avery's other side. Avery was half carried into the drawing room and laid on a fainting couch. But just as Lucien began to ask questions, Avery slipped into unconsciousness.

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CAROLINE SLAPPED Avery's face hard when he passed out. Lucien shot her a startled look.

"What? It worked before!" she protested. "And we have no time for politeness." Unfortunately, it did not work this time.

"Do you have smelling salts?" Lucien asked her.

"My lord, do I *look* like the fainting sort?" She tried not to take offense, but the implication still riled her.

"Apologies," Lucien muttered and told his butler to fetch some. "Lady Caroline, what happened to my brother?"

Caroline explained that she'd been riding through Grosvenor Square when she saw Avery walk past her in the other direction. She'd been wanting to speak to him about Adam and what else they could do to catch the spies who were after Letty and her brother, so she decided to turn around to wait for him. Her coach headed back the way she'd come, and she'd guessed that the only townhouse she was unfamiliar with

was the one he must have entered. Her guess had been right. But after a short time, she'd worried that perhaps he wouldn't come back out, and her matter was urgent, so she'd decided to knock. But when no one answered the door, she'd realized it was slightly open. Every instinct in her had warned her to be careful as she entered the house in search of Avery.

She explained the horrific scene she'd come upon, the murdered men and Avery wounded on the ground. She relayed all this calmly, but when she caught sight of her shaking hands covered in blood, she realized how taxing all this had been on her, and she sank into the nearest chair.

"I told him a hundred times he would get himself killed." Lucien stared at his brother with a lost look.

"He has nine lives," Caroline said. "I've never seen a man with so much luck as he."

"Well, one day it may finally run out." Lucien went silent as the doctor arrived.

Sometime later, the doctor was done and Avery was bandaged up. The bullet had been removed and sat in a bloody mess of cloths in a bowl. Only then did Caroline and Lucien draw a joint breath of relief.

"My lord . . . Your brother mentioned you might possess the architectural plans to Westminster?"

Lucien turned to face her. "I do. Why do you need them?"

"Because . . ." Caroline twisted her hands in her gown. "The men who attacked your brother plan to blow up Parliament, like Guy Fawkes."

"Guy Fawkes? Bloody hell." Lucien looked heavenward. "What fools are these?"

"Dangerous ones who were serious enough to kill all the men who worked with Avery."

"What of your brother? Is Morrey still at Chilgrave?" Lucien asked.

"No, he went to Scotland to keep Letty safe. They're at Uncle Tyburn's castle near Inverness."

“Oh, yes. That is indeed a safe place. We almost couldn’t get Ashton Lennox’s wife out of her family’s castle in Scotland. We practically had to storm it to even have a conversation.” Lucien was trying to tease her, but she didn’t feel at all in the mood to laugh.

“We must send someone to bring Adam back. As much as I do not want him in danger, we will need him. Avery cannot do this alone.”

“He won’t be alone,” Lucien replied grimly. “I’ll send someone north immediately.”

Caroline nodded. “If you can fetch the architectural plans for Westminster, I shall watch over your brother.”

Lucien stood, and Caroline took his place on the edge of the settee. “You saved his life,” Lucien said quietly. “I owe you a great favor, Lady Caroline. Name it, and whatever it is shall be yours.”

Caroline smiled. “Thank you, my lord, but what I desire, you cannot give.”

When she was alone with Avery, she held out a hand to take his. If only someone had been able to save John. Adam had been too late, and that moment had made him become a spy as well. It was only a matter of time before her brother’s luck ran out. Adam and Avery were both men who lived on borrowed time.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE RIDER CAME JUST after dawn on an exhausted horse, carrying an urgent message. Adam and Letty were in the drawing room with Tyburn when one of Tyburn's footmen rushed inside.

"What is it, lad?" All three people present in the drawing room stood.

"A messenger, my lord. From England. He says he has an urgent message for Lord Morrey."

A pit formed in Adam's stomach as he and Tyburn exited the room to speak with the messenger. The man who stood in the entryway looked travel weary.

"I am Lord Morrey," Adam told the young man.

"My lord, Mr. Russell said you must return to London at once." The young man gazed at him with fearful eyes.

"What? Why?"

"I was told to tell you that the fifth of November should never be forgot. That was all he told me, that and to come to the Marquess of Rochester's home once you reach London."

Adam frowned. "The fifth of November?" The implications there were worrisome indeed.

Tyburn pointed toward a door that led to the castle kitchens. "Thank ye, lad. Why don't ye go to the kitchens and eat. One of my staff will show ye to a room where ye may rest."

“Thank you, my lord.” The young man left them alone.

“Well, what does the message mean?” Tyburn asked.

“Remember, remember, the fifth of November, the gunpowder treason and plot . . . It’s a reference to when Guy Fawkes and his coconspirators attempted to blow up Parliament.”

“My God,” Tyburn said as he and Adam exchanged glances.

“I have to leave for London, now.”

“But ye’ve barely had time to heal,” Tyburn argued.

Adam rolled his shoulders and winced at the tight, scarred skin that pulled at him, but the pain was dull rather than sharp.

“Avery needs me. If he summoned me back from Scotland, then he has no one else left.” As he spoke, his chest suddenly tightened with panic. The Court of Shadows—something must have happened to them. “May I have use of your fastest horse?”

“Of course. But—”

“And me,” Letty said. “Can you have the little black gelding saddled for me?”

Both lords turned to look down at her.

“No,” Tyburn said at the same instant that Adam said, “Absolutely not.”

Letty held up a hand in silence and kept both men from speaking further with an imperious look. “Husband, you would have been dead if not for me and that horse I stole from the Crown and Thistle. And I have as much right to defend my king and country as any of you do.”

“But what of our child?” Adam argued, hoping to use this tactic to make his wife stay safe a second time.

“My menses came this morning, so the only life I risk is my own.”

Adam pulled her into his arms. “And that is already far too precious a thing to risk.”

She pushed back against him, a fierce scowl of rebellion on her face. “You will not talk to me sweetly and hope to convince me to stay here. If you go, I go. It is that simple.” She escaped his arms and rushed up the stairs.

Adam, his arms held out empty of her, stood staring after her.

“As much as she deserves protection, that is a woman who can take care of herself. Perhaps she should go.” Tyburn sounded more thoughtful now.

“And if we both end up dead?” Adam growled.

“Then at least ye are together. Trust me, as a man who lost his wife and could not follow her to the land beyond, I would say that surviving without her was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. If not for my sons . . .” Tyburn turned away, not finishing the sentence.

“Please have our horses readied. I’d better make sure she knows we can’t bring anything with us.”

Adam headed up to the chamber he and Letty shared. She wasn’t there. A young boy was bent over her trunks.

“You, lad. Have you seen Lady Morrey?”

The boy spun around with a very girlish giggle. “Perfect—even you didn’t recognize me.” Letty beamed at him from beneath the brim of her cap.

“How did you change so quickly?” Adam asked.

“A woman has to have some secrets, doesn’t she? Come, we have no time to waste.” She took his hand and led him from their bedchamber.

They were met at the foot of the grand staircase by Angus, Baird, and Tyburn, all dressed for travel.

“Uncle?”

His uncle smiled. “Ye didna think ye would be going alone, laddie?”

“But what if you can’t—?”

“Keep up? Aye, we can. The horses are ready.”

Adam followed his uncle and cousins outside. Four tall horses had been saddled, and the fifth horse was shorter than the others—a fierce little black gelding that danced about in anticipation. Letty rushed past Adam to the little horse and wrapped her arms around its neck.

“She’s going to ride that little creature?” Adam asked Angus as she approached the little black beast.

“That little creature is the beast who saved yer life. Nearly killed himself outracing those bigger horses. He’s fast. While ye were healing from yer wounds, Baird and I were seeing to him. He has the speed of the devil himself.”

“I’m glad she’s riding him, then.” Adam walked over to his wife and assisted her into the saddle. “Are you ready?” he asked.

She nodded, and the serious look upon her face made his last argument for her to stay at Tyburn’s home die upon his lips.

“Very well,” Adam said as he mounted his horse. He glanced back at his wife, uncle, and cousins.

“Lead the way, lad!” Tyburn commanded.

Adam dug his heels into the horse’s flanks. They rode as one toward an uncertain future.

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IT TOOK three days to reach London and the Marquess of Rochester’s townhouse. Letty had been there once, shortly after Horatia had married the marquess. She shouldn’t have been surprised that they were to meet there; Lucien was Avery’s older brother, after all. Adam hurried up the steps and knocked on the townhouse’s door. An older butler met them.

“We’re here to see Lord Rochester.”



“Ah, yes. Do come in.” The butler stepped back to let everyone inside. “The war council is waiting for you.”

“War council?” Angus muttered to Baird, who shrugged.

“’Tis England,” Baird said, as if that explained everything.

“This way.” The butler led them toward the library.

Letty and Adam entered first, and saw a group of men all huddled about a table. She recognized the men as they turned to see who had arrived. Lucien, the Marquess of Rochester. Along with Godric, the Duke of Essex; Cedric, Viscount Sheridan; Charles Humphrey, the Earl of Lonsdale; Ashton, Baron Lennox; and Jonathan St. Laurent.

Relief nearly overwhelmed Letty. These men were known in certain circles as the League of Rogues, and their exploits were quickly becoming the stuff of legends. If there were men able to rival Avery’s spies, it was this group of men. They parted to reveal Avery, whose left arm was in a sling.

“Welcome to the fight, gentlemen,” Avery said with a wry smile. Then his gaze drifted to Letty. “My lady.” He nodded respectfully at her.

“I hope you don’t mind, but my uncle Tyburn and his sons, Baird and Angus, insisted on joining me.”

There were quick greetings before Adam and Letty joined the men around the reading table.

“Adam, I’ll be brief. Arthur Thistlewood and his men are planning to destroy the House of Lords while they are in session for the king’s speech. We have but a short time to place ourselves in the tunnels below Westminster and stop the gunpowder kegs from being lit.”

Letty studied the pages of architectural plans laid out on the table and stepped back to allow Tyburn and his sons to see. She noticed Caroline seated by the fireplace, away from the men.

“Caroline?” She joined her sister-in-law by the fire. Caroline looked away from the flames to stare at Letty. She gasped.

“Letty? What are you doing here?”

“I came back with Adam. I couldn’t let him come alone. What about you?”

Caroline pulled Letty into a chair beside her and then told her everything that had happened at the townhouse in Grosvenor Square.

“Dead? All of them?”

“Down to the last man. I fear the sight has left me rattled.” She took Letty’s hand into hers. “These are desperate and dangerous men, Letty. God help us all if they succeed.”

Letty curled her fingers around Caroline’s and squeezed lightly.

“But *you* saved Mr. Russell.”

She nodded, that distant look back on her face. “And yet we may all die tonight.”

“Then you should stay here,” Letty said.

“Are you staying or going with them?” Caroline challenged.

“I’m going,” Letty admitted.

“Then so am I.”

“We must stay together, then.” Letty and Caroline turned to listen to the men as they made their plans.

“We will need two or three men at each of the corners. I can only guess that is where Thistlewood’s men will set the kegs and charges. We will access the tunnels through subterranean gates. Each man should be prepared to force the lock if they can’t gain entrance, but once you get close to the corners, do not use a pistol. An errant shot could cause the very thing we need to prevent.” Avery looked around at the men close to him. “Most of you are married, and some are fathers. No man will be judged if he chooses to stay behind. There are other ways you can help, should we fail.”

This pronouncement was met with stony silence.

Avery cleared his throat. "Very well. The north corner shall be covered by Essex, Rochester, and Sheridan. South corner, Lonsdale, Angus, and Tyburn. East will be Lennox, St. Laurent, and Baird. West corner will be Adam and myself. Good luck to you all. And God save the king!"

"God save the king!" the others roared in reply.

Letty collected a pistol and a slender knife from a nearby table that had been covered with weapons. When she saw Adam tuck a blade into his boot, she did the same with her own. She still wore the trousers and waistcoat of a boy, and she had her hair down tight at the nape of her neck. She could run without the encumbrance of skirts. The last thing she wanted was to be a hinderance to Adam in a moment of crisis.

They left Lord Rochester's home, and the assigned groups rode off on horseback.

Though they would not need to leave the city, the journey seemed to take forever. Letty's heart pounded as she, Adam, Avery, and Caroline finally reached the place where they could gain access to the tunnels. Westminster was only a short distance from where they stood now, huddled in the growing gloom.

Letty couldn't help but think of King George somewhere inside the building, the entire House of Lords patiently waiting for his speech. So many would die if they failed, and anarchy would soon follow. The importance of what she and the others were about to do made her tremble.

Adam tested the gate that spanned the mouth of the tunnel, which formed a black cavern ahead of them. It seemed to go on forever beyond the iron bars of the gate. As Adam eased the gate open, he shared a grim look with Avery.

"What is it?" Letty whispered.

"The gate wasn't locked. Thistlewood's men are already down there. We must be silent. Everyone, stay close." Avery lit a small lantern and then nodded to Adam. "I'll hold the lantern so you can see ahead of you."

Adam nodded and headed into the darkness first, a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other. Avery followed behind him, then Letty and Caroline.

It was an eerie thing to descend into darkness with only a weak lantern to light their way. Water trickled along the floor of the tunnel as they moved up an incline deep into the bowels below Westminster Palace. The sound of water upon stone somewhere nearby echoed so loudly that it gave Letty a headache.

Letty looked back frequently to check on Caroline behind her. Her sister-in-law was pale and silent, her skin almost luminous in the dim light. Caroline was somehow even more silent than the rest of them. Something was weighing upon her mind, and as much as Letty wished to speak with her about it, she dared not.

Adam began to move more quickly, and the rest of them followed.

“We can’t be far now,” Avery whispered as they reached the fourth crossroads of tunnels. Suddenly a faint sound came to them down the tunnels from the north. Shots, a cry, then silence.

“Oh God,” Letty breathed. “It’s started. Should we go and —?”

“We can’t stop,” Avery said. “We must trust in the others. They are on their own for a time. We must ensure that Thistlewood’s men are stopped at our corner.”

The eerie sounds of distant fighting began again. They continued through the dark tunnel, like a bad dream. After another minute, light appeared ahead from a distant lantern. Avery set his lantern down so that they might creep up on whoever was lurking in the dark.

“Are you ready?” Avery asked Adam so quietly that Letty almost didn’t hear him. As the light ahead grew brighter, Letty saw her husband’s silhouette more clearly. He was half shadow, half man, power radiating from him. It was as if the darkness he held inside him had been made manifest, the part

of him she had glimpsed the night he had saved her and Lady Edwards.

Three men were pushing several kegs close together. There were fuses at the front of the grouping of the kegs, and one man was tying the bundle of fuses together to make it easier to light the batch all at once. It seemed the men hadn't heard the sounds they had heard earlier, for they did not seem concerned that their plot had been discovered.

Avery shifted, putting himself directly in front of Letty and Caroline, blocking the men ahead from view. Letty stayed behind him, but she removed the knife from her boot and waited. She would do whatever was necessary.

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ADAM STILLED, his breath so slow that he inhaled only five times in a single minute. He needed to be invisible.

*I am mist. I am moonlight. I am the smoke of an extinguished candle. I am the shadow you do not see, but only feel . . .*

For now, only Adam would step into the light, while the others stayed safe in the dark behind him.

The three men were busy arranging the fuses around the kegs and didn't see him as he stepped into their circle. Adam tossed his pistol into the air and caught it by the barrel as he rushed toward them. The first man spun to face Adam, and he felled him with a blow from the butt of his pistol, then swiped at the second man with his blade. The third man dove at him, and they crashed against the tunnel wall. Adam growled and spun them around so he had the other man pinned. The man landed a punch on Adam's jaw, but Adam rammed his own fist into the man's gut, causing him to double over.

Someone threw an arm around Adam's neck, pulling him back, choking him. Adam shoved back hard, feeling the satisfying crunch of the assailant's ribs as they collided with the tunnel wall.

Avery appeared in his line of vision, a knife in his uninjured hand as he attacked one of the other men. Letty and Caroline ducked around the brawling figures, and Adam glimpsed them trying to undo the fuses around the kegs. Adam took down another of the men by driving his blade through the man's chest. The man crumpled at his feet when he pulled it out.

“Are you all right, Morrey?” Avery asked. He stood with one hand clutching his splinted shoulder. The other men they had been fighting were dead.

Adam nodded and wiped his blade clean.

Avery glanced back toward the dark tunnels. “Can you handle things here? I need to check on the others.”

“We have it handled.”

Avery vanished into the shadows, and then Adam turned to his sister and Letty, who were halfway done removing the fuses from the kegs.

“I can finish that.” Adam tried to shoulder the ladies away from the dangerous explosives. “Why don't you both go back the way we came? It's a straight path to the outside gate.”

“Actually, I'd rather go after Avery,” Caroline said.

“And I wish to stay with you,” Letty informed him.

Adam cupped Letty's face and stole a quick kiss as he held her close, but he wanted her and his sister as far away as possible from these blasted tunnels.

He turned to speak to Caroline, only to find the tunnel empty. His sister had gone after Avery.

“Blast and hell.”

“She'll be fine, Adam. Avery will protect her.” Letty declared this with such confidence that he almost believed her.

“Then I will escort you back to the gate.”

Letty hesitated. “Fine, but only after we have dealt with the fuses—” She stopped talking, her face suddenly pale as she apparently saw something behind Adam.

The hairs on the back of Adam's neck rose as he felt something in the dark tunnel behind him.

"It's been a long time, old friend," the voice said.

*That voice.* Adam turned, careful to keep his movements slow. The faint light of the lantern beside the kegs illuminated the form of a dead man come back to life. Adam's heart stuttered.

"J—John?" He gazed into his friend's face. "It's . . . it's not possible."

For a moment he thought he saw some kind of empathy upon the man's face, but it was soon replaced with a dark cunning that Adam had never seen before.

"And yet, here I am." John held a pistol in his hand.

"You're the one behind this? You're the one Thistlewood was meeting?" Adam guessed.

"I am," the man said.

John stared at Adam with an intensity that made Adam feel sick. This wasn't his friend—this was someone wearing John's face.

"He and his men simply needed a push to do what needed to be done."

"For two years I've *mourned* you, John. You were a brother to me. And now you do this?" Adam could barely think past the betrayal he felt at this moment. *John is alive!* But John was the man trying to destroy England's government. It was something not even his worst nightmares could've conjured up. Thank God Caroline had already left. She couldn't have borne this.

"You spent years avenging your own demons, Adam." There was pain layered in the fury of John's reply. "I spent years spying upon men who would not have done any real harm, and then I had to betray them. Innocent men died. Far too many of them."

"You think this is the answer? Burn it all down?" Adam kept Letty behind him and out of John's direct line of fire,

given that he still held a pistol aimed at them.

“You don’t think there are people ready to propose a better way? We could have a new government, a better one. One that serves the people instead of the other way around.”

“They’d never get the chance. You always understood human nature better than anyone. There would be nothing but anarchy left in its place.”

“Better anarchy than tyranny.”

“You know that isn’t true. Anarchy hurts those with the least power. The mobs who take to the streets will only truly hurt the helpless: the children, the women, the people whose lives depend on some regularity and safety. The shopkeepers who run their businesses that feed and clothe others—those are the ones you would hurt. You would see everything burned to punish those above you?”

“Those same men keep all men down simply because they were not born with the right name, or because they don’t have enough money to deserve their notice. They deserve to be punished.”

“You are a *fool* if you think what you’re doing will solve anything.” Rage built inside Adam like a gathering storm, with the wind drawing up black clouds into a violence that, once unleashed, would wreck all in its path. How *dare* John betray him, his king, and his country. Adam’s hands curled into fists. He still held his knife, but it was no use against the pistol.

“I joined the Home Office to avenge you, John—to find your killers. Everything I did was for a *lie*.”

“Always so damned noble. Now you know how *I* felt, Adam. Well, you need not carry your burden any longer. I killed the French agents who were after me long ago. It was the perfect way to disappear.”

“What of Avery’s men? You killed every last one of them. They were innocent.”

“*Innocent?*” John laughed. “They were tools for the Crown, just like you. Their lives don’t matter.”



Adam drew in a steadying breath. “Every life matters, from the street urchins to the spies who perished at the townhouse in Grosvenor Square.”

“We disagree, then.” John suddenly looked to Letty, and his pistol shifted toward her. “Unfortunately, I must be done with this quickly.”

“No. Let my wife go. She’s not part of this.”

“Not part of this? She’s one of the best spies I’ve seen in years. I can’t allow either of you to go free.” John’s voice was so cold, so hard, that Adam wondered if he’d imagined the John he’d once loved like a brother. Had that man ever been real?

“You fool, she isn’t a bloody spy. It was all a mistake that night at Lady Allerton’s ball.”

Adam thought he saw brief surprise in John’s eyes. “Why did you marry her, then, if not so she could continue her spying with a guardian in tow?”

“To protect her. Because I desired her as I have no other woman. You should remember what that’s like. Or did you never love my sister at all?”

John flinched at the mention of Caroline. For an instant, Adam saw his friend, not this monster.

“*Please*, John, let my wife leave. She won’t be able to find you or do anything to stand in your way. She’s harmless.”

Letty stepped up next to Adam, laced her fingers in his, and leaned against his shoulder.

“I’m not leaving. I’m here until the end, whatever it may be.”

Adam’s heart fractured. He had been right from the start about his wife, about her bravery and her loyalty. Adam squeezed her hand before pushing her away from him. “And that is why you must go.”

John’s voice grew quiet. “You were a good friend to me, Adam. I didn’t want things to end this way. You joined the wrong side, but your heart was in the right place. You have

your chance to leave, Lady Morrey. Go before I change my mind.”

“Go, Letty,” Adam commanded her.

His wife raised her chin and stood her ground. “You’ve failed, you know.”

“You mean the gunpowder? Perhaps. The tide may yet be turned once I am done here.”

“No, you’ve made an even graver mistake.”

“And what is that?”

Letty moved closer to Adam, once more taking his hand in hers, linking her fate to his. “You forget that there are still noble men and women in this world. Those who believe in the goodness of man, not their evil. Even if you succeed tonight, you cannot win.”

“I *can* and I will.” John leveled the gun at Adam. “It’s time we finish this.”

A shot rang out in the tunnel, and Adam pulled Letty into his arms, shielding her from whatever may come. He clenched her tightly, waiting to feel death steal him away from her.

John gasped and moaned. Adam opened his eyes to see John fall to his knees. Behind them a few feet away in the darkness stood Caroline, a pistol in her hand. She stared at John with a look of terror and disbelief. The pistol clattered to the ground as she rushed to catch John before he fell onto his back. Caroline cradled his head in her lap.

“Caro? What are you doing here?” John murmured. The hate in his features faded away as he gazed up at her.

“You forgot about me, John. About *my* love,” Caroline whispered.

Adam’s throat tightened. He held Letty close as he watched his friend draw shallow breaths.

“I never forgot,” John breathed. “You were always with me. I wanted a better world for you.” The sincerity in his voice was undeniable.

Caroline sniffed and wiped at her eyes with a balled fist. “Love and hate cannot dwell in equal measure. Somewhere along the way, you let me go to hold on to something else. But I held on to you, John. Even after our daughter died.”

John coughed, blood coating his lips. “Daughter?”

“Yes. When I heard you’d died, I grew upset, and she came into the world too early.”

“What was she like?” John asked.

“She was beautiful, with your fair hair and my eyes. I named her Elizabeth after my mother.” Caroline stroked her fingertips over John’s brow as if to try to smooth away his worries. “I wish you could have seen her. You would have adored her.”

“Our child . . . ,” John rasped.

Adam felt his own lungs tighten as if he couldn’t breathe. He would’ve given John his own breath once.

“Now I must let you go,” Caroline told John, her voice full of tenderness for a man who’d hurt them both so deeply.

Adam would never understand how she managed it. Love was a strange and wondrous thing, but right now it was pain *unimaginable*. Caroline had let love rule her heart, even when faced with John’s betrayal. She was a better person than he was. He couldn’t forgive John, not like Caroline was.

“Caro . . .” John’s body was jerking as death began to creep in on him.

“Go find our daughter. She needs you now.” Caroline bent her head to John’s and pressed her lips to his forehead as he exhaled and went still.

Adam and Letty stayed motionless for a long moment. Adam stared at John’s lifeless body. He had lost him again. The pain he’d expected to banish had only deepened, like tearing open a scar. Caroline began to sob, rocking John’s body in her lap. His sister’s grief shook Adam into action. He knelt by her and touched her shoulder.

“Shh, Caroline, it’s over now.”

She finally let go of John and stood up. Adam lifted his sister into his arms, and Letty carried the lantern. They began to walk out of the dark tunnels and into the moonlight to find Avery and the others.

## EPILOGUE

### *THREE WEEKS later*

Christmas at Chilgrave was everything Letty had hoped it would be. The castle was full of friends and family. Boughs of mistletoe had been hung freely around the castle by the footmen, much to Mr. Sturges's disapproval, since not only Adam was taking advantage of the mistletoe, but the staff members were as well. Greenery covered every surface and twisted around every banister and pole. Everywhere Letty turned, there was light and laughter.

She couldn't believe that three weeks had passed since the king and Parliament had been saved. It had been a small miracle that Avery and the League of Rogues had escaped harm other than a few bumps and bruises during the scuffles in the tunnels with Lord Wilhelm's men. They'd all been fortunate beyond belief which meant this Christmas was even more important to celebrate.

Once the king had been made aware of what had happened that night, everyone involved had been brought to Carlton House for a private audience where King George had expressed his eternal gratitude.

But not everyone had come through those dark events unscathed. Caroline had become more withdrawn than ever, and Avery, too, had grown distant. They, more than anyone else, had lost much in the last few months.

In the ballroom at Chilgrave, Angus bowed before Letty. "Milady? May I have this dance?" He offered her a courtly

bow, and she accepted with a giggle. It was easy to forget what had happened with John when Angus and Baird were around to tease her.

The ballroom at Chilgrave was full of couples lining up to dance. The hired musicians struck up a lively tune. She danced in circles with Angus until Baird captured her for the next wild, twisting dance. The two Scotsmen had called for a jig, rather than yet another of the sedate numbers the musicians had been playing for the guests, and this now put them in the path of the other dancers.

“Oi! Watch out!” Lucien barked as Baird trod on his toes. His wife, Horatia, laughed and guided her husband safely out of harm’s way. By the time the dancing paused for a brief break, Letty’s feet had grown sore. She had not seen Adam for most of the night, and as the evening’s festivities wore down, she began to worry. Adam had been distant the last few weeks. He’d been quiet, withdrawn, eating little and saying less. She found him on the terrace, looking out over the gardens in the courtyard.

“Adam, are you all right?” She shivered from the winter chill as she stood next to him.

He didn’t immediately reply. He appeared to struggle to speak. “I can’t stop thinking about that night. All this time, John was alive . . . I became someone I didn’t want to be in order to avenge him, and then I became his enemy.”

“What happened wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known what he was up to.”

“But *why* didn’t I see it? Why didn’t I know?” Adam looked toward her, and then she tucked herself against him, hugging one arm around his waist. “And if I had known, maybe I could have steered him off his dark path. Maybe—”

“You couldn’t have made him do anything he didn’t wish to do,” Letty said calmly. “He chose his own path.”

Adam drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “I wish you could’ve known me. Before . . .”

“Before what?” she asked.

“Before I became what I am now. I am no better than John.”

She turned to face him. “You’re wrong—you are better. The things you do? You’ve always been motivated by helping others, not hurting them. The man I stood beside in the tunnels, offering his life to save mine, that’s the man I love. *You* are a good man.” She leaned up on her tiptoes and pulled his head down for a kiss. He slowly began to kiss her back, but she could feel the pain and guilt in his kiss.

“Adam,” she whispered against his mouth.

He curled his arms around her waist and touched his forehead to hers. “Yes?”

“You must pull yourself out of this darkness. Do you understand? Not just for me, but for *him*.”

“For who?” he asked in confusion.

She curled her fingers around one of his wrists and pulled his hand down to her abdomen. “For *him*.”

“For him . . .” His eyes widened. “You mean . . . ?”

She smiled up at her husband. “Yes, and I’ve been dreaming that it’s a boy.”

The music from inside could still be heard where they were, and Adam seized her in his arms and twirled her around right there on the snowy balcony.

“Boy or girl, it does not matter—it’s ours.” He laughed, and the lines of sorrow upon his face began to fade a little.

“Do you like your Christmas present?” she asked him.

He chuckled. “I *adore* it, and you. We ought to celebrate, immediately.”

Letty giggled as he swept her back to the ballroom, a protective arm about her shoulders. The guests were so enthralled with the festivities that none noticed Chilgrave’s lord and lady as they snuck upstairs.

Letty giggled again as her husband closed the door to their bedchamber and flipped the lock.

“What was that for?” she asked. “I have no intention of running away—unless you want to chase me.”

“Angus has a way of appearing where he shouldn’t at the worst times,” he explained. “Now, you said something about a chase?”

Letty gave him a good run about the room before he had her on her back on the bed. He leaned over and kissed her, taking his time to work his magic over her.

She gripped the edges of his shirt when he tried to pull away. “My lord, how you tease me.”

“Oh? You don’t wish me to . . .” He leaned in and whispered wicked suggestions in her ear.

“Oh, I quite *insist* you do that,” she said with a sigh of longing.

He laughed and shifted down her body, removing and loosening her clothes as he did so. “I thought you might.”

Letty parted her thighs and threw her head back as his mouth went to her mound. Adam tortured her until she was panting and begging for him to fill her. When he finally did as she asked, they clung to each other, their love and their excitement for the future pushing them toward the bright star of their release.

They made love sweetly, though it was no less thrilling than all the other times. Afterward, Letty settled against him, her head tucked into the cradle of his arms.

Adam brushed a hand up and down her back. “I don’t deserve you,” he said.

She rested her chin on his chest to look at him. “You’re wrong,”

“Am I?”

She nodded. “Quite wrong. You deserve me and all the good things yet to come.”

His eyes twinkled. “Is that so?”

“It is.”



“Very well. I won’t argue with you, lady wife.”

She scooted up a few inches and kissed him, soft and sweet and with all her heart. “That would be wise.”

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CAROLINE WATCHED the snow begin to fall from where she stood on the balcony of her room at Chilgrave which was directly above the ballroom. Music drifted up from below, but the warmth of the Christmas season failed to reach her.

For two years she had believed that John was gone. All that had been a lie. She removed the small bit of silver from her cloak pocket and held it up in the moonlight: a cuff link with an antique coin as its face. She had given the pair to John as a gift shortly before he died. She had found this cuff link on the floor next to Avery when she had found him wounded at that townhouse in Grosvenor Square.

Somehow then she had known the awful truth—that John wasn’t dead. But she hadn’t wanted to face it. She had meant to go after Avery in that tunnel, but something had made her turn back. She had seen him, heard his voice, and before she could think she was lifting her weapon. And when John had threatened her brother and Letty, she had done what she had to, at great cost.

Caroline closed her eyes and cast the cuff link deep into the garden. She was done with love, done with dreams of a future with children and a loving husband. John had shattered that illusion. Perhaps, in some perverse way, she should thank him for that.

“Lady Caroline?” Avery’s voice called out softly. He stood in the doorway leading back inside to her bedchamber.

“Mr. Russell,” she greeted. “Why aren’t you with the others?”

He stepped out onto the terrace with her. “I am leaving shortly. I wished to say goodbye.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I am needed back in London. There is much to rebuild, and it won’t be easy.” He leaned on the stone railing, brushing a dusting of snow off the ledge. “I also have a lead regarding the woman who was seen with Lord Wilhelm and his rebels.”

“There was a woman with him?” A fresh pain stabbed Caroline’s chest. He’d said he’d held her in his heart all this time, yet he’d had another woman at his side.

“Yes, we believe she was both his mistress and a spy who worked as his left hand. She was the one who was tasked with hunting down Letty, and she led Wilhelm to my men.”

Caroline pulled her cloak tightly about her as she turned away from the balcony railing.

“Avery . . .” She spoke his name, steeling herself.

“Yes, my lady?” He searched her face.

“Don’t make John’s mistake, or Adam’s. Don’t chase vengeance forever. It will not bring you the peace you seek.”

He bowed his head without comment and left her alone. Caroline turned back to the snowy courtyard, wishing that she could feel something, *anything* aside from the numbness of her broken heart.

She was frozen—frozen forever.

# EARL OF BRECKEN

AUBREY WYNNE

## PROLOGUE

*BRECKEN CASTLE, Wales*

*November 1809*

MADOC RAN a hand over the horse's hindquarters, then moved his palm along the inside of the back-left haunch and found the swelling. He lifted the stallion's left hind leg. "Hold his head," he told the stableboy, "and when I release the leg, take him into a trot."

"Yes, my lord."

He counted to fifty then let the hoof drop to the ground. The gleaming bay went into a trot with a noticeable limp, its hoof lightly scraping the dirt. "Now halt, back him up a dozen steps, then take him into a trot again."

The boy called over his shoulder. "Ye think it's only a spasm?"

"No, I think his stifle is locking up."

The horse moved forward without an issue. At fifteen, Madoc was known for his love of animals. He slept in a stall if a mare was foaling, spent an afternoon devising a splint for a sheep or goat with an injured leg, or wiled away hours with the chemist discussing human remedies that could apply to other species.

"Did you work your magic?" asked Lord Brecken, his hazel eyes twinkling gold in the afternoon sun. "Is he ready for the hunt?"

“I’m afraid not, Father.”

“He looks fit to me.” Brecken watched the huge gelding walk back toward the stable. “That’s my favorite mount. If he’s not lame, I’m riding him.”

“I wouldn’t, sir. I think that back joint may lock up after a strenuous ride, like it did today.” Madoc took a deep breath and looked up at the towering earl. He hoped to match his father’s height in the next few years. “Take my horse tomorrow. If I’m right, a bit of rest should take care of it.”

“Ha! I’ll ride my own, and if there’s any trouble, I’ll give him the rest of the month off.” The earl smoothed back his dark hair and adjusted his hat. When he squinted up at the sun, the laugh lines deepened on his weathered face. He gripped Madoc’s shoulder and gave him an affectionate shake. “You’re the only man in this county that would dare argue with me. Besides my dashing looks, you’ve inherited my audacity.”

Madoc had never compared himself to this remarkable man. True, their features and coloring were similar, but their temperaments were wholly different. His father was gregarious, charming, and spontaneous, though Mama called it impatient. He was also a natural leader. And fearless. “Father, I—”

“And not a word to your mother. She’ll be nagging me all night.” Brecken strode away, his long legs quickly eating up the distance to the stable. The greatcoat strained against his broad back, and Madoc straightened his own shoulders as he watched the earl walk away.

“You’ve been doing that since you were old enough to walk behind him. Always in his footsteps, imitating every move and expression.”

“Mama, how do you manage to sneak up on me like that? You’re quiet as a fox hunting chicken.”

She laughed, a tinkling sound that always reminded him of the porcelain bells his grandmother had loved. “Doc, what secret is he keeping this time?”

Madoc grinned at the nickname, given to him as a child, because he was always doctoring some creature. If he wasn't heir to an earldom, he'd have studied medicine. Instead, he would follow his father's path and go to Oxford, take the Grand Tour if the war was over, and eventually assume his place at Brecken Castle.

"It will do you no good to ignore me. I won't tell, I just need to prepare myself." Her dark gaze settled on him. "When I'm kept in the dark, it usually includes some level of danger."

"I'm more concerned for the horse."

THE NEXT DAY, he wanted to take back those words. His father got his way and rode his favorite horse. At first, Madoc thought perhaps he'd been wrong. The stallion held up well after a hard day's ride. Lord Brecken, irritated they'd lost the fox, raced one of the younger men back to the castle. Coming to a hedge, both men leaned over their mounts as the horses jumped.

Madoc's heart lodged in his throat as the earl's horse balked, its back leg jutting out. Lord Brecken was pitched over the hedge. Struggling to breathe, Madoc kicked his gelding's flanks to catch up, waiting to hear his father's angry bellow. But it never came. On the other side of the shrubbery lay the twisted body of his hero. A scream, muffled and seemingly far away, sounded behind him.

*Mama!*

He turned his mount on its haunches and held up a hand to the approaching riders as he slid from the saddle. His voice sounded calm and commanding, and he wondered how that could be when he trembled like a frightened child on the inside. "Keep my mother on the other side until we know his condition."

An old friend of the earl nodded and intercepted Lady Brecken while Madoc and two other men crouched around the earl. He rested on his back, his head and one leg at an odd angle, eyes closed. Putting his ear close to his father's face and

placing two fingers on his neck, he blew out a loud sigh of relief. "He's alive. Let's get him to the castle. Send someone for the physician."

Madoc closed his eyes as his mother's wails filled the silence. "Sweet Mary, is he...?" She almost fell from her horse and collapsed over her husband. "Wake up, love." Her voice rose as she shook him. "Wake up, damn you. Wake up!"

"Mama, he's alive. We need to get him home." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up. "I'd say his leg is broken, from the angle of it. We'll know more once he's been examined and wakes up."

Someone whistled, and the wagon following with refreshment rumbled along the uneven field. It took four men to gently lift Brecken onto the bed. Lady Brecken, skirts in one hand, scrambled up next to her husband. She wiped at her cheeks, then rocked back and forth, holding one of his giant hands in both of hers. He could hear her whispering to the earl as if he could hear her.

Madoc helped the physician set the broken leg. As the bones cracked and popped into place, he wondered how the pain did not stir his father. A glance at the physician reinforced his concern.

"Let's take it as a blessing that he didn't wake," said the doctor. "I'll stop in daily to check on his progress. He'll be able to tell us more once he's conscious again."

But it would be several days before the earl was coherent. When he did rouse, the entire household heard him. Cursing like Madoc had never heard before floated down the hall. He ran down the hall that morning, praising the Lord above for small miracles. While the words weren't for delicate ears, the sound of his father's voice had eased the tightness in Madoc's chest. Until he reached the bedroom.

Inside, his mother stood next to the four-poster bed, fists pressed to her mouth, shaking her head. The early rays of dawn shone on her wet cheeks. When her gaze locked with Madoc's, his stomach lurched.



“What is it?” he rasped, tying the belt of his banyan around his waist.

“I can’t bloody move! I can’t feel my bloody legs. By God, get that physician here NOW!” The earl waved a shaking hand at the door. “NOW!”

By that afternoon, it was determined the earl had lost the use of both legs. It happened sometimes with back injuries. Madoc remembered a pup that had to be put down when a horse stepped on it. His mind whirled, going over every accident, every ailment he could remember. There had to be something they could do.

The weeks passed, and Lord Brecken went from ranting to depression. “Shoot me. Give me the same mercy we give a loyal horse. I can’t live as an invalid.”

Never had Madoc heard the pleading in his father’s voice. The thought of a gun to the earl’s head made his stomach quiver. Would he find a way to do it? Not his father. Not the Earl of Brecken. Suicide was a coward’s way out.

IN THE END, he wasn’t sure what was worse. His father chose silence over death, rarely uttering a word. He continued to breathe but stopped living. Mr. Caerton, the steward, maintained the estate and lands. When he approached his mother about working with Caerton and taking over the some of the earl’s responsibilities, she refused to listen.

“Your father planned on instructing you. We’ll have to wait until he’s himself again. I can’t imagine his reaction if you took over without his consent.”

At eighteen, Madoc left for Oxford as planned. The earl managed farewell that came out a snarl. “Enjoy your youth while you can. Happiness is capricious and snatched from you in the blink of an eye.”

“Doc, he doesn’t mean it. He loves you,” his mother soothed. “This is just so hard for a man like him.”

“A selfish man, you mean. It’s self-pity that keeps him strapped to that chair. He might as well be dead.” He closed his eyes at her gasp, stunned at his vehemence. “I’m sorry, Mama. I didn’t mean that. It’s just—”

“I understand. Be patient, my dear.” She laid a hand on his cheek. “He’ll come back to us. I know he will.”

“You’ve been saying that for three years.” Madoc wrapped his mother in a fierce hug. “I pray you are right. For your sake.”

“For all of our sakes,” she murmured into his chest.

## CHAPTER ONE

*JANUARY 1819*

*London, England*

MADOC SHIVERED, pulled up the fur collar of his greatcoat, and adjusted his beaver hat. With a well-placed kick, he urged his horse into a canter. He wanted London far behind him. His manservant followed with the luggage, but he needed air and time to prepare himself mentally for the upcoming encounter. His last visit had been more like a stay in a mausoleum than one's boyhood home. His father's mumbled responses and lackluster eyes had not prompted any lively conversation—until the end.

*“I’VE COMPLETED my final year of university. Are you sure you want me to leave again so soon?” Madoc leaned against the mantel, the smoldering peat in the grate hot against his riding breeches. The May sun poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows and mocked the thin, dour man wrapped in heavy wool blankets. Where had the Earl of Brecken gone? That man had been larger than life with a booming laugh, an iron fist, and cunning wit. A man his son had looked up to, imitated, his every action geared toward the hope of gaining the glow of his father’s approval. The kind of man who commanded attention merely by walking into a room. And therein lay the problem.*

*The silence stretched. Perhaps the earl had fallen asleep. His gaze fell on his father’s bony fingers, clutching a shawl*

*about his rounded shoulders, as if it were his last defense. Madoc swallowed as his father's hazel eyes narrowed. The brown and green flecks, passed down to his only son, sparked with anger.*

*"Every young man needs to see the world. It's part of your basic education. Do you think I'm unable to manage my own affairs because I cannot walk?" rasped the earl, pushing back a limp strand of gray from his forehead. "Do you think the inability to use these feckless limbs affects my brain?"*

*"No, Father, but I believe it has affected your spirit." He went down on one knee and took a cold, papery hand between his warm palms. "Please, let me take you for a ride in the carriage, get out and see some of your tenants. Your soul is in this land. It would do you good."*

*"I don't need you to take me anywhere. If I wanted to leave my home, I'd do it," bellowed the old man with surprising volume. His shoulders slumped as if the admonishment had depleted what little energy he'd possessed. "Go! Enjoy your youth while you have it. Lady Fortune is a capricious, evil female. You never know how long happiness will perch on your shoulder."*

*Madoc's jaw tightened as he gave the earl a rigid nod and left the room. Why was he surprised? Delaying his response to the Home office, he had hoped for one last bid to bring his father back to the land of the living. By God, he'd tried. Now, he'd take the assignment with no remorse, working under one of England's most brilliant spymasters. At twenty-two, he was making a name for himself. The danger and intrigue made him feel alive, a welcome and vivid contrast to the quiet hills of the Welsh countryside.*

*His parents suspected nothing, assuming their son had come from his last year at Oxford rather than Belgium. This "Grand Tour" would provide the perfect ruse to be abroad, his title gaining him entry into the right circles to mingle, charm, and... listen. Napoleon had been declared an outlaw and was wreaking havoc again. The Crown needed every available set of eyes and ears. It may be years before he was able to return. If he returned. Lord Risk was as fickle as Lady Fortune.*

*He stopped at the front door, his palm on the cold handle of the door as he looked over his shoulder, a final glance around his childhood home. An ancient castle with the countess's modern touch. The large receiving hall had been paneled with oak, the stone floor covered with narrow, polished planks, and the windows enlarged to allow more light. The furnishings had come from London by way of France and Italy, the earl sparing no expense for his new, young wife. Painted silks and satins hung on the walls and dressed the glass panes.*

*"Must you leave, Doc? Can you not put off your trip for a year or so?" His mother appeared at his elbow, using his nickname to soften him, no doubt. He recognized the familiar martyred expression creasing her face. Her slender fingers clutched his riding coat. "He was so looking forward to your visit."*

*Madoc snorted. "Mama, you know my passage has been paid. Father has been quite adamant that I go."*

*"You don't understand what he's been through, what it's like for him. He's bitter, that's all. If you stayed, he'd come round. I'm certain." Her onyx eyes watered, and she laid a hand on his cheek. Rays of light shed a halo about her black chignon, at odds with the growing venom in her tone. "Have you become one of those dandies, then? Looking for pleasure and living off your father's money and good name? He needs you now."*

*He ground his teeth, his jaw tense. "He's been like this for six years. My presence for a few weeks will not produce a miracle. I will obey my father's wishes, ma'am."*

*Madoc turned on his heel and stormed out the door. A chestnut gelding stood patiently waiting in the courtyard. He mounted and turned the horse to face the veranda, hooves and cobblestones reverberating in the warm afternoon air. "Good day, Mama." With a bow and sweep of his hat, he added, "Until we meet again."*

FOUR YEARS AGO. Four long years.

So much had happened in that time. He'd changed, lost his naivete, his youthful optimism. His skills belonged more to a soldier than a titled landowner. He had a relentless grip on a sword, excellent marksmanship, and a wicked right punch. He could go days without sleep. His superiors regarded him as the man with a seductive smile and honey-like charm that could distract top officials—or their wives—while correspondence was pilfered in their own libraries for secrets that could hasten the end of the war. He'd become the perfect chameleon, as comfortable playing a discontented foot soldier or a common thief in the rookeries as he was the polished dandy spending his father's fortune.

It had taken its toll.

Madoc trusted few people, rarely heard a conversation or request without discerning a hidden implication or ulterior motive, and was bone-tired. He wanted to sleep until the sun was high in the sky. Ride across his childhood estate, nod at tenants, and have no greater worry than balancing the ledgers and deciding which country dance or dinner to attend. It was time to begin his life, the life he'd been born to, the life that had called to him when he'd stepped onto English soil again. Yes, he was ready for the role he had only pretended at the last four years.

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*BRECKEN CASTLE and estates*

A TIRED AND dusty Madoc trotted toward the village of Brecknock. He crossed the stone bridge, drawing in a renewed breath as the clear water rushed and splashed under the arches. The slate mountains and snow-capped peaks seemed to be stacked on top of each other, like a crowd trying to see over the next shoulder. They provided the perfect background for his brooding mood. Curiosity would greet him in the village. Enthusiastic waves and questions about the master when the tenants realized it was Lord Madoc riding through.

A frigid wind whipped at his face, and he hunkered inside his coat and cursed. Devil confound it, it was cold. A man awake on all suits would have waited for his coach and valet. The sun peeked out from a billowy, gray cloud. He squinted at the unexpected brightness, his vision watery, barely able to discern the outline of the small town looming in the distance. As he drew closer, Madoc blinked and wiped his eyes with his palms.

He slowed his chestnut gelding to a trot and made his way to the square, taking in the dilapidated buildings. The main thoroughfare—that made him chuckle as he thought of the hectic, paved streets of London—was dotted with people buying last-minute wares from closing vendors and hurrying home before dark. A growl in his belly reminded him he hadn't eaten since breakfast, but his attention focused on the derelict condition of Brecknock.

There were no inquiries or smiles. No hoorays or nods from the men. Filth trickled like a brown and yellow brook from an alley and puddled near the street. Roofs were in disrepair and walls had been patched and patched again. The tenants' clothes were worn and shabby. What in blue blazes was going on? His lovely village had gone to ruin.

“Good day,” he called out to the blacksmith he'd known since a boy. “I've just returned home and can't help but notice...” He made a long sweep with his hand to encompass the sight before him. “What happened?”

“Ask His Lordship,” boomed the man before ducking his head and removing his cap, “or the devil in his pocket.”

“And does this devil have a name?”

“Aye, it's Caerton's eldest, Niall.”

“He's taken over for his father, then?”

“He's taken... That's a true statement, to be sure.” The man turned away and disappeared into his smithy.

“By God, I'll get to the bottom of this,” Madoc yelled to the retreating figure.

Four generations of Caertons had managed the estate for the Earls of Brecken. The last time he'd seen Mr. Caerton, the old man had been in decline. Finding it difficult to maintain the physical responsibility of managing Brecken's vast holdings, he had begun training his oldest son, Niall, to replace him. Madoc had never liked the youth growing up. He remembered the boy picking a fight, then cheating by throwing dirt in the other lad's eyes to win. Of course, that had been years ago. People change. He was living proof of that.

It got worse as he cantered toward the castle. The fields were overworked. At a glance, he knew there had been no rotation of land. Less fertile soil, less crops, less profit. Perhaps Caerton had died before he'd been able to instruct Niall in all aspects of management. He'd give the steward the benefit of the doubt until he had more facts. If the past years had taught him anything, it was that appearances could be deceiving. A mirthless laugh scratched his throat, thinking of the disguises he'd donned over the years.

Madoc kicked his horse into a gallop as he passed a paddock of thin plow horses. He was glad he'd come home. It was time to take over for his father and have a word with Niall Caerton. As he clattered onto the stone courtyard, the butler appeared at the door.

"Lord Madoc, it is so good to have you back." He held the door open as Lady Brecken rushed down the steps to greet him.

"Oh, my sweet son. The lord has answered our prayers. You've come home just in time."



## CHAPTER TWO

*LATE FEBRUARY 1819*

*London, England*

EVELINA WIGGLED her toes over the bathing tub, then plunged under the steaming water to drown out Mama's barrage of complaints. She grinned against the water, her mother's words now muffled, though the irritated tone broke the liquid barrier. Who would run out of air first? Evelina's heart pounded louder; her chest tightened. Then a thick strand of her hair went taut. *Yank!* She burst through the water, panting, and glared up at her mother.

"Evie, this is a serious conversation. Do not ignore me." Lady Franklin wagged an accusatory finger. "We need to find a husband for your sister. It will be a miracle, if you ask me, after the debacle of last season."

She sighed and pushed the wet curls from her face. "You know very well that was not her fault. That dastardly viscount is a sniveling weasel of a man. *If* you could call him a man. He humiliated poor Fenella with that wager."

Lady Franklin sank back onto the bed as the maid held up a thick towel for Evelina. "I admit it was a mistake, sending her alone for her first season. We should have waited a year and had you both presented together though that might have been frowned upon too. Who'd have thought she'd be so naïve?"

Evelina snorted. “She’s as tall as most men and meticulous with ledgers. She’s been raised like Papa’s son, could run the business herself, and is open and honest in a conversation. Yes, Mama, what could possibly go wrong, throwing her to the wolves at Almack’s?”

“Watch your tone, my girl.” Lady Franklin wrung her hands. “It *was* painful to watch. She’s so awkward.”

“Any creature is awkward when out of their habitat.” She pulled the thick dressing gown around her and sat before the small hearth. Louella, her lady’s maid, began combing out her long tresses. “Fenella is adamant not to marry at this point. She needs time to see that not all of London’s bachelors are the devil’s spawn.”

“Evelina, such language!”

“Well, it’s true.” Her poor sister had been the object of a wager between a set of self-indulged Corinthians. The young viscount—dashing but short of stature—had accepted a dare that he could get any green girl alone and kiss her. The chums had hedged their bet and decided on Fenella, the most awkward and tallest of the season’s new arrivals. It had taken him two weeks, and his cronies had hidden in the bushes to witness the cruel hoax. Evelina’s fists clenched every time she thought of her poor sister abused by those egotistical oafs.

“It’s in the past, and she must move on. I still think if you married first, she’d follow suit.”

Evelina frowned. “Fenella is no more a follower than I am. Besides, if I marry first, then she’ll see it as a ticket to freedom and spinsterhood. She deserves love as much as I do.”

Lady Franklin shook her head and took the chair next to her daughter. “Why couldn’t she have been more like you instead of such a clunch?”

She arched a brow, irritated with the comparison. Though Evelina was a more traditional beauty than her sister, Fenella had an ethereal loveliness. They were opposites in personality and physical traits. Evelina had always been friendly and outgoing. Fenella was a bluestocking who had few close

friends but fiercely loyal. Evelina was petite and curvy compared to Fenella's tall, litheness. Evelina had hair the color of dark honey while Fenella's was pale blonde. Her eyes were a light brown, almost amber. Fenella had their father's clear gray eyes.

"Mama, let's be honest. Your true goal is for one of your daughters to marry a titled gentleman—not just find a good match—so you can receive more prestigious invitations. My sister doesn't belong with the *beau monde*." She winced as Louella caught on a knot and worked it out with her fingers. "I have promised to do my best, but there is no changing who we are. Gloriously rich merchants who can buy their way into almost any event in Town. A leopard cannot change his spots and shouldn't have to. Why can you not be happy when we have so much?"

"I am quite satisfied with my life. There is nothing wrong with a baronet, except your father is not a peer. I hate it when those plump, smug women look down their noses at me with a patronizing smile," huffed her mother. "Besides, with your beauty, there is no reason we can't improve our standing. A baron or viscount would be lucky to have such a diamond of the first water."

"I suppose we should be thankful you aren't hoping for a duke."

"Oh, gracious. There's so few dukes, even marquesses. An earl, though..."

Evelina sighed. An ember in the hearth popped and drew her attention, her mind wandering as she gazed at the crackling flames. Guilt once again twisted in her chest. She *was* excited for her first season. Unlike Fenella, she loved the attention and new gowns, the flirting and dancing. Since she'd been a girl, she'd had the same dream of her first ball.

The most handsome man in the room, dressed complete to a shade, would bow and ask her to dance. It would be a waltz. His dark hair would gleam under the candlelight of a dozen chandeliers; his hand would rest on her waist, his warm palm against her gloved one. The orchestra would strike the first

notes, and she would whirl and spin as her champion held her close, their eyes locked. They would finish the dance, both breathless, and he would escort her outside for a breath of air. On the balcony, or during a stroll through the garden, he would bend his head and lightly touch his lips to hers. A tingle would shoot from her head to her toes, and with just one kiss, she would know it was love.

“Mama, you cannot use us as sacrificial lambs. I will choose the man who wins my heart. I pray for *your* sake that he has a title. I pray for *my* sake that he has a sense of humor when he meets my family.” She followed her maid to the bed, dropped her robe, and lifted her arms as Louella helped her don the soft cotton night rail. “Now, I am dreadfully tired. The season doesn’t really begin for another month. May we continue this conversation later?”

“Of course, my dear. The modiste comes tomorrow, and it will be a long day for all of us.” Lady Franklin kissed her daughter on the forehead and patted her cheek. “Before you ask, I promise to be patient with Fenella during the fittings.”

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THE ICE beneath her shining blades reflected her coquelicot red pelisse and matching bonnet. Evelina pulled the leather strap taut and secured it around her ankle. Then she tightened the ribbons of her hat, pulling the wide, flared brim closer to the sides of her face to protect her skin from the chilly breeze. She had added several gold feathers under the band, knowing they would flutter gracefully as she skated.

The Serpentine had frozen, providing a chance to enjoy one last skating session before the winter receded. Hyde Park was filled Londoners taking advantage of the day. On the north bank of the river, carriages cluttered the side of the road. On the opposite side, groups of pedestrians gathered and watched those brave enough to skate. Most were men, which had never given her pause. The ladies preferred to observe and gossip or venture out for a brief slide with a partner. Evelina would smile sweetly at any disapproving looks from the matrons,

then with a slight bow, perform what school boys called a Turk's Cap. The figure entailed cutting the numeral three, thrice, until she connected the numbers and formed the shape of a turban.

"You really should try the blades, Fenella," she urged once more as she glided a circle around her sister. "The steel is much better quality than the old wooden blades we had as children. I can move so fast, it's... exhilarating." She held her arms out and spun again. "Like flying."

"If I had your skill and confidence, I might attempt it. But my lengthy frame sprawled on the ice would only create a scandal. Or seriously hurt someone." Fenella laughed and shuffled a few feet on the soles of her boots. She clutched the lapels of her slate redingote, her knuckles white. "I prefer the saddle. The horse is in charge of balance, and I only need to hold on."

"It takes balance to stay mounted. You could outride me any day."

"That may be, but think of the snickers and whispers if I fell. *You* sprawled on your backside, however, would draw a dozen beaus to your rescue." Fenella's smile did not reach her eyes as she pushed back a pale flaxen curl from her cheek. "Not that I blame them, Evie."

"Nonsense, we are different but complementary! You are willowy and lissome to my, um... compact but graceful athleticism," she finished valiantly, hands on her hips, relieved when their cousin Charles joined them.

"Greetings, lovely ladies, is it not a splendid day?" he asked with a mock bow, at ease and steady on his own skates. "A final gift from Old Man Winter. With these temperatures, tomorrow will be too late to safely swagger and flaunt my prowess."

"Who are you trying to impress today, dear sir?" asked Fenella, nodding to a pair of giggling girls under a tree. "The pretty blonde with the pout or the darkhaired beauty who seems to follow your every move?"

“Both.” He grinned, his auburn hair shining red in the afternoon sun. His gray eyes twinkled as he glanced over his cousins and noted the taller sister’s boots. “You should take more risks,” he said with a wink. “Life is a gamble, sweet Fenella, and you can’t win if you don’t wager.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when you need another loan,” Fenella quipped back. “In the meantime, lend me your arm so I don’t make a fool of myself.”

“I’ve already promised both my admirers a promenade around the Serpentine. However, a friend of mine has arrived in London and doesn’t know a body here. Let me introduce you.”

Evelina giggled as Charles dashed away before Fenella could protest. He disappeared behind one of the booths pitched to sell refreshments. “He will never understand the art of subtlety, will he?”

“No, he won’t,” agreed her sister. “I hope he’s not trying to... What if—”

“I’m sure the gentleman will be fine if he’s a friend. Perhaps he’s a longshank and not shorter than you?” she ventured with her usual optimism.

“I can only hope,” agreed Fenella. “It’s almost worth the legshackles of marriage to avoid this constant parade of *eligible* men. Oh, the expression in their eyes when they look *up* at me.”

“One day, a man will look into those gray eyes, brush back your white-gold locks, and declare his undying love for you.” Evelina hugged her. “He’s out there, somewhere, you know. We just need to find him.”

“You really should be on stage,” Fenella said but gave her another side hug. “What would I do without you, Evie?”

She shrugged her shoulders, then spotted her cousin, returning through the colorful display of bright pelisses and fur-trimmed redingotes, bonnets, beaver hats, and elegant greatcoats. Charles appeared with his friend, a tall, lanky, handsome man with soft brown eyes. His hair was pale blond

and combed straight back. Almost the exact color of Fenella's long tresses. Evelina watched her sister smile, the tension draining from Fenella's body as she straightened, no longer hiding her height.

"Ladies, may I introduce my good friend, Viscount Raines. My lord, these are my cousins Miss Franklin and Miss Evelina." Charles smiled and nodded at each female as he spoke their names.

"It's my pleasure." Lord Raines executed a perfect leg and bowed. When he stood, he was at least a head taller than Fenella.

Evelina narrowed her eyes, studying the man. "Have we met before, Lord Raines? You seem very familiar."

The viscount shook his head. "I do not believe so, Miss Evelina. My mother enjoyed the season before she married, but alas, my father preferred the country. I am rarely afforded an opportunity to enjoy London's leisure activities."

"Hmm," she murmured, looking between him and her sister. There was something about the man she couldn't quite...

"Would you care to walk, Miss Franklin?" Lord Raines held out his arm.

To Evelina's surprise, Fenella smiled, placed her hand in the crook of his elbow, and slid one foot forward. "I pray, sir, I do not pull us both down when we must cross the ice."

"Never fear. I may not look it, but I'm sturdy as an oak. Lean on me if you feel unstable." The viscount's words faded as they moved away.

With her sister in capable hands, Evelina picked up her skirts and glided to the middle of the frozen circle. She would get a lecture about her chapped cheeks, but it was worth the price. How she loved the outdoors. Days like this were a gift, and a girl was mad not to take advantage.

She skated the perimeter of the Serpentine, leaning right, then left, turning about, and continuing backwards. With her eyes closed, she listened to the *sssssk* of the steel against the

frozen river. She slowed near the end of the skating area, twisted, and turned to move forward again. Ahead of her, Lord Raines and her sister moved slowly along the bank. What a fortuitous meeting. She hoped they were getting along well.

With a splash of pulverized ice, she stopped beside them. “You didn’t fall, I hope?” she asked, biting her lip.

“No, I did not. My lord was not exaggerating when he said he was solid as an oak. He’s been thoroughly tested and approved.” She rubbed her gloves together. “I am ready for a bit of warmth, though. The sun is already moving to the west, and I’m feeling the chill.”

“Shall we rest and share a cup of saloop?” ventured Lord Raines.

“Oh, yes,” agreed Evelina, thinking of the tasty sassafras tea. “Let me take my blades off.”

Charles joined them just as the trio headed toward one of the vendors. “I say, it’s been a splendid day.” He winked at Fenella. “Did my friend treat you well?”

“Abominably,” she answered with a grin. “However did you find a male in London who enjoys an intelligent conversation?”

“If your cousin wasn’t such a beauty, I’d take offense,” said the viscount in mock horror. They stopped at the wheeled cart. “It seems we both enjoy a balanced ledger and have similar interests in estate management.”

“I’m glad to hear it, and gladder still I wasn’t part of the conversation.” Charles ordered 4 bowls of the steaming tea. “I did warn you, though!”

A plump woman dressed in several layers, a mob cap and bonnet, and fingerless gloves sat next to the portable table. Bowls were stacked next to her elbow, and she pushed the lever on the samovar’s spout and filled a dish. Passing the first to Fenella, the licorice scent wafted under Evelina’s nose. She accepted the second bowl and wrapped her gloves around the warmth. A strange sense of being watched made her peer over



her shoulder. Some pedestrians, a few gentlemen on horseback, but no one familiar or beckoning to her.

A horse whinnied and a tall, darkhaired man moved away from the walking path. He was dressed fashionably in breeches and Hessians, his black greatcoat expensively tailored. As he urged his mount by the vendor, their gaze met. A hundred butterflies battered her insides, and one hand pressed against the stomach to stop the wings. The man was incredibly handsome with a trimmed beard and piercing brown eyes. No, green. Like emerald ice chips embedded in a circle of amber. The stranger gave a slight nod, the corner of his full lips almost tipping in a smile. She drew in air, not realizing she'd been holding her breath.

“There’s milk and sugar, if you prefer, my ladies,” the vendor said, nodding to a tin and a small pitcher, and pulling Evelina back to the moment. “My husband’s selling roasted chestnuts over there for those with a taste.”

When she turned back, the man was gone. She shook her head, scoffing at the strange hollowness that had replaced the flutter in her belly. The group finished their saloop and wound their way through the thinning crowd. Orange and red streaked the sky as the girls stepped into their waiting carriage. “Thank you for a lovely afternoon,” Fenella said to the men. “Perhaps we’ll meet again, Lord Raines.”

“I hope so, ladies, but I doubt if it will be soon. I head north tomorrow, back to my estate. I do, however, come to London several times a year.” He doffed his hat, the late afternoon rays brightening his blond crown. “I shall call on Charles when I return.”

As soon as their conveyance lurched forward, Evelina pounced. “He seemed quite taken with you.”

Fenella sniffed. “He is a very nice man and takes care of his invalid mother. His father died a year ago, and he’s spent the past months learning the estate. We had a wonderful conversation about breeding sheep and—”

“All the things Mama warned you against,” she interrupted with a laugh. “But did you like him?”

“I do, but as a fine man who engages in lively and witty conversation, not as a suitor.”

“No flutter?”

“Not even a pit-a-pat.” Fenella gave her sister a side glance. “He thought you were quite beautiful.”

“Pish and petunias! He’s much too fair for me. You know I prefer the dark, mysterious type.”

“Promise me something,” Fenella said, squeezing Evelina’s hand.

“Anything.”

“If you do meet this dark, handsome, mysterious man and I’m not yet married, promise me you won’t let him pass you by.” Fenella chewed her lip but held Evie’s gaze. “I would never forgive myself if you lost your chance at love because I’m too...”

“I promise, under one condition.”

“Does there always have to be a bargain?” She laughed and blinked, her gray eyes bright.

Evelina hated seeing the unshed tears, wanted to provide comfort and assurance that all would be well. It wasn’t fair that one of them had the features admired by society and the other a more distinctive beauty. Her sister was a prime article, just underappreciated. Evelina swallowed the lump in her throat.

“I’m a Franklin, aren’t I? I promise if Cupid’s arrow finds me first, I will not duck. But you must do the same.” She cupped Fenella’s cheek in her palm and forced a cheery smile. “As Lord Raines proved today, there are good, decent—and handsome—men. And one of them will be honored to have you as a wife. Swear to me that you will keep your heart open when that time comes.”

“Agreed. Now we only have to find the elusive man who will suit one of us *and* have the title Mama covets.” Fenella leaned back against the velvet squab with a sigh.

Evelina snorted. “I suppose we could promise our first born.”

## CHAPTER THREE

*FEBRUARY 1819*

*Brecken Castle, Wales*

MADOC CLOSED HIS EYES, slammed the ledger shut, and let out his breath. A long, ragged, resigned breath. Brecknock and its adjoining lands had always been self-sufficient. Fields were set aside and rotated for human and livestock consumption, meat and dairy animals were kept, tradesmen resided in the village. But the crops and beef cattle had been sold and not replaced, with all profits going to the estate manager. No winter turnips or potatoes planted to help the tenants through till the next harvest.

The estate was on the rocks, his father taken ill, and they didn't have a sixpence to scratch with.

Caerton had paid a visit the morning of Madoc's return. The steward had informed Lord Brecken that he'd received a lucrative opportunity elsewhere and was putting in his notice. The earl had gone into a rampage, which had both thrilled and horrified Lady Brecken. Thrilled he was speaking and taking an interest in his surroundings. Horrified at the anger and threats that echoed loudly down the hall. The chancer fled the next day when news had spread of the Lord Madoc's arrival. Charges had been filed, but there was little else to do. For now. "I'll find you, Niall, you bloody devil. You'll pay one way or another."

In the meantime, the tenants were in a bad way. He had put the men to work repairing homes and vital shops. Griff, his half-brother from his mother's first marriage, had sent grain and other staples from Monmouth. It had galled Madoc to ask for help, but at least he had family to turn to. His parents needed to understand the dire circumstances they now faced.

He pushed away from the desk and found them in the library, seated by the hearth. Lord Brecken's chin hung low, and he snored lightly. His mother smiled as Madoc leaned against the mantel. She had aged since he'd been gone. Silver threaded her dark hair, but her eyes remained clear and alert. He remembered a time when she had been his world. Her laughter had reminded him of delicate crystal bells, and he'd been certain no one could equal her beauty. Mama had doted on him, spent time with him, listened to him. Until her husband's infirmity had consumed her.

"How was your day, son?" she asked and patted the seat next to her on the chaise longue.

He sat next to her and studied the sleeping form. Last month, he'd returned to find his father in a rage and his mother at sixes and sevens. Lady Brecken had met him at the door in tears, insisting the earl had gone mad.

The scene was forever etched in his mind. An old man stood gripping the mantel, ranting to have his horse brought round. An old woman begging him to be reasonable, that he wasn't able to walk, let alone ride. But Brecken *had* tried to walk, bellowing at his wife to shut up and obey him. Lord Brecken had returned until he fell face first on the floor. Madoc and the countess had watched in horror as a scarlet puddle seeped from the earl's head and stained the carpet. Madoc had carried the unconscious form to his chamber, a sobbing mother following him up the two flights of stairs.

The physician had guaranteed the earl's skull would heal from the concussion but could not predict whether the patient would wake from the concussion or to his state of mind. What if the silent brooding father he'd left became a babbling incompetent. The worst scenario would be an endless sleep,

his mother hovering over a prone form until he took his last breath.

Guilt twisted in his gut. Could he have stopped the course of events leading to this? If he'd been home, would Caerton have succeeded in bleeding the estate? A low growl scratched at his throat. *What ifs* and hindsight weren't viable solutions.

"I have some funds to get us by for now, but this is a large estate. The roofs are repaired and grain purchased, so we're good until Spring." He ran a hand through his hair. "We'll need to find a way to produce more income until it's functioning and making a profit again. I have no idea where to begin."

"Once your father wakes up, he'll know what to do." She patted Madoc's hand. "He loves you, you know, and will appreciate all you've done."

"Blast, Mama, we don't know if he'll ever be cognizant again." He stood and walked to the side table, pouring a whisky. What he wouldn't give for some fine Cognac right now. "I've prioritized the most urgent issues, and we'll work our way down the list."

"Mind your tongue. I'm still your mother." She wagged a finger at her son. "Is there nothing left?"

"I apologize, and yes, we still have the property. Every bit of coin, anything he had the authority to sell, he did. He scraped every morsel of flesh from the carcass before he made his escape." He threw back the whisky and winced as it burned his throat. "I need brandy, not this blasted fire water."

"Getting foxed won't help us."

"Nor is waiting for Father to wake up and make everything better." He clenched his jaw and looked up to the ceiling, studying the intricate plaster crown molding. *Patience!* "I'm sorry, Mama, truly I am. This is just so galling."

"I understand." She pressed her lips together and squeezed her eyes shut. "It's only that... he's such a magnificent man. Even now when he wraps his arms around me, it's like the

world melted away. Nothing can harm me. Nothing can touch me.”

“He adores you. Always has.”

Lady Brecken nodded and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. “My first marriage was arranged by my father. I was a dutiful wife and gave my first husband the expected heir, so fate rewarded me. As a young widow, *I* chose my next husband.”

“How did you meet?”

She laughed. “A foxhunt, of course. A mutual friend invited me to a country party. Two weeks of glorious distraction from the worries of a baby and horrid mother-in-law. I was a carefree girl again. Then Lord Brecken rode in from the field on his enormous white steed, and I caught his eye. He bowed to me from the saddle and...” Her voice faded, a slight smile curving her lips, and he knew she was conjuring the details of that first encounter.

“You knew right away?” Madoc always scoffed at the female ideology of love at first sight.

“No. I had just endured a year of mourning and a woman who despised me for outliving her son. She was threatening to keep *my* son if I remarried.” She smiled at her sleeping husband. “But when Brecken looked at me and bellowed, ‘Who brought this stunning creature? I’ve been looking for her all my life.’ I realized my life had finally begun. Every time I turned around that first few days, he was there with a refreshment, or a compliment, or a request. He proposed the following week, before the first guest had departed. I said yes without hesitation.”

“No regrets? Not even now?”

“Love, genuine love, doesn’t diminish or become a hardship. It’s what keeps me going, gets me out of bed in the morning, convinces me to look my best. So I’m still the sweet Maggie he calls for to give him a kiss. Our hearts still touch, although it’s a different kind of love now but as powerful.” Her voice broke. “So no, I have no regrets. He’s made my life

worth living, and I'll be by his side until the end. Whenever that may be."

As she spoke, her features soft and her dark eyes shining, Madoc could see the young girl she'd been. An ache in his chest made him reach out to her, and he held his mother for the first time in years. She was once again the caring, beautiful Mama he'd known as a child, who loved her son as much as she loved her husband. The woman she'd been before his father's accident, before their lives had all tumbled over that hedge.

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"DOC! OH HEAVENS, DOC!"

Madoc set down his tea and brushed a few crumbs off his waistcoat. His mother's urgent tone made him quit his breakfast. With long, hurried strides, he took the steps two at a time and stopped outside the bed chamber. *What the devil was going on?*

"Good morning, son. Maggie just told me you've come home. I'm sorry I wasn't more fit when you arrived." His father, propped up against the bolsters, held out his hand to shake his son's. "I want to hear about your travels."

His mother hurried to the door. "I told you he'd come back to us." Her eyes shone with hope. "I'll have tea brought in here and give the two of you some time alone."

Madoc could only nod as he moved past her to sit across from his father. It was like he'd come back from the dead. His voice was weak, but held the same confident, jovial tone of years past. Green sparkled against the golden brown in his eyes, and a smile took ten years off his creased face.

"It's good to see you so... awake, Father. We've missed you."

The bushy gray brows furrowed, then relaxed. "Well, tell me about Egypt. Did you see the pyramids? And India? I remember my Grand Tour."



The two men chatted and laughed for an hour. Madoc remained vague about his own travels and would say just enough to draw the earl into a story and sit back to listen. It had been so long since he'd heard his father recount an adventure. The old man hadn't lost his touch.

"Enough reminiscing," barked Brecken. "What's going on with the estate? Maggie says there's trouble. By God, where's Caerton?"

Madoc hesitated, wondering if this would put his father over the edge again. "Which Caerton?" he asked, carefully feeling his way.

"Niall, of course. Didn't you hear?" Brecken's eyes narrowed. "Or are you testing me?"

He chuckled at his father's insight. The man had a right to know the condition of his own holdings, so he gave a brief summary.

"It can't be as bad as that."

"Perhaps you need to see it for yourself." It was an unseasonably warm day. They could bring the carriage around —

"Splendid idea. Some fresh air would be just the thing." Brecken tossed off his blanket and slapped his thigh. "Don't tell your mother. She's busy with the week's menu and would worry too much. Call for my valet and a couple footmen."

An hour later, the Earl of Brecken and his son rumbled down a lane toward Brecknock. The sun glinted off the layer of frost still covering the ground. Fluffy white clouds hung above them in a cornflower blue sky. The air was crisp but not biting as the earl opened a shutter and tipped his head out the window to inhale a deep breath. Dressed in a bottle-green waistcoat, fawn trousers, and a perfectly tied cravat, it was as if time had spun backwards.

"I feel like I've been in deep sleep, and the world has changed while I've been gone." His eyes narrowed when they passed the dormant fields and some bony dairy cows. "Where's the livestock?"

“Sold.”

Anger sparked in his eyes, his fists bunched, as they passed by dilapidated barns and hungry dairy cows. When he saw some of the tenants he'd known since a boy, thin and underdressed for the winter, he exploded. “What kind of monster lets his own people suffer? Caerton was part of this town, worked with these men, celebrated holidays with these families. By God, he'll pay for this.”

Word spread quickly that the master was up and about. Madoc had always known his father was popular and well-liked, but this welcome surprised him. By the time the carriage reached the end of the main street, a crowd had gathered at the small square. Children jumped up and down to see inside the fancy coach. Adults waved and smiled, relief and hope brightening their faces.

“God bless you, my lord,” one woman yelled.

“We knew you'd come round,” cried another.

The earl ordered the carriage to stop.

Lord Brecken waved to the crowd. “I'm afraid I've been amiss in my duties. If I'd known what was happening, but my... condition. I can only thank you for not leaving.” His voice broke. “I will right the wrongs done to you. I give you my word, my son and I will restore these lands.”

“Lord Madoc already had my roof re-thatched,” called one man. “And he's sent us grain, so our babes have bread to eat, and our livestock won't starve.”

An elderly man, stepped forward, his homespun shirt and coat threadbare at the elbows and cuffs. He doffed his cap and stared at his worn leather boots as he spoke. “After sixty some years on this earth, and living off this soil—this particular soil—I wouldn't leave because of four bad ones.” The man grinned, exposing several missing teeth, and looked the earl in the eye. “This is our home, my lord. Where else would we be? Loyalty goes both ways between us. The name Brecken has always been respected as noblemen who kept their word.”

The blacksmith stepped forward. “Aye, my lord, and the young master will follow in your footsteps. We have no doubt.”

“Thank you, for your allegiance *and* your honesty.”

The earl’s face paled, and panic surged through Madoc. “Now it’s time to go home, Father.”

The silence on the ride home weighed on them both. One thinking of mistakes made in the past, the other pondering the future. A wheel hit a rut and jostled them against the leather squabs, causing both men to reach for the leather arm straps. The sorrow and regret in his father’s eyes tore at Madoc’s heart. He wanted to solve this problem for his parents but was at a loss, except to sell off part of the land. There were several smaller holdings that could be let go. He mentioned this and was astonished at the quick response.

“Whatever we need to do, Doc. It’s not about the coin, not now. Those fine, hard-working people have always depended on us. It took generations to build the trust we have and my stubbornness might have washed us all down the river. Their lives, Maggie’s future, your inheritance.” Brecken ran a hand over his face and rubbed his jaw. “I let my own misfortune become their misfortune. I let my pride rob me of ten years of happiness and... living. Hound’s teeth, but I need to repair the damage done.”

“I’m here to help, Father. We’ll figure this out together.” He leaned over and squeezed his father’s arm. “Whatever happens, at least you’re alive and of sound mind again.”

Brecken nodded, wiped his eyes with his palms, and whispered, “You’re a good son.”

Lady Brecken met them in the courtyard just as Madoc was opening the carriage door, worry deepening the lines around her eyes. “Don’t you ever sneak out like that again! I’ll, I’ll—”

“Kiss me, Maggie.”

Her eyes glistened as she placed a foot on the step and leaned inside the coach. She placed her lips to his, then pulled

back, blushing.

He stroked her pink cheek. “There’s never been anything more precious, my sweeting.”

“I love you, even if you are a cantankerous, arrogant, handsome, infuriating oaf!” She moved aside for the footmen to help the earl inside, not bothering to hide her very improper grin. “Take him upstairs, please. We’ll take a light supper in our rooms.”

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*LATE FEBRUARY*

*London, England*

MADOC LET OUT a long breath and pulled his horse to a stop near the Serpentine. It was done. Two properties sold, half the money safely set aside for the estate and the other half invested. He’d met up with an old army comrade Kit, the Earl of Sunderland, for some much-needed advice. After explaining his dilemma, Kit had invited him to join in the purchase of a textile mill near Manchester. This was the second declining factory that Sunderland had financed. The first made a profit within a year.

*“Doc, you need an income until the estate is self-sufficient again. A few wise financial ventures could get you out of low water. Give you the coin you need to make the repairs, then build from there.”*

*“I can’t justify spending money when we need it so desperately.” Madoc had thrown back the last gulp of claret. “But I admit, I’m at a loss.”*

*“If you must sell property, be sensible about it. By investing half the profit, the estate will have a steady income in another year or so. It will keep you afloat after your cash has run out.” Kit poured them both another glass and grinned.*

*“And I’ve sent a cask of fine French brandy to Brecken Castle. I recall mentioning your father only keeps that godawful whisky stocked. Consider it a donation to the cause.”*

HYDE PARK WAS busy for a winter afternoon. The river had frozen, and there were skaters on the Serpentine. He found himself with a fit of the blue-devils, as if he’d failed in some way by selling off a couple holdings he’d never even seen. Without thinking, he’d guided the horse to Rotten Row and found himself wandering the park. Laughter echoed across the ice, and he stopped under a tree to watch the activity. He stood in the stirrups to see over the row of conveyances and his eyes fell on a swirling red pelisse. Honey-brown hair fluttered beneath her bonnet, mimicking the feathers atop her bonnet. She was graceful and unabashed, enjoying herself immensely if one judged by the beguiling smile curving her lips.

Madoc settled back into the saddle and squeezed the gelding’s flanks, moving closer to the carriages. He wanted—no needed—to gaze at this lovely creature if only for a while. His eyes followed her as she glided past, not losing sight of the flash of scarlet that darted between other skaters and pedestrians. A chuckle rumbled in his chest as she turned and continued backward, her head tipped down. He lost track of time as he watched her petite form sashay back and forth, keeping rhythm to some tune only she could hear. The longer he watched her, the more buoyant his mood. Something about her called to him, a whisper of enticement that tickled his soul.

“Thank you for leading your preoccupied master here,” he said to the bay gelding, patting its sleek, muscular neck as he urged him forward. “Just what I needed today.”

The woman stopped to talk to another couple, then another gentleman joined them. His features were similar to the tall, elegant blonde next to prime article he’d been admiring. The foursome moved toward the stall selling hot drinks. Madoc watched her movements, the expression in her cognac eyes. *Stunning* was the first word that came to mind. He resisted the urge to dismount and wander closer. When she brought a dish to her mouth, he groaned. Her profile showed a pert nose and

full lips. She had a woman's curves, though she appeared young. Then she stiffened and turned toward him. Had she felt him watching her?

Her gaze locked with his. Blood rushed through his veins, heat simmered and pooled low in his belly. For a moment, he could understand Kit's impassioned words about his wife. Never had a woman cast such a spell on him. He nodded, almost smiled but caught himself, then pulled his horse away from the revelers.

With a swift kick, he sent them into a trot. Away from the skating goddess and back to his hotel. Back to Wales and his parents. This time, he would leave London with a lighter heart. His father had remained lucid, and his mother was once again the mama he'd loved as a child. It had been as if the return of the earl had brought her back to life as well.

The path ahead of him—restoring the lands and finding a trustworthy steward—would be difficult and no doubt fraught with setbacks. Yet, his outlook was so much sunnier than only a month ago. Who knew what tomorrow would bring?

## CHAPTER FOUR

*MARCH 1819*

*Brecken Castle*

ANXIETY NIGGLED at Madoc as he unbuttoned his waistcoat and pulled off his linen shirt. He was bone-tired, and his bed was calling his name. He'd been home only a few days and found his father's physical health once again on the decline. His mind and humor were still intact. Though Lady Brecken was still hopeful, Madoc resigned himself to the inevitable. The earl was dying.

At dawn, he woke to intense pounding at his door. "My lord, your mother sent me," called a manservant from the hall. "It's your father."

Madoc's pulse raced as he pulled on trousers and a fresh shirt over his head. He ran his fingers through mussed hair as he strode down the hall. Inside the earl's rooms, the earl lay propped up against bolsters, his skin a dull gray against the white linen nightshirt.

"What happened? Did you send for the physician?" he asked, gripping one of the bed posts.

His mother nodded. She still wore her night clothes and an ivory velvet dressing gown. "He woke me an hour ago, clutching his chest. I'm so glad he's resting now."

"His heart, you think?" Was he to blame? Had the neglect the earl witnessed been too heavy a burden? Madoc fought

rising panic and the urge to blame himself.

“He said the pain began in his chest, like a slow-burning explosion. I held him, but there was little else I could do. Then he collapsed, and I thought—” She bit down on her fist to hold back a sob and turned for the door. “I’ll have some lavender water brought up. It might soothe him.”

“Doc.” His father’s voice was thready, and his eyes remained closed.

“I’m here,” he said, leaning over the prone form and taking the chilled leathery hand.

“Don’t let your pride keep you from living the life. Every breath is a gift, and I’ve wasted the last ten years of it.” He gripped Madoc’s hand, the old man’s yellowed nails digging into the smooth, younger flesh of his son. After several short breaths, he continued, “Make amends for me, Madoc, with the tenants. Set the estate to rights again, if you can, and then live. Live your life with no regrets.”

Madoc nodded, his eyes burning. He blinked, holding back the emotions that roiled through him. The memories of a father he had idolized as a youth. A time when the Earl of Brecken had seemed invincible.

“Promise,” he growled, his lids opening and pinning his son with a hard glare.

“Yes, Father, I swear.” With his free hand, Madoc covered the top of his father’s and squeezed, feeling the elder’s grip relax after the oath was given.

“Tell your mother... Tell her...”

A *woosh* of skirts, and she appeared next to the bed. “Yes, my love.” Her dark eyes shone with tears and a tremulous smile curved her lips. “I’m here.” Settling next to him on the mattress, she gathered his fingers and cradled his palm against her cheek.

“Don’t cry over me, *fy annwyl*,” he whispered, using his familiar Welsh endearment for her. “Be happy for me. I’ll be whole again soon.”



“I’d rather have you with me. You’ve only just returned to me.”

“I’ll always be here, watching over you. We both knew with our age difference that I’d go long before you.” The earl managed a tired smile while his thumb stroked her skin gently. “You’re still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known. Our wedding day was the happiest day of my life. I never understood why you chose an old man like me when you could have had your pick of young dandies.”

She looked up, a tangle of black curls clinging to her tear-streaked face. “You were my knight in shining armor, so gallant and strong. You swept me off my feet, and I my heart was lost.”

A sob escaped her, and she fell across his chest, tears soaking his nightshirt. “You cannot leave me. Not yet, not now. We haven’t had nearly enough time.”

“And I’m afraid I’ve wasted the last ten years.” He paused, eyes closed as he drew in a ragged breath. “I’m truly sorry. My ego stole so much from us. Forgive me.”

Madoc watched his parents, witnessed the deep love they had for one another. He swallowed, his throat thick, realizing how lonely his mother must have been. Never had she left his side since the day of the accident. Guilt twisted in his gut.

Images flashed across his mind. Memories of teasing and laughing, the stolen kisses and shared, knowing looks between his parents that had been so frequent. His own childhood had been happy and carefree, doted on by the earl and countess and most of the staff. His father, a barrel-chested man, had maintained his physical strength into his fifties. He could outride and outshoot any man in the county of Brecknock. The earl was known for a ready smile, a quick frown, and a booming laugh or reprimand. Madoc had strived to emulate his father in everything.

Until the accident. He and his mother had tried patience, funny stories, visits from old friends, every remedy they could think of—even threats—to pull him from his self-pity and depression. Nothing had worked. How was he to know

catastrophe would be the key to unlock his closed mind and bitter heart? Bollocks! Why did this family have such a tendency for extremes?

Madoc backed slowly from the room, leaving his parents alone for their final goodbyes. For he knew with a grave certainty that the earl would be dead before the day ended. He'd seen enough death over the years to know when a man was near his last breath. His mind whirled with the complications of his father's imminent death, and he willed his mind to focus amid the grief that threatened to break his composure. He'd planned on more time to get reacquainted with the estate, gain the trust of the tenants.

The physician would be here soon. There would be arrangements to make and correspondence... He returned to his rooms and finished dressing. When he entered the library, the decanter of brandy glittered in the morning sun. Madoc didn't think twice.

"Thank you, Kit," he said to the ceiling as he poured the amber liquid. "I'll need some liquid fortitude to get me through this day."



THE FUNERAL WAS simple and heartfelt. The villagers came out in their Sunday best to wave farewell to a master who had treated them well. Their eyes still haunted Madoc—the doubt, the hope, the unasked questions he couldn't yet answer.

He leaned back in his father's overstuffed leather chair and stared at the letter. One week of mourning, and the Home Office needed him back in London. His mother would have an apoplexy.

The conspirators he'd tracked from America to France and back to England, active members of the Spencean Philanthropists, had made contact with a nobleman. Why would the Duke of Colvin, one of the oldest and most respected families in England, have connections to known radicals? Madoc rubbed his jaw, mentally moving around

pieces of the puzzle. His man Walters, an ex-Bow Street runner, was keeping an eye on the trio and would give Madoc a full report when he returned to Town. Walters was also trying to locate Caerton, though the scoundrel was likely out of the country by now.

“Well, no time like the present,” he said to himself and pushed away from the massive oak desk. Tiny snowflakes fell from an iron-gray sky and pelted the windowpanes. Winter was reluctant to loosen its hold on the land. The day reflected his mood, he thought with a grunt.

Lady Brecken was in the sitting room, a large square of embroidery in her lap. The large brocade wing-back chair seemed to swallow her petite frame. Her eyes gazed out the window, fixed on the white specks swirling against the glass. She startled when her son entered the room. When had she become so fragile?

“Mama, I’m glad I found you.” He leaned against the mantel, studying the life-size portrait of his father. Dressed in riding clothes, dark hair smoothed back under the tall beaver hat, fox hounds at his feet and horse at his shoulder, it was hard to imagine such vitality gone. Madoc was now the Earl of Brecken and uncomfortable with his new title.

“You’re a younger version of him, you know.” Her eyes narrowed as she studied her son. “What has you worried? Is there something I can do?”

“Only by not berating me for leaving so soon.” He sighed and turned back to her. “I’ve business in London.”

She poked the needle into the fine linen material and set her embroider aside. “I’ll admit the timing is not ideal. However, the season is beginning in Town. You should think about marriage.”

“Mama, please, I’ve just inherited a failing estate.” He sank onto the chair facing her. “I’ve enough obligations right now without taking on—”

“Exactly my point. A generous dowry could make your life much easier.” Lady Brecken pursed her lips. “Doc, I’ve

taken stock of the immediate grounds this past week. I had no idea how badly the buildings and garden deteriorated. We need money.”

“I’m doing everything I can.”

“Not everything. As the earl, you also need sons. A wealthy wife could give us financial security and, of course, an heir. I won’t remind you of our promise to your father.”

His brows furrowed at her sharp tone. “I’m aware of my commitments and responsibilities. I’m also cognizant of the fact I have nothing to offer in return. Marriage is a bargain where both parties benefit.”

“Nonsense. This earldom goes back to Henry VII, *and* you’re young and handsome. Many girls could do much worse. If we’re lucky, there might be a knight, lavishly rewarded by the crown, with a daughter of marriageable age. As a last resort, a successful merchant would be ecstatic to have his family connected to ours. We’re far from London, so it won’t matter to the locals if her father lacks a title.” His mother rose. “I won’t rest until we’ve restored Brecken Castle and its holdings to its former glory.”

Madoc swore softly as his mother stormed past him, her eyes bright with tears. We? What blasted help would *she* be, except to harass him now to accept the parson’s trap? His future now hovered over him like a storm cloud, dark and menacing. What kind of female would marry a penniless earl, agree to life so far removed from society, and live in a dilapidated castle? Not one with a face he’d want to wake up and gaze upon each morning.

He reached for his brandy.

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*LATE MARCH*

HOW THE DEVIL had he gone from a spy for His Majesty's government to a sacrificial lamb? He hated this place, with its lemonade and thin, delicate finger sandwiches that would never fill a man's stomach. Yet, here he stood in breeches instead of his usual trousers, on parade for all the simpering mamas and the silly, bird-witted girls. A cluster of females giggled under the musicians' balcony, casting glances about the room and settling on him. *I feel like a new hat in a shop window*, he thought as he leaned against one of Almack's white plaster pillars.

His mother had been correct, though. The patronesses had sent a voucher upon request. The infamous marriage mart now greeted him with enthusiasm. One visit to these infamous halls, and he was ready to sign on for the next war. Perhaps he'd start one. In the meantime, he shared the misery of several female wallflowers trying to blend into the woodwork. Madoc squinted at a tall blonde in a sea-green dress, attempting to hide behind a flimsy plant. He chuckled at her effort. Until she was joined by another petite lady with soft brown curls.

His heart jolted.

It was the skating goddess from Hyde Park. He'd put her out of his mind since his last trip to Town. She was dressed in a pale pink silk, with capped sleeves giving way to creamy shoulders and a hint of cleavage. Her caramel hair was swept up, paste gems twinkling from the light of the wall sconce. Wispy ringlets framed her heart-shaped face.

*Simply exquisite*, he thought as she took the long-legged blonde by the hand and pulled her away from the wall. Madoc realized the other woman had also been one of the party on the Serpentine. As if sensing his attention, she turned to look over her shoulder and caught his eye. Madoc held his breath. Those toffee-color orbs held him in a trance. The sounds around him muffled, and everything around him moved slower as they drank each other in. It could have been a moment or five.

He stepped forward, eager to make her acquaintance, then stopped. *Don't be a green-boy. You've never been introduced*,

he scolded himself. In that fleeting moment, she disappeared.  
*Blast!*

Disappointment swelled in his gut. An unfamiliar sensation when it came to women. He'd find her if it took all evening. What was her family background? Where was the walking Debrett's to answer his questions? He couldn't be fortunate enough to find a woman who both stirred his desire and had the wealth he so desperately needed. His selection for the future Countess of Brecken had been slim to this point. Not that there weren't beauties available. Only none with the kind of dowry he required *and* desperate to marry an earl with empty pockets. It was a tightrope, to be sure. Inquiring into the size of a lady's dowry without revealing he was in Dunn territory. To this end, he'd found the older brother of a military friend, who was happy to recite the appropriate page of Debrett's for any young lady who crossed their path.

"Lord Brooks." He nodded at the short, pretentious baron who joined him. His *social informant*, as he'd begun to think of his new friend, was barely one and twenty, with dull brown hair and eyes. His tongue darted out nervously whenever in conversation with a female, making his thin lips red and shiny after a long evening. To make up for his lack of physical attraction, the man wore enough lace and jewelry for three. He fiddled with a diamond stick pin placed precisely in the center of an enormous intricate cravat that would make Beau Brummel proud.

"Lord Brecken, why are you not dancing? It's why you've come, is it not?"

"No, I did not come for quadrilles or waltzes. I came for a wife. I'd prefer to know she's a possible match before I resign myself to a thirty-minute dance set." Madoc searched the crowd, ignoring the ludicrous commotion in his belly. "And the sooner I achieve success, the sooner I can leave."

"I, for one, will miss you when you're gone. I'm much more popular with a fine-looking earl next to me. And for that, I thank you."

“I’m happy to oblige. Without your assistance, my search could have been endless. Your knowledge of these families is astounding.”

“It’s ironic, you know,” Brooks said, looking up at his companion. “You’re here to make the longest commitment of your life, and you’re worried about the length of a dance set.” The man smiled, showing crooked, buttery teeth.

Madoc let out a loud guffaw, causing a couple on promenade to glance their way. “Point made, my friend. Point made.” The popinjay was growing on him. He appreciated Brooks’ dry wit and quiet commentary. It made these engagements bearable. Four in a week. Did no one ever spend a quiet evening at home in London?

“I’m in the mood for a bit of gaming tonight. Would you care to join me after this?”

“It will give me something to look forward to. This evening has been interminable.”

“I promised Lady Franklin that I would dance with her daughter. Then my obligations are complete.” Lord Brooks pointed out a young woman wearing a gold atrocity that hugged her ample curves and too many feathers bouncing in her hair. “For now, I’ll tell you about that darkhaired bit of muslin. Not the brightest star in the sky, but her father is a banker. He’s put out the word he’d be very generous to any gentleman of good standing who shows an interest.”

Madoc studied the woman. She laughed, a garish sound that grated on his nerves. Her eyes were large but too far apart. He couldn’t decide if he’d look at one, then the other, or look above her nose and not choose. When the lady cackled again, he mentally struck her name off his list. He could accept a plain wife, but that noise would drive him to lunacy. *Mama would chew her up and spit her out.*

With a sigh, he watched Brooks approach the tall wallflower who had tried to hide behind a potted plant. Though his friend’s eye level was even with the woman’s chin, he was undaunted by the height difference. Madoc grinned. This would be entertaining.

*I promised Lady Franklin that I would dance with her daughter.*

Lord Brooks knew Lady Franklin and was about to dance with her daughter. Her daughter knew the honey-haired goddess. Madoc focused on the couple, determined to be introduced to the mystery woman.

Brooks bowed slightly and engaged Mis Franklin in conversation, his face pleasant and bland. She nodded her head to something he said, then hitched her shoulder up and bent her head as if she had a spasm in her neck. Then her mouth opened; her tongue shot out like a feral adder and made a wide swipe around her lips.

Madoc's mouth dropped open. What in blue blazes was the chit doing? The expression on his friend's face was uproarious, and Doc struggled not to laugh out loud. The hussy chewed on her bottom lip as if there were a bit of beef stuck to it. The baron placed one foot behind him.

*He's in retreat, and I don't blame him.* Dashed bad timing, though. How would he get an introduction to Miss Franklin's friend?



## CHAPTER FIVE

EVELINA WATCHED her sister wage a comical war with the unsuspecting Lord Brooks. Poor man. Though he wasn't handsome, the baron was a nice person, and Evie liked him. She moved to Fenella's side in time to see Lord Brooks' retreat, and their mother headed toward them, her deep brown eyes narrowed and mouth pinched.

"I'll intercept her for you, but what were you thinking?" she asked, waving her fan to cool her cheeks. "You looked like Nora the cow when we put honey on her lips."

Fenella laughed. "I'd forgotten all about that. Well, good. It had the desired effect, then." She picked up her skirt and made a dash for the refreshment table.

"I'll find a way for you to settle this debt," Evie called after her good-naturedly, blocking Lady Franklin's path to her oldest daughter. "Mother, why is your face so mottled? Gracious, let's get you some fresh air. It's stifling in here!"

They walked out of the ballroom and toward a large open window, shutters pushed to display the twinkle of a thousand stars in the midnight sky. A crescent moon shone yellow-white against the inky black. Muffled voices and music followed them. Evelina inhaled the crisp night air, waiting for her mother's tirade.

"Why does she do her best to vex me?" Lady Franklin's jaw tensed as she spoke. She blinked and smoothed the skirt of her slate gray gown. "I only want what's best for her."

“I know that, and you know that, Mama,” she agreed. “But Fenella only sees your disapproval and what she lacks in the eyes of others. She’s convinced you favor me.”

“How can you say that? Why would I try so hard if I didn’t love her?” Her mother gripped Evie’s arm. “Who else saw that ridiculous performance, do you think?”

Evelina started to sympathize with her mother until the last question. “It doesn’t matter, Mama. What matters is my sister is obviously unhappy. We need to find a way to alter that.”

“I suppose you have an idea? Please don’t say a convent.”

A giggle bubbled up Evelina’s throat. “Of course not! We’re not even Catholic.”

“I fear it would be easier to convert my oldest daughter than find her a husband.”

Evelina shook her head and hooked her mother’s arm with her own. Lord Raines face came to mind, and she smiled. “Let me think on it. I may have an idea. In the meantime, at least send taller men her way.”

“I’ll try, but choices are slim after last year and her constant attempt this season to put off any man who smiles in her direction.”

They re-entered the crowded ballroom, and the heavy warm air smacked her in the face. Pish and posh, it was only March. What would Almack’s be like in June? The odor of too many people assembled in one space assaulted her nostrils again. Snapping open her fan, she wafted it under her nose and perused the crowd. She spied Fenella by the refreshment table.

Evelina’s breath caught. Standing next to her was the gentleman she’d seen while pulling her sister from hiding earlier.

“You look flushed, my dear. Are you all right?” asked her mother.

Evelina nodded. “I need something cool to drink.” She’d apologize to Fenella later for dragging their mother back, but for the love of petunias, she wanted to meet that man.

When their eyes had met, the moment had been dream-like. Her heart raced again, remembering the heat that had swept through her when their gazes locked. One hand cradled her stomach as she walked, but the pesky wings continued to flap.

They weaved their way among the attendees. She saw Lord Brooks approach her sister and the stranger with a wary look. It appeared introductions were made, then the unknown gentleman bowed and kissed Fenella's gloved hand. His broad shoulders strained the well-tailored coat as he bent, then straightened. His smile was heart-stopping, the dark mustache making his teeth appear as white as new snow. He nodded at the baron who escaped with a look of relief. When her sister grinned, Evie's heart sank.

*Don't be a wet goose*, she scolded herself. *You don't even know the man*. If he was interested in Fenella, she should be ecstatic for her sister. Forcing a smile, they approached the refreshment table. Guilt now batted the butterflies into submission.

"Fenella, if you think—" Lady Franklin stopped as the male beside Fenella bowed. "Do you know this gentleman?"

"Mother, may I introduce the Earl of Brecken?" Fenella turned to him. "Lord Brecken, this is my mother, Lady Franklin, and my younger sister, Miss Evelina."

The earl bent over Lady Franklin's hand and then took Evie's fingers in his grip. Warmth seeped through her gloves, and her knees weakened. It was like a scene from a romance novel. He leaned over her hand, his burnt umber hair almost black. She could almost feel his breath against her skin.

The well-trimmed beard could not hide the strong jaw and dimple in one cheek. But it was his eyes that held her captive as they glittered dark gold and then green, as the gaslit chandeliers picked up the deep emerald of his waistcoat. She was mesmerized by the flickering shades, recognized the laughter in them, as if she and the earl were new acquaintances who shared an amusing secret.

When he turned to her mother, she felt chilled with the loss of his touch.

“Would you care for some lemonade, ma’am?” His voice was deep and warm, like the welcome heat of the sun on a chilly afternoon.

“That would be divine,” gushed Lady Franklin. “Are you new to Town? I’m sure we would have remembered such a fine gentleman.”

Fenella and Evelina rolled their eyes in unison.

“I’ve been traveling for the past few years,” he answered politely. “I attended Oxford before that.”

“Are you glad to be back in England? I’m sure my daughters would love to hear of your travels. They’re well read in the arts.”

“I would enjoy that very much,” he said, studying Evelina.

She waved her fan to cool her cheeks, positive they matched the color of her gown by now. “What is going on?” she hissed as he stepped away to fetch lemonade for their mother.

Fenella shrugged. “He wanted to meet you. Even promised to dance with me to lessen Mama’s anger over...” She looked away, pressing her lips together to hide a smile. “Anyway, I think he’s smitten.”

“That’s nonsense. We’ve only just met. And don’t you dare laugh.” She glared at Fenella.

Lord Brecken returned as the first notes of a waltz sounded over the crowd. Evie’s heart leapt as he caught her gaze, apology in his hazel eyes.

“I bribed your sister for this introduction,” he murmured just above her ear.

“And what treasure did she think worthy of such a favor?”

“Only a dance. If only most women were so easy to please,” he whispered before turning to her sister. “Miss Franklin, would you care to waltz?”

Fenella gave her mother a side look, then shook her head. “I believe Evie would be a much better partner, don’t you, Mama?”

“Well, I—”

“It would be my supreme pleasure to dance with Miss Evelina.” Lord Brecken held out his elbow expectantly and made a final attempt toward Fenella. “If you’re sure?”

Her sister nodded. Evie drew in a shaky breath and laid her fingertips on his arm. A bolt of lightning struck through her core. He stopped to face her once they were surrounded by other couples. Goodness, this man was divine. When he laid his palm against the small of her back, and claimed her hand in his, she knew a taste of heaven.

“I’m indebted to your sister.”

She tipped back her head and raised an eyebrow in question.

“I’ve been searching for you all evening,” he explained.

“Since that first look?” So, he’d felt it too. She shivered at the thought.

Lord Brecken hesitated as if recalling the memory, then nodded and smiled. “Yes, since that first look.”

His upturned lips sent her stomach quivering again. “I saw you from across the room with Lord Brooks. Have you known him long?” He pulled her close as they whirled in unison, neatly avoiding another couple. His body, pressed against hers, sent her pulse into a frenzy.

“I knew his younger brother from my time in Belgium several years ago.” Another quick turn. “Lord Brooks has been kind enough to accompany me around Town and introduce me to his acquaintances.” He chuckled. “Your sister is adept at keeping men at arm’s length.”

“Oh, no. You saw that atrocious display?” Evie winced. “My sister is—”

“Clever, beautiful, and has a wicked sense of humor. I believe we could be friends.”

Evelina peered up at him through her lashes. His tone did not mock; his smile was sincere. She could have kissed the man. “Do you have a brother?” she asked instead with a grin.

“Half-brother several years older, as a matter of fact. My mother was a young widow, and Griffith is from her first marriage.” He winked. “Are you matchmaking?”

She shook her head and laughed. “No, I would never assume to understand the workings of another’s heart.”

“Nor I,” he agreed. “My own is enough to contend with.”

“Does it speak to you, Lord Brecken?” He intrigued her. His practiced charm, good looks, and honesty were a heady combination.

“Not until recently,” he answered and held her gaze, causing her heart to thunder in her ears. “And now, I can’t seem to stifle it.”

“Oh my, that is a problem.” Evie sensed more to this conversation than light flirtation. She changed the subject, not trusting her reaction to the earl. “Where do you call home, sir?”

“Over the border, near the Brecon Beacons.” His eyes dimmed for a moment. “It’s beautiful country, very rural. I didn’t think I’d miss it as much as I did.”

“You were born in Wales? Your father is Welsh, then?”

He laughed. “No, although he embraced the land and the history more than my mother who *was* born there. He insists that after third or fourth generation, we became Welsh by default.”

“How did your family come to be there?”

“My English ancestors backed Henry VII. He rewarded with them lands in Wales, with the promise of continued fealty and protection of the borders. And you?”

Evelina closed her eyes. She was dizzy, either due to the waltz or his warmth against her chest when he held her tight in a fast spin. What a delicious feeling.

The final strains faded and they stood facing one another, she with a besotted smile on her face and he with a questioning one. Had she missed part of the conversation? He held out his arm again, and she took it, along with several deep breaths. They slowly made their way toward her mother and sister.

“We were discussing family. I told you of my background and it was your turn. I believe that is how conversation works. A back-and-forth, yes?” Though his expression remained bland, his eyes danced with mirth.

“My mind drifted, enjoying your expertise in the waltz.” Evelina wondered if her lack of title would deter his interest. Or was he a fortune hunter that Lady Franklin would approve of? There was nothing for it, so she’d just push ahead. “My father is Sir Horace Franklin. He inherited a baronetcy and works in imports and exports—”

“Franklin and Sons?” Lord Brecken stopped, his mouth open. “The shipping wizard who could procure almost any obscure item for the right price? Even my favorite French brandy.”

She laughed. “Yes, that would be my father. Do you know him?”

“Of him. A friend of mine speaks highly of Sir Horace. Insists his wife would have left him during the war if it hadn’t been for the goods your father provided.” He gave her an appraising look. “Do you have any other siblings?”

She shook her head. “No, he says he’s quite satisfied with two daughters.”

“Yet, your sister cannot inherit the baronetcy. There must be some disappointment to that end.”

Again, she shook her head. Or was he balancing Papa’s accounts in his head? “He and my grandfather removed the entail. However, the companies are his main concern, and those will stay with us. I suppose Fenella will end up overseeing the businesses.”

“Really? Not her husband?”

Evelina bristled at the disbelief in his tone. “Yes, really. He’s raised her as a son, and she’s gained some of his *wizardry*, but in numbers.”

“She can balance a ledger?”

“She can calculate a column of figures in her head to a farthing *and* faster than any man with a pencil and paper.” She smiled smugly at his surprise. “Not all women are muttonheads.”

“No, certainly not. My own mother is proof of that. I apologize if I sounded... condescending. It wasn’t my intention.” His eyes dimmed to light brown before he continued walking. Genuine remorse, perhaps? “So what is your talent?”

“Mediation,” exclaimed Fenella as they arrived back at the refreshment table. “Evie keeps us tolerating each other. No one can intervene and soften a disagreement like my sister. It’s a gift.”

“That’s an impressive skill. We could have used you during the war.” He winked, deepening the dimple in his right cheek. “You could have been our secret weapon.”

Evelina blushed at his direct regard. She swore he glimpsed her racing heart, heard the panicked thoughts inside her head. He affected her like no other man she’d ever met. Not that there was an extensive list of gentlemen she knew personally, but she’d had her share of admirers. In Bath last summer, there’d been the Scottish shipmaker’s boy... Lord Brecken was a mature man. A strong, handsome, virile man with a sinful smile and the most intoxicating eyes. A sigh slipped from her lips.

“Are you feeling well, Miss Evelina? May I get you a lemonade?” His velvet tone caressed and jangled her nerves, and his fingers at her elbow sent heat roaring up her neck.

Fearing her cheeks were as red as the strawberries she loved so much, Evie only nodded and gave him a grateful smile.



“He is monstrous attractive. And so tall,” babbled her mother. “Fenella, you really should accept if he offers to dance the next set.”

“That was the last set, Mama,” she murmured, but her gray eyes were centered on Evie. “Besides, he’d only be staring over my shoulder, drinking in my lovely sister.”

Lord Brecken returned, preventing a response from her or their mother. He stayed a few more minutes, thanked the ladies for their company, then made his excuses.

At the end of the evening, he found them as they waited for the carriage. The chilly air created white clouds of frosted breath while their mother chatted about the on-dits overheard that evening. Lord Brecken approached, his dark greatcoat billowing behind as his long strides ate up the distance between them. *So masculine*, Evie thought with a shiver that had nothing to do with the temperature. Removing his beaver hat, the earl bowed.

“I hope to meet you again, lovely ladies.” His hazel eyes were deeper brown in the darkness, and they locked with Evie’s. Heat washed over her face, warming her cold cheeks. “Will you be at the Wilkerson’s on Friday?”

“We received an invitation to the musicale,” announced Lady Franklin. “I believe we gave a favorable response.”

“Wonderful,” he murmured as he took Evelina’s hand and kissed her glove again. To his credit, he did the same to her sister and mother. “Until we meet again, then.”

He strode away, three pairs of eyes pinned to his back.

Their coach pulled up, and the footman helped the trio inside. Evie leaned back against the gold velvet squabs. Her mother settled next to her, and Fenella settled across from them, trying to fold herself into the corner. Would Mama begin with an onslaught of questions about the earl or admonish her eldest daughter first?

“Don’t think you can disappear into the shadows, young lady. How dare you frighten off one of the few men I convinced to ask you to dance. I don’t understand you at all.”

Lady Franklin shook her head, her lashes beginning the familiar martyred flutter. “At least consider your sister. How will she find a good match when you strive to be the pariah of the season? Again!”

“I think it’s ridiculous that Evie can’t be courted until I marry.” She crossed her arms, turning her gaze out the window. “If I were you, Mother, I’d concentrate on your youngest daughter snaring that title for you. She’ll make a much better wife for a lord than I would.”

“To be clear, I said she couldn’t marry before you, but I’m beginning to agree,” chided her mother. “I *did* allow her to dance with Lord Brecken tonight after *you* refused.”

“I didn’t refuse. I just suggested Evie would be a better partner.”

“You don’t give the gentlemen a chance, Fenella. You are so afraid of rejection that you push them away before they have a chance to like you.” Evelina kept her voice quiet but steady.

Fenella rolled her eyes. “Exactly my point. This is torture for me.”

“Well, I’m afraid you have won this time. The on-dits portray you as an eccentric bluestocking. *Eccentric*. I’ve worked so hard to make a respectable life for us.” Lady Franklin moaned and fell back against the cushions, clutching the arm strap. “And what do I get in return? A churlish daughter who debates my every suggestion.”

Evelina’s heart went out to her sister. It was true Mama’s hope to improve her *own* social status had nothing to do with the happiness of her daughters. She dreamed of being one of the *ton*. Sir Horace’s wealth had opened many doors for his wife, but she’d never been satisfied. A baronet was not a peer. Yet, Evie knew her mother loved both her daughters.

“Tell us about Lord Brecken. He seemed quite smitten with you, Evie,” Fenella suggested, her eyes smoky and pleading.

“If you think you can chase the subject—”

“Did you know Lord Brecken’s crest goes back to Henry VII, Mama?” Evelina laid her fingers on her mother’s arm, hoping to turn her away from Fenella. “He also has a half-brother.”

Peace prevailed as Evelina recounted her conversation with the earl. The knot in her stomach lessened as her sister’s shoulders relaxed. It would be a brief respite unless Fenella found a beau. Or Evie gave in and married first. Either scenario would make their mother happy. Yet, the image of a tall, lovely, blonde spinster hovered before her. No, she could not find love before her sister.

Evelina said a quick prayer to find a solution that would satisfy both Fenella and her mother, then snorted. It would be easier to turn water into wine.

## CHAPTER SIX

MADOC CRUMPLED the paper and scowled fiercely at the roaring fire. He and a close confidante were enjoying a leisurely evening at White's. After a profitable evening of gaming, they'd found a quiet place to talk and enjoy an evening drink. He'd remembered the envelope tucked inside his coat pocket while they waited for the decanter.

"Bad news, Doc?" asked Kit, his dark eyes teasing as he loosened the folds of his cravat with a finger. "It's rare to see such a storm darken your face. I'm accustomed to the jovial yet bland expression you've perfected."

He snorted with good humor at the Earl of Sunderland's observation. "Ha! My invisible armor protects me well. To answer your question, news is rarely good these days."

"Duty or personal?"

Madoc tossed the wadded paper into the flames and watched the edges blacken and curl. "Both. This report from Walters isn't promising. The scoundrels are lying low for now. I'm meeting with him later tonight to find out what he couldn't put on paper. Which reminds me—just between us—what do you know of the Duke of Colvin?"

"The late duke was proper, unbendable, but a good man. His son..." Kit paused as one of the uniformed waiters entered with their port. Once they were alone again, he continued, "His son has lascivious tastes and no conscience, so I've heard. He makes the hairs on the back of my neck prickle when he tries to be friendly. Why do you ask?"

“I met him at Boodle’s and had the same impression.” Brecken knew he could trust Sunderland, but this was a sensitive case and much of it wasn’t common knowledge.

“Boodles? Hasn’t Prinny been seen there lately?”

The Prince Regent was known to prefer London’s nightlife to the business of the Crown. His desires and affairs were infamous and the talk of social circles and pubs alike.

“With his entire menagerie,” scoffed Madoc.

“Always makes for an interesting evening. I’d steer clear of Colvin, though, if I were you. What of Caerton? Any leads?”

Madoc shook his head. “Walters has a suspicion he’s here in London but under a different name. There was a ticket bought under Niall Caerton for passage to Boston. According to the captain, who happened to be an acquaintance of Walters, a widow and two children occupied the cabin. Left the docks yesterday.”

“You think he just wanted his name on the docket to throw you off?”

“It makes sense. Once the ship sets sail, the only proof of passengers is the ledger in the office. The man’s not an imbecile. He swindled us out of fifty thousand pounds over the years.” Madoc shrugged. “If only the elder Caerton hadn’t died.”

“So your father took no interest in the estate at all?” Kit sighed. “What a drastic change from the man I knew. How old was he?”

“Sixty-three.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I should have suspected something when my allowance shrunk each year. But I had blurt from my *extra duties* and enough intrigue to occupy my mind. I assumed Mama would write if anything was amiss.”

“Speaking of the countess, how could she not notice the decline of the grounds?”

“The gardens were kept up, and the wing of the castle where she and my father resided.” Madoc clenched his jaw. “Clever chancer. She had no idea the stables were being depleted or the livestock sold off. She’d become a recluse along with my father. If Niall had just skimmed the ready, and left the herds and crops alone, I wouldn’t be at sixes and sevens.”

“In the meantime, may I loan you the cost of a razor?” Sunderland asked with a smirk.

He laughed and rubbed the dark growth on his jaw. “I grew it for an assignment and decided I rather liked it. My valet detests it and hovers over me every morning with a razor and one raised brow. Says I look like a pirate.”

“Ha! The ladies might like that,” added Sunderland with a grin, his midnight hair gleaming in the flickering light. “The mysterious adventurer.”

Madoc gave a half-grunt, half-chuckle. Outside, a light snow blanketed the filth of the city, creating an illusion of innocence. Even St. James Street seemed untouched and pure. “I’ve been instructed that as an indulged, unmarried heir, I will want to spend much of my time in London. Hence, my gambling tonight. I was in a bloody sweat when I thought I had lost that pile of coin.”

“Where did you say you were staying?”

“I’ve got rooms at the Clarendon for now, but I hope to find something for a little less brass.”

“I’ve heard they have a superb French chef. I might join you for dinner while you’re there.” Kit’s eyes narrowed as he rubbed his jaw. “You know, I might be able to help you out there.”

“Eh?”

“I belonged to a private club before I married that provided all the necessities, and then some, for single earls. It’s by invitation only. I inherited a membership when my brother died.” A flash of pain clouded Kit’s dark eyes for a moment. His twin brother, the first Earl of Sunderland, had died after a

fall from a horse. He'd left behind not only a grieving brother but a pregnant wife. "Good men, as I recall, but you're out of the club once you've been caught in the parson's trap. I believe Darby is still a member. I can introduce you."

"Cheaper than the Clarendon?"

"Rooms are complimentary for members."

Madoc blew out a breath. "That would be beneficial. I cringe every time I place a bet or spend money on something frivolous just to keep up the appearance of wealth."

"I'm happy to help, though my invitation to stay with us still stands."

"I appreciate the offer, but I couldn't impose. I have no idea what kind of company or hours I'll be keeping for the next month or so. I don't want to put you or your lovely wife, Grace, in a bad situation." He threw back the last of the port. "I thank you in advance for the introduction."

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"Is it too much for a morning musicale?" asked Evelina. The event was at two this afternoon, and it was already past noon. She chewed her bottom lip and studied the ivory walking dress in the cheval mirror. Two rows of tiny yellow daffodils decorated the hem with Vandyke collar and cuffs in the same color. A satin ribbon of pale yellow offset the high-waisted gown. "I do wish the neckline was a bit lower. I want to impress without appearing to impress."

Her maid laughed. "Yes, miss." Louella handed her the Devonshire brown hat that matched her pelisse, primping the artificial flowers on the high crown. "You'll be the loveliest girl there."

Evelina accepted the bonnet and matching gloves. "Is Fenella ready?"

"Yes, miss. She's waiting with your mother in the parlor." Louella collected the night clothes and hurried toward the door. "Will a certain gentleman be there?"

Lord Brecken. The earl had interrupted her sleep the past two nights. A waltz that ended with a kiss. A carriage ride that ended with a kiss. A walk in the garden that ended with a kiss. For the love of petunias, the man's wicked grin haunted her as soon as she closed her eyes. After each dream, she'd wake in a sweat, panting. With a smile on her lips.

"He mentioned the possibility, not that it matters." Evie sniffed and tipped her head with dramatic nonchalance. This sent the maid into a fit of giggles.

"You spent an awful lot of time dressing for someone who doesn't matter." Louella balanced the dirty clothes in one hand and reached up with the other to smooth the collar of her mistress's gown. "You'll turn the head of everyone in the room."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence. I wish we could infuse some of that into my sister."

"Miss Franklin will find her way, you'll see." The maid scampered down the hall with a wave.

If only her family was so assured. With a sigh, Evelina made her way to the parlor. The coach waited outside, and her mother whisked them out the door.

"I need to stop by the milliner's and pick up my new hat," Lady Franklin announced once they were settled and the driver cracked the whip.

The snow from the night before glittered under the sun's rays, and Evelina squinted at the sparkling lawns as they rolled through Mayfair. The streets were already congested with vehicles and people, and it seemed the whole of London had the same idea to enjoy the lovely afternoon.

Strolling the shopping district was as much about being seen as actual shopping. The luxuries offered along Bond Street were tempting, and its paved walks on each side of the road drew the *ton* in any season. The streets were a muddy mess after a rain or the snow melted. Ladies could walk the thoroughfare without fear of filthy hems, enjoy the window



displays, and smile at the clusters of young dandies often spread along the length of both Old and New Bond Street.

They stopped in front of a store window with a varied selection of hats, and the driver jumped down to help the ladies from the carriage. Their mother went into the milliner's shop while the sisters strolled arm-in-arm and admired the window displays. They stopped at a jeweler's, *oozing* and *aahing* over a lovely silver necklace with delicate wire twisted into a heart and a cluster of rubies nestled inside. Next to it was a gold pocket watch etched with swirling Celtic designs.

"Papa would like that. What do you think?" Evelina asked, pointing to the watch. She gave Fenella a side glance, who chewed her lip and fingered the button on her mantle. "Or perhaps he'd like a golden horn to call the elephants to court. I heard it's the latest whim of the Prince Regent."

Her sister nodded, eyes studying the toes of her boots. "Mm-hmm."

"Hallooo." She jabbed Fenella's arm. "What's bothering you?"

Her heart clenched as her sister blinked back tears. "Did Mama say something? Are you worried about seeing Lord Brooks again after your performance at Almack's?"

Fenella shook her head and dragged in a long breath. "I'm going to Scotland."

"What?"

Evie thought back to the past Wednesday. When they'd returned home, both girls had taken the stairs, but Fenella had been called back by their mother. They'd gone into Papa's study. She had assumed her older sister was being reprimanded for her behavior, but never had she thought...

"You're being cast out?" she shrieked.

"Shhh," hissed Fenella. "I'm going to Grandmama's for an extended visit. I'll return after the season."

"Oh, well," she said with a sigh of relief. "Mama is hoping everyone will forget, and you can start with a clean slate next

year?"

Fenella nodded. "I didn't say anything before because I didn't know if Papa could arrange it. He'll accompany me next week. I will be home by Christmastide." Her clear gray eyes begged for understanding. "I need this season to be over. I'm tired of... I'm done to a cow's thumb, that's all."

"You must promise to write, or I will be furious." Her mind scrambled to accept this news. Now *she* would be the Franklin on her own during her first season. While Evelina had friends, her closest weren't in the same circles that her mother preferred. Yet, in her heart, she knew she'd be fine. Fenella was shy around strangers, where Evelina never lacked for conversation.

"I promise, but please don't bring it up today. I'm sure Mother will have plenty to say when she's ready. She may not know Papa told me this morning." She hugged Evie. "I can work in Grandmama's bookstore and escape this circus."

"I'm jealous, you know. I miss her so and love Glasgow. Her pretty neighborhood, the garden behind her house, and the old musty smell of the shop." She glanced over her shoulder to see Lady Franklin emerge from the milliner's, holding the strings of a large hatbox. "It's time to go. Now, smile. You'll soon be safe from musicales, soirees, and all annoying activities that deal with foppish titled men." But as she spoke the words, Lord Brecken's face appeared. Nothing annoying or foppish about that man.

They arrived at the Wilkerson's and waited in line as several other coaches dropped off their occupants. The rowhouse was in the fashionable Mayfair district, and the line of pink or cream homes had a stucco finish. Their destination was pink with a door the color of turquoise and a pineapple frieze above it. A butler stood at the entrance, welcoming the guests.

It was a smaller affair, with a professional musician playing the harp and the youngest daughter, Miss Lavinia Wilkerson, on the pianoforte. Evie didn't care for her, and secretly hoped the girl's fingers tripped up on the keys during

her performance. The mean-spirited chit had been one of the group to give Fenella so much grief last season.

Once inside, the trio entered the rowhome and handed off their pelisses, muffs, and hats before ascending to the second floor. There were two rooms, one facing the street and the other looking over the back gardens. The guests would mingle and have refreshments in the front room. The recital would be held in the back room.

“He’s here,” whispered Lady Franklin, tugging on Evelina’s sleeve, “and ogling at you.”

Evie sucked in a breath and concentrated on smoothing her muslin skirt. “An earl doesn’t ogle,” she murmured.

After her dreams, she didn’t know if she could face Lord Brecken. She peeked through her lashes, and he smiled. That wicked smile. Her heart pounded. How could a man be so striking? He wore a deep gray suit with matching trousers, a ruby- and-gray striped waistcoat, and a modest cravat. When he moved toward them, her lungs froze. *Breathe!* she thought as she snapped open the ivory fan on her wrist. For the love of petunias, she’d never needed her fan so much as this week.

“Good day, ladies,” he said with a bow. “May I say you look stunning?”

His eyes glinted brown and gold as they moved from Evie’s eye, down to her toes, and up again. It started a slow burn in her chest and spread up her neck. Her fan fluttered like hummingbird wings over wobbly knees.

“You’re quite dashing yourself, Lord Brecken.” How did her voice sound so steady and playful? “Are you a music lover?”

“I enjoy the harp but prefer the fiddle. My father had a magnificent baritone that I did not inherit.” He winked, his dimple deepening. “When I attempt to sing, it sounds like a wounded bullfrog. It’s my secret weapon and only used in dire circumstances.”

The women chortled, and Lady Franklin continued the small talk. Evelina observed the darkhaired Welshman as he

answered her mother's questions. His profile was like finely carved stone, his nose straight and chin square. Thick dark waves, the color of mocha coffee, were combed straight back and curled at the back of his neck. He had wonderful hands, she observed, large with long slender fingers. They moved gracefully as he spoke, before clasping behind his back.

The doors opened to the second room and the announcement made.

"I hope you don't mind if I sit with you," he asked Lady Franklin and offered his arm. "I don't have many friends in London who attend these... events. Lord Brooks had other commitments."

"We'd be delighted to have you join us," she said, and her fingers curled over his sleeve.

They made their way down the center aisle, seats flanking them in rows of four. As Lord Brecken stopped at the third row, Lady Franklin reached out, clasped Fenella's wrist, and pulled her toward the chairs. Then she stepped out of the aisle and sat next to her eldest daughter, leaving the earl next to Evelina. Evie closed her eyes at her mother's audacity and wondered whether to pinch her or hug her. The voice in her head screamed in embarrassment; her heart leapt with joy.

She kept her gaze lowered, the white beaded reticule in her lap suddenly of great interest. Her eyes slipped sideways when his hand moved to rest on his lap, his thumb laying on his... fall. She sucked in a breath as he crossed one ankle over a knee, brushing her dress. *Stop staring, you hoyden.* It was too late. She couldn't have dragged her eyes away if someone had shouted, "Fire!" The hem of his trousers hitched up, and he reached down to pull it back over his boot. Evie watched his fingers grip the material, a square gold ring with a **B** studded in tiny diamonds adorning the right fourth finger. The stones seemed to wink at her with his quick movement, and she imagined the pads of his fingers lightly tracing her cheek.

*Breathe!* she reminded herself for the second time that hour. Gracious, it was stifling in this room. Were there no

windows to open? She licked her lips, her mouth as dry as a stone in the Sahara.

“So, are you enjoying your first season, Miss Evelina?”

His voice made her jump, guilt stinging her cheeks as she forced her gaze away from his lap and up to his face. She wasn't sure which was a sweeter torture. What would his beard feel like? Would it tickle? His lips would be soft, just like in her dreams. A sigh escaped.

“Is that a yes?” The amusement in his voice snapped her back to reality.

“Heavens, where did my mind wander?” she said, snapping her fan open. Perhaps Papa should invest in ladies' fans. Evie might need several replacements this season.

He bent low, his eyes flashing with challenge, and whispered, “I don't know, but I'd like to come along.”

His breath was warm on her cheek and she wondered if he could see the pulse racing in her neck. She wanted to wipe her sweaty palms on her skirt and stopped herself just in time. The surrounding guests hushed, and Mrs. Wilkerson stood in the front of the room. When had everyone taken their seats? When had that lovely elfin girl appeared by the harp?

Mrs. Wilkerson raised her large arms, flapping them in the air, stretching the emerald muslin over her ample hips. “Attention, attention!” Her frizzy brown ringlets jiggled about her plump face as she moved aside to introduce the harpist, a pretty, dark-haired girl with bright blue eyes and an infectious smile.

“For my first song,” she began in a thick German accent, “I'd like to play the Fantasie in C minor, a harp solo written by the celebrated Louis Spohr. I was fortunate enough to study under him when he taught in my hometown of Gotha. I hope you enjoy it.”

The first notes of the harp sent a hush over the room. The musician's lids closed, arms raised and poised over the strings. Then her fingers flicked a wire, then another, and the magic began. Haunting strokes rippled through the silence. Her body

movement flowed in perfect harmony with the music, almost seductive in the melding of the girl and the melody. Soft and lyrical, then bolder, then harsh, and back to a keening finale. The audience stood and applauded with delighted “Bravas!” and “Encore, please” as the slight girl rose and curtsied.

At the urging of the crowd, she sat down once again and played another.

“It’s rare for composers to write solos for harps,” whispered Lord Brecken.

His comment surprised her. “You *are* fond of the harp, then? I thought you preferred the violin.”

“My grandmother played and said it spoke the language of love. I used to sit at her feet as a boy and listen.” He bent close to her ear, the words hushed as the music continued. His breath washed her skin like a hot summer breeze off the sands of Bath. “Did you know you can feel the vibration of the instrument through the floor? I used to think it was trying to tell me something, but I didn’t know the love language. Very disappointing for a young lad.”

She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing. “As far as solos, I read the composer’s wife is a harpist. He had a vested interest.”

Lord Brecken’s shoulders shook as he also held in his laughter. “Intelligent man.”

When the harpist finished to more resounding applause, Mrs. Wilkerson appeared again. “I now present my daughter, Miss Lavinia Wilkerson, on the pianoforte.” Lavinia was a plain girl of medium height, as thin as her mother was round. She had mousy brown hair and thin lips that turned down, giving her the appearance of a perpetual pout.

After her first song, there was a smattering of polite applause. Evelina glanced at Fenella, who sat with her hands clasped on her lap and her jaw taut. Lavinia sat back on the bench, and her mother placed a new stack of music before her. The performance was technically perfect. Yet, she lacked the

emotion and appeal of the harpist. By the third selection, the guests were beginning to whisper and fidget.

When she stood and took a final curtsy, thanking her mother and the audience, Lord Brecken mumbled, “All good things must come to an end.”

Evelina giggled. “You’re a rake, sir.”

“So I’ve been told.” He gave her a sly wink.

Heat spread across her chest, and her lips curved in a permanent smile. She wanted to stay in this chair, next to this charming man, and never share him with anyone. At the same time, she wanted to dash out of the room, dump cold water over her head, and hide until the afternoon ended. It would be safer. But Evelina Franklin made decisions according to her heart, not her safety.

As the guests enjoyed refreshments in the front parlor, the hostesses circulated the room. Together, they ambushed the earl. “We were sorry to hear Lord Brooks could not attend, but thrilled you came in his stead. Have you met my daughter, Miss Lavinia Wilkerson?”

Lord Brecken bowed over the girl’s gloved hand. Evie noticed with glee that he didn’t kiss it.

“I told Mama you should have been in the first row.” Miss Wilkerson dipped her head and smiled, revealing protruding teeth. She gave a nod to Evelina and Lady Franklin, but a sneer wiped away the pretense of civility when she glanced at Fenella. “The, er, view would have been much better.”

Evie clenched her fists, wanting to slap the silly girl across her cheek.

Lord Brecken grinned and looked down at Evelina. “I’m happy to say I had a splendid view.” Then he bowed to both Wilkersons and turned to Fenella. “Would you care to take a stroll? I need to stretch my legs after sitting so long, and you are one of the few people here that can match my stride.”

Fenella laughed, then glared at Lavinia. “I’d be happy to. I think that may be the best compliment I’ve ever received.”

“Then there’s something wrong with the gentlemen in London.” And the two walked away arm in arm.

Evelina’s chest swelled at the jealous sparkle in Lavinia’s eyes. She was almost disappointed when Lady Franklin came to the rescue and avoided insulting their hostesses.

“Mrs. Wilkerson, where did you find that superb musician? I had to dab my eyes after her performance.”

“Thank you, my lady. Dear Mr. Wilkerson discovered her when he was in Germany last year. She’s traveling England for the next six months.”

“And my dear, when did you become so adept at the pianoforte? I closed my eyes and your divine notes took me to another realm. Such talent for a young girl,” gushed Lady Franklin. “You should be very proud of your daughter, ma’am.”

“I am, indeed. She’s my pride and joy,” the woman gushed back, squeezing Lavinia’s shoulders.

Catastrophe averted, the Wilkersons continued to mingle, conversing with the other guests. Lady Franklin watched their retreat with narrow eyes. “You should pity the girl rather than goad her, you know. She only wears that smug mask to hide her insecurities.”

Evie’s mouth fell open at her mother’s insight. “Really?”

Lady Franklin nodded. “She looks in the mirror every morning and is terrified no one will ever ask for her hand. It’s a fear that you, my dear, will never know or understand.”

“And Fenella?”

Her mother snorted. “Once Fenella sees her own beauty, the men will see it too. But at this point, she’s her own worst enemy.”

“Is that why you’re sending her to Scotland?”

Lady Franklin peered down her nose at Evie. “Who told you?”



“Papa told Fenella this morning. She said they leave next week.”

“Your grandmother has been lonely since Papa passed. Horace feels Fenella would be company and give her time to \_\_\_”

“Adjust to your expectations?” It sounded waspish but accurate.

“No, time to realize her potential and where it may lead her. I won’t force her into a role she can never be happy with. When Fenella returns, she’ll be free to make her choices. I want both my daughters to be happy, despite their insistence to the contrary.”

Evie leaned in and kissed her mother’s cheek. “I wish you’d say that to Fenella. Or let me tell her it was my insistence she marry first rather than yours.”

“She wouldn’t listen. Not now.” Lady Franklin squeezed Evie’s shoulders. “I’m thankful to have one daughter that understands me. I hope someday Fenella and I find the same. But this conversation remains our secret, do you understand?”

Lord Brecken returned with a beaming Fenella on his arm. “Thank you for the intriguing conversation,” he said with a slight bow. “Lady Franklin, you and your daughters have been a boon for the day.”

“I hope we can be of service again, my lord.” With a tip of her head, she notified the footman near the door that they were ready to leave. “Please feel free to leave your card and call on us.”

“I plan on it,” he said, but his gaze returned to Evie. “I wonder if Miss Evelina and her sister would enjoy a ride in the park? If the weather is fine, I could rent an open carriage.”

“I look forward to it,” answered Evie. “We could continue our conversation on harps and your grandmother.”

Lord Brecken bowed over each lady’s hand. When his fingers brushed Evie’s, he gave her that spine-tingling smile and kissed her glove. The warmth of his lips sent a jolt up her arm. Heavens! What would her dreams be like tonight?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*APRIL 1819*

“A SOIREE?”

Madoc ignored Sunderland’s amused expression. “Tell me you’ve never attended one.”

“Not willingly.” His friend grunted. “There must be a woman involved.”

“Of course there’s a woman involved. I’m here to find a wife who’s flush in the pocket, *and* I can tolerate for the next fifty years,” grumbled Madoc.

“And you assume to find this veritable miracle at the Pommerly’s soiree?” The Earl of Sunderland lifted the decanter and raised a brow.

“Yes and yes.” Madoc held up his glass. “Did I thank you for the brandy you sent? It was a godsend when I was home.” He swirled the amber liquid around the cut crystal and inhaled deeply. “Dashed good stuff, Kit.”

“My pleasure. Now on to business.”

The next two hours were spent going over the ledges of the newly purchased textile mill. The predictions were good, and as long nothing unforeseen crashed around them, there would be a profit before he ran out of his present funds. It would keep him above water, though the many improvements he had planned would have to wait. At least his tenants would be able

to clothe and feed themselves by this time next year, but they would all have to wait for prosperity.

“Shall we join Grace for a drink before dinner?” asked Kit, leaning back against the leather chair to push away from the massive oak desk. “We’ve invited Darby, so you’ll be able to meet him tonight.”

“Splendid. Does he have a sister?” He slammed the last book shut and rubbed his eyes with his palms. “One who wouldn’t mind leaving the glitter of London for the rural passivity of the Welsh countryside?”

“Yes, to the sister, but I don’t think I’d want to deal with Darby. He’s quite protective, and the fact you need her dowry wouldn’t sit well with him.” Sunderland rubbed the back of his neck, as if considering whether to say more. “He’s a widow and doesn’t trust women. Doesn’t trust many men, for that matter.”

“Been jilted?”

“In the worst way. She came into the marriage pregnant with another man’s child. When he found out the truth, she killed herself.” Kit shook his head. “On the wedding night. It was a terrible scandal. Darby embraced the rumors. It kept the *ton* at arm’s length.”

“Bloody bad luck. It makes my troubles look rosy.”

“On to a cheerier subject. I hear you’ve been frequenting opposing clubs. Sympathizing with Prinny and the liberals at Boodles and charming the Tories at Whites, or the other way round?”

“I sympathize with myself and getting back to life as it was before the bloody war and my work with the Home Office. Unfortunately, I need to be aware of murmurs on either side of the throne, so I must frequent both clubs. To think the past four years, I’ve been dreaming of the humdrum, idyllic countryside. Instead, I’m in the smoky dens of London. In truth? I’m tired of looking over my shoulder or wondering what’s waiting for me in the shadows.” Lifting his glass, the well-practiced smile returned. “Here’s to no more spy rings

and many long, dull days of leisure in the future. May I never take boredom for granted again.”

Sunderland guffawed. “Your days may not be filled with intrigue, but I doubt you’ll have much leisure. My estate, properties, and seat in the Lords demand much of my time. You have an even heavier burden, and I don’t envy you.”

“I’ve been trained for the title and know what is expected of me. Yet, having the responsibility solely on my shoulders scares the devil out of me.” Madoc sighed. “If I failed an assignment, my disappearance would cause little harm. Another man takes my place, and the task is still accomplished. But making decisions that affect the lives of my tenants, people whose livelihood could be crushed by a man’s whim...”

The earl nodded. “The obligation can be burdensome at times, but it’s our duty to maintain our inheritance, our family name. Those who tend the land and the animals, work within our abodes, are an integral part of the system. Treat them fairly, with the dignity they deserve, and you’ll do well. It’s that common goal for a better life that will bond you to them.”

“Blast, if you don’t sound like my father. And a Whig.” Madoc laughed. “By the way, how is Grace? Anything I should know before we join her?” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Kit grinned. “She’ll tell you herself, but yes, she’s with child. I shall have an heir by the end of the summer.”

The couple had been married several years, and Grace had miscarried once. It lifted Madoc’s spirits to know his friend had a child on the way. “Or a daughter.”

“Or a daughter,” Sunderland agreed, humor brightening his dark eyes. “As long as she takes after her mother, I won’t be disappointed. I’m afraid my face on a female would be a terrible fate.”

“True enough,” he agreed with a snort. “You still seem happy with the leg shackles. How long has it been?”

“Three years. She’s my life’s blood, I tell you. Flows through my veins. If you want some words of wisdom, the

right woman completes a man. If you can find one you love, you'll be a better man for it." The earl finished off his brandy and set the empty glass on the polished side table with a *thud*.

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THE EARL of Darby was not what Madoc had expected. A golden-haired, jovial man under thirty years. No self-pity or brooding silences. Yet, there was something in his blue eyes that warned Madoc not to trust the easy smile and polished charm. A hard glint that would make a wise man wary.

Grace, the Countess of Sunderland, entered the room in her usual brisk manner. The sheer silver overlay fluttered over the lilac silk gown. Auburn curls framed her face, and her green eyes landed on Madoc with a smile. She opened her arms wide, sweeping aside formal greetings, and kissed both his cheeks.

"How are you, Doc? Is your mother faring well?" Her genuine concern was one of the traits that made this woman so likeable. She was beautiful, caring, engaging, and yet had the maternal instincts of one much older.

"You are stunning as always," Madoc said as he accepted her embrace. "And my mother is doing better than I expected."

"It's devastating enough to lose your father, but the other catastrophe as well..." She stepped back to inspect him, then leaned back up and whispered, "I'm so glad you've joined Kit in his investment ventures. You'll be swimming in lard in no time."

He laughed. "I hope so, my lady, I hope so. How is Sammy?"

The countess had a younger brother, a bright, precocious boy as Madoc remembered. Grace had raised him since infancy, after their mother died in childbirth.

"Can you believe he's eight already?"

"Going on eighteen," added Sunderland. "This month, the boy insists boxing lessons. His father's strength is fencing and

riding. He wants Sammy to learn from someone with more expertise rather than his home-brewed style.”

“You’re quite skilled in the ring,” Madoc pointed out.

“So Grace informed them. The lad’s as tall as Grace already. He’ll be a strapping young man in another few years. Instructing him will keep me fit.”

“I didn’t realize,” said Lord Darby. “I frequent Gentleman Jackson’s. Shall we set up a match some time?”

Grace giggled. “Those days are over, I’m afraid. I prefer him in one piece.”

Sunderland shot her mocking glare. “I still practice at Offley’s when I’m in Town. They have an excellent beefsteak and good ale after I’ve worked up an appetite.”

“Good to know,” said Darby with a nod. “My lady, how goes the renovation of Sunderland Castle?”

“Almost complete. We began work on the oldest part of the castle last summer. It’s been quite... enlightening.”

“Trying to ferret out a ghost that she thinks lives in the original stronghold. The last time I ventured to that area, the hairs on my neck rose. Grace seems to think it’s an ancestor.” Sunderland laughed, his dark eyes crinkling. “Good God, I hope I don’t have that effect on people. But if the days get too tedious for either of you, come to Sunderland Castle. We’ll give you the whole north wing.”

“No, thank you. I prefer an adversary I can see.” Madoc laughed. “Perhaps Lord Darby is more adventurous?”

“My past is haunting enough. I think I’ll wait until Lady Sunderland has sent the spirits on their way.” His smile didn’t reach his blue eyes, but he held up his glass of claret. “To a splendid evening with two of my favorite people and a new friend.”

“Hear, hear!” cried Grace. “Speaking of new friends, will you sponsor Lord Brecken? My husband says the Wicked Earls’ Club may be open to new members.”

Darby opened his mouth but she continued, undaunted.

“I’m sworn to secrecy, but I wouldn’t rest until he told me what *this* stood for.” She tapped a gold **W** on her husband’s lapel. “He wears it whenever we’re in London.” She glanced at Kit. “I’m happy to know that the wearer is always someone I could turn to for help, but even happier he is no longer an active member.”

“Lord Darby has offered to take me to the club tonight. He’s introducing me to the members.” Madoc held up his glass and nodded at the blond earl.

“It’s been arranged on Sunderland’s references and a mutual friend,” Darby confirmed. “Several of the men knew of the former Lord Brecken, and one remembers the present Brecken from Waterloo. A set of rooms has just been made available due to a recent marriage.”

The butler appeared in the doorway. “Dinner is served, my lord.”

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THE DOWNSTAIRS of the club resembled any other gentlemen’s club. There were rooms for gaming, a library for those who preferred a quiet space, and a dining room that served food at any hour. They entered a crowded area with several men engaged in conversation near a fireplace, drinks in hand. Several tables flanked the right side of the room where various games of whist, faro, and hazard were in progress.

“I’ll warn you the stakes are often high,” Darby said as he nodded at several of the men. “I don’t gamble, myself.”

“I appreciate the warning.” This inconspicuous building, in an inconspicuous neighborhood, with a single **W** above the entrance, would be Madoc’s refuge. He could come and go without raising any suspicion.

The meeting with the other members had gone well. He’d had the requisite qualifications—trusted among his peers and claimed the title of earl and bachelor. The benefits included an exclusive floor of this club, a set of private rooms for each, and almost any vice for the asking. He’d recognized one of the

men from his days in Oxford. Another had been an acquaintance of his father's. A third, while they had not acknowledged each other, he had worked with the man after the war. His amusement at the name "Wicked Earls' Club" had dissipated. These were not frivolous dandies. Madoc rubbed the shiny new pin on lapel. It was good to know he could count on these men if needed.

"Now you know the lay of the place. Care for a game of billiards?" asked Darby.

Madoc perked up. "It's been some time since I've played, but that and a ball of fire would be a perfect end to my evening."

"I think that can be arranged. We'll play in the billiards room upstairs, so there's less interruptions." Darby took the lead down a hall, then Doc followed him up an enclosed staircase.

Their steps were muffled by the plush wool carpet and thick paneled walls. Coming up to another long hall, there were several doors on either side. These were the private quarters for the earls. The billiards room was rectangular and well-appointed with the table at the far end. Its golden-scrrolled legs gleamed in the firelight, ending in lion heads under each of the corner pockets. In front of him, chairs were arranged facing the table in a semicircle, with 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.

Madoc stroked his finger along the fine green cloth before pulling the three colored balls and the target from the pockets. He picked up one of the two white cue balls and tossed the ivory orb a couple times. "Nice set."

"One of the best in London. Choose your cue," said Darby, "while I pour us a drink."

Madoc found his new friend to be proficient at billiards. With two wins each, they were on the final game. He poured the last of the brandy into his glass and watched Darby bend,



aim, and make a perfect shot. "I'm rather glad you don't like to wager. I think I'm about to lose."

Darby grinned. "I'm having a good night."

"At Sunderland's, you mentioned we had a mutual friend. I had the feeling you didn't mean the earls from the club." Madoc took a chair by the fireplace as the game ended. The flames crackled and danced, and he stretched out his legs, leaning his heels on the hearthstone.

"Walters also works for me." Darby sat down in the opposite chair and relaxed in the same manner. "He highly recommended you as a gentleman of your word and a trustworthy Englishman."

"He's a good man." Doc rubbed his jaw. "How did my name happen into a conversation?"

Darby gave a sheepish grin. "I had to be certain you were a bang-up cove before I sponsored you. I trust Sunderland, but a man can't be too careful these days. I asked Walters to see what he could find out. He confided he was also your man and vouched for you. It was enough for me."

"I'm glad to hear it. This situation is a godsend for my circumstances. I hope to repay you someday."

"We look out for each other," Darby replied, tapping the **W** on his jacket. "Stay true to that code. It's all that's required."

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"YOU MUST SWEAR to write me every week." Evelina hugged her sister after their mother had completed an endless list of instructions. "I shall miss you so."

Fenella smiled. "You will be too busy with suitors to think about me. This has worked out for the best, you'll see." She climbed into the carriage and waited for her father. Their trunks were tied on top of the conveyance, letters safely packed to her grandmother and other relatives, and some fresh biscuits from Cook wrapped in paper.

Fenella blinked, a watery smile on her face. "I love you, little sister. And thank you. For everything."

Sir Horace bustled down the steps, tall and elegant as usual, as he placed a hat on his silver-streaked blond hair. "Finish up those goodbyes, you mawkish females," he teased as he embraced first his daughter and then his wife, giving the latter an enthusiastic farewell kiss.

He climbed in and settled across from Fenella. Tapping the roof with his cane, the carriage lurched forward and another round of waves began until the vehicle disappeared around a corner. Both women stood silently for a few minutes, lost in their own thoughts. A piece of Evie's heart had just left for Scotland.

Lady Franklin pulled her shawl tight and turned toward the veranda steps. "I'll miss that man," she mumbled as she entered the hall.

Evelina grinned. "We have invitations," she said stopping at the side table and poking through the envelopes and calling cards on the silver tray. Her finger flipped one over and her breath caught. She picked up the small card with the simple engraving:

One corner of the card was folded over. He had delivered this himself. When? "Mama!"

"Oh, my dear! He must have left it early this morning. I bet he went on an early morning ride and dropped it off." She clapped her hands to her face. "He'll call on us this afternoon, I imagine."

Evelina's heart quickened at the thought. "I need to change. I can't greet him like this." She picked up her skirt and ran up the stairs, a surprisingly agile Lady Franklin right behind her. "Louella, Louella, come quickly."

"I believe Lord Brecken is smitten."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mama. There are dozens of lovely ladies out this season. I am only one of many." Even as Evelina said the words, she hoped they weren't true. Was he only pitching her the gammon? "Why would he consider me?"

He could have the daughter of an earl or possibly even a marquess.”

“I don’t believe he needs the dowry. His clothes and accessories are of the finest quality. He doesn’t own a house in the city, but many rent for the season. I had your father inquire into the family, and there’s no rumor of gambling. It’s an old, respected name.” She laid her hand on Evie’s cheek. “Perhaps he’s drawn to your beauty and wit?”

Evelina snorted. She was certainly drawn to his. “I still believe I should wait until Fenella is married before I *think* about courting *any* gentleman.”

“Said the girl who ran up those stairs faster than a fox in a hunt.” Her mother chuckled. “I can’t blame you. He’s a fine-looking man.”

“With a fine title,” Evelina muttered under breath. It wasn’t as if she was setting her cap for him. She only wanted to improve her skills in flirtation. Yes, that was it. If he was only cutting a wheedle, then she would use him in a like manner.

Evie thought of the dreams that continued to fill her nights. If he ever *did* kiss her in the flesh, would it be as good as in her fantasies? For the love of petunias, how would she hide her disappointment?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“THE EARL OF BRECKEN,” announced the butler.

Evelina drew in a sharp breath, then stood to shake out any wrinkles in her pale rose skirt. Two rows of tiny white buds, sewn in vertical stripes down the front of the dress, curved out in opposite directions to create the illusion of a split skirt. White lace adorned the modest neckline and sleeves. She toyed with the cameo on her chest as he appeared in the doorway. His indigo jacket and fawn pantaloons hugged his muscular frame; shining black boots and a matching hat gave him a jaunty air.

“Heavens,” muttered Lady Franklin, “what a specimen.”

Evie smiled gratefully at her mother and stifled a giggle. It was just what she needed to shake off her nerves. “My lord, how good of you to call.”

He moved forward and bowed. “Miss Evelina, Lady Franklin, I trust I’m not interrupting?”

“Of course not, this is our day at home. Please, sit. It’s been a dreary day, so tell us something entertaining to take our mind off the morning.” Her mother sat back down, folded her hands in her lap, and looked expectantly at the earl.

“I’m afraid I haven’t much to report.” He paused, rubbing his beard, then held his pointer finger in the air. “Ah! Did you hear Lord Thurstin’s youngest son challenged the Duke of Neville’s son to a race? They met early this morning at Rotten Row and chased the grooms off who were exercising their masters’ horses. They took off just as the authorities ran to

stop them. I was told there were at least two dozen spectators there to watch, all placing bets.”

Evelina covered her mouth. Horses and carriages were always to maintain a sedate pace in Hyde Park. The grooms of aristocracy were allowed to exercise horses early in the morning, but for safety reasons, the rule was in place for the rest of the day. “Oh my, Lord Thurstin will be irate. His youngest is known for daring exploits.”

Lady Franklin laughed. “Oh, how I love a good race. There’s nothing wrong with young Corinthians feeling their oats occasionally.”

“Any on-dits in return?” asked the earl, his eyes on Evelina.

“Nothing nearly so exciting. My sister and father left for Scotland this morning. She’ll be staying with my grandmother for a long visit.” She paused, casting a side glance at her mother at her mention of a relative in Scotland.

“Nothing serious with your grandmother’s health, I hope?”

“Only loneliness,” she assured him.

“I’m certain Miss Franklin will chase the blue devils away.”

A knock at the door and the butler announced, “Mrs. Wilkerson and Miss Wilkerson.”

Evie fought to keep her disappointment hidden, knowing the earl would follow protocol and not linger once the new guests were ushered in.

Lady Franklin rose, an apology in her smile. “Oh, please show them in.”

As the Wilkersons entered, Lord Brecken stood and bowed. “Ladies, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Mother and daughter both smiled, questions in their eyes at the earl’s presence. “We’re surprised we haven’t seen you in Hyde Park, my lord. Lavinia enjoys afternoon rides now that the weather is improving.”

“He prefers to ride early in the morning.” Lady Franklin spoke for the earl as if they were old friends.

“I’ll walk you out,” intervened Evelina, hoping the earl hadn’t taken offense.

As the butler held the door open, Lord Brecken paused on the step. “I wondered if you would accompany me next Tuesday afternoon? Mrs. Wilkerson is quite right about Hyde Park. The weather is much improved, and I could bring round an open carriage.” Another pause. “Lady Franklin is welcome, of course.”

*Pish and petunias, I hope not*, Evie thought. “I don’t believe I have any other obligations. I accept your kind offer.”

He bowed over her hand again and trotted down the steps. “Until then,” he called with a final wave.

In the parlor, the conversation was lively. Mrs. Wilkerson had the same aspirations as Lady Franklin, so they were two rival peas in a pod when they were together. “Lord Brooks has shown a decided interest in Lavinia. Why, she could be a baroness by Michaelmas.”

“Mama, don’t put the cart before the horse. It’s only been a ride in the park and several dances,” Lavinia scolded before turning to Evelina. “It seems Lord Brecken has established an interest?”

“Another cart before the horse,” said Evie, though the satisfaction in Lavinia’s eyes irritated her. “He did ask me to drive with him on Tuesday, however. If Mama approves?”

“Of course, my dear. Nothing would please me more.” Lady Franklin gave Mrs. Wilkerson a smug smile. The competition between them was almost comical. “To think, my friend, your daughter a baroness and mine a *countess*. How divine.”

Lavinia’s lips pressed together, but she gave Evelina a contrite glance. “I came along today to apologize, only to find Fenella’s gone. I don’t know what got into me at the musicale.” She let out a martyr-worthy sigh. “I suppose I’ll

have to wait... unless *you* could mention it in a letter when you write?"

"I'd be happy to include a personal note from you, of course." What a sham! If Lord Brecken *was* interested in Evie, he may resent any callousness toward her sister. Miss Wilkerson hadn't been kind that afternoon. Lord Brooks and Lord Brecken were chums. Lavinia had her sights on the baron and didn't want to appear peevish in his eyes. The chit didn't fool anyone.

Evelina smiled sweetly as Lavinia opened her mouth, then shut it, wisely choosing not to pursue the subject. If only Evie could be a fly on the wall when Fenella received that note from Miss Wilkerson.

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THE CARRIAGE DRESS of primrose yellow highlighted her dark honey-brown curls to perfection. Evelina adjusted the straw bonnet so it tilted just so. "Where's the parasol? The sun is out today, and we'll be in an open carriage."

"Calm yourself, miss. It's not as if he's the first gentleman to take you for a ride," said Louella as she fetched the parasol and reticule for her mistress.

*Only the first to imperil my heart*, she thought as she pushed her hand through the clutch of her reticule. Mama had declined the invitation, which made Evie anxious—in a good way. Sort of.

"Though I don't blame you none, he's very fine indeed," added the maid. She held the wrist loop of the reticule open while her mistress slid her wrist through it.

"He's here," called her mother up the stairs. "Hurry, now. Don't make him wait."

She rolled her eyes at her mother's impatience, but hurried down the hall when the butler's deep voice announced the earl. Evie descended the stairs, and all thought vanished. Her world narrowed to those golden-brown eyes that flashed green and

the breathtaking smile. Her heart pounded, and the wings in her belly took flight again.

“Miss Evelina, you are sunshine on a dark day,” he murmured as he bowed over her hand. “Are you sure you won’t join us, Lady Franklin?”

“No, but I thank you for the offer. Enjoy this lovely afternoon.”

And it was a beautiful day. They arrived to a dozen carriages and riders crowded along Rotten Row, making it difficult to stop and talk with acquaintances. Others strolled near the Serpentine.

“How are you adapting to life without your sister?” asked Lord Brecken.

“I shall endure, though I’m jealous. I haven’t seen my grandmother since last summer. I doubt if I’ll be able to visit this year.” She giggled. “Fenella will come back with Grandmama’s thick Scottish brogue and drive poor Mama mad.”

“This is your maternal grandmother?”

She nodded.

“Lady Franklin is a Scot? I’d have never guessed. She sounds so...”

“English? She’s half and half. My grandfather came from Manchester.” Evelina rolled her eyes. “My mother hates Scotland and her merchant beginnings—my grandparents have owned a bookstore in Glasgow for forty years. Mama considers all Scots as coarse brutes and strives to be very English. She even hired a tutor when she married Papa to teach her how to speak and behave like the aristocracy.”

“The Scots have much in common with the Welsh. Both are strong, stubborn, and like a good fight. My father was English by blood but raised as Welshman. He rarely took his seat in the House of Lords, preferring the wilds of Wales.”

“Do you have any siblings?”



“I never had any sisters, and my half-brother, Earl of Griffith, didn’t live with us.”

“But why?” She couldn’t imagine being alone as a child. Fenella was her best friend and confidante.

“Griff’s grandmother insisted he should live in his ancestral home and be raised on his own lands. When my mother remarried, there was a terrible argument, and it seems the dowager countess won. They have not spoken since, preferring correspondence when necessary to any actual conversation.”

“That’s horrible.” How could one mother be so vindictive to another?

He shrugged. “Griff spent the summers with us and seemed to accept the situation. He said in medieval times boys didn’t live with their mothers and were sent away at the age of eight to train as a page. He defended his grandmother, insisted that she was fulfilling his father’s wishes. Griff wasn’t yet two when my mother became the Countess of Brecken, and Lady Griffith doted on him.”

“It must have been hard for your mother.”

“I don’t know, to tell you the truth. As a child, I remember her being very pretty and happy. She smiled and laughed often until my father’s accident.” A shadow passed over Lord Brecken’s face.

“What happened?” she asked, putting a hand on his arm. “If you don’t mind talking about it?”

He told her of the accident, his father giving up, his mother’s sole focus on bringing him back. His voice turned husky as he spoke of the late earl giving up on life because his legs had failed him. He kept his eyes on the path as he spoke, and she was glad not to see the anguish that would surely be there.

“But the man you knew and loved did return in the end?” It wasn’t exactly a silver lining, but it was better than the late earl dying without resolution with his loved ones.

He nodded. “Yes. Yes, he did.” He switched the reins to one hand, slowed the horses, and covered her glove with his own. “Thank you for listening. I haven’t spoken of his passing much, not the circumstances, anyway.”

Evie gazed into his hazel eyes, and glimpsed the vulnerable boy he had been once. She wanted to cradle his face in her palms and tell him all would be well. They regarded each other, a moment in time suspended. Oh, how she wanted him to kiss her. Press his lips to hers.

His hand lifted, his knuckles tracing the outline of her jaw. “So soft,” he murmured. “Do you have some kind of magical powers that draws me to you?”

His touch stole her breath, so she shook her head.

“I don’t believe you,” he said, his voice husky, his eyes a smoky amber.

His breath fluttered against her cheek. Her fingers reached up of their own accord and stroked the soft beard along his chin. She moved up, one pad tracing his bottom lip, cursing the gloves that blocked her touch. He sucked in a breath as if in pain and she jerked her hand back. He caught it in his. “I’m sorry. You’re bewitching me, Miss Evelina.” His eyes were glued to her mouth; his head bent—

“Hullo, there, Brecken,” called a male voice.

Evie jumped, aware of her surroundings again and not just the man beside her. Coming toward them was Lord Brooks and Miss Wilkerson. Brooks looked over his shoulder, saw no one behind them, and pulled his conveyance to a halt.

“It seems most of London had the same idea today. It was like getting down Oxford Street earlier. I’m glad the traffic has thinned.” Lord Brooks and Lavinia smiled at the same time, and Evelina bit the inside of her lip to keep her mouth closed. She hadn’t noticed how similar they were in appearance. Pish and petunias, they were a match.

“You remember Miss Evelina?” asked Lord Brecken of Brooks before turning to the lady. “I hope he’s being the perfect gentleman, Miss Wilkerson?”

“Oh yes,” she said with a bob of her head, brown curls bouncing off her cheeks beneath the wide-brimmed bonnet. “Lord Brooks is a skilled driver and has such entertaining stories.”

“Will I see you at Boodles later this week?” asked Brooks.

“Without a doubt,” said the earl. The couples bade farewell and parted ways.

“Do you think he’s interested in Miss Wilkerson?” he asked as they trotted off.

“According to Mrs. Wilkerson, he’s very interested.” *In her dowry*, she thought. “So men don’t talk about these things with each other? I mean, like women do? Fenella has always insisted that men gossip as badly as women.”

Lord Brecken let out a loud guffaw. “We don’t always confide our *own* secrets. But the clubs are full of rumors and the latest scandals. The only thing men prefer to the latest on-dits or sports is a good wager.”

“You mean at the tables? Or horse races?” she asked, enjoying the conversation as much as his handsome profile.

“I’ll tell you a secret.” He glanced over his shoulder, then to either side, as if making sure no one was listening. “Last week, at a club that shall remain anonymous, a certain viscount finished his meal and proceeded to the faro table. He had a dob of gravy on the end of his nose.”

“Oh, my,” she giggled. “That is truly scandalous.”

“But wait, there’s more. Another baron, who will also remain anonymous, bet his friend how long it would take for the viscount to discover the gravy and wipe it off.” Lord Brecken bent his head close to her ear. “The bet was for one hundred sovereigns.”

Her mouth fell open. “For gravy on someone’s nose?”

He nodded. “Within the hour, there was over a thousand gold coins hovering on the tip of the viscount’s nose.”

“What happened?”

“A newcomer entered the room—”

“Who will also remain anonymous,” added with Evie with glee.

Lord Brecken grinned. “Exactly. He didn’t know about the wager and tells the viscount about the remains of dinner on his nose.” He laughed and shook his head. “No one had bet whether someone would tell him, so all bets were off.”

“I’ll have to write Fenella and tell her she was right. Males can be just as mutton-headed as females.”

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*Mid-April 1819*

“HOW IS MISS WILKERSON?” Madoc and Brooks were enjoying a dinner at White’s. “I didn’t think you were perusing the market.”

Brooks nodded, a brown curl falling across his forehead. He pushed it back and took a long draw from his ale. “On the contrary, I’m in the same predicament as you, dear friend. My father was rather fond of the tables and possessed no luck or skill. While your situation is not common knowledge, mine is. I thought you knew.”

He shook his head. “When it comes to the London circles, I only know what you tell me or I’ve gleaned from other conversations.”

Doc’s brows furrowed. It made sense. “That’s why you offered to dance with Miss Franklin.”

Brooks gave a mock shudder. “Yes, her dowry is quite a bit larger than Miss Wilkerson’s, though she’d make sure any man earned it. She won’t be easy. Instead, I’ll take a little less blunt and a more malleable wife.” He tipped his head and tapped his lips with his napkin. “You’ve set your cap for Miss Evelina, haven’t you? Sir Horace made it known the eldest daughter was to marry first, which was why the dowry was so large.”

“Miss Franklin’s off to Scotland for an undetermined amount of time, and I’m not close to making an offer on the younger.”

“Does the dowry, er, transfer to Miss Evelina?”

“I assumed...” *Blast!* He didn’t know.

“The Franklins may assume their youngest’s beauty will save them blunt. She could do well with a liberal, yet not princely sum.”

“I rather need the princely sum.” He blew out a loud breath. “Better to find out sooner than later.”

“It seems I have a mission, then. Is my face clean?” asked Brooks with a smirk.

“It is,” Brecken told him with a chuckle. “Though an unscrupulous man might not tell you if it wasn’t. You could save me from the leg shackles altogether with a well-placed piece of egg on your cravat and a room full of bored, well-breeched aristocrats.”

“Lawks! It may be a scheme worth considering if both our dowries fall through. In the meantime, I’ll put in some discreet inquiries and find out what plans Sir Horace has for his youngest daughter.”

“I appreciate it.”

Brooks paused. “Let me give you fair warning. One’s finances aren’t kept in the dark for long. Your secret will be found out sooner than later. Do you know when Sir Horace returns?”

“No.” If Miss Evelina didn’t have the brass, he’d have to continue his search. The idea made his chest ache. Though he had been careful not to come close to another kiss, she invaded his thoughts throughout every day. A flash of sandy-brown hair, a glimpse of topaz orbs made his pulse quicken until he realized it wasn’t her. The image of her full lips turned up in a smile, her ivory skin, those full curves stoked his desire at night, and he woke aching with need. There was no doubt she held him in her affection. He knew women well enough to recognize the passion in her eyes. Would it make a difference

when she discovered he was cleaned out? Worse, would she doubt his growing affection?

The *what-ifs* could drive him mad. He could be honest with her. Brecken snorted to himself. Or wait until he was certain of her regard, *then* tell her the truth.

How could he give her up?

How could he *not* keep a deathbed promise to his father?

## CHAPTER NINE

*MAY 1819*

MADOC ENTERED THE GUINEA, found a back table, and winked at the barmaid. Along one wall, a cheery fire blazed in an enormous hearth. Two large iron pots hung at each end, the smell of bubbling stew mingled with sweat and stale ale. Patrons clustered around the fireplace, a loud shout or guffaw rising above the steady din. There were employees from the mills and shops, street cleaners, delivery men, all workers necessary to the city for their menial labor.

The pub was also a favorite haunt for the staff of the wealthy. Grooms and footmen could complain about their masters without fear and share secrets about the titled families who paid their wages. Located on the outskirts of Mayfair, it was just far enough that their employers would never wander in. Close enough, and costly enough, not to attract thugs from the rookeries.

“Some days you’re harder to recognize, my lord,” Walters said as he plunked a bumper of ale onto the table. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think ye like playing dress-up.”

Madoc snorted. “I got used to the scratchy wool long ago. It’s the rented hackneys that can be torture. Never know what you’ll find—or smell—in one of those cabs.”

Tonight, he was a factory worker in a cotton shirt, brown homespun trousers, and a threadbare wool coat and cap. He’d stopped in the alley and scraped his fingers on the ground to

dirty his nails, brushed off the excess on his backside, and pulled on fingerless gloves.

“It’ll be a shame when ye give it up. I swear ye have common blood somewhere in your ancestry.” The investigator’s dark eyes twinkled at the jest. Before the war, Walters had been a Bow Street runner until he found too much evidence on a crime involving a nobleman. A false charge of accepting bribes had quickly followed Walters’ report. Now he worked for the private sector—and ironically, the Home Office—but still held a grudge against certain members of the higher class.

“We’ve had some adventures, my lord. I’ll miss working with ye.” He pulled a hat off his unruly brown hair, the wall sconce highlighting the early streaks of silver at his temples. “I have good news, I think.”

“Personal?”

“Aye, and the other.” Walters grinned at the barmaid as she passed by and dropped another cup of ale next to his elbow. Her fingers trailed up his sleeve in a familiar fashion as she walked away. He was well-known in this tavern; much of his information, directly or indirectly, came from the patrons. As one of them, he could coax them into discourse much easier than a constable or even a man with deep pockets. A matter of trust, Walters had explained.

“The pair I’ve been following and their friend, the duke, seem to be in the devil’s palm together. I believe His Grace is providing funds for the radicals.” He ran a hand through his thick curls. “If ye’d be so kind as to accompany me, I’ll show you what I’ve learned. Then you can write your report. With the implication of the Duke of Colvin, this will fall under another’s jurisdiction. Someone with more authority than you, my lord. You’ll be out of it in short time.”

“It can’t be soon enough. This is good news.” Relief washed over him, but he still worried for Walters. The man took chances, and he hoped the Crown’s next representative appreciated the ex-Bow Street Runner. “What about you?”



“If my guess is correct, I know who’ll take your place. I’ve served under him before. He’s a good man.” Walters checked his pocket watch. “The performance should be finished soon. The duke usually leaves the theater and has his carriage wait for him in the piazza at Covent Garden. He never goes to the same brothel two nights in a row, so we’ll need to be there to follow him.”

“Are we on foot?”

“Aye, if ye don’t mind. It’s less conspicuous.” Walters threw a coin on the table and stood, placing his cap on his head and pulling it low. Madoc did the same.

They left The Guinea and strode quickly toward the market. The well-tended shops and homes faded into tenements and older buildings where shopkeepers had their business on the ground floor and their living quarters above. Only a few streets led to the square. These were narrow and dark, lit only by the weak light shining through covered or draped windows. Here were the gaming hells that sent wealthy men fleeing the country over enormous debts and houses where an abbess catered to any sexual desire or whim for a price.

In the morning, these alleys would be crowded with costermongers hauling their wares and customers vying for the best produce and cheapest prices. Closer to the piazza would be the coffeehouses and bawdy entertainment the *ton* frequented for titillating adventure. There was sometimes less than a block that separated most of the visiting *beau monde* from the seedy part of the district.

Tonight, men in search of drink, gaming, and women lurked in the shadows. Doxies leaned in doorways, calling out to passersby. Madoc peered up at the moonless sky. The fog was heavy tonight, making visibility poor. A perfect night for thieves and pickpockets. They reached the piazza and found a shadowed corner to wait. It didn’t take long.

A coach appeared with a gold enameled C on the black lacquered door. A tall, dark-haired man stepped out, his black silk hat set low, his collar pulled up.

“That’s him,” whispered Walters. “If he meets up with his Spencean friends, it’s always after the theater at a coffeehouse. He takes information from them and then moves on to a brothel.”

They waited for Colvin to pass, his long coat flowing behind him, cutting a path in the gray mist. He stopped in front of a shop and peered inside, before opening the door and entering. Walters and Madoc waited a few minutes, then followed. Voices competed to be heard over the din, and they squinted against the smoky atmosphere. Many of the customers here were a step up from The Guinea. They wore waistcoats and cravats, and while they still worked for a living, it wasn’t manual labor. Walters settled at the end of the wooden counter, blending in with the rest of the patrons. Madoc slid in next to him and ordered a pint for each of them.

He sipped the dark porter and watched the duke over the rim of his cup. Two other men sat at the small table with him, all three heads bent together. Madoc recognized the dark hair and hawk nose of one man, Arthur Thistlewood, a prominent member of the Spencean Philanthropists. He’d already been involved in suspicious activity so it was no surprise. Thistlewood shook his head vigorously and the duke stood. The second man stood also and said something that made the duke sit down again. An envelope was passed across the table and Colvin slid it inside his greatcoat. Fifteen minutes later, all three men left the coffeehouse. Madoc and Walters tossed back the rest of their porter and did the same.

“There,” said Walters. He pointed to a dark alley where the duke disappeared. “Now, he’ll pass that letter on to someone else.”

“How often does this happen?” asked Madoc.

“About once a month.” Walters patted his side. “Ye brought your weapon, my lord?”

“Do you need to ask?”

They crossed the street and followed Colvin. He stopped at the entrance of dead-end alley. A young boy stepped from the shadows, they spoke, and the duke reached inside his coat and

handed the lad the envelope. The boy tipped his cap and ran off. Colvin continued down the dank alley and knocked on a side door. When someone answered, he entered. Madoc and Walters leaned against a building across from the brothel.

Fog looped around their boots, and a slimy moisture soaked into the back of their coats. It brought back memories of past missions. He was glad this part of his life was coming to an end.

“Do you want to wait and see what he does after this?” asked Walters.

“No, I can write me report. I have no interest in the lascivious activities of the duke.” Madoc looked around the dead-end. “Let’s get out of here. I’ve got a bad—”

*Click!* Two men emerged from behind stacked oak barrels, blocking their exit. The glint of metal told Madoc at least one had a pistol. He was glad he’d slipped the knife into his boot.

“G’ ev’ning, ge’lmen,” said the tallest. His crooked nose and missing tooth spoke of past scuffles and near-misses. “What brings ye to our li’l establishment?”

“We thought we were up for a bit o’ excitement,” said Walters. “But I fear it’s too rich for me blood. Me wife’s none to pleasant if I spend the whole week’s wage.”

“Aye, I have a missus that always wants wot I can’t give ‘er,” chimed in the second thug, gripping a thick wooden club.

“We’ll just be goin’ then,” said Walters with a tip of his cap.

“No’ quite yet,” said the big man, tapping the barrel of his gun against his leg. “Our employer don’t like folks followin’ him. Our job is t’make sure ‘e knows who has an interest in ‘im.” He stepped forward with the pistol cocked. “So, we’d like ye t’take a friendly li’l walk wi’ us.”

The two others appeared behind the casks. A tall, lanky man swinging an iron bar and a short, stocky man brandishing a blade in each hand. Madoc bent his knees and withdrew his dagger. *Shhht!* If he tried for his pistol, the big brute would get a shot off at one of them. He hunched his shoulders and shook

out his arms as the four men circled. He and Walters put their backs to one another, each facing two of the attackers.

“It’s only two to one. We’ll spill a bit of claret and be on our way,” said Madoc. His muscles tensed, then relaxed as his body prepared for the fight to come.

“Aye, I’ve been craving a good mill, but these smelly ruffians will do.” Walters was tossing his blade from hand to hand. He always preferred to wait and react.

Madoc was the opposite and preferred to be the aggressor. He thrust out his arm and grabbed the wooden club, pulling the smaller man off-balance. Madoc turned on his heel, pushing the club and the man into the large thug with the gun. A shot rang out. Behind him, metal slicing against metal echoed against the brick walls.

A groan sounded beneath his boot as his heel toe connected with the downed man’s head, and then he went silent. Madoc reached for his pistol but a blow to the gut sent him reeling against the building. He fought for breath. The swine rushed him, wrapping his great paws around Madoc’s throat. The knife still in his hand, he drove it into the man’s shoulder. As his attacker howled in pain and pulled at the blade, Madoc smashed his fist into the thug’s bone-box and felt the teeth give way against his knuckles.

When the man stumbled back, Madoc withdrew his pistol and cocked it.

“Are we about ready for a drink, my friend?” he asked Walters, panting and leaning a hand against the slippery brick. Every breath sent needles darting through his sides.

“Aye, these two have decided to take a nap. What shall we do with this last one?” Walters appeared at his side. “I didn’t think it possible, but ye made the devil even uglier.”

Madoc chuckled and then winced. Pain shot through his chest, like a blade between his ribs. The bloody devil cracked a rib or two. “Mill his canister and let’s get out of here,” he said with a grunt.

Walters approached the man. "I think ye have something belonging to us." He gripped the handle of the knife and yanked it from the man's shoulder. A howl of pain rang through the alley. As the man clutched his arm, Walters fist came up and caught the man's jaw. He crumpled to the ground.

"Are ye hurt bad, my lord?" asked Walters, wiping the blade on the unconscious man's jacket.

Madoc shook his head. "He battered a couple ribs but I've had worse. Nothing that won't heal." He slid the gun back inside his coat, and they made their way back to the piazza. He'd have his man call a physician once he got back to his rooms. Wrapped up good and tight, he'd be fine and no one would be the wiser. He could hide the pain easily enough.

Walters hailed a hansom. "You don't need to walking all the way back, my lord. Let's get ye off your feet."

Once inside the cab, Madoc relaxed. "I'm afraid you'll have a bit of black and blue," he said of Walters' red and puffy eye. "I hate to say it, but I'll miss the occasional scuffle."

"There's always Gentleman Jackson's." Walters gingerly touched his eye. "I'm glad I saved the best news for last. I've located Caerton."

Madoc's pulse increased. Even if the money was never recovered, he wanted that swine brought to justice. Whether retribution came through the courts or otherwise, he didn't care. In fact, he preferred to take his own revenge.

When he'd first arrived in London, Walters had requested Madoc meet with a lad who was quick and talented at sketching. Madoc had described Caerton, and the boy had created a reasonable likeness for a penny. Walters had used it during his search, knowing the scoundrel had a new moniker.

"It seems our fugitive is more a chawbacon than clever embezzler. He's got a partner here in London who must be the brains behind this scheme. They were splitting the money, but Caerton found out his colleague was cheating him. I may have some information on the identity of the *associate* and checking on that presently."

Madoc finished his ale and beckoned to the barmaid. “Is Caerton still in Town?”

“Aye, and he’s become quite the loose fish. Drinking, gambling. He’s been high on the ropes, making a name for himself in the gaming hells. An ivory turner took him for a hundred pounds last week in a game of hazard. He’s made himself known with the, er, ladies too. Dressed complete to a shade and spending coin on the finest trollops.” Walters chuckled. “You won’t like what he’s calling himself.”

Madoc pulled on the arm strap with a grunt and straightened. “Yes?”

“Mr. Griff Madoc.” Walters leaned back in the chair, a grin on his ruddy face. “The man’s got bollocks.”

His half-brother’s name and his own rolled into one. That bloody little louse. “It seems he’s digging his own grave— with *my* money.”

“Seems that way.”

“Any ideas, besides a gun to the side of the man’s head just for satisfaction?”

Another grin. “I have some comrades from Bow Street that are available for a price. They can befriend Caerton and gain his trust. Meet up with him at the tables. Let him win some, lose some, then— ”

“How much?” Madoc mentally went through his ready, calculating how much he could spare.

“A pittance in advance, mind ye, but they’ll take a percentage of the winnings for their wages. We can throw a rub Caerton’s way.”

“I’m listening.”

## CHAPTER TEN

“PAPA, it’s so good to have you home.” Evelina threw her arms around his waist. “You must have arrived late last night.”

Sir Horace smiled down at her. “We had a bit of trouble on the road, and I didn’t want to spend the night in another strange bed. So, I hired another coach and rattled all the servants with my midnight entrance.”

“Where is Mama?” She busied herself at the side table, filling a plate with toast, butter, and preserves. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.” He sat at the head of the table and tucked a napkin in his cravat. “Your mother was... tired. She’s sleeping in this morning.”

“How were the roads? You said you had business on your return trip.” She poured coffee for her father and tea for herself, then passed the sugar.

“Excellent, though the ship ran into some bad weather and was late to dock. I tell you, Evie, there is nothing quite as satisfying as the completion of profitable venture. And Fenella is comfortably settled with your grandmother.” He added a lump of sugar to his cup. “How goes the Season during my absence? I assume there will be a dozen dandies asking for your hand by the end of the week?”

She giggled. “No. I have made several friends of the female persuasion, which has helped immensely with Fenella’s absence. Grace, er, Lady Sunderland is the loveliest person. She and the earl went to the theater with Mama and Lord Brecken and I.” Evie licked the spoon with the sticky jam,

then wagged it at her father. “However, I’m not interested in a beau this season. I’ve decided it’s like shopping with Mama at one of the bazaars. I’ll inspect the goods first and then decide what deserves a second look.”

Sir Horace set down his cup. “Evelina, don’t refuse an offer for any reason other than you don’t like a man. Don’t turn down a proposal to be a martyr in your sister’s name. It won’t make either of you happy.” He stuck his fork into a sausage. “For all we know, she could find love in Glasgow and never return to London.”

Evie’s hand flew to her chest, panic stealing her breath. “How can you say that? Fenella belongs here, with us, in London. She’s like your partner in Franklin & Sons.”

Her father reached over and squeezed her hand. There were more streaks of silver in his white-blond hair. “No, my dear, Fenella belongs wherever she’s happiest. As do you. Where that may take either of my daughters, I have yet to see.”

She took a deep breath and another. Papa was right. They were both adults now, and their paths were bound to lead in different directions. Better to prepare herself for the inevitable now.

“Have you written your sister recently? I understand you’ve been busy with one of the suitors you *aren’t* interested in.” Sir Horace returned his attention to the eggs, dipping his toast in the runny yolk. “Soirees, carriage rides, the theater?”

“I’m sure you’ll meet Lord Brecken soon enough. I do hope you like him, Papa.” What if he didn’t? How could she continue giving pieces of her heart to a man her father didn’t like?

“If you think he’s gentleman, and worthy of your time, I’m sure I’ll agree.” He popped the last bite of runny egg into his mouth and smacked his lips. “By the way, your grandmother sold the bookstore.”

“What? She loved that shop.” Had the world gone to sixes and sevens?



“She was tired and got a good price for it. Now she can enjoy the rest of her years and travel some. I believe she longs to see the Highlands again.” Sir Horace rose and snapped his waistcoat down over his slight belly. “I believe I’m ready for the office. Your mother informed me there is a ball tonight. I shall see you at dusk.”

Evelina returned to her rooms and settled at her writing table. She waved the feather back and forth, deciding what to put in her letter. The first two correspondences had been full of woe, how much she would miss her sister, how dreadful it was not to spend every day with her. She hadn’t mentioned Lord Brecken at all. This time, Evie would weave him into the letter, just a remark here and there.

*DEAREST FENELLA,*

*First, I must apologize for such sparse correspondence. Mama and I have been so busy. I have met several young ladies of good quality, as Mama puts it, and we’ve become fast friends. They help fill the void you left behind.*

*I must admit, I did not realize how much I depended on you. The first few weeks, I found myself going to your room to share something or ask your opinion. I was terribly lonesome. My new friends keep me company and ease the emptiness while you are away.*

*Now, on to news of London. I attended my first crush. It is aptly named as I could barely move through a room. However, Lord Brecken showed me how to move through a crowd with only my back brushing against another. The secret is to keep my fan a distance from my chest and walk sidelong, allowing for space to the front. It helps one to breathe and not succumb to the terrible heat.*

*One of those insipid girls who was unkind to you had a glass of punch spilled down her front. I do not know for certain how it happened, but the earl was nearby, and I’d just told him at the last musicale how horrid she was. I am certain there is a rascal hidden behind his perfect manners.*

*I have decided I quite like the theater. Lord Brecken has escorted Mama and I and promised to do so again. He has his own box for the season, and I wanted to pinch Mama when she continued to gush about it. I find him to be quite attentive and a perfect gentleman, though he's terribly old. Nearly six and twenty!*

EVIE REALIZED the earl's name peppered the letter. Guilt flooded her. Perhaps her father was right, but old habits were hard to break. She dipped the nub into the inkwell again.

*OH MY, rereading this, I see I have mentioned his name several times. Do not let your imagination run away with you. I have no designs on the earl. There are plenty of others who find his dark looks appealing. A competition does not interest me. He is merely a diversion until you return. I find he is quite useful in honing my skill of flirtation and quick wit. The gentleman is awake on every suit, and our conversations can be quite lively. Did I mention he is also an accomplished dancer?*

*I hope you are not too bored in Glasgow. Why on earth did Grandmama sell the bookstore without informing us? Of course, she was the owner and certainly doesn't need our approval. I shall miss the dusty old place. And I miss you dreadfully. Give Grandmama a hug and a kiss for me. Papa sends both to you. He's never been much for writing, but reminded me to send salutations. Enclosed is also a letter from Mama.*

*YOUR DEVOTED SISTER,*

*Evie*

MADOC SCANNED THE BALLROOM. He was late, but the meeting with his superior had gone better than expected. He'd

delivered the report and, as Walters predicted, was finally released from duty. For now. The Home Office never completely let a man go, and one always had to be prepared to help his country. He'd also met the older gentleman who would be working with Walters and was pleased with the outcome. As far as Caerton and the stolen inheritance... They were within arms-reach. So very close

The event was crowded, but not the same crush they'd attended last week. He'd come close to kissing her then, out on the balcony, under the stars, a cool breeze ruffling the curls against her cheeks. Madoc knew he should continue his search for an heiress. Miss Evelina might not have the sizeable dowry he needed. Caerton may have only a pocketful of coins left. Yet, those alluring brandy eyes refused to let him go. He was obsessed with everything about her.

The way her eyes sparkled when she thought she was clever. The husky tone when she confided something. The satisfaction that enveloped his heart when he amused her, the sweet peal of laughter that tickled his ears. Her lips as they turned up in a slow smile. The long, silken curls of caramel that he wanted to slide his fingers through. The hollow of her throat that begged his lips to... *Blast and perdition! Don't go down that road now.*

In a corner of the room, a tall man guffawed, the sound carrying over the many voices in the room. He was close to his own father's age with pale blond hair and streaks of silver. He seemed familiar, and his expensive black suit of clothes and ruby cravat pin indicated wealth. Then the lady always foremost in his mind appeared by his side, and he knew who the stranger reminded him of. *Fenella!* She was the image of her father. As the baronet stepped away, Doc saw Lady Franklin. Yes, it was Sir Horace Franklin.

His attention returned to the striking beauty next to him. Miss Evelina wore a low-cut satin gown of pale gold with a delicate emerald overlay that glistened and came alive each time she moved. Amber tresses had been braided and wrapped around her head like a ribbon, with tiny gems of topaz and emerald giving her a halo effect. The rest of her tawny locks

were swept up at the crown and cascaded onto her neck. When she laughed at something her father said, her bare shoulders shook gently, showing off her creamy bosom. The blood pulsed in his temple and shot through to his core. The woman was breathtaking.

“Good evening, Lord Brecken, how goes the hunt?” Brooks appeared at his elbow. “Any more contenders?”

He shook his head. “And you?”

“I think I’ve decided to be happy with my present circumstances.” Brooks grunted. “Miss Wilkerson carries a pleasant enough conversation, knows the social graces, is pliant, and dotes on me. I believe we’re well-suited.”

Madoc snorted. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It is, really, if you’re not some mawkish romantic who must have love rather than a partnership.” The baron’s gaze followed Doc’s across the room. “It seems Sir Horace hasn’t mentioned the size of his second daughter’s dowry. After a disastrous first season, my guess is the size of Miss Franklin’s was alluded to in order to attract interest. Since Miss Evelina is so much more... A close friend of Sir Horace’s told me he was waiting to see who was interested. The amount would depend on the suitor.”

“That’s as helpful as a lame horse.” So, Madoc would have to make his intentions known to find out the dowry. What if it wasn’t enough? He couldn’t back out once he’d spoken to Miss Evelina’s father. He was effectively hobbled.

“I can tell you that Sir Horace is an honorable man and very fond of his daughters. I believe if he likes you, and trusts your affection for his daughter, he would offer the same generous amount he did for the elder.” They watched Mrs. Wilkerson by the refreshment table, flapping her fleshy arms in their direction. Her frizzy brown curls were mostly tucked into a puce turban that matched her tight gown. “I’ve been summoned. Good luck, Doc, and let me know how it goes.”

He sucked in a deep breath, tossed back the champagne, and grabbed another from a passing tray as he ambled toward

the Franklins. The knot in his stomach twisted and tightened at the thought of losing Miss Evelina. As did the idea of breaking her heart. If Madoc were to transfer his attentions elsewhere, she would be confused and feel betrayed. He couldn't blame her, and he'd only have himself to blame. The chit had worked her way under his skin, and the thought of marriage with another left a sour taste in his mouth.

Studying her father, he decided this would be a night of reconnaissance. Tomorrow he'd plan his next step.

"Lord Brecken, its lovely to see you again," cooed Lady Franklin. "May I introduce my husband, Sir Horace Franklin. My dear, this is the Earl of Brecken."

Sir Horace's smile was warm and his handshake firm. "Thank you for keeping my girls entertained while I was away. They speak highly of you."

Doc gave Miss Evelina a sideways glance. She studied her gold leather shoes, a tinge of pink coloring her cheeks. But when she looked up at him with those soft brown eyes, a slight smile turning up her full, pink lips, he shared the heat from his belly to his neck. She always had the same effect on him. Always the same need when he was near her.

"I'm relieved to hear it, Sir Horace. And your reputation precedes you, sir. If I remember correctly, you were known as the Merlin of hard-to-find goods during the war."

"I'm a resourceful man," admitted Sir Horace.

"And stubborn," added Lady Franklin. "I believe that's the secret to his success."

"It's why you married me, my sweet. I wouldn't take 'no' for an answer."

Madoc turned to Miss Evelina. "This is much better than the crush we attended, don't you think? I went home smelling like half of London last week."

She laughed. "Yes, it's certainly an improvement. Could you imagine trying to dance?"

“A crush is not for dancing, my dear,” explained Lady Franklin. “It’s to see and be seen. The more people, the higher one’s popularity. I do find them tiresome, though.”

“Speaking of dances, please save one for me,” he said to Evelina.

“Only if it’s a waltz. I need to wash away the memory of the last one,” she quipped. “My feet have suffered terribly for Lord Hempton’s overindulgence of ratafia.”

“I can’t believe the old sop can still dance,” joked her father. “Consider yourself lucky he didn’t topple over on you.”

“I’ll do my best to erase the unpleasant memory from your mind,” added Madoc gallantly. He joined in more small talk, waiting an appropriate amount of time before asking, “Would you care for a promenade, Miss Evelina?”

They strolled the perimeter of the room, enjoying the open windows and light breeze that stirred the air inside. When they reached the terrace that led to the garden, she stopped. “A walk in the moonlight would be divine tonight.”

She peeked at him through her dark lashes, and a wave of desire ignited low in his belly. He opened his mouth to answer but was saved by the orchestra. “You’ll appreciate the breeze so much more afterwards. Shall we?” He turned on his heel in the opposite direction and offered her his other arm. “Have I told you how stunning you look?”

“Yes, but feel free to repeat it as often as you like.” She gave him a dazzling smile and held her gloved hand up, waiting for him.

He placed one hand on the small of her back and held her as close as he dared, his other cradling her palm against his. She fit him like his favorite leather hunting gloves. Soft and pliable, clinging yet not constrictive.

It would be torture to let her go, then see her in the arms of another. For the first time in years, he said a silent prayer as he pulled her into a sweeping turn.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

HE SMELLED of soap and leather and the woods. Ambergris, perhaps? She'd never considered the scent heavenly until she met Lord Brecken. It would forever remind her of the man who was becoming such a dominant part of her life. In barely two months, Evie couldn't fathom a day without at least a mention of Lord Brecken. They drove in Hyde Park on Tuesdays and attended a minimum of two evening activities weekly.

*If your father was home, he'd ask for your hand. I'm sure of it,* Mama had said a few days before Papa returned.

Evie closed her eyes, lifted her face to the waft of air as the earl spun them in a half circle and then another. Her head only came to the top of his navy waistcoat, and she imagined being lifted into his arms as easily as hoisting a saddle. The muscles flexed in his broad shoulders as he dipped and swirled her about the floor. Would her stomach ever grow used to his body close to hers? Would her heart ever stop racing when he just entered a room? According to Lady Sunderland, Evie had all the symptoms of Cupid's malady. It was a heady sensation, this falling in love.

The final notes faded, and she stood half-panting, one hand covering her chest. "Now would be a good time for that walk," he whispered in her ear.

His breath skimmed her lobe, and a tightness pulsed low in her core. With shaking fingers, she gripped his arm and followed him through the clusters of guests. He'd been right about waiting for the stroll. The night air dried her damp skin.

She leaned on him as they descended the shallow steps to the garden, the exertion from the dance and his proximity making her legs unsteady.

“I imagine you are glad to have Sir Horace back home?” he asked. “Especially with your sister also gone.”

“I missed him terribly. So did Mama, though she’s loath to admit it.” Her thin overlay brushed a rose bush and caught. She stopped, releasing Lord Brecken’s arm and found the offending thorn. “Pish and petunias, I’ve torn it.”

He bent to inspect the sheer material and rubbed it between his thumb and fingers. His knuckles brushed her calf. Her breath caught, and his hand stilled. He dropped the skirt slowly, his fingertips grazing her thigh as his gaze lifted to the rise and fall of her chest, the pulse pounding in her neck, and finally her face. Straightening, his eyes locked on her lips. With the pad of his thumb, he stroked her mouth. The rough skin, the gentle touch, sent searing flames through her.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” he asked, his eyes still on her mouth.

Evie shook her head; her breath quickened. *Oh, heavens, he’s going to kiss me.*

Lord Brecken moved his hand to cradle her cheek, his thumb now caressing her temple, and a whimper escaped her throat. He chuckled. “Confound it, you were made for love, Evie,” he rasped.

Was he angry? But he’d said her name—her given name—as if it were a word of passion.

He bent his head and brushed her lips with his, the barest touch, once, twice. Like she would dip her toe in the ocean at Bath to test the waters. A shiver passed over her, then his mouth covered hers, and the world went topsy-turvy. She closed her eyes and gave in to her body, gave in to her own desire. And found that her dreams couldn’t compare to the man. His lips were velvet, just as she knew they would be. The edge of his beard tickled her chin, and she breathed in his spicy scent. His hand came away from her face, his arms went



around her, and his body pressed against hers. He was hardness and muscle and power.

Evie wanted to drown in the sensations that tore through her body. Her arms moved of their own accord and wrapped around his neck. His hair was thick and silky beneath her touch, his skin like tanned leather, soft yet strong. When his tongue traced her lips, Evie instinctively parted them and allowed his tongue to dart in, then out. Never had she felt anything like this. It was as if a stormy ocean tossed and turned within her, crashing and receding.

His fingers tangled in her hair, then tilted her head back, and his lips left a trail of fire down her neck. Her chest heaved, her hands clutched his shoulders to stay upright on legs that had turned to jelly. And then his mouth was gone, her skin was cold again, and she opened her eyes.

Lord Brecken shook his head, vibrant green sparking in his hazel eyes. “I’m so sorry, Miss Evelina. I shouldn’t have done that. I have no right—”

She grabbed the lapels of his coat, pushed up on her tiptoes, and kissed him again. “You have every right, my lord. And I prefer Evie.”

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THE NIGHT HAD BEEN pure torture. Miss Evelina—Evie—had been everything he’d imagined. Soft, pliant, smelling of sweet lavender, and oh, so willing. Each time he dozed, she emerged behind his lids, teasing and laughing. Madoc rose from the four-poster, resigned to a sleepless night. He went to the writing table but found only a few sheets of paper.

His rooms and the service at the Wicked Earls’ Club were sumptuous. His toes sank into the lush carpet beneath his bare feet, shadows from the oil lamp gleamed against paneled walls, satin bed linens covered multiple feather ticks, and his favorite French brandy was stocked in the liquor cabinet. With the pull of a rope, he could request any craving at any time. Need a discreet bit of muslin? Done. Extra protection for an

expedition to one of London's seedier districts? Done. A keg of smuggled, untaxed brandy? Done. The butler might be offended when asked to procure only writing pen, paper, and a bottle of ink.

Lady Brecken had written, informing him that renovations were underway, and Griff had sent over a candidate for estate manager. She needed him home. He was torn, not wanting to leave Miss Evelina. With a ragged sigh, he ran a hand through his hair and flopped back against the chair. Brooks' comment went round in his head.

*I can tell you that Sir Horace is an honorable man and very fond of his daughters. I believe if he likes you, and trusts your affection for his daughter, he would offer the same generous amount he did for the elder.*

If that were true, he needed time to earn his confidence. No toad-eating flummery, just honesty. Once he was sure Sir Horace favored him, he would broach the subject of a betrothal to Miss Evelina. He would delay his return to Brecken Castle until June. Hopefully, he would have news for Mama concerning his marriage prospects.

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EVIE SAT in her window seat, watching for Lord Brecken's carriage. He, Brooks, and the Wilkersons would be dinner guests tonight. She was growing fond of Lavinia. The two formed a tentative friendship when Evelina had found the girl sobbing in the necessity room at a dance. Lavinia had heard some of her "friends" making fun of her and Lord Brooks. Evie's heart had gone out to the girl, when she'd blurted, *They said we'd have the ugliest babies in the whole of London. I can't have a child as bracket-faced as I am.*

Evelina had assured her that a mother always sees the beauty in their children, and those girls had been jealous. She may not have believed Evie, but her loyalty had been fixed from that moment on. Mama had been right. Insecurities had led Lavinia to go along with the cruel jokes and gossip of the

other girls. She'd only wanted to belong. Fenella would find a friend in Miss Wilkerson when she returned.

But it was also Tuesday, and she and the earl would drive in Hyde Park this afternoon before the evening event. It was a cloudy May afternoon, and she crossed her fingers it wouldn't rain. When Lord Brecken arrived, the first wet plops of rain splashed the window panes. He dashed up the front steps, pounding the iron ring on the door. The butler gave him entrance, and her father met them both in the portico.

"I think you need an alternate plan, Lord Brecken," said Sir Horace amiably as the earl brushed the droplets from shoulders and beaver hat.

"Perhaps it will"—thunder rumbled—"stop," Evie finished.

Lord Brecken stood, holding his wet hat, his brows furrowed with indecision. "We could..."

"Chess," exclaimed Sir Horace. "Do you play, Lord Brecken?"

"I do, sir," he answered, relief in his tone.

"Well, then, who shall challenge him first, my dear?"

"Oh, I believe you should rout him thoroughly, Papa. It will be monstrous fun to watch."

"Thank you for your confidence, Miss Evelina," said Lord Brecken, a smirk bringing out his dimple.

She and Lady Franklin embroidered while the two men played. It began with polite exchanges until more and more ivory pieces were removed from the board. Good-natured jibes were added to the polite conversation each time one of them gained advantage with a move.

"Think you're clever, eh? Young malapert!" jested Sir Horace.

"Don't threaten me, you old termagant," retorted Brecken.

Evie laughed. "You two sound like an old married couple!"

“You know he enjoys a good bashing, my lord,” added Lady Franklin.

“As did my father.” Lord Brecken smiled and tipped his head at Sir Horace. “I thank you for reviving those memories regardless of the outcome.”

In that moment, Evie saw glimpses of a future with the earl. Her father liked him. Their immediate rapport was obvious. Sir Horace would embrace his sons-in-law as only a man with no sons can. The earl missed his own father.

“Check,” announced Lord Brecken. He sat back against the velvet cushion, his fingertips resting on the lip of the carved chess board.

Silence hung heavy over the room as Sir Horace glowered at the board, a finger pressed to his lips. Her father had a jovial personality but also a competitive side. He didn’t like to lose in business, chess, or horse racing. He picked up his king, then set it back down with a grunt. He picked his knight and did the same.

“I can’t move, blast you!” he mumbled.

“You mentioned my first born, Sir Horace. Since I’m the victor, I’d prefer your second born.” Lord Brecken winked at Evie, and her father burst out laughing.

“Save me the headache and cost of a wedding, and she’s yours!”

The smile fell from the earl’s face. He cleared his throat and rose from the table, adjusting his cravat and avoiding eye contact with Evie. She didn’t know what to make of it. Was it the mention of marriage to her? Or the mention of the institution in general? Or the fact that he’d beaten her father at chess? The memory of their kiss flooded back, and she decided on the latter.

“The rain has stopped. Shall we go for a walk in the garden?” she asked, anxious to talk to Lord Brecken and ease her mind.

“The purple delphiniums are in bloom, and the pink are just beginning,” informed Lady Franklin. “Take a basket and

shears and cut some, please. They're so pretty for dried arrangements."

Evie collected a basket and shears from the kitchen. Lord Brecken looped his forearm through the wicker handle and offered her the other. As they strolled the main path, she looked over her shoulder to see her father watching them from the parlor window.

"I feel eyes upon us." Lord Brecken whispered loudly, a hand over one side of his mouth. "Please, I beg you, don't take advantage of me now. I'll be ruined."

She giggled and stopped at one of the tall stems with the tiny purple blooms. "I wish these had a scent, but Mama is right. They are lovely."

"The most fetching in London."

Evie glanced up and found he was staring at her rather than the flowers. "Thank you," she murmured, her cheeks hot. "Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly," he answered, holding out the basket for the clippings.

"Why did you turn serious when Papa mentioned me and weddings?"

He sighed. "Because I must return to Wales. There is work to be done that I need to oversee, and a steward needs to be hired." He stopped and turned to face her. "I received a letter from my mother, requesting I come home."

She pulled in air, realizing she'd been holding her breath waiting for his answer. "How long will you be gone?"

"I'll leave at the end of the month." He ran a hand through his dark hair. "I can't ask you to wait for me. I doubt I'm back before the end of the season."

Fear gripped her chest, and she struggled for composure. She had thought a proposal was around the corner, and now he would be gone in a week. "But I thought... I thought we..." Her lips pressed together to hold back her denials. She had her

pride, and if he could abandon her so easily then he could... he could go to the devil.

“I wish my situation were different. We’ve been left in a precarious state without a steward, and I’m needed.” He blew out a breath, his eyes pleading. “It’s my duty, my inheritance. I have no choice, Miss Evelina. I would love nothing better than to stay here with you.”

“When will you return?” she asked, taking comfort in the fact he didn’t want to leave. She swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked back hot tears.

“As soon as humanly possible.”

The answer soothed the mayhem in her belly. “Then I *will* wait, of course.”

“But Miss Evelina—”

“I would think you know me well enough by now. Once I’ve made up my mind, I don’t waver. I’m like my father in that way.” She crossed her arms defiantly. “If you argue with me, I’ll throw my arms around you and kiss you while my father is watching.”

A smile tugged at her lips as the panic flashed across his face. “Now you’re being reasonable,” she said smugly before continuing down the path. “Oh, here’s Solomon’s seal.”

They moved toward the next plant, and she pointed to the tiny white buds. “They look like little bells,” remarked the earl.

“Yes, Grandmama says if you listen closely you can hear them tinkle.” She bent down and placed her finger under a row of the blossoms and tapped them. “Can you hear it?”

He shook his head and bent down, one ear toward the plant.

“Closer.”

He bent farther, his face positioned within reach. Evie leaned forward and kissed his cheek, then stilled. He turned and their lips brushed. The earl let slip a husky moan, and a hand cupped her cheek. His mouth covered hers, caressing her

lips with his. She closed her eyes as the familiar spin of her belly caused havoc with her sense.

“You are a temptress, Miss Evelina,” he growled, then straightened. “You don’t realize your effect on me.”

“I said I prefer Evie.” With that, she turned on her heel, strode into the house, and left Lord Brecken holding the basket of clipped, purple delphiniums.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

THREE DAYS. He had three more days to find out the amount of Miss Evelina's dowry. Madoc stood in the dining room of White's, pondering his next move. Sir Horace sat alone at a table, reading *The Times* and sipping port. *Now or never, you coward*, he prodded himself.

Madoc eased into the chair beside Sir Horace and cleared his throat. A snap of a newspaper, and Sir Horace's silver-streaked blond hair came into view.

"Good evening, Lord Brecken."

"Good evening, sir." Madoc opened his mouth and closed it. His mind had gone blank, the practiced inquiry forgotten. He struggled to find words.

"Did you wish to speak with me?"

Doc nodded, his mind whirling with several different approaches. "If it's not a good time..."

"Why don't we go into the library where it's more private?" suggested Sir Horace.

"Thank you," he agreed with a loud sigh. It bought him a few more minutes to sound like a man with some sense rather than a muddleheaded green boy.

Once installed in the library, a glass of port in hand, both men studied the orange and yellow flames. "I'll be blunt. My daughter is quite taken with you, my lord. Is the affection returned?" It was a simple statement. Madoc wished he had a simple answer.



“She’s a beautiful lady.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Madoc swirled the deep ruby liquid. “I have responsibilities.”

“We all do,” Sir Horace agreed patiently. He set down his glass and folded his hands across his stomach, his full attention on the earl.

“What are your intentions? Do you care for my daughter?”

“I do.”

“Are you considering marriage in the near future?”

“I am.”

“You realize I’m not a dentist?”

“Yes.” Madoc scowled at the fiery embers, wondering where this was leading.

“Yet extracting words from you is like pulling a tooth.”

Doc glanced up to see Sir Horace smiling. “I love her, Sir Horace,” he blurted out.

*Where did that come from? Did he love her? Yes, you lecherous lickpenny!* The silent voice bounced in his brain.

“With all my heart,” he finished lamely.

“A match between the two of you would make my wife very happy.” Sir Horace picked up his glass and sipped his port. “I feel as if there is a sizeable secret hovering above us. It’s about to break open like the storm the other day when you visited.”

“I’m broke.” It was out. “I’m here looking for a wife with a generous dowry. Instead, I fell in love with Miss Evelina.”

“I’m not surprised after the kiss in the garden. But you said, *instead*. You must know I’m quite plump in the pocket. Or is it our social status?”

Embarrassment spread up his neck as he shook his head. He could feel the sweat popping out on his brow and resisted the urge to wipe it away. “She doesn’t know about my

financial situation. Miss Evelina should be courted by a man who will love her for who she is, not for the dowry she will bring. Yet, here I am caught to point nonplus, wanting her for the woman she is but trapped by my obligations to find a wealthy wife.”

“You realize you are just what Lady Franklin has been looking for to elevate her social status? A penniless aristocrat willing to marry below his class. My wife rattles on about your ancient family lines and title. It wouldn’t make a difference to her.” Sir Horace took another sip, his eyes narrowed as he studied Madoc. “Tell me your circumstances.”

For the next hour, Madoc talked. He recounted his life from the time of his father’s accident, omitting his work for the Home Office. “And that leads us to the present.”

Sir Horace nodded and poured another brandy. “Interesting story. I can put out some inquiries about Caerton myself. I have connections in all the nooks and crannies of London. My first office was on the docks.”

“I’d appreciate that.” The fist in Madoc’s chest loosened. The man didn’t seem fazed by his circumstances.

“How much?”

The abruptness of the question caught him unaware. “Pardon me?”

“How much were you hoping for as a dowry?” Sir Horace’s steely gaze pinned Madoc. “And where would you live?”

“The amount rumored for your oldest daughter would be ample.” He swallowed, his stomach roiling as he haggled for Miss Evelina like a horse at Tattersall’s. Madoc held up his hand, palm out. “I can’t do this. She deserves someone who doesn’t need her money.”

“She deserves to be happy and loved. Both my daughters do. Our goal here is to determine if you can provide both. If so, the cost is inconsequential.” Sir Horace smiled. “I am a very wealthy man. If I can’t make my girls’ dreams come true, what use is it to me?”

Madoc blinked. A man with scruples who didn't use his daughters to further his connections. "I would do everything in my power to do both, sir. But standing at this crossroad, I realize I'm unable to go through with it. It would hang over our heads and darken our marriage. She would always wonder if I truly loved her."

Sir Horace nodded. "I can understand that. As a businessman, giving money away doesn't rub me well. Yet, marriage and contracts and dowries are part of life. My wife says it's an investment in our future. Our daughters' future, anyway."

Both men returned their gaze to the fire and sipped their brandy. Madoc clenched his jaw, thinking of the confession he'd just made. He loved Miss Evelina Franklin. "I can't turn my back on my responsibilities, but I don't want to lose your daughter."

"Would you consider a loan?" Sir Horace leaned forward.

"Absolutely not." The idea of owing his future father-in-law appalled him.

"You aren't making this easy, my lord. You love my daughter. I believe you'll make her happy. You have integrity and honor and are attempting to restore your family seat." He pursed his mouth and wagged a finger at Madoc. "If the boot were on the other foot, would you still offer for her?"

"Within a heartbeat."

"Then let me help you."

An idea sparked in Madoc's brain. "Would you consider... No, never mind." It was unfair to ask. "You're a busy man."

"Go on, spit it out now that you've started."

"Would you consider coming to Brecken Castle? I could show you my lands, and you would better understand my predicament. We would both enter this agreement with eyes wide open. You'll know if Miss Evelina would be content there. I'm not opposed to spending part of my time in London, either. I'd like to resume the seat my father neglected in the House of Lords," he admitted.

Sir Horace brightened. “I’ll be in your neck of the country in July. Taking the boat from Bristol over to Cardiff. I could ride up to Brecknock after I conclude my business. Would that suit you?”

He nodded. “Yes. Yes, it would suit me fine. If you’re still confident that I’ll make her a good husband, it would be my honor to propose upon our return. To ease my conscience, I will add her original dowry price to the widow’s jointure we agree upon.”

“And we won’t mention this to my daughter until I’ve seen the estate and it’s settled. Will you agree to that?”

“It’s more than fair.”

“Until we meet at Brecken Castle, then?” Sir Horace stood and held out his hand.

Madoc gave him a hearty shake. His heartbeat slowed, the fist around it unclenched. A glimmer of hope surged through him, and he snatched the slender thread. His lifeline for the next month.

---

“EVIE,” he whispered in her hair as she leaned against him. They were in the Franklin’s garden, under a tree in the shadows. The stars glittered above them, the night air was warm, and her soft, pliant body melded into his like the last puzzle piece. “We should go in. We’ve been out too long as it is.”

“I won’t see you for months!” She twisted in his arms and faced him, her palms on each of his cheeks. “Who will I flirt with while you’re gone?”

His jaws clenched at the thought of her smiling up at another man. “Brooks is the only one I’ll allow.”

“Gah! You have no claim on me, sir. I shall dally with whoever I choose.” She leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed his chin. One finger circled his dimple.

He closed his eyes. How could he explain? Resigned, he nuzzled her neck, breathing in the sweet lavender and wondering how he would hide his reaction to her backside wiggling against him. She had no idea how naïve she really was.

“I have some matters to attend to in Wales, and when I return, we will discuss... things.”

“Things? I’m a *thing*?”

He stopped his ministrations on her neck and cradled her face in his palms. “The most delectable, beautiful, alluring thing in the county.”

“Only the county?”

“In all of England.” He chuckled and brushed her lips. “Are you satisfied?”

“For now,” she purred.

He wrapped his arms around and held her close, burying his nose in her satin hair. Her arms snaked around his shoulders, tickling the back of his neck as finger softly caressed his skin. Blast! It would seem like a lifetime without her. Is that what love did to a person? It drove him mad when she wasn’t near, within eyesight to make him feel whole and content. Would he survive, live on if he couldn’t have her? Yes. But he knew with an unexplainable certainty that he would never love another woman as he did Miss Evelina Franklin.

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*I’M IN LOVE.* Evie hugged herself and twirled around until she was dizzy. She had to write her sister. Fenella was working as an accountant for a factory in Glasgow. It was owned by the MacNaughton clan, and she’d mentioned the name Lachlan more than several times in her letters. Perhaps her dear sister had found love too. She giggled. Their mother would have an apoplexy if her eldest daughter married a Scot. Lady Franklin had worked most of her life to erase her Scottish heritage.

Evie had confided in Papa about her feelings for Lord Brecken. His advice had been to be patient and all would work out as it should. As if she'd leave anything to fate.

*Madoc!* When he returned, he would propose, and she would call him Madoc. What a virile name. It felt decadent rolling off her tongue.

Would he bring Lady Brecken with him? What if his mother didn't like her? What if she was one of those women who felt no woman was good enough for her son? *Stop counting those eggs!* she scolded.

Lady Franklin knocked on her door. "May I come in?"

"Of course, Mama. I was just daydreaming." She fell back on the counterpanes, sinking into the mattresses, her arms over her head. "I'm so happy!"

"Well, save some of that buoyancy for the actual proposal. But I have no doubt it will come." She smiled like the cat who'd finally trapped the mouse. "Your father seems confident this match will come to fruition. He rarely makes a prediction unless the odds are in his favor."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*JULY 1819*

*Brecken Castle, Wales*

MADOC WIPED the sweat from his brow and let out a long, loud satisfied sigh. He'd insisted on helping with the barn raising. There was a certain satisfaction knowing he'd helped build the barn that would house many of the tenants' livestock. The main street of the village had improved. While there was still work to do, cursory repairs had been made, and Brecknock was once again tidy and inviting. He examined the buildings and St. Mary's Church with pride. It was an ancient place, built by the Romans as their first military base when they invaded Wales.

The village had given him a hearty welcome with a bonfire and slaughtered two pigs for a much-deserved celebratory feast. The perfect end to a terrible ordeal. Too much ale, too much wine, too much whisky, too much food. They had hailed him as a hero for taking care of his responsibilities. For doing what never should have *needed* to be done. They were good people, and he was blessed.

"You've done a fine job, Brecken," said Sir Horace, accepting a cup of cool water from a lad with a bucket. "Your tenants are loyal and hardworking, just like their master."

"I'd say we didn't need your help, sir, but it was much appreciated. You're very fit for..." *Blast!* How did he finish that sentence?

“A man my age? Well, I do a little boxing, hunting, and ride every day. I’ve always liked the satisfaction of a job done well.” He dipped the wooden cup back into the bucket and gulped it down. “I’ve helped unload my own shipments countless times. There’s something about physical labor that makes a man feel like a man, don’t you agree?”

“I do.” Madoc had grown close to his future father-in-law over the past weeks. He was a shrewd man with a keen eye, quick wit, and kind heart. For Madoc, Sir Horace helped replace that void left by his father so many years ago. For Franklin, a man who loved daughters fiercely, the earl was a way to embrace a son.

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow.” Sir Horace nodded at the blacksmith as he passed. “I miss my wife and my daily routine.”

“My mother has been happy to have your company in the evenings. Her winnings from your nightly games of loo are embarrassingly large.”

Sir Horace guffawed. “She’s an excellent player. I’m glad she’s not a man, or I’d have to lose to her at White’s.”

The men said their goodbyes and mounted their horses. Sir Horace pulled a flask from his coat, took a drink, and handed it to Madoc. He took a swallow and gave it back. “Good brandy, sir. My father always preferred whisky. Don’t care for the stuff, myself.”

“Nor I,” said Franklin, studying Madoc. “I wasn’t sure what to expect when I arrived. Your mother is gracious and lovely. I presumed the lands and buildings would be much worse off than they are. It shows me two things.”

Madoc nodded. “Go on.”

“First, you’ve already poured your blood and sweat into this estate. It shows initiative and pride.” Franklin tipped back the flask and passed it to Madoc again.

“And the second?” he asked before taking another swallow.



“You describe this place as ramshackle, deteriorated. In my eyes, it needs work, but it’s not crumbling. This leads to me believe the estate must have been glorious to appear so decayed to you.” Sir Horace tucked the flask inside his jacket. “I have every confidence my daughter will be well-loved and provided for. That makes me a very content papa.”

The two rode back to the castle in companionable silence.

Madoc’s chest swelled. Words of praise that were deeply appreciated, especially from Evie’s father. His mind wandered to Evie, as it always did these days.

What would she think of his lands, the castle, his inheritance? Would she love Wales as he did? The land and their location were remote, the winds often blustery and cold, the waters turbulent. Yet, he somehow knew that she would embrace this land and the people. She would be their countess, and the villagers would love her in return.

“Rub them down and give them extra oats. They worked hard today,” he told the stableboy as they handed off their reins. The earl turned to Sir Horace. “We’ll see you in the parlor before dinner?”

“Of course. And one more chance to lessen my losses. Tell Lady Brecken that a reckoning is coming.”

Madoc took the steps two at a time and peeled his clothes off, dropping them on the floor of his chamber as he walked toward the bed. He was exhausted and satisfied. After a bath and a meal, he’d write Evie. She had been constant and merry with her correspondence, and with each mention of Lord Brooks, he’d relaxed. Madoc had asked his friend to watch over her. Sunderland and his wife had returned to the country in June. Grace was growing large, and Kit had been anxious to have her home. Most of the nobles escaped the heat and smells of London until the summer heat ended.

In the dining room, refreshed and hungry, he stuck his nose in the silver bowl of roasted fowl and inhaled the scent of spices and juices. His stomach growled.

“It seems you worked up an appetite,” his mother said from the doorway. “Shall I pour you some wine?”

“Thank you. Sir Horace will be down shortly. I think he enjoyed the barn raising today.”

“He seems like the type of man who would. Your father used to lend a hand the same way.” She handed him the glass and poured herself some madeira. “With her father leaving tomorrow, I must ask when I will meet the famed Miss Evelina Franklin.”

“I expect you’ll return with me to London. Would you rather I arrange transport later?” He wondered if London intimidated Lady Brecken. Or if she would be jealous of his young wife and resent becoming the dowager countess. He’d heard horrific stories of mothers and new wives in a constant battle of hierarchy. Yet, this had been her idea.

“I shall accompany you. I’d like to know the entire family. Will she live here? It’s a far cry from Town.” She nodded at the servant who began ladling out a clear broth. “Will she be bored?”

“Does it matter? You wanted me to find a wife with a large dowry. I did. I will expect you to treat her as a daughter and help her acclimate to her new surroundings.” He finished the broth in three swallows, discarding the spoon and tipping the bowl to his mouth.

“Of course it matters. And why would I treat her badly? I’m looking forward to another woman to share my afternoons.” She sipped the broth without a slurp. “When will you tell her about our... situation?”

“I don’t know. When the time is right,” he answered irritably. “Let’s take one step at a time.”

“She must know before the ceremony. You cannot begin a new life with her on a lie.”

“Yes, I realize that,” he said with gritted teeth. “I will know when the time is right. But first, I will propose.”

“Shouldn’t you tell her before she accepts?”

“I’ve done as you asked, was fortunate enough to find a woman I care for, so I believe I’ve proven myself capable. I will tell her when I deem it appropriate and not sooner.” He threw back his wine, swallowing loudly. “The subject is closed.”

“You’ve been rubbing elbows with the tenants too long,” his mother admonished. “Mind your manners when your future father-in-law joins us.”

“I’m not worried about my manners with Sir Horace. He’s more concerned with his daughter’s happiness.”

“I wish my father had been.”

Madoc paused. His mother’s upbringing had been so different. As a female, she’d been a pawn among men, a brood mare for a Welsh earl. He reached over and squeezed her hand. He couldn’t imagine Evelina being forced to marry a man she’d never even met. “I wish he had been too. I’m glad you met my father and found happiness.”

He heard his voice. He heard the patronizing tone and winced. Yet, he couldn’t help himself. After the late earl’s accident, his mother had almost... forgotten him. She had spoken harshly without provocation, shushed him when he asked about his father’s condition. He hadn’t been allowed to be angry or sad or confused. He knew that young boy’s anger had not been dispelled.

“Why did you ignore me after Father’s accident?”

Her spoon dropped into her soup bowl. “I beg your pardon?”

“After Father’s accident, everything centered around him. It was like I no longer existed. Do you have any idea what that felt like to a fifteen-year-old boy?” He leaned his elbows on the table. “First, I lost my father and then my mother abandoned me, through no fault of my own. I had no hero to look up to and no comfort from the woman who had once doted on me. It was as if his crippled legs had sucked up all the happiness in my family.”

“Is that what you thought?” A hand covered her mouth. “I always loved you, Madoc.”

“I didn’t understand that.”

“I know I was harsh with you after the accident. First, he was horrified at what he’d become and didn’t want anyone but his manservant and the physician to see him. It wasn’t just the walking, it was the fact he had to rely on others for simple things. He no longer felt capable of being a man. He gave up.

“Stoicism became his defense. He would look at some point across the room, never blinking, as if in a trance, while he was bathed and ministered to each day. Each bath, each emptying of a chamber pot, each night when we lay together and nothing else...” Her cheeks pinkened, and she looked away. “I was petrified. He was my life, my love, my heart. He had made my life not only bearable but wonderful. Who would take care of me?”

Madoc stilled. His mother had rarely spoken of the early years of his father’s infirmity.

“When he allowed me back in, I spent every moment I could with him. Our daily conversations became my motivation. For an hour or two each day, he was the man I married. We reminisced of good times, of memories that might make him see life as valuable again, even without the use of his legs. I was single-minded in my determination, and that’s what you remember most, I think. But I had to be strong, be iron-willed to hang on until he got over his bitterness. And I would be there.”

“I always thought you loved him more than me.” He hated the accusation in his voice. The needling tone of a wounded youth.

“You were my purpose in life—but he *was* my life. Without him, I am half-empty and will wither away. So yes, he was my priority from the day of the accident until he took his last breath.” She blinked, tears spilling down her cheeks. “Now, we must fulfill our promise. I cannot join him until that is done.”

“Mama, don’t talk like that.” He was shocked. His mother wasn’t old enough to give up on life and join her husband. “I still need you.”

She stood and walked to him with her arms extended. “Oh, my poor, sweet boy. I do love you so.”

Madoc stood and enfolded her in a tight hug.

“I’m not going anywhere yet, but you must be prepared,” she murmured into his chest. “Life without him is too hard. I just don’t have the strength.”

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*JULY 1819*

*London*

“LORD RAINES, it’s so good to see you again.” Evelina had caught a glimpse of the tall blond after the last dance set. “Lord Brooks, Miss Wilkerson, this is Viscount Raines, a friend of my cousin Charles.”

“It’s a pleasure,” welcomed Lavinia.

“I believe we met once.” Brooks held out his hand and they shook. “Was it the races or Tattersall’s? I remember there was horseflesh involved.”

Raines gray eyes sparkled. “Tattersall’s. I bought that magnificent white stepper.”

“Ah, yes. How did he work out?”

“He’s my favorite mount. Have any of you seen Charles?” asked the viscount. “He was supposed to meet me here.”

“I’m afraid my cousin is always more than fashionably late, but he’ll be here,” assured Evelina. She waved over the guests as her parents came in from the garden. “Shall I introduce you to my father and mother.”

He squinted over the heads of the guests. His face went pale, and he made his excuses. "I would enjoy that very much at another time. I see an acquaintance I must speak to before they leave." He bowed and disappeared into the crowd, his blond head still visible as he moved away.

"Who was that?" asked Lady Franklin. "He seemed familiar."

"Lord Raines, a friend of Charles." Evie wondered at the man's odd reaction. What had alarmed him? *A cursed rum touch*, her grandfather would have said.

"Raines, did you say?" asked Sir Horace in a harsh tone.

Evie studied her father. He wore a frown and his jaw twitched. "Do you know him? Is he respectable?"

"The man I knew certainly wasn't. But the viscount I was acquainted with was much older. Has to be his son. The scoundrel must be dead, then. Good riddance."

"Horace, that's a terrible thing to say." Lady Franklin rapped him with her fan. "We're in mixed company."

"My apologies, ladies, but avoid that family. The apple never falls far from the tree," he said with a warning scowl. "I need a drink."

This was a new side to her father. She'd never heard such malevolence in his voice. It piqued her interest. Another conversation with Lord Raines might be enlightening.

Near the end of the evening, the opportunity arose. She saw the viscount walk onto the terrace for some air and followed. Outside, it was still muggy but a slight breeze cooled her neck.

"Lord Raines, are you enjoying the dance?" she asked, leaning on the white rail that overlooked the garden. She inhaled the clinging scent of iris and sweet pea. The moon was nearly full, but clouds blocked out the stars. "You dashed away so quickly."

"Er, yes, I had to speak someone." He stood next to her, hands clasped behind his back. "How is your sister?"

“I think she’s doing well. She’s in Scotland with my grandmother for a visit.” Evie pressed her lips together, wondering if she should ask. “Did you like her?”

“Of course, I...” He paused as he took in Evie’s questioning expression. “Not-not, er, in that way.”

“Oh, you dashed away so quickly before meeting my parents, and you got along with Fenella so well. I thought if you were interested in her—”

“Absolutely not!”

His words and adamant tone hung between them. “I didn’t mean to offend you!” She turned on her heel, but he caught her elbow.

“Wait, please. I didn’t mean to insult you or your sister.” Remorse darkened his gray eyes. “Did I tell you my mother passed?”

Guilt squeezed her chest. “I’m so sorry. No, Charles didn’t mention it.”

“She had suffered for so long that it really was a blessing.”

Evelina placed a hand on his arm. “It’s hard to lose a loved one. Is there anything I can do?”

He shook his head and turned back to the garden, staring out into the darkness. “She told me a secret just before she died.”

His voice was thick, and her heart went out to him. “A confession?”

He nodded. “What would you do if you found out that your entire life was based on a lie? The man you thought you were, was a sham?”

Evie swallowed. She hadn’t expected some hidden family scandal to enter the conversation. “I don’t know. I’d never thought about it. I’m sure, whatever it is, she did what she thought was best.”

“She lied to me, and she lied to her husband. The man I thought was my father...” He laughed, a harsh sound that sent

goosebumps up her arm. “He was unscrupulous in business and not a pleasant man, I’ll admit. We didn’t get along most of the time, but he was still my father...”

Sir Horace’s reaction to the name made sense now, after Raines comment about the late viscount’s reputation. Still, sons didn’t always inherit a parent’s traits.

“I think of the years I spent caring for her”—he ran a hand through his pale blond hair—“and my reward was a deathbed confession. But some sins can never be forgiven.”

How did one respond to such a revelation? Was Lord Raines saying his mother had been unfaithful? Evelina was at a loss for words. She had no idea how to soothe his anguish.

“Did she tell you who your father was?”

He looked at her, horror in his eyes. He swiped his hand over his face. “I must apologize. I had a shock tonight, and I’m not myself. I don’t usually rattle on about my affairs.”

“I’m glad to listen.”

Raines turned to her. “Yes, that’s why I came to London. I wanted to see him, meet him. Now that I’m here, I don’t know. Perhaps it’s better to leave the past in the past. What would it change?”

“Does he know he has a son?”

“A by-blow, you mean.”

She sighed. This poor man, led to believe one thing all his life. It must be like the crumbling foundation of a building and one day, the entire structure gives way. “Will you contact him?”

He shook his head. “I doubt it, but I apologize again for burdening you with my woes. I’ve been brooding over this for weeks...”

“Sometimes it’s easier to share your feelings with a stranger. I promise it will go no further.” She touched his arm again, and he tensed. “I hope you come to terms with it and find your father.”



Lord Raines pushed away from the railing and looked down at her. "If I believe some good may come of it, I would consider it. For now, I shall keep it to myself and return to my estate next week." He held out his elbow. "Thank you for being a friend and listening. Talking about it eased my soul a bit, I think. Time will be an ally while I make a decision."

Evelina's fingers gripped his forearm, and he led her back into the crowded ballroom. She had the oddest feeling about this man. If only she could put her finger on it.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*AUGUST 1819*

*London*

EVELINA STARED at the calling card, her knuckles white as she gripped the silver tray. He was back in London. Finally, Lord Brecken was back. She fought the urge to squeal and jump up and down. Instead, she took the stairs two at a time and threw open her bedroom door.

“Louella,” she called. “I must change. Hurry!”

She pulled off her white linen cap and grabbed her ivory comb, pulling it through her tresses. He would be back this afternoon, she was sure. It was their day at home, and he wouldn't wait to see her, would he?

By the time her maid entered the room, Evie was in a panic. What if he proposed today?

“What has you so befuddled, miss?” asked Louella.

“Lord Brecken is back in Town and left his card. I must be ready!”

“Well, why didn't you say so?” The maid marched to the wardrobe and found a sprigged muslin dress of pale Pomona green with tiny pink blossom embroidered along the hem and cuffs. The neckline was modest but didn't extend all the way to her neck. “Let's get you dressed, then we'll work on the hair.”

As Louella finished weaving the ribbon through Evie's curls, they heard the clatter of hooves. "He's here, miss. Now hold still while I fasten your pendant."

Evie's heart raced. What if he'd had a change of heart? With trembling hands, she picked up her fan and looped it over her wrist. She took the steps slowly, breathing deep to calm her racing pulse. The butler met her at the bottom of the stairs.

"Lord Brecken has arrived and is in the study with your father. Sir Horace asked that you wait in the parlor."

She nodded and walked down the hall, her mind whirling with the conversation between her father and Lord Brecken. A hand went to her stomach to calm the butterflies battering to get out. She sat down on the chaise longue. Fragrant red and white roses were arranged in a vase on a low table. The parlor was bright and cheery with the windows open to take advantage of any breeze. Usually, they'd have been in the country by now, attending one party or another. Evie had turned down several invitations, afraid to miss the earl's return.

She sat with her hands clasped in her lap, her feet sweeping the Persian rug as her legs swung back and forth. Studying the delicate, hand-painted vines on the wall paper, she willed her breathing to slow.

Though she'd been waiting for him, Evie startled when the door opened. Lord Brecken entered and stopped in front of her.

"Miss Evelina," he rumbled.

"Lord Brecken." Evie couldn't breathe, couldn't move. It was the most important moment of her life.

"May I sit?" he asked, not waiting for answer. Before she could turn fully to face him, her hand was in his. "Have you missed me?"

She nodded, afraid to trust her voice. Her throat was so thick, she could barely swallow. Tears threatened, and she blinked to hold them back.

“You were in my thoughts every day,” he said. The sun caught the brilliant specks of green in his eyes. His dimple appeared when he smiled down at her, and her insides tumbled. “I’ve spoken with your father.”

She held her breath. Oh, heavens. *Say it! Ask me! I can’t stand another second*, she pleaded silently.

“The day I met you, my life changed. When I thought of marriage, I thought of a proper match and my duties as an earl. It was all part of my responsibilities when I inherited the title.” He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand, the warmth sending a shiver over her skin. “You made me realize that marriage can also mean a partnership, a bonding of two people who make life better for one another by... simply being together.”

Her heart pounded. The blood rushing through her head made it hard to hear him, and she leaned forward so as not to miss a word, a syllable.

“I saw you skating on the Serpentine last February. Call it fate, call it destiny, but I was drawn to you. I realized when we met that my heart was half-empty. You made me whole, made me love you. Miss Evelina, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Her breath quickened, her chest rising and falling. A tear slipped down her cheek as she nodded, a watery smile curving her lips. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, Madoc.” Oh, how she loved to say his name.

Madoc leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. His fingers brushed back her curls; his knuckles grazed her cheek. Her hands pushed against his hard chest, feeling the solid strength, and she closed her eyes. He loved her. He *loved* her.

Madoc pulled her close, his lips moving from her mouth to her jaw and down her neck. When he moaned, a giggle bubbled up her throat.

“You find this scene amusing?” he murmured against her earlobe, his breath ticklish.

She shook her head. “It’s nerves. I’ve been so anxious for your return.”

He cradled her face between his palms. “I never want you to worry about that again. Know that my feelings are steadfast and will never change.” His thumb swiped her wet cheek. “And I only allow happy tears.”

“They are,” she assured him, leaning her face into his palm. “So very happy.”

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*TWO DAYS later*

“MISS EVELINA, I’d like you to meet my mother, Lady Brecken.”

Madoc watched the two women appraise one another. The younger with openness and optimism, the other, guarded and reserved. His mother had no illusions of marriage. She’d assured him that she only wanted to know Evelina would be a loyal and obedient wife.

“I’ve heard so much about you, Lady Brecken.” Evelina gave a slight curtsy. “Would you care for some tea?” They sat on the chintz wingback chairs. A table in the center held a tea service and an arrangement of sweet-smelling flowers.

“That would be lovely, thank you.” The countess sat, arranging her black bombazine skirt and tugging on the black lace gloves. “My son has told me of your family and background. Your mother must be quite pleased with the match.”

“Mama!” His jaw clenched. They had agreed not to mention the Franklins lesser status or the dowry. She should have been happy this wedding taking place at all, rather than acting high in the instep and insulting his betrothed.

“She’s beside herself with joy,” agreed Evelina, casting a reassuring glance at Madoc. “I realize a baronet’s daughter is a

step down for an earl, but love doesn't see titles."

"No, it doesn't. But love doesn't pay the taxes, or repair the tenants' roofs, or purchase livestock, does it?" Lady Brecken sipped her tea, setting the delicate china cup onto the saucer with a clatter. "But dowries do."

Madoc closed his eyes. His fingers curled into his palms as resisted the urge to throttle his mother. What was she doing? He was supposed to choose the time and the place to explain.

"Mama, don't—" Evelina's questioning gaze stopped his next words. "Let me explain."

"Your dowry is the answer to our prayers. It will restore the estate and my husband's name in the county." The countess smiled sweetly. "You really are a godsend, my dear."

"My dowry?" asked Evelina, her voice pitched high. She blinked at the countess and turned her gaze back to Madoc. "My dowry?"

"It doesn't affect my feelings for you—"

"You need my dowry?" Her bottom lip trembled.

"It's why he came to London. I was concerned what I might have to endure. Some of those mushrooms are so crude. But you, Miss Evelina, are a beauty. We are truly fortunate."

Madoc felt the floor tilt. "I'm marrying Evie because I love her." He moved next to his betrothed and took her hand. "It's not what you think."

She refused to meet his eyes, staring at their entwined hands. "Are you in need of funds?"

He sighed and glared at his mother. "Yes."

"Did you come to London to find a wealthy bride?" Evie spoke in a husky, monotone.

"Yes, but—"

She yanked her hand from his and stood. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Lady Brecken. I'm afraid I'm not feeling well, a bit of a megrim. I hope to see you another time." She curtsied and rushed from the room.

“What in the devil are you thinking?” he growled. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

“I do.” His mother took a sip of tea and looked him in the eye. “I know my son. He would put off telling his fiancée about his need for a dowry. He would hem and haw, use the excuse he hadn’t found the right time, the right place, the right words.”

“So, you took it upon yourself to do it for me?” He paced the length of the room, trying to control the anger that slowly erupted.

“I did. It occurred to me that you have the chance for the kind of marriage I had, the second time. If you go into this marriage being dishonest, she’ll resent you for it. It would be better to have a wife you don’t care a whit for than to live with a woman you love who despises you. We are not the fragile creatures you think we are. It would hurt her more knowing you didn’t trust her with the truth, than the fact you need her money.”

Lady Brecken set the cup down and stood, laying a hand on Madoc’s arm. “Can you imagine the pain of seeing her every day for the rest of your life, but never having her love?”

Madoc stared at her, wondering how to repair this, knowing she was right.

“Now, inform the butler I would like to visit with Lady Franklin while you speak with your betrothed.”

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EVIE SOBBED INTO HER PILLOW. He was a brute, a sop. A terrible, horrible lout. How could he do this to her? She had been sure he loved her. What a wet goose she was. When a knock sounded at her door, she yelled, “Go away!”

“Evie, my sweet, open the door,” called Sir Horace from the other side. “I know you’re upset, but I need to speak with you.”

She sniffed and wiped her cheeks with her palms. “Come in.”

Sir Horace entered and held out his arms. Evie rushed into his embrace, snuffling against his silk waistcoat. “He only wanted your money,” she wailed.

“There, there, Evie. This is all my fault.”

She pushed back from him. “Your fault?” Could this day get any worse?

Her father recounted the discussion he’d had with Lord Brecken at the club. He told her of the late earl, the bamboozling estate manager, Brecken’s hesitancy to ask for her hand, and the agreement they had arrived at. “It was my idea not to tell you. He’s a fine man, and he cares for you deeply. Believe me, I know a man in love when I see one.”

“Would he marry me if I were poor?” she asked petulantly.

“The world isn’t so simple, Evie. I can tell you if he didn’t need the money, he would still marry you. You must show him some grace in this situation.” Sir Horace held her by the shoulders. “You are a clever girl with good instincts. In your heart, you know what’s true.”

He kissed her forehead. “He’s waiting for you in the garden whenever you’re ready. You have my support whether you accept or reject his proposal.”

Evie watched her father walk away, the earl’s recent words revolving in her brain.

*WHEN I THOUGHT OF MARRIAGE, I thought of a proper match and my duties as an earl. It was all part of my responsibilities when I inherited the title.*

SHE SAT down at the dressing table and scowled at her puffy eyes in the mirror. The day had been so promising. What was she to do now? She closed her eyes, and Madoc’s face came to



her. His eyes glistened with panic, a reflection of his love and concern.

Of course he loved her.

*YOU MADE me realize that marriage can also mean a partnership, a bonding of two people who make life better for one another by... simply being together.*

SHE TOOK IN DEEP BREATH. And another. Then another.

*KNOW that my feelings are steadfast and will never change.*

HER FATHER WAS RIGHT; she needed to trust her own instincts. Evie felt his love in each shared glance, each smile, each touch. She should be thanking fate rather than cursing it.

After washing her face and adjusting her dress, Evie rushed down the stairs and out to the garden. “Madoc,” she called, pausing at the trellis and barely noticing the heavy scent of wisteria.

“Evelina.” He stood next to the fountain, hands clasped behind his back, his face ravaged. Her heart ached for him. He’d been through so much in the past months. She could be the balm to heal the wounds of the past.

Evie picked up her skirts and ran down the path, throwing herself against his chest. “Tell me you love me,” she panted as she hugged him with all her might. “Tell me.”

He scooped her into his arms and sat down on a stone bench. “I love you, Evelina Franklin. I need you like I need my first breath in the morning. You are the day to my night, the stars to my moon.” He peppered her face with kisses.

“Promise me you’ll say it every day and never forget.” Life without this man would be hollow. It didn’t matter what led him to her. Their fates were entwined.

“I swear.” He kissed her mouth, hard and demanding, and she wiggled in his lap.

“Should we join your mother?” she asked in his ear, biting the soft lobe.

“Lady Franklin is keeping her company.” Madoc kissed her eyes, then her nose. “It seems my mother feared I wouldn’t tell you before the wedding. She said it would be a wedge between us that could never be removed.”

“My father told me of his part too. I understand now.”

“You must also promise me something.” He tipped her chin, his hazel eyes serious.

“Name it.” She would do anything for this man.

“You make me whole. I was half a man these last two months.” He brushed her lips. “Never, ever doubt that *you* are enough for me. I would have found a way for you to be mine, with or without a dowry.”

“I promise to never doubt your love,” Evie whimpered as his mouth closed over hers and passion claimed all thought. As soon as the world stopped spinning, they’d plan their future. Together.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*September 1819*

“HOW MUCH IS LEFT?” Madoc wondered what would give him more satisfaction, retrieving some of his lost inheritance or killing Caerton. Perhaps he could have both.

“Three-quarters, I’m guessing,” answered Walters. “He’s half-flash and half-foolish, so full of himself yet so easily gulled.”

Madoc did a quick mental count. They’d found the solicitor who’d collaborated with Caerton. Walters had uncovered the evidence in his office, including receipts with dates and names. The accountant had tried to feign ignorance, that he didn’t know the items he’d sold “on the side” had been stolen. His business was now closed, and he sat in a crowded cell awaiting trial. The swindler would hang or rot in Fleet Prison. Either was fine with the earl.

Fifteen thousand pounds recovered. It was a start.

Rather than the constable arresting Caerton, Madoc and Walters had devised a more satisfying plan. After all the suffering the bloody thief had put his family and tenants through, Niall would realize some of the agony he’d caused.

“My *acquaintances* have been gambling with him the entire summer. They win some, lose some, and the cull doesn’t suspect a thing.” Walters rubbed his hands together. They’d collected three thousand pounds so far from the winnings.

“The boys claim a hundred pounds per thousand, as agreed upon. They’ve put a lot of time into this investigation. Tonight, we finish off the blethering oaf.”

Niall Caerton hadn’t trusted a bank to keep his money. Walters had searched his room and found a heavy pouch of coin but no bank notes. The bulk of the fortune was hidden somewhere.

“He’s in a decent neighborhood in Covent Gardens. When we meet tonight, he believes Smythe and I are bringing him to a private club. Which we are, in a sense.” Walters grinned. “This will be a sweet end, my lord.”

Walters would be introduced as a man of influence who was bringing them to an exclusive gaming hell. The foursome would arrive at the back entrance of a rented shop and escorted to the “private rooms” upstairs, now transformed into a small gaming den. He himself would tend the dice for the hazard table, while Brooks oversaw the card game of Vingt-et-un. Other associates of Walters would be random customers.

Madoc waited in full guise, though he didn’t know if Niall Caerton would recognize him after so many years. When the group entered, he ground his teeth. The peep-o-day boy hadn’t changed. Same pale face and sly blue eyes, sandy hair, weak chin, and lewd smile. His small eyes darted about the room hungrily and glanced off Madoc quickly. Walters led him to the vingt-et-un table. It had begun.

Over the next hour, Caerton won some and lost some. By midnight, sweat dotted his brow, and he wiped at the freckles on his cheeks with a handkerchief. Madoc knew many men addicted to gambling, and this Welshman was no different. The gleam in his eyes, the fervor of the next win would lead them to his hiding place.

“Sir, you’re out of credit. I’m afraid we’ll need another bank note to place another bet.” Brooks played the dealer perfectly. Madoc bit his lip to keep the smile from his face.

“I don’t have any more with me,” said Caerton. “I’m good for my debt.”

“I’m sure you are, sir, but we do not accept credit here.” Brooks’ brown eyes even appeared apologetic. Blast, but he owed his friend.

“I can get more,” pleaded Caerton. “I’ll return within the hour.”

“As you wish, sir,” agreed Brooks, his smile wide.

Caerton left the building, and activity stopped. “I’ll go first,” said Madoc, peeling off his gray wig and spectacles. “Follow me in case the plan goes awry.”

It didn’t. Niall went to an old church on the outskirts of Covent Garden. He strode into the cemetery and stopped at a headstone. Pushing it backwards, he reached beneath it and retrieved a box. He opened it, pulled something out, and tucked it in his coat. When he reached the cemetery gate, Madoc stepped out.

“Hello, Niall.”

“Wh-who are you?” Caerton asked, a hand going to his chest where he’d placed the bank note.

“Lord Brecken,” he responded with a tight smile. “Don’t you recognize me?”

“He’s dead. Out of my way, I have business to attend to.” Niall tried to walk past but Madoc grabbed him by the collar.

“What are you doing? I’m a man of means. Unhand me.”

“I was a man of means until you embezzled my inheritance,” he snarled.

Caerton paled. “L-Lord M-Madoc?”

“You do recognize me.”

“How did you find me?” he whispered.

“I’m as tenacious as my father.”

Caerton’s eyes were wide. He held out a hand, backed up several steps, then turned and ran. Madoc followed and tackled him. When Caerton swung and connected with Madoc’s jaw, the earl lost control. It all came back to him—the lost years

with his father, the crumbling estate, the hopelessness in the tenants' eyes, his mother's tears.

He sat up and drove one fist, then the other into Caerton's face, pounding him again and again until another pair of hands gripped his shoulders and pulled him back.

"Ye won't get the justice you're looking for by killing him now, my lord." Walters' voice of reason sounded dimly in his ears as he panted. "We have a plan, remember?"

Madoc nodded. "Yes. Yes, we have plan." He caught his breath and rubbed his knuckles. "I'm fine now, Walters. Thank you."

"What plan?" whimpered Caerton.

"You're taking a trip," said Walters, "back to Wales. You've missed your village, haven't ye?"

Niall shook his head, his eyes wide with fear and his lip trembling. "I can't go back there. They'll—"

"What? Kill you?" Madoc asked, a wicked curving his lips. "No, you're safe enough. I've instructed the new estate manager to hold you while you await trial. It may take several months for that, though. You know how few magistrates there are in Wales."

"But we have no jail in Brecknock."

Madoc laughed, a hollow sound. "We've made arrangements. A new barn has been built for the livestock. There are plenty of empty sheds for you to sleep in at night, and many tenants willing to put you up in theirs. Your daylight hours will *not* be spent in the same place, though."

Walters yanked the man from the ground and pulled his hands behind his back, tying his wrists. "Don't ye want to know where you'll be?"

"We've found the old pillory, and you'll be on display for the villagers every day until you are sentenced. They won't kill you, but..." He chuckled. "They'll make you suffer as they did, with words and deeds."

Madoc envisioned Caerton with his hands and head enclosed in the wooden block, subjected to taunts and whatever dirt, dung, or refuse the tenants threw at him. Brecknock would have their revenge before the courts.

“No, no, I can’t go back there. I’ll never get a trial. I’ll—”

“Enough!” yelled Madoc. “Your fate has been decided.”

---

*One week later*

EXQUISITE. Evelina stood before the mirror while the modiste fussed and clucked with pins held between her teeth. Mid-morning rays slanted through the open sash, cooling the room. A light breeze billowed the sheer cambric curtains across the arched windows. As Evie fidgeted, clingy white satin shimmered beneath a champagne overdress of Brussels point lace that added a glow to her skin. Gold embroidery trimmed the cap sleeves and hem, as well as the satin and lace train. Gold silk gloves and slippers finished the ensemble.

“You will be the most beautiful bride,” Fenella said, blinking back tears. “What accessories will you wear?”

“Brecken’s mother gave me a tiara of thin twisted gold and clusters of pearls. It looks like white roses entwined in golden vines.” Evie’s voice was wistful. “She wore it at her wedding.”

“So, the two of you get along well?” she asked.

“Of course they do,” interrupted Lady Franklin. “Who would not appreciate Evelina’s delicate beauty and flawless manners?”

“We’ve come to an understanding,” Evie said quietly. “She’s not pleased the ceremony will take place in London rather than their family home in Wales.”

“No one would travel so far to a Welsh estate. He spends most of his time in London anyway,” huffed their mother.

“Mama, could you give Fenella and me some time alone? It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other.” She gave Lady Franklin a sweet smile. “Please, Mama?”

“Well, I suppose.” Their mother moved to the door and paused. “I want to see the final fitting before Madame leaves.”

She waited until Lady Franklin closed the door. Evie had been so relieved when her sister had written to her about Lachlan MacNaughton, a Scot she’d lost her heart to. Her only concern for Fenella was their mother’s reaction. If she and Papa put their heads together, Evie was sure their mother would come round.

“How will you tell Mama about Lachlan?” she asked.

“That is not why you had her leave the room. I see the fear in your eyes,” said Fenella with a wag of her finger. “Tell me what’s bothering you.”

“I’m having doubts,” Evie whispered. “While Brecken’s been successful with investments since gaining the title, he cannot afford to revive the estate without...”

“Your dowry. Do you fear the money persuaded him into marriage more than you?”

Evie nodded and sniffed, her eyes glistening. “He speaks of love, and I do believe him, but there’s this nasty little voice in the back of my head that taunts me.”

“The Lord Brecken I first met was enamored of you at first sight. He had no idea of your dowry.” She laid a hand on her sister’s cheek. “I can only imagine your time together enhancing his attraction.”

“The reason he was attending the season was to find an heiress.” Evie blinked. “His mother was pressuring him.”

“We certainly understand overbearing mothers.”

The modiste snorted.

“Dear sister, when you enter the room, his eyes see nothing else. It’s love in his gaze. I’m sure of it.” She hugged Evie.



“Do you really think so?” She bit her lip, wanting to be convinced.

Fenella nodded and hugged her sister. “I swear it.”

Evie wiped at the corner of her eyes. “Thank you, dear Fenella. I’m so glad you’ve come.”

“By the way, you hadn’t mentioned moving to Wales in your letters.”

“Nothing has been decided as of yet, so there was no need to.” She made a circle as Madame pulled at her skirt. “He said we will make all decisions together.”

“See? He’s not only handsome but reasonable.”

Evie pulled up her curls and turned as the modiste sat back on her heels.

“Puhfecshun,” the modiste said around the pins in her mouth.

---

RAIN SPLATTERED against the roof as they settled against the squabs of the carriage. “This means good luck!” exclaimed Sir Horace.

“Why do people say that?” asked Evelina. She couldn’t imagine a drenched bride being lucky.

“It’s about knots. Handfasting included knots tied around the wrists of the couple. When a knot is wet, it’s twice as hard to untangle. So it’s believed your marriage will be twice as strong.” Fenella grinned at her mother’s frown at the mention of a Scottish custom.

Evie’s stomach was a bumblebath. It was her wedding day. Miss Evelina Franklin would walk into the St. George’s Hanover Square Church, and Lady Brecken would walk out. She gripped Fenella’s hand as the carriage halted and a footman opened the door. Sir Horace exited first and then assisted Evie, his wife and oldest daughter.

“Are you nervous, my sweet?” asked her father as they made their way up the steps.

“My stomach has finally calmed. The mint tea Mama prepared helped.”

They entered the church and her breath hitched as she took in the stunning interior. A typical Anglican church, it had a spacious nave and tall, box pews facing the aisle. Galleries and a balcony overlooked the nave on three sides. The dark intricately carved wood and ornate plastered arched ceilings contrasted with the brilliant stained-glass windows behind the altar.

Her mother and sister took their places, and then her father escorted her to Lord Brecken. She swallowed, wondering if his hands were trembling as badly as hers.

In front of her stood Lord Brecken in black tails, satin breeches, and a coffee-brown waistcoat, embroidered with gold to match the trim of Evie’s dress. An intricate white cravat was perfectly tied with a diamond pin set in the middle. His dark hair was combed back, his beard neatly trimmed, and his smile genuine as he gazed down at his new bride. The love in his hazel eyes eased the tension in her shoulders, and she let out a sigh.

As the ceremony began and the vicar opened his Bible, Madoc leaned over and whispered in her ear, “I’ll explain later, but I no longer require your dowry. I wanted you to know.”

Her eyes flew to his handsome face, wide and questioning, and he winked in response. He didn’t need the money? What had happened in the past week? Madoc had left London in the middle of the night and returned only yesterday. She hadn’t seen him. In fact, she’d had a nightmare that he jilted her.

Evie clutched her nosegay, unable to wipe the smile from her face. Matrimony was a serious endeavor, and here she stood with a ridiculous grin on her face. Oh, how she loved this man. Destiny may have used her dowry to entwine their paths, but it was their love that held them close.

The vicar peered out at the guests. “Therefore, if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.”

Their vows were said in blur, Evie lost in the moment and the joy of marrying the man she loved.

Madoc took her hand in his and spoke his vows. “With this ring, I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all *my* worldly goods, I thee endow.” He slipped the simple gold band onto her finger, and they both knelt before the vicar, who continued with another prayer.

The vicar joined their right hands and said loudly, “Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

After the wedding, the parish registry was signed. As the group filed out of the small office, Madoc held her back.

“I’m sorry if I took you by surprise at the beginning of the ceremony, but I wanted you to know before you said your vows. I love *you*, Lady Brecken, with all my heart.” He pulled her in his arms and brushed her lips.

She raised a palm to his face, parting her lips for him. The wings fluttered in her belly, and thoughts of their wedding night her heart pound. His mouth claimed hers, velvet against silk, and desire sent heat swooshing to her core. Tonight she would know him as a woman knows a man.

“I thank fate and the grace of God the day I saw you skating on the Serpentine. You stole my heart, Evie. I humbly give you mine in return.” He kissed her again, a slow, sensual dance against her lips.

Their entire lives were before them. She would be mistress of her own castle, a dozen children if she had her way, and a man who adored her. Evie would wake up to his devastatingly handsome face every morning and see the love in his hazel eyes each night before she closed her own.

She blinked back the tears. Pish and petunias, a bride could cry on her own wedding day, couldn’t she? *I only allow happy tears*, he had told her once. These were certainly full of joy.

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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 KEYWORD

COLLETTE CAMERON



## PROLOGUE



*My darling, not a day goes by that I do not wish we were  
together.*

*I should have defied Keyworth. I should have been brave and  
strong*

*and escaped when I knew I carried you, my precious love.*

*But Landry needed me. I was so frightened for him...*

*Can you ever forgive me?*

*~Letter from the Countess of Keyworth to her daughter,  
Lenora.*

*Never sent. Ripped up and burned.*

*FARINGCROFT PARK—EARL of Keyworth's Country Seat*

*Lancaster, England*

*16 February 1810—Late Evening*

SWEAT BEADED his brow as Landry Audsley, Earl of Keyworth, held his dying mother's cold, frail hand. A roaring fire hissed and snapped angrily in the hearth. Regardless, the Countess of Keyworth shivered, her feeble form racked by chills.

The suffocating heat fairly choked him, making it impossible to breathe. Or perhaps it was the unshed tears constricting his throat and cramping his ribs that made the simple task of drawing air into his lungs difficult.

He tenderly drew another blanket from the foot of the bed over his mother's emaciated form.

Always slight of build, his once pretty-as-a-pansy mother had wasted away these past months until only a shell of the woman he adored remained. She was only two-and-forty—much, *much* too young to die.

“I love you, Landry,” she said, reaching out to graze his cheek.

A sob caught in Landry's throat and, with grim resolve, he quashed the evidence of his heartbreak.

“I love you too, Mama.”

He nearly strangled on the five short words. There was so much more he yearned to say.

His mother was all that was gentle and sweet, compassionate and kind. The opposite of the coldhearted, mercenary blighter she had entered into an arranged marriage with. The previous earl had preceded her in death only last year, and within months she had also fallen ill.

*So bloody, bloody damned unfair.*

Providence. Destiny. Fate. Whatever higher force had dealt this unjust hand was capricious and immensely cruel.

Scorching tears stung Landry's eyes.

His mother's delicate features, ashen in contrast to the pale lavender pillows she rested upon, blurred before his gaze. Summoning gritty determination, he blinked the stinging moisture away, lest Mama witness his grief and become even more distraught.

This dear woman's unconditional love was what had kept him from becoming a replica of the former earl: harsh, unforgiving, selfish, and an abusive, sodding cockscum.

Some claimed giving one's life for another was the greatest gift, and Landry supposed it was. But loving someone unconditionally, even when it guaranteed you'd suffer at another's hands because of that love...

Well, that made his mother a bloody saint in his mind.

Landry had not shed a tear or felt the minutest flicker of grief when his father had kicked off his mortal coil in a most befitting manner—an apoplexy while shagging a Covent Garden doxy.

In truth, it was a wonder the previous earl had not perished from the clap or pox decades ago. It was no more than he deserved.

However, the inflexible, unrelenting reality of never seeing his beloved mother again nearly eviscerated Landry.

*God*, he screamed silently. Desperately.

“Landry, I must...tell you something,” Mama whispered, her voice the merest whisper of sound. An old woman's weak, quavery voice. Not his mother's dulcet tones.

“Shh, Mama,” he soothed, leaning down to press his mouth to her too-cool, pale-as-milk forehead. “Save your strength.”

It would not be long now.

He swallowed the grief strangling him.

Soon his sweet mother would draw her last labored breath.

Doctor Rendle had left an hour ago. Shaking his silvery-white head, he'd patted Landry's shoulder in a fatherly fashion. “I am deeply sorry, my lord. There is nothing more to be done. The countess will pass shortly. I have given her laudanum to keep her comfortable.”

Rage burgeoned in Landry's chest at the unfairness.

*By God in heaven.*

Evil people should die young.

Those as decent and loving as his mother should live to a ripe old age. To see their son married and to hold their grandchildren in their loving embrace. To enjoy the peace and happiness that was denied them for far, *far* too long.

The muffled weeping of Warner, his mother's lady's maid for the past two decades, came from the corner she huddled in miserably. The sniffing and watery shudders agitated Landry, but he did not have the heart to order her to leave the bedchamber.

He well knew how much Warner loved his mother. How, she too, had willingly acted as a buffer between the dying countess and the previous earl's violent rages and calculated cruelty.

"No, Landry. You *must*...listen to me." Mama grasped his waistcoat, weakly urging him nearer. "I should have told you long ago. Certainly after Keyworth died."

Landry had removed his cravat and coat before the doctor left. It somehow seemed wrong to be attired in starchy formality at a time like this. Besides, the bedchamber was a blistering inferno, the scarlet and orange flames in the hearth fiercely battling each other for dominance in a skirmish neither would win.

Sweat trickled down his back and soaked his underarms. *His* discomfort did not matter. He'd endure hell's fires if it meant easing Mama's suffering a single jot.

Landry forced a smile, though his facial muscles protested the effort, and a merciless vice crushed his breastbone, threatening to pulverize it into dust.

"What is it?" he asked, wishing she would save her strength. Each additional minute with her was a treasure he could store up in his heart and memory.

"You have a sister," she whispered through blue-tinted lips.

*A sister?*

*What?*

“What?” Landry drew back, his befuddled mind trying to comprehend what she had murmured.

Was she delusional?

*Hallucinating?*

Was that a sign of impending death?

Pressing two fingers to his temple, he searched the recesses of his mind.

Had Dr. Rendle mentioned anything of that nature?

Landry honestly did not know.

He could not remember half of what the kindly doctor had told him.

Grief had turned Landry’s mind into a foggy, cottony, befuddled mess.

“I named her Lenora, Landry,” Mama sobbed softly, a sodden handkerchief pressed to her mouth. “Keyworth was *not* her father.”

So his gentle-hearted mother had taken a lover.

Brava for her.

She certainly deserved a sliver of happiness after having been married to the monster she had called husband for four-and-twenty years. Regardless, his sire’s hypocrisy was beyond maddening and equally infuriating.

Where was this sister?

Shunted off to live in obscurity with a distant relative?

Squeezing her hand, he said, “It is all right, Mama.”

For what else did one say to one’s dying parent when they were confessing their darkest secret?

“He...he did not even permit me to hold her,” she muttered raggedly, almost as if speaking to herself. Repeating a phrase she had no doubt murmured over and over and over again to herself in her sorrow.

“She would be ten years old now, my little girl,” Mama said.

Scorching wrath tunneled through Landry’s veins in the next heartbeat. He fought to keep the anger from showing on his face or manifesting in his voice.

He knew of three boys born on the wrong side of the blanket his father had sired—all by different women. And all of whom had been servants in the debaucher’s employ.

Undoubtedly, more of his seed had found fertile soil in the countless other women, from the filthiest slatterns to the nobles’ perfumed and powdered wives he’d swived. Worse than a rutting bull, the previous earl had not been the least selective or discreet in whom he tugged.

In his typical callous fashion, the reprobate had dismissed his pregnant servants on the grounds of promiscuousness. Likely as not, the cockscum had forced himself on them.

When Landry became the earl, he had hired Dirby Madagan, a detective, to locate each ill-used woman and had settled a generous portion on those women and their sons.

It was the least he could do.

And yet...it still was not nearly enough for the disgrace and humiliation the poor misused women had endured. Would continue to endure, for the status of illegitimacy would forever hang over his half-brothers’ heads.

Landry had seen to it that the boys received an education, and when they were of an age, he would help them in the vocation of their choice.

How it must’ve enraged his father to have sired three more sons that he could never claim, while his wife had never born him another child. Just the one heir. Landry. No spare to satisfy the old earl’s ego or guarantee the continuance of his spindly, unworthy branch of the family.

Reeling from his mother’s confession, Landry asked, “Who is her father?”

All this time, he'd had a sister thirteen years younger than he.

Did she have quicksilver gray eyes and chestnut hair with reddish-bronze ribbons like their mother and him?

Did she possess the same sweet disposition and innocent beauty as their mother?

With apparent effort, his mother tipped her mouth upward a fraction.

"It does not matter, darling. He was not a nobleman or even landed gentry. He died...some time ago. Your father—"

Landry's mother winced, an expression of indescribable anguish flickering across her ravaged features. She licked her chapped lips. "He..."

"Yes?" Landry prompted. "He...?"

"Keyworth...killed him when he learned I was...with child."

"A *duel*?" Landry asked incredulously, unable to disguise his astonishment. His father had never seemed the honorable or courageous sort.

"No. Keyworth...he shot him in the back." A single crystalline tear trailed from the corner of one eye. "Keyworth gloated about it to me."

She had never called the late earl anything but Keyworth in a carefully neutral tone. As if she had retreated to someplace within herself where he could not hurt her anymore. As if inflecting any emotion into the word validated him in some manner.

"He delighted in telling me...all of the horrific details," she whispered brokenly. "How much my darling suffered."

*The bloody, bloody murdering blackguard.*

"I welcome death." A soft, faraway look entered her gray eyes. "I shall see my beloved again, at last."

"Do you have any idea where the earl would've sent the babe?" he asked, now desperate to gather as many details as he

could so he could find Lenora.

Where did Landry start looking, for God's sake?

Ten years was a very long time—*too long?*—to attempt to find a trail likely gone arctic cold. Nonetheless, he must try.

Mama gave a shallow nod.

“Warner spied on Keyworth for me. He sent Lenora to live with a family in France. In the *Touraine* region. All of these years, I have tried to find her, but Lenora seemingly disappeared without a trace.”

Her voice cracked, and the torment on her frail face ripped Landry's heart from his chest. Another tear trickled from the corner of her eye.

That devil's spawn had sent an innocent babe to live in France while England and France had been at war? He'd probably hoped the child would die.

Or...had *he* disposed of the innocent babe?

*Jesus.*

That possibility soured Landry's stomach. Bile seared the back of his throat, and acrid bitterness flooded his mouth.

He abhorred the notion—couldn't conceive such evilness.

Regardless of how repulsive the thought, he must consider the possibility. If his sire could cold-bloodedly shoot a man in the back and confiscate a babe at birth, he could also dispose of a defenseless infant without a qualm.

“The physician said I would bear no more children after Lenora. I laughed in Keyworth's face and told him I would cuckold him with any willing man hereafter.” Mama coughed, her thin shoulders quaking.

Landry offered her a drink of water. After a small sip, his mother curved her mouth into a sardonic smile he'd never before seen upon her face. “It drove him positively mad, trying to figure out who I had been with. There wasn't anyone, of course. Not after...” Her lower lip quivered. “But I so



despised him that I made it appear as if there were dozens and dozens.”

*“Heav’n has no rage, like love to hatred turned, nor hell fury, like a woman scorned.”*

A rather infamous line from playwright William Congreve whispered across Landry’s mind.

How greatly he had underestimated his mother’s strength and determination.

She focused her failing gaze across the room. “It was not hard to do, you know. Keyworth always wanted to believe the worst of me.”

Aye, that festering sod’s perception of everyone and everything was tinged with his pessimism and his own depraved outlook.

Mama clutched at Landry’s hand, suddenly frantic. “Find her for me, Landry. She should be...with her brother.”

She gasped, struggling to breathe for a pair of heartbeats.

A rusty blade skewering his heart would hurt less than watching her suffer—watching her die.

“Promise...me...my son,” she rasped, her breathing ever more labored. “Before all else, please make finding your sister your priority.” She drew in a shallow, rattling breath. “Then I can...rest in peace, knowing my children have each other.”

Holding both of her hands in his, choking on the bevy of sobs throttling up his throat, Landry nodded. His tears flowed freely now, and he did not give a blacksmith’s oath. The person he adored the most, his constant in an uncertain and often cruel world, was leaving him.

Forever.

At three-and-twenty, he would be alone.

He had no one.

Except for a ten-year-old sister *somewhere*.

And the possibility of a wife and children someday.

For his own sake, because of what his mother had longed for and been denied, and to spite the rotter burning in hell who'd sired him, Landry would not have a cold, distant marriage filled with icy disdain or fulminating anger.

*By God, I would marry a flower hawker or a seamstress if she loved me, and I loved her.*

"I shall find her, Mama." He pressed his lips to her icy knuckles.

"Thank you," she uttered so softly that the sound barely slipped past her dry lips.

"I vow it," he swore. "I shall make finding Lenora my top priority."

She was gone before he finished his oath.

# CHAPTER ONE



*I know what I must do.*

*Nevertheless, I confess, I fear the repercussions.*

*Desperation does not allow much room for wisdom or logic.*

*~Miss Celestia Tolman to her diary.*

*A WINDY SPRING morning*

*Mayfair, London*

*3 April 1818*

FROM ACROSS THE STREET, Celestia Tolman covertly studied the regal yet unpretentious townhome owned by one of the *haut ton's* most eligible and enigmatic lords. As usual, the morning breeze carried the pungent tang of the River Thames and acrid coal dust.

She wrinkled her nose.

Not a pleasant combination by any means.

Folding her arms in what she hoped was a casual boyish stance, she leaned a shoulder against a plane tree. Bushy tail swishing a warning, a red squirrel scolded her from high upon its lofty perch.

Wouldn't Mama be horrified to see her usually prim and proper daughter thus attired and bent on an escapade that was at best imprudent?

At worst...

*No. NO*, Celestia admonished herself more strenuously.

She would not dwell on the many, *many* disagreeable possibilities.

Besides, she had done her research and had memorized the layout of the building's five stories, not counting the attic space. Acquiring the house's blueprints and the other equally impressive homes marching along the same lane like a row of matching uniformed soldiers had not been difficult.

Records and archives of building plans and blueprints were accessible if one knew where to look. As she worked in a used bookstore, Pattern Books produced by architects and designers were not unfamiliar to her. To be sure, they were not the most titillating of reading, but they were quite informative when one planned on sneaking into a lord's house.

Which she did.

Today.

This day's objective was the study, situated at the rear of the house on the ground floor. A study that opened onto a narrow terrace, facing a not-so-well-tended small garden area. That particular detail was somewhat surprising given what she knew about the uncompromising, inflexible lord who lived there.

She would've thought *he* was the sort of starchy, rigid, self-important peer to have an apoplexy if a single leaf dared fall onto the lush grass. She suspected the monstrous black dog she'd spied a time or two loping about the enclosure might be the reason for the garden's less than pristine condition.

Probably a watchdog trained to rip trespassers to pieces.

She shivered and ducked her neck lower into the scarf tied there.

Pray God that shaggy, colt-sized brute was not wandering the corridors unattended today. The creature was quite the largest dog she had ever seen.

Regardless, the garden was another escape route if her encounter with Landry Audsley, Earl of Keyworth, went sideways. Or to Hades in the devil's knitting basket, as Mama used to say. Which, on further consideration, really made no sense at all.

What need would the devil have for knitted anything? Hell was blazing hot, after all. Besides, wouldn't Lucifer be far too busy wreaking havoc on peoples' lives to bother with a hobby?

Huddled into a moth-eaten, charcoal-gray twill coat—one of her brother Nash's discards from a decade ago—Celestia directed her attention to the pavement whenever anyone passed by on foot, atop a horse, or in a conveyance.

It was best to appear bashful and inconspicuous—no more noticeable than the bark on the tree supporting her at present. For good measure and to give the impression of a woebegone street urchin, she had even smudged soot on her cheeks, nose, forehead, and chin.

Mama would roll over in her grave if she could see what drastic, unladylike measures Celestia had stooped to.

And Papa?

Well, he'd suffer a paroxysm for sure.

Uncle Paul would laugh heartily, though, thinking it great, good fun, as would Nash and Orion.

Nonetheless, Celestia's nerves were strung taut as the proverbial bowstring. Trepidation for what she was about to do had left her mouth as dry as the toast she had tried—*unsuccessfully*—to eat for breakfast almost four hours ago. Even after spreading strawberry preserves on the triangle, she'd only managed one bite.

At this moment, she was hard-pressed to produce a single drop of moisture in her mouth.

Celestia blew on her cold fingers before rubbing her ungloved hands together. Her gloves were far too feminine to pass muster for a delivery boy's. Papa's and Uncle Paul's were too large, and her brothers' boyhood gloves all seemed to be missing their mates.

A rare grin swept her face for a second.

As children, Orion and Nash were forever losing their gloves. After a slight scold—Mama could never remain vexed with any of her children for long—she would knit them a new pair with whatever shade of yarn she possessed the most of.

As quickly as it had appeared, Celestia's humor faded, and a dull ache gripped her heart.

She missed her rambunctious, teasing older brothers.

Mama too. Unbearably so at times.

Times like these when Celestia was forced to act as the head of the family and make impossible decisions that would impact them all, for better or worse.

The squirrel began a new scold, this one somewhat agitated. She glanced upward and spied a crow perched on a branch, head cocked and eyeing her with its tiny, unnerving black eyes.

Well, that couldn't be a good omen.

Giving herself a mental shake, Celestia resumed her perusal of the townhome. It was much too late for second thoughts. She had already put her well-thought-out plan in motion.

A small cloth bag containing a sugar cone with precious, expensive white sugar was tucked inside her coat pocket. The sugar was her means of entering Keyworth's home as a delivery lad.

*My key to Keyworth's.*

She chuckled to herself at the awful jest.

Paradoxically, though the wind was biting under a few scattered, slumberous pale gray clouds, anxiety-borne sweat

trickled in sticky rivulets down her back and dampened her underarms and hands in a cruel juxtaposition of cold and hot.

Icy dread and smoldering anger.

Swiping her moist palms against the front of the woolen jacket, Celestia dried her hands, then balled them into tight fists. Her rounded nails cut crescents into the soft flesh, yet she welcomed the sting.

The pain kept her focused and reminded her of her purpose.

Why she was here.

What—*who*—had brought her to this desperate position.

Landry Audsley, the contemptible, irascible, *unreasonable* Earl of Keyworth.

If Celestia were a man, she would call out the black-hearted bounder living in luxury across the street for sullyng the Tolmans' heretofore good name and nearly destroying their business. Too bad she was not of a vengeful bent, else she would spread nasty rumors about him and ruin *his* reputation as he had done to the Tolmans.

More specifically, Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer.

Instead, she had to rely upon her wit, intelligence, and a good deal of luck, truth to tell, to accomplish her purpose. A little favor and grace from the Almighty would not be amiss either. Although, asking for the Lord's help and protection when she intended to illicitly enter a peer's home seemed the quintessence of irreverent hypocrisy.

Two lanky men conversing animatedly in thick Cockney accents approached, and she pointed her gaze toward her scuffed boots into which she had tucked her several inches too long trousers.

Thank goodness Nash had been a chubby youth, or else Celestia never would've been able to pull his old black trousers over her rounded hips. A length of wide blue ribbon served as a belt to secure the gaping waist. Beneath her

borrowed coat, her breasts strained against the lawn shirt—one of Orion's outgrown garments.

Sentimentality had prevented her from disposing of the trunks of old clothing and other assorted items no longer of use and stored in the attic of the house she shared with Papa and Uncle Paul. Situated in an older but still quite respectable neighborhood, the house was similar to dozens of others in the area: unremarkable but comfortable.

Celestia had what Mama called a *voluptuous* figure. In other words, her womanly curves were indeed *very* apparent and more than once had drawn unsolicited masculine attention.

Most often, not for honorable reasons either.

Last week, while she had been arranging the new inventory of cheroots and cigars in the display at Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer, a pudgy dandy, smelling of mutton and violet water of all things, had cornered her. *Again*.

Vowing undying devotion, Ignatius Cronk—the third son of Viscount Ballew—had for the fourth time—*or was it the fifth?*—beseeched her to allow him to become her protector.

He was the seventh degenerated codpate to insult her with such a vulgar offer and then dared to act affronted when she coldly, possibly rather rudely, refused his offensive proposition.

*Men. Tossspots all.*

No, not so.

Nash and Orion were not like those men—libertines and rounders. Neither were Papa nor Uncle Paul. Her father and his older brother had adored their wives—still did, though Mama had been gone these three years past and Aunt Rosalie eight years now.

Celestia curved her mouth into a droll, derisive smile.

She was an unapologetically prim bluestocking who chose to wear drab, shapeless gowns to discourage male attention. Gowns in muted, unflattering shades and boasting such high necklines that a nun would envy the modest garments.



Celestia typically twisted her ordinary brown hair into a sensible, tight knot too. What was more, she also usually possessed ink-stained fingers, a clear testament to her lowly station.

Nevertheless, according to Mr. Cronk, she was an, “*irresistible temptress. A goddess of unparalleled beauty and form.*”

She rolled her eyes skyward at the nauseating memory of him waxing poetic. Her jaundiced view of society was well-earned, nevertheless.

That vile Mr. Cronk had licked his protruding froggy lips and boldly ogled her generous breasts, though they were covered by an apron and her slate-gray gown. He behaved as if he were doing her the greatest honor by asking her to become his paramour.

Could he really be so dull-witted?

“My dear, dear, Celestia. A woman of *your* station,” Cronk wheedled, dragging the *your* out and making the word three syllables, “cannot expect anything more from an individual so superior to you in station and birth.”

How easily the nobility trespassed.

That baconbrain had actually had the ballocks to say that to her. It had taken all of her self-control not to stab his lordship with one of the nearby metal quill nibs or crack him atop the head with a very thick book.

Was she supposed to be grateful that he, along with the others, had offered her money, jewels, and gewgaws for her ruination? Her virtue? The loss of her self-respect? Degradation and disgrace?

*Yes.* Yes, indeed she was.

The lower orders were always expected to worship the hallowed ground aristocrats trod upon. Never mind that birth, position, or titles did not in any way make one superior in character or moral fabric.

True, Celestia's lineage boasted a noble peer or three on various distant and gnarled Tolman family tree branches. Mama had also been the great-granddaughter of a viscount.

However, Celestia, like her brothers and their father before them, were of the working class. *They* smelled of the shop, which to *le beau monde* was akin to ailing from a highly contagious and deadly disease.

*Better to smell of the shop than mutton and violet water.*

It had been Nash's idea to begin selling quality tobacco products. Snuff, cheroots, pipe tobacco, pipes and the like—only the most sought-after items preferred by the gentry and aristocrats.

Tobacco was popular with the upper ten thousand, and he reasoned they would venture into the shop and, while they were there, purchase a book or stationery items. Or, perhaps, even hire a scrivener.

Regrettably, the latter had not occurred.

No new clients had sought scribe or transcribing services in weeks. Not since Lord Hard-hearted Keyworth had discharged Papa. The likelihood that the simultaneous decline in the shop's business and Papa's dismissal was a coincidence was as implausible as Celestia becoming a lady.

*That* would never happen. Not only due to her lowly birth but because, unlike many feather-brained young women, the idea was as abhorrent as a leprosy diagnosis.

Firming her mouth against the shiver scuttling from her waist to her shoulders, she hunched further into her coat, pulling the collar higher against the annoyingly brisk wind.

The oversized garment hung to her knees, disguising her feminine curves. She felt confident her nondescript clothing, perfect for a humble delivery boy, would not draw attention nor reveal her gender.

She had plaited her waist-length hair and tucked the thick rope into a knitted cap pulled low on her forehead—another discarded item of one of her brothers. For good measure, she wore a shabby muffler around her neck, half-covering her

lower face. Not much other than her eyes, cheeks, and nose were visible.

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth. Mindful of the immense risk she was about to undertake, Celestia reviewed her methodically and meticulously crafted plan.

This must work.

It had to.

Too much was at stake if she were not successful. Aye, however, a gossamer-thin thread divided boldness from folly.

*This is foolhardiness at its absolute worst, Celestia Andromeda Josette Tolman. If you are caught...*

## CHAPTER TWO

2

*I apologize, your lordship, but that lead in  
Devonshire has resulted in another dead end.  
No one I spoke with there has ever heard of  
anyone named Smythe-Shufflebottom.  
How should I proceed?*

*~Letter to Landry Audsley, Earl of Keyworth, from Dirby  
Madagan, investigator.*

*KEYWORTH HOUSE*

*Mayfair, London*

*That Same April Morning*

*GOD'S WOUNDS.*

Another deuced dead end.

For eight interminable years, Landry had been searching for his sister. Eight years of dead ends, false leads, impasses, and so much blasted frustration.

Well, not entirely.

After Mama's death, he had toddled off to the continent to search for his sister and learned that his despicable father had

not sent Lenora to France after all. That had simply been a ruse the blackguard had contrived to put Warner off the trail. The cur had known the maid was eavesdropping and would relay the false information to the distraught countess.

What an unmitigated whoremonger to deliberately deceive his wife. Landry's father had known Mama would search for her daughter, and the old earl had ensured she would never find Lenora.

May his black soul burn in the ninth level of hell.

It had taken Madagan months, but he had been able to trace the wet nurse hired to care for Landry's sister as well as the coachman who had driven the coach that night. Each vowed the babe had been left with a childless vicar, Reverend Cornelius Smythe-Shufflebottom, and his wife in Lancaster.

Four years later, the vicar had died after falling down the parish church steps and hitting his head. Local tattle suggested it mightn't have been an accident. If rumors were to be believed—there was generally a nugget of truth buried within gossip if one dug deep enough—the vicar was not exactly the model of piety and virtue.

After his *accident*, his widow, along with Lenora, appeared to have disappeared off the face of the earth. No one knew where they had gone. Neither did anyone know a blasted thing about the deceased vicar's or his elusive wife's family.

How could a parish be so ill-informed about their cleric?

According to the letter Landry held, the reverend had not been precisely beloved by his congregation. Reverend Smythe-Shufflebottom had been coldly aloof, arrogantly judgmental, and severely critical, which accounted for the sparse attendance to hear his gloom and doom sermons every Sunday.

As Landry stood before the French windows leading to the gardens, he assessed the grounds with a critical eye. Absently, he patted Sampson's oversized head. The dog leaned into his leg, all ten stones of him, and Landry had to brace his stance against the Newfoundland's weight.

Sampson had absolutely no concept of his size and occasionally still tried to crawl onto Landry's lap.

He probably ought to hire a real gardener to tend the area rather than the lads from the streets. But truth be told, the urchins needed the blunt more. If that meant his flower beds, hedgerows, and grass failed to measure up to the *ton's* haughty approval, he did not give a beggar's curse.

Their approval didn't put food in starving children's bellies.

The same could be said of his townhome, except for the kitchen.

Jolly of disposition and with a ready smile upon her face, Mrs. Cox had stood her ground when it came to the kitchen's cleanliness. She had even threatened him with a rolling pin. And as he adored her pastries, biscuits, and other treats, he was not about to alienate his talented cook.

Furthermore, Landry did not retain a housekeeper. Not for want of trying, however.

Seven housekeepers had given notice and hightailed it within a week when he'd informed the women their duties included training homeless girls as maids. Every single housekeeper believed it beneath her to provide the waifs with a means to earn a respectable living. Even paying the prideful women an exorbitant salary had not persuaded them to stay on.

In the end, Landry had given up on retaining a proper housekeeper.

Instead, one of his long-time parlor maids—herself a former street rat—had agreed to take on the task. Hence, there might be half a dozen or so girls and boys ranging in age from seven to seventeen on the premises performing all manner of chores on any given day.

They would leave with a full belly, often a new article of clothing, and much-needed coin.

When he could, Landry placed the younger children in various foundling homes run by his philanthropic friends. There were not nearly enough beds available, however. A

better solution was to build institutions that provided the children a place to live, education, and vocational training.

Many of the upper class thought those ideas dangerously radical, and those who did wanted no part in funding such establishments. Ironically, those same pompous peers grumbled incessantly about the multitude of pickpockets and other street rabble.

How, pray tell, did the *haut ton* expect the children to keep from starving?

Did they have any idea how many of those unfortunate urchins did indeed starve?

No, and most did not want to know.

Ignorance being bliss and all of that tripe.

A hand cupping his nape, Landry perused the letter for the third time from the investigator he had retained all those years ago to locate his illegitimate brothers.

*How should I proceed?* Madagan asked.

Indeed, how should he?

Landry glanced at his dog, acquired soon after his mother died to offset his unbearable loneliness.

“How should we proceed, Sampson?”

Sampson gave him a doggy smile and thumped his massive tail.

“Just so.”

Landry scratched behind the dog’s ears. A bit of drool hung from his mouth—not an uncommon occurrence.

“I shan’t give up, Sampson. Lenora’s out there somewhere, and I mean to find her.”

Mayhap...yes, indeed, mayhap it *was* time to hire a new investigator.

But who?

At one time, Mathias Pembroke, Duke of Westfall, had been an amateur sleuth. He might know of someone qualified.

Someone younger and perhaps with a bit more prowess and ambition than the aging and less than motivated Dirby Madagan.

Landry had suspected for some time that Madagan was not up to the task any longer.

Perchance, one of the earls at the Wicked Earls' Club might be able to recommend someone. That lot was neckcloth deep in mischief half of the time. All right, *most* of the time. Undoubtedly one of the earls could point him in the right direction.

Rubbing his chin, Landry mentally ran through the most likely candidates to be of assistance.

Baxter? Sharonford? Kendal? Alnwick? Brecken?

Assuredly *not* Mosely or Harrison. Or Thuxby, for that matter.

When not foxed or whoring, the former were always stirring up trouble in the House of Lords. They did not appreciate advancement, nor did they like anyone who advocated for change. By no means was Landry a Whig, but common decency demanded everyone with positions of power aid those less fortunate than themselves.

And not by giving them handouts over and over again.

As the proverb went, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime."

Thuxby was simply a pompous windbag who abhorred any type of forward-thinking and would do most anything to squash what he termed "*dangerous, rebellious, insurrectionist ideologies.*"

In truth, the prime minister, Lord Liverpool, was cut from much the same narrow-minded cloth as Thuxby. Stuffy, stuck-in-a-rut, mule-headed bores, both.

Except, whereas Landry believed Lord Liverpool genuinely wanted what was best for England, Thuxby's motives were purely self-serving.



Rumors abounded about the man's deviant preferences as well.

Regrettably, Landry's principles and philosophies were not echoed by the majority of the lords. George Tierney, the House of Commons leader, was a jot more amenable, but Landry needed the lords' support for what he had in mind.

At that rumination, he grimaced.

He had a speech to write, and it was not going to pen itself as much as he wished otherwise. He'd terminated his increasingly incompetent scribe a few months ago. Now Landry was obliged to write his own speeches, rather than dictating them as had been his habit and, truth to tell, was still his preference.

Competent, entirely trustworthy, and loyal scribes were not easily come by.

Blasted impossible to find, in point of fact.

Writing, principally spelling and grammar, were not tasks Landry particularly excelled at. He meant to have Baxter and Sharonford review the entire speech—word for word—before his presentation in Parliament lest he make a laughingstock of himself.

Too blasted bad, Jonathan Tolman had bumbled so drastically that Landry could not risk using the scrivener any longer after six years. The amanuensis had inadvertently delivered the third chapter of *A Mistress's Memoirs: The Daily Duties of a Demimonde* to Landry and had, presumably, delivered Landry's speech to the courtesan.

Mouth turned downward, he shook his head.

God only knew what the lady of the evening had done with his work.

Probably tossed his presentation into the fire as he had been tempted to do with her, ah...borderline erotic musings. For certain, Madame Meriette Bonacieux—assuredly not her real name—had not returned the papers to him.

Which had meant, blast it all, Landry had no choice but to rewrite the deuced thing again himself.

His reproachful speech on society's responsibility to the homeless children populating London's streets and how he regularly assisted them was far less scintillating or titillating than the paramour's sexual escapades with several well-known aristocrats.

Chapter three mentioned two lords with whom Landry was pretty confident he was acquainted. Surely Lenkershire was none other than Lord George-Walter Lankershim and Ferndale must be Lord Wendell Fawndale.

The meagerest alteration of her clients' names suggested Meriette Bonacieux had a rancorous streak and wanted her former protectors to squirm.

A sideways grin pulled Landry's mouth up on one side.

He had not believed Lankershim physically capable of the maneuvers Madame Bonacieux described in embarrassing, rather repugnant detail, given Lankershim's turnip-shape form. Lady Lankershim mightn't be overly thrilled her libertine husband was named in the courtesan's memoir either.

Landry had half a mind to purchase the book just to see who else Madame Bonacieux publicly outed.

Upon further reflection, he grimaced, turning his mouth downward.

Nay, perhaps not.

He would not be able to look any of those men in the eye again and not see what she had so vividly described and either smirk or laugh outright as in Lankershim's case.

Some things could not be erased from one's mind.

Of equal concern was that Tolman had not even brought the transcribed documents to Landry himself—a term Landry had insisted upon for privacy reasons.

Instead, Tolman had sent the confidential documents with a delivery boy. A lad hired straight off the street. The risk of a Whig or someone with a more nefarious intention getting their

hands on Landry's speech before he could present his case to Parliament was inexcusable.

Landry had, in fact, returned Madame Bonacieux's packet to Jonathan Tolman the day the man had come to entreat Landry to reconsider his dismissal. However, Tolman had arrived smelling strongly of spirits and slurring his words.

Any inclination Landry might've had for clemency promptly flew straight out the window—which he had been compelled to open in January, so pungent was the aroma of liquor on Tolman—when the scribe hiccupped and dragged a flask from his pocket.

Landry could not risk dictating delicate subject matter to a drunkard.

Pulling himself from his reverie, he sighed. "Let's be about it, Sampson. If I finish in time, I shall take you for a long walk in Green Park. How does that sound?"

The only thing Sampson loved more was racing across the meadows at Faringcroft Park.

Sampson gave a little woof of approval, and drool dripped onto the carpet.

Landry grabbed the linen left for just such a purpose, bent, and wiped up the mess.

Sampson took the opportunity to lick his cheek.

"Yes, I love you too, you great brute. Now go lay down while I attempt to wrestle a speech from yonder quill, and do try not to drool all over everything."

A fool's hope, that.

Sampson obediently wandered to the fireplace and, after circling precisely five times—never four or six—with a loud *oomph*, plopped his large, furry body down. His ebony muzzle resting on his big paws, he watched Landry's every move with soulful brown eyes.

Landry glanced to the burr walnut drumhead mantel clock.

Three hours to work on his speech, an hour in the park with Sampson, and then on to the Wicked Earls' Club. Hopefully, though it would be fairly early in the day, one of his friends would be around to consult about an investigator.

While he was out and about, Landry intended to place an advert for an amanuensis. He might as well since his days of oration in Parliament were over unless he could memorize his speeches. And most inconveniently, he would still have to write the bloody things first to do that.

“Damn,” he cursed beneath his breath as he settled into the chair.

It crackled softly as worn leather is wont to do. Clearing his thoughts of Lenora for the time being, he bent his head and set to the task of convincing the House of Lords that it was their civic duty as well as common Christian decency to aid the homeless waifs.

*What if...*

A most unwelcome thought penetrated his concentration, causing him to pause mid-word.

Landry shook his head to dispel the ugly idea.

Nevertheless, the deuced persistent notion would not go away.

*What if Lenora and her adopted mother did not have anywhere to go after the vicar passed?*

What if...

What if Lenora *was* living on the streets?

Or worse?

She had been forced into prostitution to survive?

*Fiend seize it.*

His gut wrenched sickeningly.

He pulled out a clean sheet of foolscap. Another much more pressing matter than his speech required his attention.

He'd send a note round to Sharonford and ask the earl to meet him at The Wicked Earls' Club.

Landry must hire a new detective as soon as possible.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3



*What if I am compromised? Arrested? Or...worse?*

*What becomes of Papa and Uncle then?*

*But what other recourse have I?*

*Our situation has become truly dire.*

*~Miss Celestia Tolman to her diary.*

*ACROSS THE STREET from Keyworth House*

*Mayfair, London*

*3 April 1818-Still Morning*

*IF CELESTIA WAS CAUGHT*, well, at least she would have done her utmost to save her father's reputation and that of Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer too. Since January, the requests for note-taking and transcribing had trickled to nearly nothing when the Earl of Keyworth had dismissed Papa as his amanuensis.

For the past several weeks, only the scarcely sufficient sales of used books and tobacco and stationery supplies had kept the shop operating. For decades, the bulk of the establishment's income had come from the professional, confidential, and estimable scrivener and scribe services provided by the Tolman brothers.

*And me.*

That included taking shorthand and then translating the notes for dictated books, contracts, other documents, all nature of research, and even long-winded, *boring* speeches for members of Parliament.

The odious Earl of Keyworth had obviously blabbed to his elite cronies about Papa's single unfortunate disgrace.

Why else would the shop's loyal clientele have dwindled so drastically and so swiftly?

No, Keyworth must be spreading incendiary tales.

A scalding swell of anger blunted Celestia's apprehension, and she squared her shoulders in rebellion as she pulled her mouth into a mutinous line.

Keyworth had forced her into taking drastic measures.

Hadn't she tried all of the reasonable and respectable avenues to speak with him?

Of course, she had. What prudent woman wouldn't have done?

A contemptuous snort escaped her, earning her an odd look from a thin-faced, red-cheeked woman bustling past in a too-thin cloak.

Celestia had politely requested an audience with the earl.

Multiple times, in truth.

She had written at least a score of carefully worded letters over the past three months. More if she counted the notes she had thrown away after her dratted temper had taken hold of her.

Those times, she had told the unmerciful, condemning, arrogant blackguard precisely what she thought of him in the most indelicate of terms. Terms a prim and proper young lady had no business knowing, but that also came with working in a used bookstore. There was a ready supply of reading material, and no one had ever thought to censor her choices.

What was more, she had also called at his lordship's residence no less than eight times.

*Eight blasted times.*

And on each and *every* occasion, a monstrous butler, who appeared from his battered face to have been a prizefighter in his youth, had turned her away with a frosty frown and thin-lipped disdain.

Had the great brute even told the earl she had called? A single time?

Or—she scowled darkly as a thought sprang to mind—had Keyworth given a standing order that *all* Tolmans were to be turned away?

Likely the latter, the unfeeling fiend.

Papa had given up speaking to the earl after one evidently very unpleasant attempt to regain favor with his lordship. He'd come home that January afternoon and drunk himself into a tippler's stupor. Not an uncommon occurrence since Mama's death. If Celestia were wholly honest, the reason they were in this shamble to begin with too.

Papa really must sober up, or all might be lost, even if the earl agreed to rehire him.

She was at her wit's end with her father, and compassion and sympathy had gravitated into frustration and resentment. Which, in turn, made her feel guilty and like the worst sort of wretched daughter.

Celestia shifted her position to better view the alley running between the two grand homes, and though she wore three pairs of her father's thick socks, her feet slipped slightly in the too-big boots. The narrow, cobbled lane leading to the mews and coach houses behind the grand homes was most conveniently used for deliveries to the earl's residence.

After a fortnight of watching the household's routine, she had learned various lads between ten and twelve years old made frequent deliveries. Almost daily, in point of fact, and they always entered through a gate in the rock wall.



The boys descended the stairs to the basement door and knocked three times.

A kindly, round-faced servant admitted them.

The lads left a short while later, usually munching a biscuit, a cinnamon bun, or perhaps a slice of seed cake.

Celestia had spoken to the two boys she had most often seen making the deliveries and convinced one, Petey, to aide her.

Today was sugar delivery day.

The earl, it seemed, had quite a sweet tooth. Probably needed all of that sugar to offset his sour disposition and acerbic temperament.

She had paid Petey, the sugar delivery boy, five pounds—a veritable fortune to a street lad—to allow her to make today’s delivery in his stead. After that, Petey had been an absolute fountain of information, explaining that the earl always requested the merchants use ragamuffins and street urchins to make the deliveries rather than the merchant’s own employees.

Celestia considered that rather odd.

Wouldn’t the merchant’s delivery boys be more trustworthy?

She gave a mental shrug.

But what did she know of such matters?

Petey’s eyes shone with admiration, and a grin wreathed his thin face when he spoke of the earl. As she assuredly did not share his esteem of his lordship, Celestia had remained silent as Petey extolled Keyworth’s many praiseworthy virtues.

“He don’ let the merchants deliver everythin’ at once like most swells do.” Petey had leaned in and winked. “The earl wants more of the boys to have a chance to make a few coins. He’s a big tipper, he is. ’Specially if he’s pleased with ya.”

As Celestia shopped for her household, she had no notion of what was typical for the *haut ton*, nor did she really care.

Regardless, she could not conceive this benevolent, saintlike version of the Earl of Keyworth that Petey described.

“The earl’s butler, Teeven, is a right scary chap. Grunts more than talks most of the time. But yer in luck.” His dirt-smudged, freckled face alight with importance, Petey grinned, revealing slightly crooked teeth. “Friday mornin’s are Teeven’s half-day off.”

He scratched his towhead. Vigorously.

*Lice?*

“Queer that,” he said with a final enthusiastic scrape across his scalp with dirty, jagged fingernails. “Most butlers have Sundays off.”

How he’d come by that tidbit, Celestia could not imagine.

A petulant gust of wind tried to whip her cap from her head, and she slapped a palm to her scalp to keep it in place. It might be April, but spring had yet to reveal herself. Winter’s chill lingered in the air. She shivered, though whether from the dank breeze or the tension thrumming through her, she did not know.

How she yearned for her warm pelisse or cloak to bundle around herself as a buffer against the persistent wind. Instead, she wrapped herself in determination and tenacity. There was no one else to resolve this *misunderstanding* between Papa and the earl.

Keyworth *must* be made to see reason and agree to give Papa another chance.

But Papa *must* also put aside his drink.

Her brothers, Nash and Orion, were off doing whatever sailors in His Majesty’s Navy did. They seldom came home anymore, and when they did, they were eager to depart for another adventure when their leave ended.

Her brothers had not had to deal with their father’s melancholy and increased drinking after Mama’s death either. Nor his decline into the doldrums or his incapacitating grief.

Neither did they fret nightly about making ends meet or whether the store would remain open another month.

Celestia had taken over transcribing for Papa, although that was a well-guarded secret.

For the past eight years, she had worked closely with him, and he had occasionally allowed her to transcribe the shorthand notes he'd taken into longhand for his patrons. She also knew how to take notes in shorthand and frequently did so while working at the bookstore to save time.

After Mama's passing, Papa had increasingly permitted her to clandestinely transcribe his notes except for those of his most elite patrons, including the Earl of Keyworth.

A swift glance at the timepiece she had tucked into her pocket confirmed what she'd suspected. It was almost nine of the clock.

With a fortifying gulp of air and a prayer sent heavenward that she would be successful, she darted across the street. Giving a quick glance up and down the alley, she slipped through the gate and descended the short stairwell.

As Petey had told her to, she knocked thrice upon the wood panel.

A few blinks later, the friendly faced, plump cook opened the door. Wiping her hands on a towel, she eyed Celestia curiously. "Ye're a new laddie, ain't ye?"

"Aye, ma'am." Adopting a street accent, Celestia lowered her voice and kept her gaze riveted on the threshold. "The name's Tom."

A common enough name she'd decided upon, unlike her and her brothers' unusual names.

"Petey sprained his ankle. I came in his stead."

"Poor laddie." The servant's brow pleated like a fan in worry. "I'll tell his lordship. He'll be concerned. He may want to send a physician 'round to look at Pete."

Caught off guard for a fraction, Celestia gaped.

What peer did that?

“Nay. Nay need for that. He’s already limpin’ about,” she said, scrambling for an excuse. She leaned in and whispered, “Betwixt you and me, I think he wanted me to have a chance to earn a bit o’ coin. I am a bit down on me luck.”

That was not a lie.

“Well, come in, Tom. I have a treacle on the stove that I need to get back to. By the by, I am Mrs. Cox.” With that, the sturdy woman in her black gown and crisp white apron and cap trundled inside. She returned to the stove and stirred the heavenly smelling treacle.

Celestia followed her, noting the neat-as-a-pin kitchen. If a single speck of dust or a crumb had escaped notice, she’d dance a jig. She pulled the sugar cone from her jacket, then withdrew it from the protective bag.

“Where should I put the sugar?”

She held up the blue-and-white papered cylinder.

Mrs. Cox did not look up but angled her head toward a table by an open door leading into a shadowy corridor. Several loaves of bread, Shrewsbury biscuits, and ginger buns cooled upon its spotless surface.

“Help yerself to a biscuit or ginger bun, Tom,” she said, leaning over to examine the pot’s contents. “His lordship insists upon treatin’ his lads well, he does.”

Approval laced her voice, as did evident admiration for her employer.

Were all servants and underlings enamored of the Earl of Keyworth?

Why?

The man was positively beastly.

Celestia seized the moment and slipped into the corridor. Breath held, she rushed along on tiptoe. As she rounded a corner, she heard Mrs. Cox mumble, “Hmph. Bashful, that one. He left without sayin’ farewell and without his tip too.”

A satisfied grin pulled at the edges of Celestia's mouth as she rushed up the servants' stairway, praying all the while that the gargantuan dog was not inside the house.

## CHAPTER FOUR

4



*Are you available to meet at  
The Wicked Earls' Club at half-past two this afternoon?  
I require immediate advice of a delicate nature.*

*~Urgent note to the Earl of Sharonford from the Earl of  
Keyworth.*

*THE EARL of Keyworth's Study*

*Keyworth House*

*An Hour Later*

LANDRY'S NAPE PRICKLED, and he knew he was not alone a blink before Sampson jumped to his feet. The dog swung his head toward the door—a spray of drool flying across the room—and gave a deep, warning woof. Many a grown man quaked in fear when the Newfoundland approached.

*Not a servant.*

The dog would not have sounded a warning had it been.

“Shh, boy. Stay.”

Sampson plopped his haunches onto the floor, but his attention remained riveted on the other side of the room.

He thumped his ropelike tail thrice.

*Not a threat then, either.*

Taking his time to settle the quill in its brass holder beside the chariot-shaped inkwell, Landry turned his head and took in the waif standing uncertainly four feet inside his study.

The lad might've been fourteen or fifteen. A little older than the boys that generally made deliveries or brought messages. Likely a waif with younger siblings to feed. And from the nervous glances he kept spearing Sampson, not accustomed to dogs either.

Well, not dogs as large as Sampson, in any event. But to be fair, most people weren't.

Sharonford had responded much quicker than Landry expected his carousing friend to.

He grinned his satisfaction, and a shadow played across the lad's features.

Typically, the earl did not even find his mattress until the wee hours of the morning. For Sharonford to be upright and revived enough to respond to Landry's urgent missive before noon was either exceedingly peculiar, or it meant Sharonford had, at last, turned over a new leaf.

*And Sampson dined with knife and fork.*

*Or*—a third explanation poked its head up.

Sharonford had not been to bed yet.

That, quite plausibly, was the correct explanation.

“Have you a message for me?” Landry asked when the tongue-tied youth continued to hover mere feet from the doorway. As if he heartily yearned to turn tail and run but did not dare. Either because he feared Sampson would attack or was desperate for the coin he hoped to receive by way of a tip for a job well done.

Mrs. Cox or Henrietta, the parlor maid, must've sent the lad along, as Teeven spent Friday mornings with his ailing father.

A faint smile tipped Landry's mouth.

His household was anything but ordinary, to be sure. It was a good thing he had vowed to his mother not to wed until he'd found Lenora. Landry was not at all sure his future countess would appreciate his lax strictures or irregular staff.

At the time—eight years ago, to be precise—that vow had seemed reasonable.

But now...?

Well, he had not yet given up on finding his sister. Neither had he specified he would *not* wed—only that he would make finding his sister his highest priority. Besides, he was only one-and-thirty. Not quite ready to stick his spoon in the wall or cock up his toes just yet.

Glancing at his speech upon the desk, he pulled his eyebrows together in consternation.

*Only three bloody paragraphs?*

It felt like he'd labored over those few words for hours. A glance at the mantel clock revealed an hour had indeed passed. Whenever he was deep in thought, time flew by.

If Landry still retained a scrivener, the task would've been completed by now.

When the boy did not answer, he looked up again. "Come then. Hand it over. I am quite busy."

This speech must be finished by Monday so that his friends might peruse it before he spoke before Parliament.

He extended his hand, eager to see if his friend was available to meet with him later today.

Sampson meandered forward and proceeded to sniff the lad. He snuffled at the boy's scuffed boots, leaving a wet trail across the lad's scruffy footwear, then made a slow circle around the white-faced, rigid youth.

Perhaps the lad was afraid of dogs.

Landry gave a low whistle and, at once, Sampson padded to his side.



The messenger breathed out a visible breath of relief.

“My message?” Landry repeated, a tad less patiently.

“I do not have a message for you, my lord,” came the lad’s low reply.

Landry narrowed his eyes and furrowed his brow.

Much, *much* too articulate and refined for a street youth.

Who was he?

Eyebrow cocked, a half-smile bending his mouth, Landry leaned back. “Then why are you here? Looking for work?”

He supposed his groom and stable hand could use another pair of hands.

Not truly, but they would find something for the boy to earn a few coins: oil the harnesses and the like.

Isn’t that what one did to harnesses and saddles?

He felt rather like a pampered idiot that he had absolutely no idea.

Inhaling a deep breath, his fingertips scraping the front of his coat, the youth advanced toward the desk. When he stood directly before Landry, the lad removed his hideous hat, and a long, thick, unassuming brown braid tumbled free.

*Zounds.*

Not a lad at all but a lovely young lady.

At least Landry thought she was lovely beneath the smudges on her face. Her skin appeared far too creamy, the delicate planes of her face too smooth, and her startling green eyes far too innocent for a street rat, however.

An aristocrat or two must’ve perched haphazardly in her family tree somewhere. Her fine-boned features were a contradiction of her birth if that were not the case, and he’d be bound it was.

Umbrage glinting in her gaze, now narrowed to jade slits, she unwound the ugly as sin scarf from around her neck.

She was angry. Livid, if Landry had to venture a guess.

But why?

A rosy hue tinged her face beneath a generous sprinkling of freckles.

Anger, nerves, or fear?

Or was she merely too warm from the heavy coat she wore?

Leaning forward, Landry placed his elbows on his desk and steepled his ink-stained fingers. He'd discarded his jacket upon entering the study this morning, and it lay slung across the claret-colored leather divan. As was his habit, he'd rolled his shirtsleeves up his forearms to prevent any chance of getting ink upon them.

Amused reproof made his lips twitch.

He was not a tidy writer as the ink-smudged paper before him attested.

The young woman swiftly perused his study, no doubt taking in every detail, before she settled her gaze disconcertingly on him.

How old was she?

More on point, why was she here?

Landry casually scrutinized the wraith before him. Eyebrows knit together in an elegant line, her eyes shone with silent fervor. She was either exceptionally courageous or extraordinarily imprudent.

Her clothing was of fair quality, appropriate for the merchant class, but years and *years* out of fashion. Her oversized coat hid much of her figure, but well-shaped legs disappeared into boots he'd wager were several sizes too large for her small feet.

“My lord, I am Celestia Tolman of Tolman Tomes—  
Scrivener and Stationer.”

*Ah. Now the puzzle came together.*

The tenor of her voice, dark warm honey, surrounded Landry: husky, lyrical, and very, *very* feminine. How could he

have not realized she was a woman from the moment she opened her mouth?

*One sees what one wants to see.*

One of Landry's mother's favorite sayings trailed through his mind.

*Indeed, Mama. Indeed.*

He pondered upon his intruder's name for a blink.

*Celestia?*

An uncommon name for an unusual woman.

At one time or other, while performing scrivener services, Jonathan Tolman had mentioned in passing that he had a daughter. Sons, too, if Landry remembered correctly. Two—both in service to His Majesty's Navy, were they not?

He lifted his eyebrows higher on his forehead.

Truthfully, he wasn't sure whether to be amused or exasperated at Miss Tolman's deception and impertinence.

"Again, I ask, why are you here, Miss Tolman? I assume you used misleading measures to enter my home?"

A rather charming burst of color tinted her rounded cheeks and spread to her forehead.

To Landry's surprise, she did not cast her gaze downward, clench her hands, or shuffle her feet in embarrassment or shame. Instead, with the artful elegance of a duchess, she hitched her rather adorably mutinous chin and the delightful nub of a nose an inch higher.

"I did, my lord," she boldly confessed. "I pretended to be the sugar delivery boy."

A bark of laughter escaped Landry, and Sampson's tail thudded in happy agreement.

She had put some effort into her deception. Which meant she wasn't as impetuous as he had first supposed.

"Did you now? Mrs. Cox will be beside herself when she learns she has been duped."

A small fission of admiration for Miss Tolman's honesty and straightforwardness sparked behind Landry's ribs.

She was a courageous little thing. Landry would give her that.

"Have a seat." He motioned to the chair. "Please."

The least he could do was hear her out, although he very much suspected he already knew what she would say.

"No, thank you." She shook her head, and her braid bounced against her chest, having the unfortunate effect of dragging his focus to where the coat hid her breasts.

Interest sparked, and desire pulsed in his loins, startling Landry with its intensity.

*What the hell?*

"I am here to ask, my lord, if you would reconsider your decision to discontinue using my father as your scribe," she said in that lyrical contralto, her words sticking slightly on the "my lord" bit.

He filed that detail away to examine later.

Rather than answer her, Landry asked, "Does your father know you are here?"

## CHAPTER FIVE

### 5



*I know that I am adopted. Mama told me so when I was a little girl.*

*Right after Papa died, and we had to leave Lancaster.*

*Who are my real parents? Why didn't they want me?*

*Who am I really? Will I ever know? More on point—do I want to?*

*~Laureen Smith to her diary.*

*KEYWORTH HOUSE*

*Mayfair, London*

*Still in the Earl of Keyworth's Study*

MISS TOLMAN neither bristled at the question nor wilted in self-castigation. Instead, she arched a pert, winged eyebrow. With each passing second, Landry found himself ever more intrigued.

“No. My father is unaware I am here, my lord. I came of my own accord.”

Making a noncommittal sound in his throat, Landry leaned back and folded his arms.

“Miss Tolman, your father already made the same request of me, and I regret I was compelled to decline.”

Two neat lines interrupted the smooth plane of her forehead, and her stoic composure wavered. To her credit, she swiftly regained her equanimity.

“Yes, yes, I am aware. But since you...”

Fingering her earlobe, Miss Tolman struggled for the appropriate word. Her face cleared, and she continued.

“Dispensed with his services, my lord, our other clientele have also done so at an alarmingly expedient rate. Nearly everyone, in truth.”

In point of fact, that reluctant revelation came as no great surprise.

If Tolman had made the same unpardonable mistake with other clients, then he had brought his downfall upon himself. It was deucedly unfortunate that others had to suffer for his incompetence, however. And that Miss Celestia Tolman had to degrade herself and was reduced to sneaking into her father’s former client’s house.

Nevertheless, Landry could not be held responsible for Jonathan Tolman’s ineptitude, his fall from grace, or the reduction in Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer’s clientele.

That blame lay solely at Jonathan Tolman’s inebriated feet.

Suddenly restless under her unrelenting regard, Landry stood.

From across the desk, she stared up at him.

Her almond-shaped green eyes regarded Landry with a mélange of wariness, hope, and antagonism. She reminded him somewhat of a feisty kitten. A small kitten at that.

Crossing to the rosewood liquor cabinet, he asked, “Would you care for a sherry?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No need to beg, my dear Miss Tolman,” he replied rather wickedly, giving into the devil on his shoulder prodding him. Glancing over his shoulder, Landry was very much gratified to see he’d shocked her.

She gaped at him as if he’d sprouted two horns, a forked tail, and cloven hooves.

Perhaps appalled was more apt than shocked.

Giving her his most rakish grin, he held up the crystal decanter. The stopper clinked at his slight jostling. “Sherry?”

“But...” She searched out the mantel clock before turning an incredulous and somewhat censorious gaze upon him. “But it’s... It’s only just past nine,” Miss Tolman said with such incredulousness that Landry could not help but chuckle.

As if she’d never seen her father imbibing so early in the day. A man did not become a sodding drunk like Tolman by restricting his tipping until the evening hours.

“I am aware of the time.” He winked just to see her reaction. “You look like you could use a swallow. Perhaps you would prefer something stronger?”

She looked rather taken aback at that suggestion.

Or was it his wink?

“No,” she said bluntly before quickly adding, “No, thank you. I do not partake in spirits.”

*Unlike her sire.*

Probably *because* of her sire.

A prim and proper miss was Miss Tolman.

Except for her boy’s clothes, sneaking into a peer’s house, and being alone with said peer.

Mayhap not so prim and proper after all.

Landry assessed her from beneath half-closed eyes, very much appreciating what he saw.

Reigning in his wayward musings, he said, “Too bad that. You do not know what you are missing.”

Did her eyes narrow the merest bit in a silent challenge?

“If by *missing* you mean being irresponsible and negligent, making a general fool of oneself, and otherwise failing to measure up, then I *do* know what I am missing.”

The kitten had claws. Sharp claws.

*Interesting.*

After Landry had poured himself a finger’s worth of brandy, he returned to the desk and rested a hip on the edge. He took a sip, welcoming the familiar heat trailing to his stomach.

In truth, it was not his habit to partake of anything more substantial than tea or coffee this early in the day. But Miss Tolman made him edgy in a manner he could not quite put his finger on.

After her outburst, she remained silent, her green eyes alert and keen. She fidgeted with her hat, and her delicate jaw tightened.

Finally, she blurted, “Are you not going to say anything?”

Sampson wandered over and sat next to Landry’s feet. He gazed up at him with the adoration and unconditional love only a dog was capable of.

Landry ran his fingers through the dog’s fur before shrugging and taking another deep swallow.

“What more is there to say? Your father delivered my transcribed dictation to a courtesan, and her—er *prose* was presented to me. Such colossal mistakes are inexcusable, as I am sure you are aware, Miss Tolman.”

Only a slight tightening around her extraordinary eyes indicated his mark had hit home.

“It was the delivery boy’s error, but as my father should have brought the documents himself, I acknowledge his culpability. I can assure you that I would personally see that your dictation was securely delivered, and no further mistakes of that unfortunate nature would occur ever again.” Head at a proud, nay majestic angle, she said, “I guarantee it.”



She seemed quite sincere and not a little desperate.

A tendril of guilt snaked through Landry, and it was not easily squelched.

“Miss Tolman? May I be perfectly candid?”

She met his gaze unflinchingly but without antagonism.

“I would prefer that you were, my lord.”

He rather liked that about her.

How she treated him as an equal though they were stations apart.

Most women simpered and batted their eyelashes and either played the coy innocent or issued seductive invitations with their sultry gazes. Miss Celestia Tolman simply looked expectant and, by damn, genuinely unaffected by him or his title.

A rare, rare woman indeed.

“When last your father was here, he was well into his cups, Miss Tolman. And I do mean *well* into his cups. Ape drunk is more apt. He even took several generous swallows from his flask during our meeting.”

There were two things Landry could not abide: liars and cheaters. Mr. Jonathan Tolman fell into the former category. He had tried to conceal his failure to deliver Landry’s transcriptions and had lied about it. His daughter did not need to know that as well.

Landry had no wish to completely destroy her father’s character in her eyes.

“*Oh.*” The single syllable slipped past her lips, part sigh and part exclamation.

Her remarkable eyes, now a forest’s color at sunset, rounded as did her plum red cupid’s bow mouth. As if she could not bear his perusal or the stark truth, her lids fluttered closed, her lush eyelashes fanning her cheeks in shadow.

A handful of heartbeats later, Miss Tolman popped her eyes open, her earlier desolation replaced by laudable resolve.

As the full comprehension of what Landry had revealed slammed into her, her expression hardened into brittle lines.

Landry would vow, Mr. Jonathan Tolman was due for a severe scold when next she saw her father.

Biting the corner of her lower lip, she averted her gaze for the first time. But only for the span of a heartbeat. Straightening her spine and pushing back her shoulders, she notched that delightfully rebellious chin even higher.

Perhaps to make up for her diminutive height?

If she reached his shoulder, Landry would forgo cake for a week, and he truly revered his sweets.

“I can do the transcribing then,” she said. “I have been doing so for eight years. Since I was fifteen.”

Well, now Landry knew how old the spitfire was.

Miss Tolman plowed onward in a rush, as if afraid to give him a moment to speak.

“I have been transcribing *all* of my father’s work for two years, except for his most prominent clients. Men such as yourself. I have also transcribed numerous documents for my uncle. Contracts, letters, wills, research papers, journals, and much more,” she ended a tad breathlessly.

Heartrendingly hopeful. Utterly desperate.

Guilt and compassion coiled even tighter in Landry’s gut.

“Very commendable,” he murmured at last.

And it was. Astonishing, if he were perfectly candid.

Landry would never know what wicked devil prompted him, but he asked, “And Madame Meriette Bonacieux? Did you transcribe her memoir?”

The transcription had been excellent. Faultless, in truth, as far as Landry could tell. Regardless, what manner of man would permit his daughter to transcribe what could only be described as rather creative sexual exploits?

Miss Tolman bristled, her full mouth firming into two thin lines for an instant as another wave of bright color skated up her pale cheeks. Her freckles stood out in stark relief, a constellation of cinnamon specks on ivory.

Did those delectable freckles cover the rest of her as well?

*Are you mad, Keyworth?*

“I did,” she replied succinctly.

*I’ll be damned.*

No virginal lowering of her regard. No dramatics or theatrics that Landry asked such an inappropriate question. A forthright answer.

The truth of it was, Landry needed a scrivener.

Urgently.

But a woman?

Not that he had anything against a woman making her way in the harsh world. Bully for her for having learned the skill. The logistics were what made him hesitant.

*Hesitant, hell.*

Reluctant. Unwilling. Disinclined.

The phrasing mattered little.

Simply put, what Miss Tolman asked was impossible.

A young, unmarried woman visiting the home of a lord of the realm regularly? At least three times a week for several hours?

No, no. It would not do.

She’d be ruined.

It would not take a week before the *on dit* would label her his mistress.

Landry finished his brandy and set the glass atop the desk.

Mouth pressed into a grim line, he gave a rueful shake of his head. “I do not think that would be a prudent arrangement for either of us.”

He offered a conciliatory smile, hoping to appease her with his charm.

She stood straight and proud, no shoulders slumping in defeat—no pouting or tears. Few noble ladies could boast the regal bearing and demeanor Miss Tolman naturally possessed.

“You are an intelligent woman, Miss Tolman.” Landry folded his arms and continued with a slight jutting of his chin in her direction. “I suspect you knew what the outcome must be to both of your requests before you finagled your way into my house.”

“I see,” she said tautly. Flatly.

He’d bet his best boots every muscle in her small frame was rigid from the control she’d marshaled and the effort to display composure. Her attention darted to Sampson for a moment, then gravitated back to Landry.

“Might I ask that you at least please stop disparaging Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer then? As I am sure you are very well aware, it only takes one withering or critical word from a man of your station to your contemporaries to blacken a business’s name.”

It was Landry’s turn to go stiff with affront from head to toe, and he clamped his jaw to bite back his immediate harsh response to her unsavory accusation. Several *tick-tocks* of the longcase clock situated between two of the windows broke the stilted silence before he scratched his nose and relaxed his clenched teeth.

“I give you my word, Miss Tolman. If there is unflattering tattle about your establishment, it did *not* find its beginning with me.”

“How can you say that?” she cried, at last losing her composure. “You are the only powerful client who has reason to be dissatisfied with our services.”

Arms folded once more, he regarded her.

Her eyes spewed green sparks, and her breasts—very ample breasts he’d be bound—rose and fell rapidly beneath that godawful coat.

“Are you absolutely positive in that regard, Miss Tolman?”

“Of course, I am...” Her words trailed off, her attention shifting over his shoulder to the gardens. She touched her earlobe again, a crease forming between her eyebrows. “There are children—boys—in your garden.”

Landry looked over his shoulder.

Sure enough, a trio of urchins equipped with gardening tools attacked the hedge with the vehemence of inebriated goats. He cringed inwardly, pitying the poor hedgerow. Make that blind, inebriated goats.

“Yes,” he said, turning to face her again. “There are.”

Miss Tolman cleared her throat before primly saying, “I beg your pardon for interrupting you as well as for entering your home under false pretenses. It may not be any consolation to you, but I am not in the habit of being deceptive.”

Her apology was drenched in insincerity.

She was not the least bit regretful, he’d be bound. She believed Landry to be an unfeeling ogre and, at the moment, he rather felt like a troll.

She wound her long braid into a knot with practiced movements before cramming the ugly hat upon her head. Next came the scarf, impossibly uglier than the cap.

“I regret I could not be of service, Miss Tolman.”

Landry honestly did have regrets.

What she asked was simply not done.

Hadn’t he already come under unfavorable scrutiny for employing as many urchins as he did? Miss Celestia Tolman might be a commoner, but he would not have her reputation besmirched on his account.

She stared at him, the moment stretching on and on, their gazes locked.

Hers accusing and reproachful.

His compassionate and understanding. At least, he hoped that was what Celestia saw because it was what he was feeling and tried to emanate.

It felt as if she peered into his very soul, his spirit. Something—he had no idea what— unlatched. It was the oddest, most penetrating sensation.

Physical, and yet...*not*.

At that moment, Landry knew beyond any vestige of doubt, as improbable and implausible as it was, his life would never be the same. It had shifted course in an unanticipated direction, and he was as helpless as a newborn, sightless kitten to regain control.

And she, Miss Celestia Tolman, with her arresting green eyes, was the reason.

“You *could* have been of service, my lord. You have chosen not to be. I understand and can sincerely appreciate your displeasure. I mistakenly hoped you would be lenient, though I should’ve known otherwise, given my experience with the nobility.”

Landry did not take offense at her well-aimed barb. His refusal to hire Celestia was for her own good. When she had a chance to reflect upon the matter, unless she was a lackwit—which she most assuredly was not—honesty would compel her to accede to the truth.

“I sincerely wish I could have been of assistance,” he said, softening his refusal with a smile.

“Please, do not repine on it, my lord.” Her tart riposte was as disingenuous as her earlier apology.

Why Landry should care, he could not begin to fathom.

He forbade himself to.

Miss Celestia Tolman was a stranger. A woman he’d just only met: a woman who had used dishonest measures to enter his home, no less.

And yet...something about her called to him and caused a startling check in his spirit.

He stood and laid his fingertips upon her forearm. Up close, he could see the deeper green that ringed her irises and the citrine flecks shining there.

As if his touch singed or he'd slapped her, she flinched and retreated a pair of steps.

Clearly, she had not experienced the same phenomenon—an awakening in her spirit—an answering vibration in her soul.

That knowledge puzzled and disconcerted him.

“What will you do?” he asked with genuine interest and concern.

“*Do*, my lord?” She raised her impertinent turned-up nose in a lofty manner.

By God, Lady Jersey herself could not have given him a better set down.

“Do you fear I have a vengeful streak, your lordship?”

“Do you?”

*“Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.”*

The quote by William Congreve he'd thought of while his mother lay dying intruded upon his contemplation of Miss Tolman.

Landry skewed an eyebrow, several unpleasant scenarios playing out in his mind about how she might retaliate.

Rather than answer, she shrugged. “I have absolutely no idea what I'll do, but I am sure I'll think of something. I'm quite resourceful.”

She sliced him a cutting glance meant to eviscerate.

An odd twinge stabbed the region near his heart. In truth, he felt rather badly for Miss Tolman and her situation.

“Perhaps I'll accept Ignatius Cronk's or one of the other gentlemen's offers of a protector,” she said with a flippant airiness that did not reach her eyes.

*Ballocks to that.*

Surely her circumstances were not *that* calamitous?

“Miss Tolman...?”

Landry was about to ask that very thing, but she surprised the starch out of him by dipping into a perfectly orchestrated curtsy. The incongruity of it, such a graceful, ladylike gesture from a hoyden dressed in boy’s attire, made him grin despite himself.

“Good day. I’ll see myself out,” she said crisply, angling toward the French windows. “I pray you lay awake at night pondering if I shall exact revenge upon you.”

Was she jesting?

He honestly could not tell.

Instead of exiting through the doorway, she departed through the gardens, taking the time to speak to the eager young chaps as she did.

Chin between his forefinger and thumb, Landry watched her go.

“I think I may have just made the biggest mistake of my life, Sampson.”



## CHAPTER SIX

### 6



*I honestly could use your advice and direction, dear brother.*

*On the infrequent days that Papa does come to the shop,  
he spends most of his time in his office or the storage area,  
either drinking himself to oblivion or passed out.*

*Even Uncle Paul is fed up, though with his failing health,  
his hands are as tied as mine are.*

*~Letter to Orion Tolman in the service of His Majesty's Navy  
from his sister Miss Celestia Tolman.*

*Sent but never received.*

*TOLMAN TOMES-SCRIVENER and Stationer*

*Oxford Street, St. Giles, London*

*13 April 1818*

CELESTIA WRAPPED THE THREE BOOKS, a brass dove-shaped inkwell, feather quills, nibs, and foolscap the Duchess of Westfall had purchased in plain brown paper.

Wearing an exquisite lavender and black walking ensemble, the noblewoman was the embodiment of aristocratic elegance.

She also smelled positively heavenly.

Celestia had never owned real perfume. The closest she'd ever come was a bottle of lavender rosewater Nash had given her for Christmas the year before Mama died. She found herself inhaling the four duchesses' fragrances, the scents so pleasing that a tiny sliver of envy speared her.

Seldom—almost never, in truth—did Celestia covet *le beau monde* fashions or the female members of the *ton*. She knew her place in society and accepted her circumstance without antipathy. No one had any choice about their birth, whether high born or low.

However, the elegant quartet presently standing before her well-polished but undeniably well-used, scuffed counter made her yearn for something as colorful and stylish as these ladies wore. Her plain ash-gray gown boasted not a single embellishment, and she felt a positive frump compared to their colorful frocks and resplendent bonnets.

English Lavender, sky blue, butterfly yellow, and cranberry red.

A vibrant, fashionable flower garden.

What was more, these ladies were actually pleasant.

*Very* pleasant and gracious, in truth.

Clustered near the stunningly beautiful Duchess of Westfall, the equally exquisite Duchesses of Sutcliffe, Bainbridge, and Pennington waited, each with arms full of their purchases. And each looking as if she had stepped directly from an Ackermann's fashion plate.

Never had such prestigious ladies of the *haut ton* frequented Celestia's humble shop.

This made the fourth group of noblewomen this week, and a quartet of duchesses was unprecedented. She was positive not one of them had any need for ink, books, paper, quills, tobacco products, or any other item for sale at Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer.

Nevertheless, Celestia was not one to look the proverbial gift horse in the mouth.

She did not care *why* the women were here, though she had a pretty good inkling. She'd wager her best gown—a rag compared to the dazzling array before her—the Earl of Keyworth had put his friends' wives up to patronizing the shop.

Interestingly, none of their husbands had stopped in—just the usual male patrons.

Thankfully, not Mr. Cronk or Lord Crocodile as Celestia thought of him because of his propensity to smile broadly, even at inappropriate times.

Humiliation and gratitude wrestled for supremacy behind her breastbone, and she squeezed her earlobe between her bent forefinger and thumb, slowly massaging the flesh in small circles. She did not know precisely when she'd acquired the habit, but many years ago, she had discovered it calmed her.

Unsurprisingly, gratitude triumphed. Celestia's pride was meaningless if the store closed, which was a genuine possibility at this juncture. Every item sold contributed to the funds for next month's mortgage payment.

*What happens after that?*

Even the thought made her cringe inwardly. The building was almost paid for. Just another nine months. She must hold on.

*Then what?*

She honestly and truly did not know.

Giving the Duchess of Bainbridge a bright smile as the lady laid her purchases on the counter, Celestia booted that worry to a dingy corner and covered it with a thick blanket. Tonight, as she lay in bed awake once more, troublesome thoughts parading through her mind, she'd have plenty of time to examine that concern.

The bell attached to the door gave a happy little jingle as yet another customer entered. Today was the busiest day

Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer had experienced in weeks.

From Celestia's position behind the counter, she could not see who the patron was. For some time now, she'd wanted to rearrange the shop's interior since anymore, more often than not, she was alone. Well, at least alone on the ground floor.

This arrangement had worked well when Mama and Aunt Rosalie both worked here as their husbands transcribed in the offices above. However, now that Celestia operated the establishment by herself most days, she really required a vantage point where she could observe the entire sales floor.

In recent weeks Celestia had considered changing the establishment's name to Tolman Tomes and Tobacco since, at present, no transcribing took place. It wasn't probable that it would in the future either, and she still partially blamed Keyworth for that.

However, his question about whether she was certain Papa had not made other mistakes niggled like an annoying pebble in her shoe. The truth of it was, she could not be absolutely positive he had not.

Would Papa destroy correspondences terminating his services so she would not know? The man he had been before Mama's death would never have. But now...?

After her unpleasant and unproductive visit to the Earl of Keyworth's home, Celestia had confronted her father. He admitted to having arrived half-foxed to request his position back.

"Just needed a little nip to bolster my courage, my girl," he claimed, looking sheepish.

Exhausted and downtrodden because of her constant worry, Celestia had finally lost her temper.

"We are on the verge of ruin, Papa! I can barely make the mortgage payment each month."

"Surely not," he muttered, his ruddy face etched in disbelief.

“I am not exaggerating. You must put aside your spirits and focus on your work once more. If not for yourself or me, then for Mama. She would’ve been heartily ashamed of you. Your grief isn’t an excuse to remain foxed and avoid your responsibilities.”

Born out of frustration and panic, that last accusation had been unfair and unkind. A yoke of shame and regret weighed heavily upon Celestia. She was abashed that she’d spoken to him so harshly, though she still believed he’d needed to confront the truth.

Regardless, her dust-up had served no useful purpose. Her father had simply hung his head and shoulders slumped, made for the nearest pub. Or wherever it was that he procured his gin.

As far as changing the shop’s name went, Papa and Uncle would have to agree. Plus, that would require funds she could not spare to have a new sign made and the window painted. So, like so many other things she’d wished for, considered, or wanted, she filed the idea away.

Perhaps someday.

She cast a swift glance to the narrow stairway leading to the upper rooms. Papa’s and Uncle’s offices were overhead, as well as a large storage area with a cot. Three other rooms sat empty.

The previous proprietor had lived above the shop with his wife, but when Papa and Uncle Paul bought the building nearly five-and-twenty years ago, Mama had declared the space too small for a family and insisted they live in a real house.

Jonathan Tolman had stumbled in three hours ago and had staggered directly upstairs, as was his wont these past weeks. As usual, he had not offered to help.

However, as soused as he was, he would not have been of any assistance in any event.

How much longer could this go on?

She'd taken to hiding the earnings each day to keep him from pilfering the funds away on spirits. Where he had obtained the coins for his current bout of drunkenness, she couldn't fathom.

Uncle Paul had stayed home today as well. His gout had been a terrible trial of late. When he had an onset, nothing but bed rest and elevating his affected foot would do. Cold compresses brought him a small degree of relief too.

Childless, he regarded her as the daughter he never had. Between fretting over Papa's drinking, Uncle Paul's health, the fate of the store, and her unanswered letters to her brothers, Celestia was a jumble of nerves.

"I am so delighted I came today," Her Grace, the Duchess of Pennington, said while examining her purchases.

Shrugging off her doldrums, Celestia smiled.

"As am I, Your Grace," she said, wrapping a silver cigar nipper. "I am extremely honored."

"Keyworth," exclaimed the Duchess of Bainbridge. "I'm so happy you stopped by."

*Oh, Lord. No. Just what I need.*

He was here?

"Thank you for recommending this delightful establishment," her grace said. "I have been trying to find this exact shade of sealing wax for ages."

"Did not I tell you this establishment's inventory was exceptional?" came Landry's melodic baritone.

"Indeed, you did," agreed one of the duchesses.

Celestia had no idea which lady because she refused to raise her attention from the brown paper she expertly wrapped the snuff box in.

"Miss Tolman is also an accomplished scrivener, should you require the services of an amanuensis," he said a trifle too casually and with a distinct droll edge to his tenor.

“How fascinating,” replied another duchess, sounding anything but.

*Dratted man.*

Most of the time, ladies of quality wrote their own correspondence and those that did not hired a secretary.

Was Lord Keyworth determined to humiliate her?

## CHAPTER SEVEN



*Keyworth, I have done a bit of poking around on your behalf, and I believe I have found just the fellow for you. His name is Marshall Britmere.*

*He has gained a reputation as a brilliant investigator— a master sleuth, if you will.*

*~Letter to the Earl of Keyworth from the Duke of Westfall.*

*TOLMAN TOMES—SCRIVENER and Stationer*

*(Soon to be Tolman Tomes and Tobacco?)*

*Oxford Street, St. Giles*

*A Few Extremely Awkward Minutes Later*

CELESTIA'S HEART flopped around behind her ribs like a dying trout before diving straight to her stomach as if weighted by a lodestone.

Why was the earl here?

She was equal parts appreciative and vexed. Excited and trepidatious.

*That annoying man had her at sixes and sevens.*



Landry, Earl of Keyworth, had snarled her in more complicated knots than those her seafaring brothers had shown her. Keeping her focus pointed at the new group of items that required wrapping, she steadfastly refused to meet his penetrating, pewter gaze.

Yet, despite deliberately ignoring him, she felt his potent visual touch as forcefully as when he'd touched her arm in his office.

Her stupid, gullible heart had thrashed about her chest like a terrified fox in a basket that day. How could the merest wisp of his fingertips threaten to incinerate her? She'd nearly gone up in a sizzling conflagration of sensation.

No doubt existed that he observed her with that disarming twinkle in his eye and his mouth tilted in that rakish manner.

*I shall not look.*

*I. Shall. Not.*

The duchesses chatted about their children, where they intended to have a spot of tea this afternoon, and the Duke of Asherford's dinner party next week.

"You are attending, are you not, Keyworth?" the Duchess of Westfall inquired as she secured her reticule's silk ribbons. "Ansley and Willow are as well."

"Indeed, I am," the earl replied. "I quite look forward to seeing your brother. I have a matter I wished to discuss with Scarborough."

The Duchess of Sutcliffe laughed and shook her head. "I'll venture it has something to do with that project you've been working on for Parliament."

He chuckled, that delicious rumble reverberating in his chest. "Perhaps."

"I vow I shall tell my husband to prohibit any talk of politics," the Duchess of Westfall teased.

Celestia managed to avoid looking in Landry's direction until she'd tied the last string on the Duchess of Sutcliffe's purchases.

He leaned casually against the counter, his hat tilted at a rakish angle, and that playful, arrogant, devastating smile notching his mouth up at one corner.

Must he be so deucedly attractive?

Just when she convinced herself he was a complete ogre, entirely irredeemable, he'd done something kind and generous.

*You knew the moment you discovered he regularly helped street urchins that his heart is not entirely black.*

True. And the earl needn't have recommended the shop to his illustrious contemporaries, and yet he had.

Why?

Guilt?

No, he had no cause to feel guilty.

Everything he'd said to her last week had been correct.

After Celestia had reflected upon it, she'd been forced to acknowledge that truth. Papa's unprofessional behavior had brought them to this juncture. The earl had no choice but to dismiss him.

Keyworth's reputation was at stake too.

That did not make it any easier to accept, however.

"Thank you, Your Graces," she said as they gathered their purchases and edged toward the entrance.

"Rest assured, Miss Tolman, I, for one, intend to return often." Her face swathed in a warm smile, the Duchess of Bainbridge canted her head.

"As do I," echoed the other ladies.

They took their leave, and Celestia busied herself tidying up the counter. After she'd rolled the string up and put away the scissors, she faced the earl.

"Did you need something, my lord? Or did you just stop by to see if your benevolent efforts were successful?"

He grinned, not at all put off by her starchy tone.

“Have they been?”

He brushed a piece of lint from his charcoal gray coat, accented by black velvet cuffs and lapels. Understated elegance and powerful masculine grace. She'd never considered a man graceful before, but after seeing him in his office, she could think of no other appropriate description.

He moved with lithe, lean, smooth measures, and an undercurrent of powerful male fairly oozed from him. Never had a man so rattled her. As much as she loathed admitting it, she, a prim and proper bluestocking, was hard-pressed not to stare like a gawping schoolgirl.

His features were not precisely handsome in the conventional sense. They were far too rugged for that. Yet the straight blade of his nose, the strong, angular jaw with the faintest hint of whiskers, a well-formed mouth that had the vexing tendency to twitch with amusement, and his hawkish dark sable eyebrows melded together to create a fine specimen of manhood.

Very fine, indeed.

His finest features, though, were his endless eyes.

In short, they were beautiful. Stunningly so.

Gray ringed with midnight blue and shards of silvery-blue fringed by thick, sooty lashes—she felt as if she were sinking each time she gazed into them. At first, she'd believed his eyes were pale blue. In some light, they appeared silver.

No, quicksilver.

His intense gaze probed hers. Asking, taking, and something else glinted in those depths that Celestia could not, for the life of her, identify.

Lifting a shoulder, she brushed away paper residue from the shiny wood. “I appreciate any business, so I thank you. However, you should be aware, ladies of the *ton*, in general, have no need of an amanuensis.”

“Not even for their memoirs?” Landry asked, giving her a rakish, lopsided smile.

*The devil.*

Fire burned in Celestia's cheeks, for she knew full well what he referred to, the scoundrel.

"A gentleman would not remark upon *that*," she said, frost edging her words.

"I think it admirable," he said in apparent seriousness. "And you've done nothing to color about."

Now he was lying through his perfectly even and annoyingly white teeth.

They both knew how utterly inappropriate it was for Celestia to have transcribed Madame Bonacieux's memoir. The experience had been...educational and enlightening.

Celestia gravitated her focus to the storefront, where a young couple stood arm in arm outside, perusing the window display. The man said something, and the woman turned her adoring gaze up to his.

Celestia felt like an interloper and resolutely turned her thoughts to today's sales.

Despite Landry's steering business in the shop's direction, she knew—in the deepest recesses of her soul—it would not be enough.

Sudden weariness engulfed her, and a flood of hot tears sprang to her eyes. She swiftly lowered her lashes, lest he see.

*Drat. Drat. Drat.*

Celestia did not weep in public. Ever.

She was a strong, self-sufficient woman, and by Jiminy, she would not cry.

It must be a lack of sleep. She lay awake each night, staring at the cracked ceiling and worrying about her future and Papa's and Uncle Paul's too.

Neither Orion nor Nash had answered her last three letters.

What could they do anyway?

Nothing, devil it. Not a dashed thing.

Neither of her brothers had any desire to take on the store's operation, and both loved the navy, so she suspected they'd make it their careers.

Perhaps she could talk Papa and Uncle Paul into selling the house. The shop's upper story could be transformed into living accommodations again. It mightn't be as comfortable as their current home, but it was better than losing their income source.

For the second time in less than half an hour, she grasped her earlobe and gently rotated the flesh between her fingers.

"You do that when you are tense or agitated," Keyworth said matter of factly.

*What?*

"Do what?"

He gave a pointed look at her fingers massaging her earlobe. At once, she dropped her hand to her side.

Never before had anyone noticed or commented on her habit.

Not her mother or father.

Not her older brothers, who loved nothing better than to tease her.

No one until this irksome man had taken note. And not only took note but rudely remarked upon it.

*Well, you, my lord, quirk your eyebrows and mouth in a most arrogant fashion ALL of the time.*

Leveling him a bland look, she said, "My lord, I have tasks that need my attention."

Dusting the shelves was not a pressing chore, but the earl affected her most curiously, and she needed the distraction.

"I have a proposition for you, Miss Tolman."

## CHAPTER EIGHT



*I should never have visited the Earl of Keyworth.  
I want to hate him as I did before, but I now know  
he's not the blackguard I once believed him to be.  
I cannot stop thinking about him.*

*Miss Celestia Tolman to her diary.*

*TOLMAN TOMES—SCRIVENER and Stationer*

*Oxford Street, St. Giles*

*Several More Impossibly Uncomfortable Minutes Later*

CELESTIA WENT UTTERLY STILL, despair sluicing through her, shredding the last remnants of hope that the Earl of Keyworth wasn't an opportunistic libertine.

*Lord, not him too?*

Was that why he'd refused to hire Papa back or retain her services.

She felt all of the color drain from her face as she permitted her eyelids to drift shut and block his handsome visage.

*Why should he be any different?* her cryptic conscience scolded.

Kicking her disappointment aside, she dredged up her fractured composure and opened her eyes.

“I am not interested,” she stated flatly. Icily. Loading those four words with as much disdain and scorn as she could muster.

“You do not even know what I was going to suggest,” Keyworth said, his eyebrow cocked in that skeptical, faintly mocking manner she’d already come to know.

Plunking her hands on her hips, Celestia glowered, far past the point of politesse, lord or no lord.

“Don’t I?” She jabbed an ink-stained finger at his chest, taking a measure of satisfaction when he retreated a step. Never mind that her finger throbbed where she’d encountered an inflexible wall of solid muscle.

He blinked at her in bewilderment, as if she’d impaled him with a sword.

Oh, he was good.

So very good.

Acting the innocent. The imposed upon victim.

“You’ll offer me a tidy sum,” she snapped. “A few jewels or bric-a-brac. Perhaps a carriage and team for my use, along with a *charming* little house in an older but *respectable* part of town.”

Utter shock flitted across his chiseled features, and the earl’s jaw slackened comically. If she weren’t so riled, she might actually have been amused.

“You think...?” Lord Keyworth stuttered, shaking his head and waving his hands before him. “By God, I am not...”

Just short of rolling his eyes, he pointed his gaze toward the ceiling for a blink.

“*Blessed Jesus,*” he practically growled.

Was that a prayer or an expletive?

Lord Keyworth inhaled a steadying breath and shook his dark head again.

“Miss Tolman, I give you my word as a gentleman. I am *not* asking you to become my mistress.”

His cheeks were suspiciously rosy. As if *he* were genuinely embarrassed.

*Impossible.*

Rakes and rogues and flirtatious rascallions such as he did not blush.

Eyes narrowed to furious slits and hands balled into fists, she glared daggers at him. “You are *not*?”

“Indeed, no. I would never be so degrading.” His quicksilver gaze searched hers, and the intensity there made her want to squirm. “Have you had...that is, I presume you have been made such insulting offers before?”

She gave a stiff nod. “I have. Several times, in fact.”

The air chuffed from his lungs. His expression turned to stone, and flinty fury glinted in his eyes.

“Who?”

One short, steely syllable. Landry seemed genuinely offended on her behalf.

“Why should you care?”

“I care that any woman is imposed upon in such a debasing and demeaning manner.”

She laughed then, disbelieving and shrill.

“Are you telling me you’ve *never* kept a mistress, my lord? I thought all lords ran through lovers as swiftly as bluestockings read books.”

His mouth quipped upward, and the seductive twinkle returned to his gray eyes. “That, Miss Tolman, is an interesting analogy.”



She felt the unflattering flush mounting from her chest to her hairline. *Again.*

Her face probably looked like a radish by now.

Celestia did not blush daintily like the lovely English roses who'd just left her shop. She turned raspberry red from her bosoms to her hairline. It was most aggravating and gave her every emotion away.

“You avoided the question, my lord.”

“As any gentleman should,” he remarked unapologetically while regarding her in such a penetrating fashion, she felt... Well, she did not have a name for whatever this warm, unnerving feeling was.

Smoothing her skirt, she deliberately changed the subject. “Your...ah...proposition?”

“I should like you to transcribe my speeches and letters for me,” he announced succinctly. “As you say, the duchesses have little need for a scrivener, and I have a pressing need for one.”

Celestia's jaw went slack, and her heart somersaulted with excitement. And hope.

Precious, improbable hope.

Was it possible?

Had he *really* reconsidered?”

“But...but you said I could not come to your residence,” she said, gripping the countertop so hard her knuckles turned white.

Which, as she reflected upon it later, would never have worked.

Who would've run the store in her absence?

She'd have to close it during those times she transcribed, and they could not afford that.

“And you shan't.” He looked around the small space. “I presume this establishment has an office?”

Nodding, she said, “Two, actually. Upstairs.”

She directed her gaze to the narrow stairway at the back of the room behind the counter.

“Well, then. We shall use one for our purposes. Your father or uncle can act as a chaperone.” Forehead knitted, he perused the shop. “You are alone?”

“My father is upstairs. He’s...”

She lifted a helpless gaze to him, the shame settling on her like a heavy, familiar cloak.

Pity darkened Landry’s gray eyes to charcoal. She hated that he so readily understood the futility of her situation. Pity stripped a person of their dignity, no matter that it came couched as compassion and kindness.

“I spoke with Papa after I visited with you.” Lips pursed, Celestia shook her head. “As much as I wish otherwise, our conversation was not productive.”

“And your uncle?” he asked, seemingly sincerely interested.

“He’s been unwell too, I fear.”

“Hmm.” Landry made that inarticulate sound in the back of his throat that he made when he was thinking.

“I know two trustworthy, hardworking lads, each sixteen or seventeen years old, that could act as sales clerks when you are transcribing for me,” he put forth.

“No.” Mortification scalding her cheeks, Celestia shook her head and wet her lower lip. “The shop is not in a financial position to pay anyone wages.”

“You would not have to,” Landry replied easily. “I have placed several older boys and girls in respectable establishments to learn various trades, rather like apprenticeships. I pay their wages during training, and quite often, their employers are so pleased they offer them full-time positions.”

Why, Celestia had never heard of such a thing.

Utterly flummoxed and momentarily rendered speechless, she, at last, found her tongue. “That is very generous of you and, I must admit, quite unusual as well as philanthropic.”

“So, are you interested?” Landry pressed, a glint of expectation in his kind eyes.

Celestia searched his face for any indication of deception or mockery. Any hint of jesting or taunting.

There wasn't any.

Just sincere, heartfelt regard that made her feel at once very feminine and extremely maladroit.

How could she ever have believed him hard-hearted or uncaring?

She had observed him being the epitome of kindness, benevolence, and consideration in all things. Such characteristics were unusual, most especially in a privileged lord of the realm.

Celestia's admiration and respect grew markedly stronger.

“I'll pay you the same fees I paid your father,” he said.

Hope flared behind Celestia's ribs again, and a wave of relief unfurled in her belly.

It might, *just might*, be enough to keep the shop running until the mortgage was paid in full. Nine months was not so very long.

She fashioned her mouth into the first authentic smile of the afternoon and extended her hand. “I accept, my lord.”

Landry glanced at her gloveless, outstretched hand and then, flashing her a blinding, incandescent grin, clasped her hand firmly in his big palm.

A jolt shot up her arm to her shoulder and then spread, a scintillating electrical current throughout her body.

Well, one thing was for certain, she conceded once her pulse had returned to a semblance of normal. She would *never* be bored with Landry, Earl of Keyworth, about. No, bored was the farthest thing from what she was feeling at the moment.

“I think we shall get along very well, Celestia,” he said in that warm-honeyed baritone that caused all sorts of peculiar reactions from the hair rising along her nape in awareness to a most discomfiting sensation low in her abdomen.

*Perhaps, far too well.*

And yet, that sardonic thought did not disturb or unnerve Celestia nearly as much as it ought to have done. Would have done a mere week ago.

“I shall call tomorrow at three if that time is convenient for you.” Mouth tilted into a lopsided smile, Landry glanced toward the door and then back at her. “I’ll bring the lads with me.”

## CHAPTER NINE

### 9



*Your Lordship, I have most excellent news!  
I have been able to locate a former parishioner  
of Reverend Smythe-Shufflebottom in Lancaster.  
The elderly woman corresponds with a Ruth Smith, though  
irregularly.*

*Mrs. Smith and her daughter, Laureen, currently live in  
Brighton.*

*I believe Mrs. Smith is, in fact, Mrs. Smythe-Shufflebottom,  
and her daughter is your sister, Lenora.*

*~Letter to the Earl of Keyworth from Marshall Britmere,  
investigator.*

*STILL AT TOLMAN TOMES—SCRIVENERS and Stationer*

*Oxford Street, St. Giles, London*

*And Still 13 April 1818*

LANDRY SKEWED his mouth into a lopsided smile as Celestia licked her lower lip, then gave a hesitant nod. “That should suffice. I’ll inform my father and uncle.”

Attempting to ignore the immediate and powerful surge of lust to his groin when her tongue darted out, he focused his attention on what she'd said.

Why had her uncle and father let her bear the brunt of the store's operations?

It was not that Landry did not think Celestia capable. She'd proven she was a most resourceful and intrepid female. No, what rankled him was slugabed men who thought nothing of letting a woman shoulder most of the burden.

Such men deserved no respect.

Neither did the cads who had propositioned her. He would have their names from her eventually, and when he did...

Well, they would not trouble her with their uncouth suggestions ever again.

He would also wager his beloved Sampson that Celestia did the brunt of the shopping, cooking, and housework too. Beneath her magnificent, intelligent eyes, faint purplish half-moon shadows contrasted with her ivory skin.

In truth, she looked done in. And indescribably beautiful.

The urge to shield her from harm burgeoned inside him, a wildfire building in intensity and power until it consumed Landry. No woman other than his mother and, to a degree, the sister he'd never met had ever stirred such protective sentiments.

That was one of the reasons he'd imposed upon the wives of several friends to frequent Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer. Other than a few elevated eyebrows, quirked mouths, and speaking glances amongst his chums, they had prudently kept their thoughts to themselves and readily complied with his request.

That was what good friends did.

Supported one another without question.

Although Landry knew full well they were dying to learn the whole of it. And no doubt, after today, he'd face an

inquisition the next time he encountered those duchesses. At some future juncture, he would have to explain everything.

God save his soul.

Tucking a stray strand of treacle brown hair behind her ear, Celestia filled her lungs with a deep breath. His gaze slipped to the voluptuous bounty hidden beneath the plain fabric of her gown.

*Damn my eyes.*

Despite his determination to be a gentleman and not ogle her like a delicacy displayed at a pastry shop, his focus repeatedly dipped to her ample bosom. Celestia might be small in stature, but Landry would vow she possessed a very womanly form. Even her gown, a drab gray affair, could not detract from her luscious curves or her unpretentious beauty.

“I wonder if you’d do me the courtesy of answering a personal question, Miss Tolman?”

She had begun dusting the countertop and paused, glancing up at him, her gaze unwavering. A tiny, puzzled frown drew her delicate eyebrows together.

“I suppose that depends on the question. I’d be an addlepatte to blindly agree without knowing what it is you want to know.”

Unable to fully check his grin, Landry scratched his nose.

Verbal sparring with her was quite refreshing and entertaining.

“Your name. It is quite unusual. I have not heard it before. Is it a family name?”

Her low, melodic laugh caused something to unfurl deep inside him. Its strands wound around him, ensnaring him in warmth and wonder.

“No. My mother was an amateur astrologer. My brothers’ names are Nash and Orion—both other names for star. Mama adored studying the constellations and stars.” She angled her chin toward a bookshelf. “We still stock a selection of books

on astronomy. I believe she read every one of them at least twice.”

“Fascinating,” Landry said.

Setting aside her dust cloth, Celestia’s expression grew pensive. “That is a wonderful advantage of owning a used bookstore. I am never without reading material.”

“Your mother sounds like a remarkable woman. How long ago did you lose her?” he asked with sincere interest.

A fragile half-smile bent her rosy mouth upward, and sadness darkened her eyes. “She was the most intelligent woman I have ever known. She passed three years ago from cancer after a long illness. She was only six-and-forty.”

Landry made a sympathetic noise in his throat. They had more in common than he would have ever supposed. “I, too, lost my mother from cancer. She was two-and-forty. We were very close as well.”

“I am sorry.” Compassion softened her mouth and the corners of her eyes. “Have you other family?”

Landry was astounded to realize he wanted Celestia to know about Lenora. He had not even shared his sister’s existence with his closest friends until recently. To be precise, until he’d been required to seek their advice about retaining a new investigator.

“None except a half-sister that I have been trying to locate for eight years.”

Celestia’s eyes grew round with disbelief, and she inhaled a short, sharp gasp.

“You do not *know* where she is?” she asked incredulously.

Shaking his head, he said, “Not for certain. I have had an investigator searching for her ever since I learned of her existence eight years ago.”

He brushed a black-gloved fingertip back and forth below his nose before responding.

“Lenora was not my father’s child.”



No disdain or shock marred Celestia's features. Rather, she laid her hand on his forearm and gave a small, sympathetic squeeze. A jolt not unlike the time lightning had struck a tree a half-mile away out of the blue when he'd been out riding sluiced through him.

Every hair on his body had stood on end then too.

What was it about this woman that had him so mesmerized?

Celestia Tolman was a perplexing, tantalizing enigma that he yearned to unwrap and explore. And yet, he knew he must proceed with caution. She was wary of men. Justifiably, given what she'd disclosed a few minutes ago about the multiple offers of protectors.

A nice word for a pimp, just as a kept mistress was a polite word for prostitute.

Landry wanted to know everything about Celestia, and that was a first for him.

Her station meant less than nothing to him.

What she did to him *did* matter. Rather a lot, actually.

Removing her hand from his arm, Celestia gave a little self-conscious smile, as if she'd suddenly realized she'd overstepped the mark. Clearing her throat, she picked up her dust cloth once more.

"Until tomorrow then, your lordship," she said primly, clearly bringing their discussion, and thereby his visit, to a conclusion.

Removing his hat, Landry bent into a gallant bow. "I eagerly anticipate it."

Very much indeed.

She blinked and then, a mischievous grin arcing her mouth, dipped into a perfect curtsy.

It was his turn to blink in astonishment.

Her entire demeanor transformed, and she had become a teasing vixen.

“None of that. I do not intend to stand on formality falderol.” He winked and was delighted to see two charming spots of color spring to life on her cheeks.

“Good day, Celestia.”

Her eyes went wide at the familiarity. However, she did not chastise Landry, though from the way she clamped her bottom lip with her teeth, the thought had occurred to her. For whatever reason, she’d eschewed doing so.

Good, because he intended for them to be on a given name basis.

He exited the store, feeling more satisfied than he had in a good while. And also quite positive he’d just put something in motion he could not control nor stop. What was more, he was not altogether certain he wanted to do either.

Whistling a bawdy tavern ditty, Landry mounted Fie, his black gelding, and turned the horse in the direction of the Wicked Earls’ Club.

Ridiculously happy—almost giddy—Landry grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Celestia had agreed to transcribe for him.

His guilt for sending her packing without hope or recourse slid from his shoulders like a discarded cloak.

*“I pray you lay awake at night pondering if I shall exact revenge upon you.”*

She had exacted her revenge, just not in the manner Landry had expected. And he did lay awake at night, but not for the reasons she had no doubt anticipated.

Miss Celestia Tolman had disrupted his life, his sleep, and his future. But what an incredible, extraordinarily welcome disruption.

Landry’s meeting with Sharonford had not been as productive as he’d have liked, but later that afternoon at White’s, he’d encountered the Duke of Westfall. It turned out Westfall had been most helpful, and within four-and-twenty

hours Marshall Britmere had departed London in search of Lenora.

Britmere had a stellar reputation as an investigator. To date, he hadn't failed at a single assignment. His fee was exorbitant, but he also guaranteed his work—something no other detective offered and which also testified to Britmere's confidence and expertise.

No wonder Madagan had not been able to find Lenora, not that he'd tried overly hard, truth be told. He had become accustomed to slugging along on Landry's coin. Once he located Lenora, he would've put himself out of a cushy job. Therefore, he had only sent along tidbits to keep Landry's appetite whetted but never enough to actually solve the case of his missing sister.

He was out of a position now, nevertheless.

Lenora's adopted mother had changed her name when she was first taken in. Later, after her husband died, Mrs. Smith had dropped the latter part of her surname and changed the first part's spelling. Which, given the nature of and reason for her wayward spouse's demise, was not at all shocking or astonishing.

It seems the cleric's paramour—a buxom tavern maid he had got with child—had pushed him down the parish's back stairs when he refused to leave his wife and adopted daughter.

Landry kicked himself to next Sunday and back for not having hired a different investigator sooner. Lenora might have been safely ensconced beneath his roof and under his care and protection years ago had he done so.

In a single day, his life seemed to be falling into order.

His sister might very well be found, and he had come up with a viable solution to his need for a scrivener and Celestia's need for funds. She'd be in high dudgeon if she knew he had poked around a bit regarding the Tolmans' finances.

Neither of the Tolman elder brothers was a gambler nor a wastrel, and neither had outstanding debts, aside from the building's mortgage. A mortgage which Landry had paid off

but had made the bank swear not to inform the Tolmans—or anyone else for that matter.

Instead, the remaining monthly payments were to be deposited in an account in Celestia's name. Somehow, Landry knew in his gut that she would not appreciate his high-handedness. Regardless, he could not squelch his ever-increasing instinct to protect her.

*It is bloody well more than that, and you well know it.*

Indeed, he did.

Yesterday, he'd finally admitted the truth to himself.

He, Landry Garrad Jeremy Audsley, Earl of Keyworth, had a romantic interest in Celestia Tolman. Not just an idle, passing fancy that would slake him physically. No, this allure went much farther than mere carnal desire.

A ridiculous, farcical notion had begun rattling around in his head days ago, and the memory of an oath he'd made to himself years before bobbed to the forefront of his mind once more.

*By God, I would marry a flower hawker or a seamstress if she loved me, and I loved her.*

Or a petite bluestocking scrivener?

Aye. A prim and proper and utterly enchanting, breathtaking, incomparable bluestocking. All the better that she could act as his amanuensis. Theirs would be a perfect partnership if he did say so himself.

Several people gave him odd looks as if he were bosky as he trotted Fie along the busy lane.

It may have had to do with the ridiculous grin splitting his face from ear to ear.

It had been a very long time since he'd anticipated anything as much as his appointment with Celestia Tolman tomorrow afternoon.

## CHAPTER TEN

10



*Once my service in the navy is over in June, I may stay in the Americas, Tia.*

*There are many opportunities in this country, the likes of which I cannot hope to achieve in England. You know I have never been interested in the store or scribing.*

*Do not say anything to Papa just yet. I know he'll object.*

*Letter from Orion Toman to his sister Celestia Tolman.*

*Sent early April 1818 but not received.*

*TOLMAN TOMES—SCRIVENER and Stationer*

*Oxford Street, St. Giles, London*

*6 May 1818*

BENT over her father's serviceable desk, Celestia waited for Landry to proceed with his dictation. The chair's cracked leather protested as she shifted her position to better catch the light from the small window behind her. Once a cheerful yellow, the faded and chipped paint had mellowed into sallow saffron and did little to brighten the chamber's dingy atmosphere.

Today's document was a draft of a petition Landry meant to circulate to support workhouse and child labor reformations. She admired him for his lofty goals, though if she were wholly forthright, she doubted he would muster the backing he required.

In her experience, people adored the pretense of munificence, benevolence, and charity. As long as it did not require any real degree of sacrifice or commitment on their part.

*All of the accolades of a saint without any of the discomforts*, she thought bitterly.

Neck bent, his thumb and forefinger cradling his chin, Landry paced back and forth. His glossy Hessians rapped rhythmically upon the wood floor, a comforting cadence.

Celestia could not help but admire the tautness of his superfine forest green coat as it stretched across his broad back and shoulders. Nor the biceps straining the fabric of his jacket or the rippling muscles of his thighs encased in black trousers.

He moved with a lithe sinewiness, an ebb and flow of stark masculinity that beckoned to her femininity on a primal level. She was unsure if he was aware of the effect he had on women, or if perhaps she was simply more susceptible to his manliness than other females.

Because, stupid and foolish and preposterous though it was, she'd come to care for him these past weeks. Care for him a great deal, in point of fact.

Inhaling a steadying breath, she ceased her clandestine examination of the much too good-looking and far too distracting earl. Stifling a sigh for which she could not name the cause, she attended to the foolscap before her.

Quill poised, Celestia fingered an earlobe and waited.

"Therefore," Landry said, one forefinger raised and his voice ringing with conviction and authority, "it is the intrinsic responsibility, the ethical duty, and the moral obligation to help those amongst us who cannot help themselves. To whom much is given, much shall be required."

Pride thrummed through her, bringing a nascent smile as she carefully penned the shorthand.

*He is a good man.*

Landry was indeed a decent man—peer or not—and shame swept her that she'd ever believed otherwise. She had judged him without knowing all of the facts. Condemned him because it was easier to blame someone else than look closer to home to where the real culpability lay.

Wasn't that just like human nature?

To see the flaws in others so clearly while turning a blind eye to one's own, often far worse, faults?

How drastically things had changed since Celestia had sneaked into Landry's home and his big dog had terrified her. Sampson had visited Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer several times now.

He was every bit as gentle as Landry had vowed.

Indeed, the very man she would've relegated to hell's bowels without a qualm four weeks ago was now the person she most looked forward to seeing. He, quite literally, had brightened her dreary life to such a degree she could not comprehend returning to her former drudgery.

It did not bear thinking upon.

Landry had become a vital—no, *the* vital—part of her life.

They had fallen into a comfortable routine these past three weeks. He arrived in the afternoon Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays and dictated for two, three, or occasionally four hours. The rest of the week, she transcribed his work and presented the finished notes to him the next Monday.

If he needed to add a thought or if she required clarification, they sent notes back and forth several more times throughout the week. She looked forward to those brusque but polite missives without a trace of the poetic or a romantic vein with the same anticipation as receiving a lace-edged Valentine.

Not that she'd ever received such a novelty.

Regardless, she had seen them displayed in the picture windows of various establishments year after year near Valentine's Day. Every year, she coveted one for herself from her very own sweetheart.

Never before had the days inched by so exasperatingly slowly as they did between Landry's visits. Celestia found herself fussing over her appearance and had even remade two of her mother's gowns in the evenings after work—one in seafoam green and another in midnight blue.

There also remained a lovely berry red gown trimmed in euchre lace she thought to attempt to make into a more formal affair, but her seamstress skills were not her greatest strength.

Even as she took extra care with her appearance and worked her needle in and out, in and out, in the parlor each evening, she knew full well she had set upon a fool's journey. A sojourn that could only lead to heartache and regret.

Fine then.

Celestia would take whatever she could because all too soon this man who made her heart sing and blood tingle, who had crept into her dreams at night and tangled her thoughts during the day, might be gone from her life.

Forever.

These memories would have to sustain her.

Today, Celestia had dared to wear the green gown and had even threaded a matching ribbon in her new, less severe hairstyle. A few curls brushed her ears and framed her face. Her mother's pearl earrings hung from her ears, and a simple, single strand of pearls graced her neck.

She felt pretty and elegant.

And rather silly, like a dressed-up doll. And not a little vulnerable.

Would Landry see through her playacting?

Understand it for what it was?

An attempt to appear attractive for him?



Of course, Celestia understood she could never compare to the chic ladies of *le beau monde* draped in their first stares of fashion. Nevertheless, for a bluestocking shopkeeper, she supposed—*hoped*—she measured up satisfactorily.

A simple shawl wrapped around her shoulders helped to keep the ever-present drafts at bay. A tiny thrill rushed through her as she recalled that several times this afternoon, she had observed Landry's smoldering gaze wandering to the skin exposed above her bosom.

Not in a leering or lecherous way, as had the other men who had stared at her breasts. Those men made her want to hide or cover herself or take a bath and scrub her skin until it glowed pink.

Landry's male appreciation did not make her feel any of those things.

There was another gleam in his gray eyes. A glint that darkened them to pewter, except for the silver flecks that sparked and glimmered.

*That* look made her shiver, and not from cold either.

Celestia castigated herself for allowing the Earl of Keyworth to wriggle his way into her heart in such a short time. She, a prim and proper bluestocking, knew better than to permit a handsome man to charm her. To seduce her into casting aside common sense and practicality. To long for that which could never, ever be.

There was nothing the least bit prim and proper about the dreams she'd had the past few nights, however. Dreams that awakened her after midnight and left her...wanting...wanting...

*Good God and sweet Jesus too.*

Heat suffused her, and she ducked her head for fear her fiery cheeks would give her away. A draft would be most welcome at this moment. Alas, at this precise interlude, the upper room remained draft-free for the first time in weeks.

Curling her toes into her shoes until they cramped, Celestia tightened her fingers on the quill, pressing the nib so hard it

snapped.

*Blast.*

She did not know *what* it was exactly that she wanted when she awoke sweaty and tense and aching. Nevertheless, she was confident the peculiar throbbing sensation had something to do with Landry.

And the way he surreptitiously watched her.

And the way she covertly watched him watching her.

Did he also watch her watch him, watching her?

A delicious little quiver tiptoed up her spine at the idea.

*Enough*, Celestia scolded herself.

*Think of something else lest you make a complete cake of yourself.*

Anything or *anyone* other than the powerful man prowling back and forth, back and forth, mere feet from her. Anything but what it would be like to be under his protection. To know him in the intimate way a man and woman knew one another.

Was it worth her ruination, though?

For the unmitigated truth of it was, a man of his station would never lower himself to marry a commoner. Besides, Landry had never hinted at anything inappropriate between them despite his sizzling glances.

In fact, he'd been aghast when she'd believed he'd improperly propositioned her.

*STOP, Celestia Andromeda Josette Tolman.*

*Just stop, for pity's sake*

She scrambled for something else to ponder.

*Wyatt Johnson and Nelson Black.*

Yes, that would do to distract her errant musings.

The two lads Landry had retained as apprentices had become adept at overseeing the store, and she had become perfectly comfortable leaving the operation in their hands for a

few hours. Intelligent and unexpectedly articulate, both young men professed an interest in training as amanuensis as well. Which meant the real possibility that Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer might actually have a future.

Surprisingly, Uncle Paul had approved of the idea and, beaming, announced his plans to only work two days a week henceforth. Fridays and Saturdays, he instructed Wyatt and Nelson on scribing and shorthand.

Today, only Nelson worked in the store. Wyatt had come down with a vicious cold yesterday, and Celestia, after assuring him his position was not in jeopardy, had sent him home until he was well.

A scowl wrinkled her forehead as she waited for Landry to continue.

Just when she believed finances might be manageable, Uncle Paul had decided to reduce his hours. Not that she blamed him. He was nearing seven-and-sixty, and his health had been failing for years.

She had not mentioned transforming the upper level into living accommodations yet. Not with Papa valiantly trying to remain sober. Their house was situated much farther away from the taverns and pubs that populated many lanes near the bookstore.

After a lengthy, private discussion with Landry that first day he had arrived for transcribing, which Celestia was not privy to, her father had taken himself home. He had not appeared in the shop since, but neither had he, to her knowledge, taken a single swallow of liquor.

To her absolute astonishment, he had begun cooking supper and even tidying up the house.

She had no idea what Landry had said, but whatever it had been, it appeared to have worked. Every day, it was on the tip of her tongue to ask Landry, and every time she quashed the impulse.

He would tell her when he wanted her to know.

Or else Papa would.

She closed her eyes, sending a silent prayer heavenward that, at long last, her father might have put his drinking behind him. The previous three years had been a trial, to be sure, and she honestly had not known how she could go on with things as they were.

“Celestia?”

Landry’s warmth beckoned to her from beside her chair. He stood so near that she smelled that combination of him that never failed to unhinge her knees and cause a little flutter in her tummy.

Soap and starch and sandalwood and cloves.

And something woodsy she could not quite put her finger on. Perhaps juniper or eucalyptus or cedar.

Someone really ought to bottle that aroma and call it *Essence of Earl* or *Male Magnetism*.

They’d make a fortune.

“Celestia? Are you all right?”

Worry drove the tenor of Landry’s voice an octave lower.

He placed his large palm upon her shoulder. His bare fingers grazed her collarbone, and she all but melted and slid from her chair. Every pore came alive at his touch, and Celestia feared she was on the brink of either disintegrating or erupting into an inferno.

Clothing rustled, and she became aware he had crouched beside her in his concern.

*Oh, Lord.*

He was so close, and she felt her body sway toward his, the traitorous thing. She was helpless to resist his masculine pull.

“Celestia?”

His fingers tightened the merest bit.

Opening her eyes, she found herself sinking into pools of quicksilver fringed in thick, black lashes. She could not have

broken the connection had she wanted to, and God above, she did not want to.

Desire flared in Landry's eyes before he boldly sank his attention to her parted mouth, descending lower to the expanse of feminine flesh her bodice did not conceal, and then returned lazily up her face to meet her eyes again.

At his visual caress, she vowed her nipples pebbled and strained against the muslin of her gown.

Thank God for her shawl. It hid the evidence of her arousal.

A sideways grin tilted his seductive mouth.

*He knows.*

Indeed, he knew very well how he affected her.

"I very, *very* much want to kiss you, Celestia," Landry's voice emerged as a throaty purr.

*Yes. Yes. Yes.*

Could he possibly be as overcome as she?

Licking her lips, Celestia struggled to find her voice. To agree without sounding like a wanton hussy or an immoral strumpet. Or utterly desperate.

"May I kiss you?" he asked. "Please?"

Of course, he would not force himself on her. He was a true gentleman in behavior and character. Landry gave her the choice.

She nodded and managed a barely audible, "Please."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

11



*Keyworth, I heard something disconcerting today from that  
cockscum,*

*Thruxby, and wanted to alert you. Unsavory rumors are  
circulating about your  
relationship with the children you employ—particularly the  
boys.*

*Who have you angered of late? Do you know of anyone with a  
vendetta?*

*I must speak with you at your earliest convenience.*

*Not in public. Come directly to my house.*

*~Urgent note to the Earl of Keyworth from the Earl of  
Sharonford*

*TOLMAN TOMES—SCRIVENER and Stationer*

*Oxford Street, St. Giles, London*

*A Few Minutes Later*

LANDRY HAD FOUGHT the desire to sweep Celestia into his arms and claim her sweet rosebud mouth for weeks. At this instant, when she gazed at him with such longing in her jade

green eyes, even knowing it was foolhardy, he could not resist for another moment.

“Sweet, Celestia,” he murmured before gazing his mouth over her silky cheek. Then the other cheek. Then the delicate, fragrant skin between her neck and ear.

She smelled of soap and cinnamon and Celestia.

Her little gasp of pleasure spurred him onward.

It had taken Herculean effort to appear unaffected each time he saw her. To hold his emotions and desire in check for days on end for fear of insulting her and destroying this remarkable, precious thing burgeoning between them.

“Please,” she implored again, her voice a breathless whisper as she tilted her mouth up in invitation. “Kiss me, Landry.”

How could he refuse what his heart wanted more than his next breath?

Scooping her into his arms, he cradled her small form against him as he settled his frame into her chair. Her lush breasts surged upward, the twin mounds creamy and tempting as hell. The valley between them dipped into a deep cleft he longed to explore with his fingers and mouth.

Her unsightly plain gowns could not disguise her tantalizing woman’s figure, the likes of which he had never beheld. Full, ripe breasts, a small waist that flared into generous hips, which swayed provocatively when she moved.

When Celestia had entered the office today wearing this green gown, almost the same shade as her stunning eyes, it was as if spring had arrived in all of her illustrious glory. The verdant shade brought out the bronze and golden ribbons in Celestia’s chestnut hair, and her honey-toned skin glowed with health.

She was, in a word, exquisite.

And hope had ventured to bloom within his chest that she had put aside her drab-colored frocks and dared to wear something bright and colorful because of him. She should

always wear color and never hide her beauty under unbecoming sacks again.

Landry would be bound she had deliberately done so to discourage unwanted masculine attention. Regardless, even attired in the dull grays and browns she had favored, she could not disguise her beauty.

No doubt, that is why men had degraded Celestia with their offensive offers.

By God, he *would* have all of their names, and they would know his wrath.

A groan throttled up Landry's throat when she adjusted her position, and the twin pillows of her delicious buttocks rubbed against his rigid length. He had been at half-staff since that day in the bookstore when she'd erroneously believed he had offered to make her his mistress.

Never would he degrade her so.

Not this woman who had come to mean everything to him.

It was not just her beauty, for he knew many women who others would consider more attractive. Neither was it only her keen intelligence or ready wit or her unflappable courage.

In truth, it was all of those things and more. Much, much more.

But he could not simplify what this sentiment was with mere words. They jumbled in his mind and wrapped around his tongue. What he felt for Celestia was beyond words. It kindled joy in his spirit and simultaneously frightened the hell out of him.

Trailing his mouth over her arched neck, Landry delighted in her whimpers and sighs. In the way her hands clutched at his coat and how she instinctively pressed into him. Though it was impossible given the layers of fabric between them, he swore her pert nipples branded his chest with their scorching heat.

At last, he could bear it no more, and with tender reverence, he grazed her lips with his own.



*Heaven. Bliss. Perfection.*

She whimpered and raised her torso upward so that her mouth met his.

Her passion did not surprise him.

In his study, he'd seen a flash of the fiery woman she kept subdued behind her prim and proper exterior. That carefully constructed propriety was a thin shell, a veneer she presented to the world, behind which sizzled a spitfire.

He had every intention of cracking that shell wide open and allowing the magnificent woman within her freedom. Freedom to be herself and to shine in all of her resplendent glory.

Celestia curled one hand into his hair and parted her mouth at his gentle urging.

Sweeping her tongue with his, primal satisfaction thrummed through Landry's blood. She gasped and eagerly returned the movement. Dueling, lashing, sparring, their tongues mated, their breaths coming in ever-increasing deep rasps.

Landry's bollocks felt as hard and large as billiard balls as his turgid manhood surged against the delectable softness of her plump bottom.

They needed to stop before this went too far.

He had only intended to kiss her, but he was near to losing control.

*He* did not lose control.

Reluctantly, Landry lifted his head.

"Darling, we had better stop."

Someone could come upon them at any moment.

Wyatt and Nelson were quick studies, but they poked their heads into the office with a question or three or four every day. Landry would not risk Celestia's reputation or make her tattle fodder for the gossips.

Her eyelids slowly flickered open, and she gave him such a beatific smile, a piece of his heart tumbled to her dainty feet.

“Yes, of course.”

With a jerky little nod, she straightened, and he helped her to stand.

He brushed a loose tendril of silky chestnut hair behind her ear. She wore her hair in a Grecian knot today. The softer style flattered her oval face and displayed the luxuriousness of her hair.

Twin spots of color accented her cheeks, but she pinned him with one of her direct looks.

Had he finally found a woman wholly incapable of artifice?

“Thank you,” she said softly, diffidently.

“Thank you?” Landry repeated stupidly.

*For what?*

Kissing her?

Stopping?

What a marvel Celestia Tolman was.

A shy smile bloomed across her radiant face, her lips swollen and berry red from his kisses. She gave a little self-conscious smile and lifted a shoulder as if to say, *I do not know. Do not ask me to explain.*

And he understood, because Landry, too, could not put what had happened between them into words. It was far more than a first kiss, and he would vow she also knew it.

This was love in all of its imperfect, complex, and astonishing glory.

He loved her.

Landry, Earl of Keyworth, loved, adored, cherished Celestia Tolman, prim and proper bluestocking.

She and no other soothed his spirit, calmed his soul, brought him unparalleled peace, and yet stirred his carnal

desires into an inferno with an innocent look.

His attention flicked to her new gown.

Or a delectable expanse of velvety flesh above her modest bodice.

All, he had no doubt, without any intention of seduction or allure on her part.

She was, without exception, the most unaffected and unpretentious woman he had ever met. With her, Landry always knew exactly where he stood. He trusted her too, and that was why he now knew unequivocally that she could not have anything to do with the nasty chatter currently circulating about him.

That had not been the case when the *on dit* began weeks ago.

“*Do you fear I have a vengeful streak?*” she had quipped that day she had asked for his help, and he’d denied her his aid. Unforgivable of him when she had hinted how desperate her plight was.

In truth, he *had* wondered if she would behave as a woman scorned.

Now, he found the notion wholly untenable. After one day of working with Celestia, Landry dismissed her as the culprit. She was not capable of such premeditated malevolence or of spreading rancorous rumors.

Rumors so disgusting that Sharonford had insisted on meeting Landry at his home rather than at one of their gentlemen’s clubs to disclose the exact nature of the gossip.

Someone was very capable, however. And that someone seemed determined to destroy Landry’s reputation and political career by spreading tattle that he required sexual favors from the children he hired.

Too damned bad Britmere was not in London, or he would set the investigator on the rumormonger’s trail in short order.

Soon enough, perhaps as early as the day after tomorrow, Britmere would be back with Lenora and Mrs. Smythe—that

is Laureen and Mrs. Smith—in tow, if all went as planned. Landry had sent his coach to fetch his sister and her adopted mother. Mrs. Smith would always have a home with him.

After all, without the benefit of a husband and amidst an ugly scandal, she'd raised Lenora. He owed the woman a huge debt of gratitude, and he would see that she lived the remainder of her days in comfort.

Meanwhile, Landry had instructed his staff to not allow any children inside his house or on the grounds. Extra help had been hired to attend the household duties as well as prepare food for the waifs. Meals were dispersed in the alley adjacent to Landry's house, morning and evening.

It had only taken a few days for the urchins to understand the temporary change in their employment. For those who had younger siblings to feed, food was sent home with them. Presently, he did not dare pay them in coin, and he made sure he was never present when the food and other supplies were distributed.

Teeven and Fiske, Landry's valet, had been tasked with overseeing the children's welfare who had been put out of a position, as all depended on the coins they earned.

Familiar anger raised its thorny head, but Landry tamped it down. This was not the time to dwell on such unpleasantness. He shoved that ugly business to a recess of his mind to explore later.

Right now, he had something much more pleasant to ponder.

"I must go below, Landry," Celestia said, indicating the broken pen with a sweeping gesture. "I need a new quill. Give me a moment, please."

"By all means."

It would give him time to wrestle his ardor under control and provide her a few moments to regain her equanimity.

She started to turn away but then glanced at the small clock on the slightly lopsided and cluttered shelf nearby before facing him. "Shall I put water on for tea too?"

“Please.”

“I made seed cake this morning.” With a nuance of a smile hovering at the corners of her mouth, she left.

Landry had told her seed cake was a particular favorite of his, and the minx had baked it for him.

The days he dictated to her, they shared tea in the afternoon. She always baked a tasty treat or two, and the half-hour or so they spent chatting had become something he eagerly anticipated.

They spoke about all manner of things: their parents, her brothers and his sister, the places they wanted to visit, his dog, which he assured her was a big, gentle brute, and much more.

He’d learned her dreams—or at least part of them, and he had shared details of himself he’d never revealed to another person. Landry also regaled her with humorous tales of mishaps at balls, musicals, museums, and the theater.

Celestia had laughed until tears trailed down her porcelain cheeks.

She told him of the books she had read, her favorite flower—irises—how she’d always wanted to learn to ride a horse and dreamed of the day when women could openly pursue the same careers as men.

It seems his little bluestocking had read Mary Wollstonecraft’s writings. While Celestia did not agree with everything the philosopher wrote, she did very much believe men were not naturally superior to women simply because they were born males.

Landry could not have agreed more.

He supposed it was not precisely proper for them to be alone in the office. Chiefly as neither Celestia’s uncle nor father occupied the office next door as he had initially anticipated. That unfortunate circumstance could not have been predicted when he’d retained Celestia’s transcribing services, and he sure as hell was not giving her the sack now.

Nonetheless, Landry always left the door wide open and made sure, until today, to dictate from across the room from her. That way, if someone ventured upstairs, they would see nothing worth remarking upon.

Pounding on the stairs had him turning his head before Nelson, red-faced and highly agitated, stumbled to the stop. “My lord, Miss Tolman needs yer assistance straightaway. There is a cove below who won’t leave her be. He is behavin’ in a most improper fashion.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

12

*I know it's foolhardy and will undoubtedly result in  
heartbreak.*

*The instant I admitted to myself that I'd fallen in love with  
Landry,*

*I should've stopped scribing for him. But what can it hurt?  
He does not know, and that's the only way I can be with him.*

*I realize he'll have to marry someday and produce an heir.  
Why shouldn't I claim this time while I can?*

*~Miss Celestia Tolman to her diary.*

*TOLMAN TOMES—SCRIVENER and Stationer*

*Oxford Street, St. Giles, London*

*Still 6 May 1818*

LANDRY WAS out the door before Nelson finished speaking. Taking the stairs two at a time, he raced below. He jumped down the last three, landing with a heavy thud.

“I said release me, Sir Cronk.”

Though Celestia's voice was steady, an undercurrent of alarm tinged her words.

“Come now, Celestia,” a familiar, irritating male voice crooned. “No need to play the coy vixen with me.”

*The bloody blighter!*

Landry wanted to punch Ignatius Cronk to next December.

“Why else would you be wearing such a charming frock if not to entice us men?” Cronk asked, his tone lecherous and condescending.

Nelson’s heavy footfall indicated he had also descended the stairs and awaited Landry’s instruction.

“I know how women of your ilk think, my dear. Holding out for a bigger prize.” Cronk laughed, an unpleasant, nasally snicker. “I suppose I could offer you one hundred pounds annually in addition to a house. More if you please me, my dove. Let’s have a kiss to seal our bargain, shall we?”

By all that was holy, Landry would wring the blackguard’s neck before pummeling him. He ground his teeth so hard that if he continued grinding them much longer, they’d be dust. He’d gum his food for the rest of his days.

“Release me,” Celestia bit out with undisguised ire.

The sounds of a struggle ensued as Landry rounded the end of a bookshelf.

The tableau before him made him see red, and a growl of pure, animalistic fury escaped his clenched teeth.

*I’ll kill him.*

Celestia struggled to escape a rotund, balding gentleman slathering her face with sloppy, wet kisses while he brazenly pawed her breasts.

“Unhand her this instant,” Landry roared, sailing across the remaining distance without consciously moving.

Which side of the gargoyle’s face should he smash first?

Or should he pulverize his bulbous nose?

Definitely, the nose, if the red-veined, bulging appendage in the center of Cronk’s ugly face could even be called that.



Shock contorted the toad's already unpleasant features before he narrowed his eyes to vengeful slits and roughly yanked Celestia closer.

"She is taken, Keyworth," he sneered, curling his lips into a ghastly smile.

Taken? *Taken?*

By all that was divine. How dare this shriveled scrotum in a suit treat Celestia like she was a hackney or a seat at a card table or a pastry?

"I most definitely am not *taken*, sir."

Celestia jerked her arm free of his grasp and rubbed the reddened imprint of Cronk's fingers clearly displayed on her pale skin.

"And I shall never, ever, under *any* circumstances, agree to be kept by the likes of you," she spat. "I am not, nor will I ever be any man's mistress."

*Brava, my brave darling.*

Landry grinned, pride beating against his ribcage.

She was magnificent in her fury.

Nelson hovered nearby, one hand in his pocket.

Landry had no doubt whatsoever a deadly blade lay nestled there. You could take a youth off the streets, but it took longer than a few weeks to take the street out of the youth. It was to Nelson's credit he had not used the knife on Cronk already.

He probably would have done if Landry had not been above.

Green eyes blazing, Celestia raised her chin. Defiance and affront radiated off her in tangible waves. "Now leave my establishment and never, *ever* return."

"Did Keyworth make you a better offer?" Cronk demanded, sending a sly sideways glance toward Nelson. "I recently heard you preferred buggering boys, like yonder young chap."

Celestia choked on an appalled gasp. “How dare you?”

“You bloody sod. I’ll have yer guts for garters,” snarled Nelson, brandishing a lethal-looking stiletto.

Landry raised his hand in a halting gesture.

“Nelson,” he ordered with a hint of steel in his voice. “Put the knife away.”

Nelson lowered the blade to his side but did not return it to his pocket.

Fair enough.

“I told you to leave.” Celestia sent Nelson an anxious glance. “You are not welcome here.”

Was she afraid he would attack Cronk?

It was no more than the assling deserved.

Cronk’s features contorted in haughty wrath. “You forget whom you address, you little slut...”

Landry leaped forward and planted the wretch a facer. Bone crunched and Cronk howled in pain as he flew backward, crashing into the wall.

“She said to leave, Cronk. I shall give you until the count of three.”

He held up three fingers.

Chest heaving, Landry tossed a glance toward the display window. A small, open-mouthed crowd had gathered. Eyes agog, they gawped at the scene playing out within the bookstore.

Better than a Drury Lane tragedy and all for free.

*Devil and damn.*

The chinwags would be in fine fettle when they caught wind of this.

Cronk dragged a less than clean handkerchief from his pocket and, pressing the stained wad to his damaged nose, attempted to staunch the bleeding.

“You’ll pay for this, Keyworth,” he mumbled from beneath the cloth.

Landry flicked him a disinterested glance.

“Really, Cronk?”

Twisting his mouth into a derisive smile, Landry shook his head as he reached for Celestia and drew her behind him.

“One.” Landry raised his forefinger.

She made no attempt to resist. Instead, her relieved gaze shouted, “Thank you.”

“I do not think so. You see, whoremongers such as you prey on those you deem weaker than yourself. You shan’t call me out because you are a craven coward, and you know I would easily best you at swords *and* pistols. You would *not* survive,” he grated, allowing all of the loathing bubbling inside him to leach into his voice.

“Two.” He held up a second finger.

Cronk edged toward the exit, hatred spewing from his bloodshot eyes.

“Before the day is over, I’ll swear to everyone who will listen that I have had that whore a hundred times.” Cronk stabbed a finger in Celestia’s direction. “This pathetic excuse for a bookstore will go bankrupt. I’ll see to it. I have already been dropping hints in the right ears.”

Ah, so Cronk was responsible for the decline in the store’s clientele.

“And she’ll soon be spreading her legs for any sot who can spare a thruppence,” Cronk spat.

“Bloody, sodding bugger,” Nelson swore, advancing a step. He shot Landry a sidelong glance. “Let me carve him up a bit, gov.”

Extending his hand, palm outward again, Landry stopped the infuriated lad.

*To hell with a count of three.*

Instead, Landry prowled forward. Just when Cronk darted for the door, he extended a leg, tripping the spawn of Satan.

As Cronk lay cowering on the floor, Landry relished the fear in the other man's meaty, sweat-covered face.

“First, *I* have a vested interest in this building. I would not take kindly to you defaming a business within its walls.” Landry leaned over, gratified to see terror widening Cronk's cow-manure green eyes. He seized Cronk's bloodied neckcloth and jerked him upward.

“Secondly, you worthless piece of excrement, Celestia Tolman will soon be the Countess of Keyworth. I *shall* call *you* out and end your miserable life if you besmirch her in any way whatsoever. What's more, the *ton* will applaud me for ridding their number of a detested scourge like you.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

13



*I cannot believe it, though Mama assures me it is so! I have a brother,*

*and he is an earl! An earl, of all things. Mama says my given name is Lenora.*

*However, she and Papa changed it when I came to live with them.*

*Tomorrow, we travel to London to meet the Earl of Keyworth.*

*That is, Landry, my brother. He sent his coach for us to make use of.*

*I do hope he is a good person. He would not have been looking for*

*me for eight years if he were not, would he?*

*~Miss ~~Laureen Smythe~~ Lenora Audsley to her diary.*

*TOLMAN TOMES—SCRIVENER and Stationer*

*Oxford Street, St. Giles, London*

*Several Chaotic Minutes Later*

AFTER CRONK DRAGGED his despicable presence from the store, still swearing vilely beneath his breath, Celestia stood

motionless as Landry shooed the riveted onlookers away from the window.

He'd been magnificent in his defense of her. Despite the shock she had just endured, a little thrill zipped through her. Cronk had not stood a sugar lump's chance in hot tea against Landry's wrath and superior strength and intellect.

Even now, he handled the crowd with enviable diplomacy.

She had no doubt that he was a spectacular orator in Parliament.

"I do beg your pardon," Landry said to the onlookers, every bit the self-possessed and polished aristocrat now. He straightened his jacket before arranging his features in an estimable semblance of penance and stately pride.

"I regret you witnessed my less than gentlemanly behavior. However, I had no choice but to defend my betrothed's honor after Mr. Cronk put his hands upon her person and disparaged her character."

Why did he keep saying that?

They assuredly were not betrothed as much as Celestia wished with all of her heart otherwise.

The *on dit* would already be horrendous without adding a false betrothal to the inferno.

In point of fact, Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer might very well be further shunned after this debacle. Which, once again, was none of her doing but which she would bear the brunt of.

*Blast Ingantius Cronk to Hades.*

God, then what would Celestia do?

"Served him right, the bugger," one skinny man wearing a tweed suit said, scratching his temple.

"I should say so," a stout woman attired in a godawful chartreuse and orange walking costume agreed while enthusiastically brandishing her cane. "Miss Tolman is a proper young miss, she is."

Celestia did not recognize the dame.

A previous customer, perhaps?

“My felicitations, my lord,” simpered a pinch-faced, elegantly dressed woman while inspecting Celestia with her critical gaze through the window. “This is the first I have heard of your upcoming nuptials,” she said, her shrill voice scraping across Celestia’s nerves like a fork on a plate. “There’s been no announcement in the news sheets.”

She curved her mouth into what Celestia thought was meant to be a smile, but which looked as if she struggled not to pass wind.

“Will the banns be read soon?” she asked in that tinny tone, somewhere between a kettle whistling and a donkey braying. Bold as brass, poking her long nose where it had no business.

*No, they most certainly will not!*

A shadow flickered across Landry’s face, sharpening the already chiseled contours. He did not like this woman.

“Lady Crustworth,” he replied with the meagerest downward angle of his strong square chin.

It did not escape Celestia that he had not answered the busybody’s question.

Who was this Lady Crustworth?

She had never been inside the shop, of that Celestia was positive.

Disapproval etched every crease of the woman’s haughty face as she regarded Celestia through the storefront glass.

Celestia would’ve remembered her. Would’ve recalled her disdain.

One tended to do that when one encountered someone who loathed you on sight.

Landry did not appear any too pleased to see the lady either.

Sweeping a hand through his tousled hair, he passed his gaze over the crowd. “You may go about your business now. All is well.”

“Not for the gent ye sent on his way, it ain’t,” a rough-looking character missing a front tooth and needing a shave chortled, slapping his thigh.

A few others joined in his laughter.

Not, however, Lady Crustworth.

If anything, her mouth pursed tighter.

Spying someone across the street, she lifted her hand, calling in a sing-song voice, “Sylvia. *Yoo-hoo*. Sylvia Darumple! Do wait for me.”

Sylvia Darumple and her miserable-countenanced maid came to a stop. They peered inquisitively at the matron scurrying toward them with notable alacrity for a person of her age and lack of decorum for one of her lofty station.

Shoes clacking loudly on the pavement, Lady Crustworth bustled away. “Sylvia, you simply will not believe what...”

A passing carriage drowned out the rest of her words, but Celestia could guess what they were. She’d be bound the telling did not spin her in a flattering light.

Shivering and hugging herself, she could not seem to move her leaden feet. They were anchored in place. She ought to remove herself from the gawking bystanders’ curious perusal, but every bit of energy seemed to have seeped from her.

For the first time in her three-and-twenty years, she feared she might faint.

Her mind kept replaying Cronk’s assault—his groping hands and revolting mouth. What he’d accused Landry of—improper relations with boys—was the crudest, most grotesque accusation.

Were people really saying those vile things about Landry?

Nausea billowed up her throat, hot and acrid.

She swallowed once. Twice. And a third time.



No, she would not faint, but she might well cast up her accounts.

“Are you all right?” Landry’s tender inquiry as he touched her upper arm brought her back to herself, and she nodded, sliding a glance to the window.

The crowd had finally disbursed, thank God.

“Yes. Yes, I am fine.”

She was not, but not for the reasons Landry no doubt believed had shaken her to her very core.

“Here, Miss Tolman.” Worry crinkling his forehead, Nelson handed Celestia her shawl. It must’ve slipped from her shoulders during her struggle with Cronk.

“Thank you, Nelson. You were wise to fetch his lordship.”

Flushing, he nodded, his mouth pulled into a taut line as he slid Landry a knowing look. “I still wish ye’d let me cut him, my lord. His kind only understands that sort of talk.”

Celestia suspected Nelson might be correct in that regard. However, if he had laid even a finger on Cronk, the youth would’ve faced severe charges. Cronk might be scum, but he was noble scum, and current laws protected aristocrats.

Why wouldn’t they?

The elites created the laws, which always seemed to benefit them at the common man’s expense.

“My lord, may I have a word with you upstairs?” She met Landry’s concerned gaze, unable to keep the accusation out of hers.

If she’d heard him correctly in her distress, he had claimed an interest in the bookshop building.

*An interest.*

What exactly did that mean?

Did that mean he’d somehow purchased their building out from under them?

How? When? Why?

It made no sense.

Of more import, what did he think he was doing by announcing to the world that she was his betrothed?

*Dear God.* Her stomach cramped. Surely he knew he could not make such a claim and then retract his statement later? People would assume all sorts of sordid things.

Celestia would be utterly ruined. Not in the manner a debutante or lady of society was ruined, but disgraced nonetheless.

Until he had throttled Cronk, she had not thought Landry impulsive. But perhaps all that riled up male virility or his manly ego had prompted him to blurt that she was his betrothed. Or mayhap, he'd simply called upon the most effective and useful means to shut Ignatius Cronk's vulgar mouth.

"Now is not the time, Celestia," Landry said. "I know you have many questions, and I shall be happy to answer them tomorrow evening."

*What?*

Tomorrow evening?

Celestia was not waiting until tomorrow to have this discussion.

Suppressing the impulse to stamp her foot and shout at him like a retractable child, she forced calm into her voice.

"That is unacceptable, my lord."

Sighing, Landry slid a troubled glance toward the street. "I do not trust Cronk to keep his mouth shut, Celestia. Or Lady Crustworth, for that matter. She's one of the *ton's* worst chinwags, as is Sylvia Darumple."

*Of course,* they were.

"I must deflect as much damage as I can as soon as possible, Celestia. There is no time to spare," Landry said, the corner of his eyes crinkling.

"Oh." She deflated like a fireplace bellow.

He was not trying to avoid the conversation.

Once again, his purpose was to protect her.

“You have had a terrible shock, my dear.” Cupping her shoulders gently as he peered into her eyes, he said, “Go home. Nelson will escort you. I beg you. Stay there so that I’ll know you are safe. Do not open the shop tomorrow.”

Celestia jerked her head up.

“Not open? But, Landry, I cannot afford to keep the doors closed for even a day,” she protested.

Pride be hanged.

Pride did not pay the mortgage or put food on the table.

He gave her a boyish smile and grazed her cheek with his bent forefinger.

As was becoming a habit, her blood hummed in her veins at his touch.

“You need not carry that burden alone any longer.”

She had no idea what he meant by that and was convinced he would not explain himself now either.

“But won’t keeping the store closed cause more gossip?” she asked instead.

Naturally, it would. Conjecture and speculation would fly about London like dandelion down in a meadow on a blustery day.

“I have a plan, but I cannot take the time to explain everything right now. I need you to trust me, Celestia.” Landry tilted her chin upward, his gaze tender and caressing. “Can you do that?”

She searched his face, and what she saw shimmering in his eyes stalled her breath.

*Yes. Yes, I would do anything for you.*

His mouth curled into a confident rogue’s smile, and a knowing glint lit his gray eyes. For a mortifying instant, Celestia panicked, thinking she’d spoken aloud.

Had she?

“I shall call at your home tomorrow evening and have a discussion with your father and uncle. I’ll send a missive, so they expect me. All will be well, Tia, I promise.”

He had remembered her brothers’ pet name for her. She had shared that personal detail during tea last week.

What morsel of her heart Landry had not already claimed became his at that moment.

Acutely aware, Nelson stood but a few feet away and avidly took in all that transpired. Celestia caught the corner of her lower lip between her teeth.

All would *not* be well. Not by half.

Landry must know that also and was trying to alleviate her qualms.

Arguing would serve no purpose because he was right. He stood a far greater chance of squelching the gossip than she could ever hope to. She mightn’t want to, but she could wait until tomorrow to speak with him.

What reason would she give Papa and Uncle for being home earlier than usual?

A version of the truth.

Just enough to pacify their curiosity—not a whisper about that nonsensical betrothal business.

Facing Nelson, Landry withdrew his purse from his inside coat pocket. He passed the youth several coins. “Hail a hackney, Nelson. I’d like you to accompany Miss Tolman to her home. You may ride atop with the jarvey. There is enough money to take a hack home yourself too.”

“Yes, sir.” Nelson bobbed his head and darted for the door.

“I’ll fetch my cloak and bonnet.” Celestia needed a few minutes to collect herself.

What did Landry think Cronk would do?

Follow her home?

She shuddered at the rather petrifying idea as she collected her belongings. After shrugging into her coat and tying her plain black bonnet's ribbons, she returned to the front of the store.

Landry stood, one shoulder propped against a bookshelf, gazing out the window. At her approach, he turned. He regarded her so soberly, with such intensity, she braced herself for what she knew was coming.

The retraction of his claim that they were affianced.

He must've decided not to wait until tomorrow then. Just as well. Better to get it over and done with.

“Celestia?”

She would save him the trouble. Likely as not, Cronk would sully her reputation beyond redemption anyway. At least she could spare Landry the awkwardness of calling off a false betrothal.

“My lord, you need not remark upon the matter.” The “my lord” was for her benefit. To remind her of her station and the great chasm of class difference that separated them. She ought never to have allowed her emotions free reign. “I certainly did not take your claim of our betrothal serious.”

“What if I did?”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

14



*Mama, I have met the most extraordinary woman. You would  
adore her, I think.*

*She's not a noblewoman, but I believe you, of all people,  
would understand.*

*Love does not recognize birth or position, nor power or  
prestige.*

*I vowed on your deathbed that I'd find my sister. That same  
night, I promised myself*

*I would marry a commoner if she loved me and I loved her.*

*As it happens, Lenora has been found, Mama. What is more, I  
have fallen in love.*

*I want to spend the rest of my life with Celestia.*

*~Letter from Landry, Earl of Keyworth, to the deceased  
Countess of Keyworth.*

*Torn up and burned.*

*TOLMAN Residence*

*Number 36 Carnaby Street, London*

*7 May 1818-Evening*

*WHAT IF I DID? What if I did? What if I did?*

The dratted refrain played over and over in Celestia's mind. A preposterous mantra that would not cease, though she had repeatedly ordered the monologue to hush since yesterday. Honestly, she did not know what to make of Landry's flummoxing declaration.

One minute her hope soared skyward like an eagle and the next plummeted like water over rocky falls.

Before she could respond or ask Landry precisely what he meant, Nelson had poked his head in the door—his timing utterly, utterly abhorrent.

“The hackney is waitin', my lord.”

Landry had unceremoniously bundled her inside the musty-smelling conveyance, and with a softly murmured, “Please do not leave your house tomorrow,” had shut the door and signaled the driver.

Now, the fire played shadows over his handsome features as he lounged in a saggy-cushioned armchair, all lean masculine grace, chatting amicably with Papa and Uncle Paul about horses, politics, tobacco, and sheep.

*Sheep*, of all things.

What did Papa or Uncle Paul know about sheep other than they produced wool and mutton?

Celestia, on the other hand, knew more about the creatures than either of them. Nevertheless, she must smile politely and pretend ignorance.

Early in her teens, she had gone through a phase where she was fascinated with barnyard animals and read everything she could get her hands on about them. *That* knowledge was not something a bluestocking shared willingly unless they wished others to stare as if one was an oddity displayed at Bullock's Museum.

For instance, sheeps' pupils were rectangular, and they could see behind themselves. Oh, and breeding sheep was

referred to as tugging, which strangely, was a term Madame Bonacieux had also mentioned in her memoir.

Along with rogering, swiving, and shagging.

All crude words to describe copulating.

Something else Celestia was not supposed to know *anything* about.

After transcribing the madame's memoirs, she possessed carnal knowledge that would send most well-bred ladies into a swoon.

Heat stung her cheeks. She pointed her attention to her plain black halfboots peeking from the hem of her blue gown. She'd donned the remade frock to boost her confidence.

Oh, very well.

Celestia allowed she had worn the pretty gown because she wanted to look attractive.

Only she did not own any silken slippers and had to wear her sensible boots. Until recently, she had not cared a whit about their ugliness. Her footwear was practical and durable. Now she found herself longing for pretty, impractical beaded silk slippers and stockings embroidered with flowers and garlands.

Glancing up, she caught Landry's bold, appreciative perusal from beneath his hooded lids. Not for the first time since his arrival either.

A secret thrill fluttered around her heart.

*Celestia Tolman will soon be the Countess of Keyworth.*

*I had no choice but to defend my betrothed's honor.*

*What if I did?*

Botheration!

Would her errant thoughts never stop tormenting and taunting her?

No, because Landry owned her heart—every last tiny piece of it.



Every time they were together, another part had become his. Lord knew Celestia had not wanted to fall in love with him. She had doggedly determined to guard her emotions and heart against his charisma and charm.

That disarming tilt of his sculpted mouth and the glow in his striking gray eyes.

At this very moment, a shock of hair hung over his forehead, adding to his devil-may-care rakishness.

A beeswax taper held over a flame was made of stiffer stuff than she when it came to Landry. A single glance from his smoldering eyes or a roguish tilt of his mouth, and she all but melted.

God help her, but she was well on to becoming a calf-eyed ninny.

Compelling her lips to bend upward a fraction more, Celestia forced herself to look away. Her jaw ached from the false smile she had pasted upon her face three-quarters of an hour ago when Landry had arrived. If she kept this pretense up much longer, would her face actually crack?

It certainly felt as if it would.

Initially, she had busied herself with tea pouring and serving the biscuits and cakes she'd made earlier in the day. The Tolmans might not have much compared to the upper ten thousand, but Celestia could present a tea tray and dainties that would not shame them.

Papa and Uncle Paul were pleased as Punch that a peer had graced their home. The note Landry had sent around earlier said he wished to discuss a business venture with them and would call this evening at half of seven.

Did this business undertaking have anything to do with his claim of a vested interest in the building?

Celestia bit her tongue and curled her toes tight in her boots to keep from informing Papa and Uncle that the earl was not there to just see them. He had a matter of some import to discuss with her as well.

Of course, she realized how special an occasion this was—to have a member of *le beau monde* sipping tea in their parlor. A first and likely last occurrence. It was one thing for Papa to visit the earl's residence as his scrivener and another entirely to have that same noble take tea with them.

On the other hand, she had become so accustomed to Landry's presence that she sometimes forgot he was a noble. Probably because he never behaved like a pretentious, self-important peer of the realm. Not even that day when she'd sneaked into his house. She'd been able to speak to him freely, and he had not acted the least condescending or autocratic.

A wonder, too, that Papa and Landry seemed on quite cordial terms. One wouldn't have thought that would be the case, considering the earl had sacked her father. What was more, Landry had insisted on having a delicate conversation with Papa about his over-imbibing.

Nonetheless, although every sense was keenly alert, Celestia could not detect an undercurrent of hostility or resentment between the earl and her father.

Her father and uncle acted the proud hosts while she sat on the green and yellow floral chintz sofa, very much aware of how outdated and worn the furnishings in their comfortable home were. The cozy house that they might need to sell to save their business.

That conversation was long overdue, but in light of what had happened yesterday, she was unsure if it made any difference now. Perhaps she might impose upon Landry's duchess friends to write her letters of reference, and Celestia could become a governess.

No, that was not a solution either. She could not earn enough as a governess to provide for Papa and Uncle Paul.

Rather than ruminate on that troublesome subject, she turned her attention once more to their guest, wholly at ease in the overstuffed chair the earl relaxed in. Landry's seat and a matching armchair sat at right angles to the fireplace. Knees crossed, Papa occupied the second chair while Uncle Paul sat on the far side of the sofa from Celestia.

The lumpy sofa paralleled the hearth, and a rather battered Chinese Ming Square coffee table sat centered between the chairs and sofa. Candles glowed in a pair of crystal hurricane lamps, one of Mama's greatest treasures, atop the mirrored oak inlaid fireplace mantel.

The green Aubusson rug's frayed edge abutted the hearth's cracked tiles, and a flush of embarrassment heated Celestia. She pointedly kept her attention focused on the small fire cavorting behind the sooty screen.

Had she not been in Landry's elegant townhome, she would never have felt self-conscious about her residence. To be fair, he did not appear to look down his nose at their much humbler dwelling. But then, he would not, would he?

She shifted her regard to him once more. Something she couldn't seem to help. Landry drew her gaze to him like the proverbial moth to a flame.

It was not in his nature to act superior or condescending. Not for a man who readily employed street ragamuffins.

Papa sat a little straighter, and after sending Celestia a doting glance, cleared his throat. "I understand there was a bit of a dust-up at the shop yesterday, my lord."

Landry lifted that dratted dark eyebrow and settled his beautiful gaze upon Celestia.

She heard his silent question as clearly as if he'd asked it in those clipped, upper-class tenors.

*"What precisely did you tell them?"*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

15



*I saw the skirmish myself—saw Keyworth bloody Cronk’s nose.  
I also heard the earl claim that common chit was his betrothed  
with my own ears.*

*What is this world coming to when a prize catch on the  
Marriage Mart settles for a common shop girl?*

*I, for one, do not believe Keyworth. He’s a sentimental do-  
gooder.*

*Always going on and on about orphans, ragamuffins, and  
other riff-raff.*

*He won’t marry the lowborn gel. That Tolman wench is too far  
beneath him.*

*~Letter from Lady Crustworth to Lady Clutterbuck.*

*TOLMAN Residence*

*Number 36 Carnaby Street, London*

*That Same Evening*

*OH, no, Landry, you did not.*

*Celestia told him as much with her slightly narrowed gaze.*

They were not going to discuss the debacle with Lord Ignatius Crocodile Cronk until Landry had explained the other matter that had plagued her since yesterday.

Not the betrothal issue.

That required privacy and should take place between the two of them.

Regardless, she would have an answer about his claim of an interest in Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer’s building.

Fashioning her sweetest smile, she blinked innocently.

“My lord, yesterday, you said that you had an interest in Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer’s building?” Celestia placed her cooled tea on the table and schooled her features into a benign expression. “Would you care to elaborate? I am sure we would all like to know to what you referred.”

She included her father and uncle in the query. Surely they were as curious as she.

Landry chuckled, then kicked his mouth into a broad grin. “I have purchased the building to the right of Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer. I’d also like to purchase your building and, if you are agreeable, move your shop to another location I own on Bond Street.”

Papa and Uncle Paul exchanged flabbergasted glances.

“Bond Street, you say?” Uncle Paul said, obviously enthusiastic about the notion. “That would be quite, *quite* exceptional.”

Bond Street was a highly coveted venue for any merchant, the Tolmans included. It was also *very* expensive. Well beyond their means, in point of fact.

Rubbing his chin, Papa nodded slowly. “What are your plans for the other buildings?”

A grin lit Landry’s face, and his eyes snapped with excitement. “I would like to turn the upper floors into housing for street youths—one for girls and the other for boys. Naturally, I would also retain an adult to supervise the children

and a cook for each establishment. The lower level would host a business or businesses that would provide professional training for those same youths.”

Chagrin swept Celestia, quickly followed by admiration. She’d been worried Landry’s motives were far less altruistic.

Did he ever do anything for selfish reasons?

No, not since she’d known him.

Fingers steepled on his slightly paunchy belly, Uncle Paul chuckled. “I have no objection. In fact, I think it is a capital idea. Jonathan? Celestia?”

Bless him for including her in the decision. Few men would have done.

“I’d like to see the Bond Street building first, if I may. However, if it proves satisfactory, I think it a brilliant notion too.” Papa lifted his teacup toward Landry as if it were a glass of spirit in a silent salute.

No. No. *No*.

What were they thinking?

Their present building was almost paid for.

Real estate on Bond Street was at a premium, costing three or four times what they’d paid for the current location. They would never be able to afford a building there, even if it had a habitable upper level. Which Celestia very much doubted. At least not one large enough for three people to live comfortably.

Was she the only one in their family who considered every aspect of Landry’s suggestion before eagerly jumping from the pan into the proverbial fire?

Landry’s quicksilver gaze bored into her. “What do you think, Celestia?”

Again, he crossed the mark using her given name.

Why did she have the distinct impression his question comprised more than her approval regarding a new location for Tolman Tomes—Scrivener and Stationer?

“I think,” she said, choosing her words with care, “that there are several important factors that need careful considering before a final decision is made.”

“That’s my girl.” Papa beamed, a smile crinkling his face. “Neither of my sons has a lick of business sense, but Celestia? She is just like her mother. Keen mind and sharp wits. Logical and sensible.”

Why didn’t the heartfelt compliment fill her with joy?

For heaven’s sake. Celestia had never craved flattery, flowery accolades, or platitudes before.

“Aye, she’s a credit to her sex,” Uncle agreed with a jolly wink.

“She is, indeed.” An undercurrent in Landry’s smooth-as-velvet timbre made her skin tingle all over. “As reluctant as I am to bring up the unfortunate occurrence yesterday, I believe we must address it,” he continued, his timbre taking on a more business-like tone.

“Yes, yes,” Papa agreed. “Celestia explained Mr. Cronk made a nuisance of himself, and you encouraged him to leave the shop, your lordship. Please accept my sincerest gratitude for your intervention.”

Celestia wetted her lower lip, disinclined to meet Landry’s gaze. Simply put, she had downplayed the event, loath to relive the trauma or reveal to her father the exact nature of what had transpired. She had been on pins and needles all day, wondering what slanderous chatter was spreading around London about her and Landry.

Though she told herself she should not care, she did.

Not just for her sake, but for her father and uncle. For Nelson and Wyatt too. It went without mentioning that she was also severely troubled on Landry’s behalf. The repugnant slur Cronk cast on his character was damning.

How could anyone believe Landry capable of such depravity?

Who would propagate such disgusting rumors?

An enemy?

Yes, that made the most sense.

Unfolding his legs, Landry pulled a cuff of his black jacket into place before giving Celestia a speaking glance. His indigo blue and silver paisley waistcoat were the only detraction from his somber attire other than his blindingly white shirt. Even his intricately knotted cravat was comprised of ebony silk.

*Trust me*, his calm gaze said.

It rattled and exhilarated her that she could so easily read his thoughts and that he could do the same to her.

“Celestia has been tactful in her description,” Landry said, idly roving his attention around the parlor before bringing it to rest on Papa.

Her father’s and uncles’ grizzled eyebrows climbed their identical foreheads at Landry’s use of her given name. *Again*. The air fairly crackled with their unspoken questions.

*Why did his lordship take such liberties, and dare they remind him—a lord—that he overstepped the bounds?*

However, Landry seemed not to notice. Or if he did, he disregarded their unspoken question.

He leaned forward, his jaw hard and expression earnest.

“Cronk set his hands upon your daughter, Mr. Tolman. In full view of several witnesses,” Landry clarified. “He also insulted her character, threatened her, and made such a lewd and vulgar proposition, I cannot repeat it.”

“By Jove, he did not!” Papa thundered, like the Papa of old. The sober Papa she’d known before Mama’s death. The father who’d protected her and guarded her against the ugliness of the world. Who had praised her intellect and bluestocking tendencies.

“Indeed, sir, he did. I planted him a facer in defense of Celestia’s honor.”

“You broke his nose,” Celestia reminded him, then juttred her chin upward. “Lord or not, that blighter deserved it.”



Papa turned a wounded, accusing gaze upon her.

“Why did you not tell me the whole of it, dear girl?” Forehead puckered, he shook his head and tapped his chin with his forefinger. “This does present a rather difficult conundrum. I do not see how you can continue to work at the store in light of this.”

Swallowing her immediate, strong objection, Celestia tried reasoning with him first. “Papa, Nelson and Wyatt are there, as is Lord Keyworth three afternoons a week. I am rarely alone anymore.”

If Uncle Paul worked his reduced schedule and Papa began transcribing again, she might never need to be alone in the bookshop.

“’Tis more than that, Celestia,” Uncle Paul put in, concern wrinkling the corners of his eyes and downturned mouth. “That blackguard’s behavior will have made you a target for all manner of degenerates and curs. I imagine tattle is already being bandied about.”

Well, of course it was. But if people hid away whenever the chinwags flapped their tongues, nothing would ever get done.

Uncle sent Landry an apologetic glance. “Whenever a peer is involved in a scandal, the gossip seems particularly fervent.”

That was *all* of the time.

*Aye, like maggots to manure.*

Rakehells and rogues abounded in the peerage. Even a bluestocking working in a used bookstore had access to the previous weeks’ gossip rags and scandal sheets.

Nonetheless, Celestia’s stomach sank like a brick in a deep well.

She had mistakenly believed her father and uncle were oblivious to society’s goings-on.

“Indeed, sir, it is,” Landry said with his usual confidence. “Nonetheless, I have been able to squelch a large degree of the chatter.”

“How so, your lordship?” Papa asked, his face folding with confusion, even as hope and gratitude infused his gaze.

Celestia would very much like to know the answer herself.

Landry rose and crossed to her.

Her hands grew clammy as she tipped her head.

What was he about?

Oh. Oh. *Oh!*

Suddenly she knew, absolutely *knew*, and was at once overcome and appalled. Excited and terrified.

He would not.

Not here in front of Papa and Uncle.

Not without speaking to her first.

Not without asking Papa for her hand.

Did she want him to ask Papa for her hand?

*No. Yes. No.*

*Yes?*

*Dear God. Yes.*

Her blood pounded in her ears, and her heart hammered so hard behind her breastbone that she felt it might break free of its confines.

Smiling a rather wicked, enigmatic smile, Landry drew her to her feet by both hands but did not release her at once.

“Landry, you cannot.” She shook her head, casting her astonished father a hurried glance.

Drat, she had addressed Landry by his given name in front of her father and uncle.

Still grinning like a cat in the cream, Landry slid an arm about her waist and turned her so that they faced Papa.

“Sir, I love your daughter and, with your blessing, wish to make her my wife as soon as possible.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

16



*I have found the source of the unsavory gossip:*

*One Lord Wilfred Thruxby, a former client of Madame  
Meriette Bonacieux.*

*She gave Thruxby the speech you wrote about personally  
helping homeless urchins.*

*However, Thruxby recently gave Madame Bonacieux her  
congé,*

*and the woman is bent on retaliation. She is quite willing to  
aid you should*

*you require her assistance. Let me know how I may be of  
further service.*

*~Letter to the Earl of Keyworth from Marshall Britmere,  
investigator.*

*TOLMAN Residence*

*Number 36 Carnaby Street, London*

*An Hour into Lord Keyworth's Visit*

A DEAFENING quiet descended upon the salon for several seconds after Landry's confession. Only the scarlet and

yellow-orange fire crackling and snapping in the hearth broke the stillness.

*Devil a bit.*

“Well, did not expect that. No, I did not,” one of the two other men mumbled to fill the awkward chasm.

Landry was not sure which because his attention remained fixed on Celestia’s flabbergasted features.

He had not meant to blurt the confession like an uncouth bumbler. In fact, he’d practiced any number of ways in which he planned to tell Celestia he loved her and to ask for her hand in marriage.

In truth, he’d prepared to counter every argument she presented as to why they could not wed. If she chose that route, which of course, he prayed she would not.

By rights, if he were to go about it the correct way, he ought to have met with her father in advance, stated his intentions, and asked for Celestia’s hand.

However, Celestia was not a conventional woman.

The truth of it was, Landry rather thought she’d want to be the first to know his feelings and intentions. As luck would have it, his skill for public speeches completely deserted him, and he’d simply spouted the first thing that popped to mind.

Taking in her beloved face, he could not help but grin.

“Surprised you, did I?” he asked.

Her eyes, huge, green, wide and wondering pools, stared up at him, and her pretty rosebud mouth formed a perfect “O” of amazement.

“You love me?” she whispered, her voice so soft and irregular that even standing beside her, he strained to hear the barely audible question.

Leaning nearer, he spoke into her shell-like ear.

“I do, my darling. So very, very much.”

Her fragrance wafted upward from her warm skin, an intoxicating feminine aroma.

A loud, gravelly throat-clearing pulled his attention to the two elderly men watching the scene with enthusiastic interest.

“Paul, I could use your assistance with...a...with the...a thingamabob in the kitchen,” Jonathan Tolman mumbled, giving his brother a speaking look, which fairly screamed, “Let us leave the lovebirds alone.”

Perhaps denser than he appeared, Paul Tolman peered at his younger brother as if the man had two noses or another head.

“*Thingamabob? Kitchen?*” he parroted, his stupefied gaze veering back and forth from Landry and Celestia to his brother.

“Yes, yes.” Nodded Jonathan eagerly as he gained his feet. “*You know*, Paul. That whatchamacallit doohickey that arrived yesterday.”

Comprehension finally dawned, and Paul Tolman’s countenance lit up like a chandelier.

*God above.* Landry rolled his eyes ceilingward

The men were as subtle as intoxicated Covent Garden harlots.

“Ah yes. That doodad contraption for...making...ah butter,” Paul said, rising from his chair as well.

Celestia giggled before slapping a palm across her mouth.

In short order, her father and uncle made their way to the door.

His hand upon the lever, Jonathan Toman faced them. “You have my heartfelt blessing.”

Landry had fretted Jonathan might hold a grudge because he had dispensed with his service and then took it upon himself to have a frank discussion about what his drinking was doing to his daughter and their business.

Thank goodness, Jonathan Tolman was a reasonable man when sober.

The door closed with a soft *snick*.

Landry turned Celestia toward him, wrapping one arm about her trim waist and cupping her chin with his other hand. “Please forgive my less than finesse proposal. I had intended to get down on one knee and present you with a ring. I even memorized a rather good speech, if I do say so myself, detailing why we’d make a brilliant match.”

Eyes glowing and a smile teasing the edges of her mouth, she tilted her head back. “You were so confident I’d accept?”

“No, actually.” He shook his head, then brushed the hair that had fallen over his forehead back with a sweep of his hand. “I fully expected you to present a long, logical list of reasons why you could not.”

Two lines creased Celestia’s forehead as she scrunched her nose. The mantel clock struck the hour, chiming eight times.

“I am not countess material, Landry. We both know that. I am a commoner and an unapologetic bluestocking. I have no dowry, and I’ll never be any good at hostessing house parties, balls, routs, and the like. Your friends will say you have gone mad.”

“Mad in love.”

Cupping her chin, Landry brushed his lips across her velvety soft mouth.

“I do not give a beggar’s purse about any of those things, my darling. When my mother lay dying and confessed that she had loved a man other than my father and that she had born that man a child, I vowed to myself I would marry a commoner if I loved her and she loved me. Because nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important to me than love.”

He tasted her sweet mouth again.

“You truly do not care?” she asked.

Her gaze searched his face with such gravity that Landry wanted to capture her mouth with his and prove how very

much he didn't give ten damns.

"Your peers will never accept me, Landry." A half-apologetic, half-defiant smile slanted her pretty lips upward. "I shan't accept being banished to a country estate while you romp around London."

"Romp?" he teased, wagging his eyebrows.

She raised her eyebrows archly.

"Well, whatever it is, reformed rapsallions do when their wives are not about. Need I remind you that I transcribed Madame Bonacieux's memoirs? I recognized several names within those pages." Celestia giggled again. "She really was quite horrid at disguising her...erm...*clients*. I cannot but wonder if she did not do so purposefully."

"I definitely have not forgotten," he purred, lowering his voice to a seductive timbre. "In fact, I'd be very curious to know just what you learned while transcribing the madame's memoir."

"Naughty man," Celestia chastised as she turned an adorable shade of pink.

"Not as naughty as I'd like to be." Landry pulled her close until her breasts flattened against his coat and the apex of her womanhood cradled his manhood through their clothing. "Say you love me too. Make me the happiest, luckiest man to have ever drawn a breath and agree to be my wife."

Tears sparkled in her eyes. Laying a palm upon his cheek, she smiled. "I love you too, Landry. And yes. I shall gladly become your wife."

"Tomorrow?" He nuzzled her ear, then whispered, "I have a special license."

Laughing, she stood on her toes and clasped the back of his neck, bringing his mouth down to meet hers. "Yes, my love, tomorrow."

## EPILOGUE



*I am the Countess of Keyworth now.  
I do not need to confess my dreams or sorrows  
between the pages of this journal any longer.  
I have my beloved husband with whom I can share everything,  
and Lenora has become a dear friend and confidant too.  
My life is full and blessed.*

*The new Countess of Keyworth to her diary—last entry.*

*FARINGCROFT PARK-EARL of Keyworth's Country Seat  
Lancaster, England  
28 August 1818-Mid-Morning*

“LANDRY,” Celestia moaned, clutching his broad shoulders, her legs wrapped around his waist as their lovemaking neared the apex of fulfillment. “I cannot take anymore,” she gasped against the strong column of his throat as he thrust again.

He tasted slightly salty, and a sheen of perspiration glistened on his skin.

“Yes, my darling, you can.” Braced against the folly’s cold marble, Landry pumped into her over and over and over.



“Come for me, love.”

And then, in a flash of color and blissful sensation, she was there—at the summit, cresting and tumbling over the edge.

“Landry,” she screamed, her head thrown back, a heartbeat before her name tore from his throat on a guttural groan.

“Celestia.” His passionate cry dragged the four syllables out into several more.

She had no idea how much time passed before their ragged breathing returned to normal and, with a soft, primal male chuckle, he lowered her to the ground. After helping straighten her peach silk gown, he kissed her forehead.

“We were supposed to be working on my correspondence to Lord Livingston, Countess.”

Giving him a coy look, she raked her gaze over her husband. “You are the one who professed it was too warm and started disrobing.”

He possessed the most divine male body, and the crisp dark hair that covered his legs, chest, and arms felt utterly delicious rasping against her own soft flesh.

They’d come to the folly to escape the study’s heat. As often happened, Celestia and Landry ended up making love.

Not that she was complaining.

Today’s adventure had been her idea. She’d read a very titillating description in Madame Bonacieux’s memoir while transcribing the book. When she’d asked Landry if it was physically possible to couple in such a position, he’d gladly demonstrated that, yes, indeed it was. And most satisfactorily too.

Instead of returning to her cushioned seat, she collected her fan and wandered to look out over the pond. Swans and ducks glided across the still-as-glass surface. Unfurling her hand-painted lace fan, she leaned against the marble.

Beyond the pond, Lenora and her mother walked arm in arm across the greens.

“I am so delighted you found your sister, Landry. She is the sister I never had.”

Landry came up behind Celestia, wrapping his arms about her waist, and rested his chin upon her head. “Ruth is a treasure too. She’s near the same age my mother would’ve been had she lived. She hasn’t begrudged Lenora wanting to use her given name either.”

Sighing in contentment, Celestia leaned back into her husband. “I fear we’ll have our hands full next season when Lenora makes her Come Out. She’s a diamond of the first water if there ever was one.”

“Aye, she’s incomparable, but I prefer brunettes with green eyes.” He nipped her ear, and she giggled.

A stunning redhead with turquoise-blue eyes, Lenora possessed a rare combination of outward and inward beauty.

“Well, at least we do not have to worry about lechers such as Cronk or Thruxby setting their sights on her,” Landry said. “Cronk took my advice and found himself an on-the-shelf spinster with a heavy purse and retired to the country.”

Which was to say, Landry had told him if he ever saw his face again or even heard a whisper that he was in London, he’d challenge him to an affair of honor.

The idiot had indeed been stupid enough to speak ill of Celestia, and once she became the Countess of Keyworth, Landry had given Cronk two choices: leave London and never return or die on the field of honor.

Cronk had scuttled away so quickly his shadow could not keep up with him.

Due to the diligence of Marshall Britmere, Thruxby had been exposed as a pedophile.

Interesting how those committing crimes so often projected their sins onto others.

Thruxby had despised Landry and his determination to aid London’s street children. The degenerate and others of his ilk

preyed on those same innocents, finding them easy targets for their depraved appetites.

“I had a letter from Papa today,” Celestia said, running her fingertips over the knuckles of Landry’s hand at her waist. “Nash has decided to leave the navy and take on overseeing Tolman Tomes and Tobacco.” She shook her head. “I honestly never thought the day would come that either of my brothers would willingly leave the sea. Especially to run the shop.”

“I am glad Nash wants to enter the family business,” Landry murmured into her hair. “Your uncle is getting too old to work, and although your father has given up spirits, he too told me he is looking forward to retiring. Although, I am confident Nelson and Wyatt could operate the store without any supervision now.”

“I agree,” Celestia said as Landry nuzzled her head and pressed fervent kisses on her crown. “Orion plans on bringing his wife to England to visit next year. I cannot wait to meet her. She’s part Mahican. Who knows, maybe he will decide to stay too. If not, I hope we can visit him in Vermont one day.”

“I would like that,” Landry said as a raven swooped down to land near the pond. After cocking its head and inspecting the area, it toddled forth and enjoyed a drink of the cool water. “I have always wanted to visit the United States. I admire the ingenuity and independence of her people. They remind me of a certain bluestocking.”

Twisting to look up at him, Celestia bent her mouth into a loving smile. “You see me as something much more brilliant and courageous than I am, dear husband.”

“Never,” he countered. “You are a wonder, and I shall love you until the day I leave this world.”

Turning in his embrace, Celestia kissed his square chin, then his firm mouth. “I shall love you until time ceases and beyond.”

Check out the entire [Seductive Scoundrels](#) series.

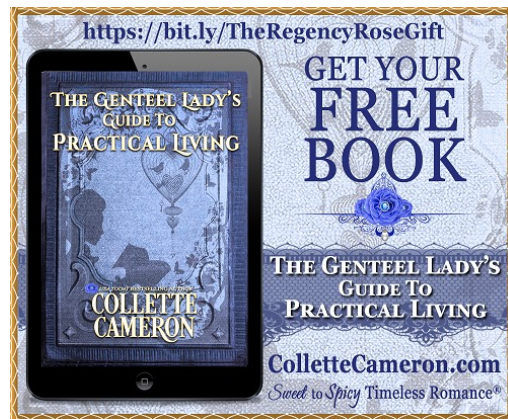
## About the Author



*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING, award-winning author COLLETTE CAMERON<sup>®</sup> scribbles Scottish and Regency historicals featuring dashing rogues and scoundrels and the intrepid damsels who reform them. Blessed with an overactive and witty muse that won't stop whispering new romantic romps in her ear, she's lived in Oregon her entire life, though she dreams of living in Scotland part-time. A self-confessed Cadbury chocoholic, you'll always find a dash of inspiration and a pinch of humor in her sweet-to-spicy timeless romances<sup>®</sup>.

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*From the Desk of Collette Cameron*

THANK you for reading EARL OF KEYWORTH.

Landry is my third wicked earl for the Wicked Earls' Club series. My first two wicked earls were EARL OF WAINTHORPE and EARL OF SCARBOROUGH. All of my wicked earls are also part of my [SEDUCTIVE SCOUNDRELS SERIES](#).

If you've read the other books in my [SEDUCTIVE SCOUNDRELS SERIES](#), you've seen Landry mentioned a few times. A bit of a nonconformist, I wanted him to have a heroine that was a little outside the typical wife for a peer. In a period when women were greatly restricted, she made the most of her situation. I admire Celestia for her intrepidity.

To make sure you do not miss any of my books, subscribe to [The Regency Rose](#), my newsletter (Get a free book too!). I also have a fabulous [VIP Reader Group on Facebook](#). If you are a fan of my books and historical romance, I'd love to have you join me. You'll also be the first to see new covers, read exclusive excerpts, be the first to know about contests and giveaways, help me pick titles and name characters, and much, much more!

Please consider telling other readers why you enjoyed this book by reviewing it. I also truly adore hearing from my readers. You can contact me on my [website](#) and while you are there, explore my author world. If you enjoyed reading Landry and Celestia's story, be sure to check out the other books in my [SEDUCTIVE SCOUNDRELS SERIES](#).

*Collette Cameron*

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# WICKED EARLS FOREVER

Dear Readers,

When I started the Wicked Earls club nearly five years ago, I hoped and dreamed that my multi-author project would be as successful as all of you have made this project! And so, humbly, I say thank you for reading along with us. It's been a joy!

We've loved writing these books so much, we've officially decided to do ONE MORE installment. Wicked Earls Forever will be coming out in January of 2023!!!

Rather than individual books, we've decided to publish one boxed set of ALL NEW MATERIAL at one low price to finish out our Wicked Earls with maximum enjoyment for you, the readers who have supported us for all these years.

Thank you from the bottom of hearts and we hope you enjoy the very last round of the Wicked Earls's Club.

You can pre-order the entire set here... [Wicked Earls Forever](#)

Or keep reading to find a sneak peek of the first new book in the boxed set, the Earl of Evermore.

All our best,

Tammy Andresen

And the authors of the Wicked Earls Club



# EARL OF EVERMORE

## WICKED EARLS FOREVER

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 and viscounts and marquess's 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." Beverly 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 walling. 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.”

Beverly 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 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 working. “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 Beverley 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 his 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 men she'd met this past season. They'd been fun at first but she'd already grown tired of them.

Her brother had assured her that she had all the time in the world to find that right man but she'd not see 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.

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.

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.

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. “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.

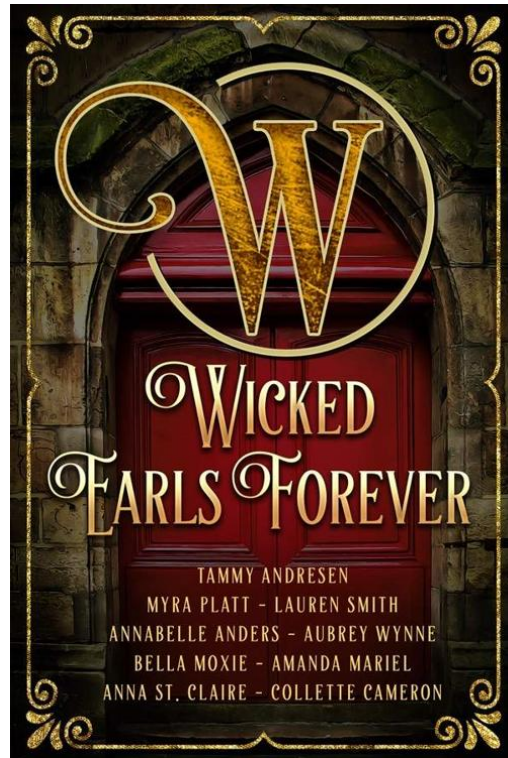
“Vi,” Carl started, stepping closer. “Evermore does not wish to bore himself at such a party.”

“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 returned his grin. This man was all that heart hoped he would be.

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