



WRECKING
BELLE

EMMA V. JEECH

WICKED SONS ~ BOOK 2

Wrecking Belle

Wicked Sons Book 2

By Emma V. Leech

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About Me!



I started this incredible journey way back in 2010 with *The Key to Erebus* but didn't summon the courage to hit publish until October 2012. For anyone who's done it, you'll know publishing your first title is a terribly scary thing! I still get butterflies on the morning a new title releases, but the terror has subsided at least. Now I just live in dread of the day my daughters are old enough to read them.

The horror! (On both sides I suspect.)

2017 marked the year that I made my first foray into Historical Romance and the world of the Regency Romance, and my word what a year! I was delighted by the response to this series and can't wait to add more titles. Paranormal Romance readers need not despair, however, as there is much more to come there too. Writing has become an addiction and as soon as one book is over, I'm hugely excited to start the next so you can expect plenty more in the future.

As many of my works reflect, I am greatly influenced by the beautiful French countryside in which I live. I've been here in the Southwest since 1998, though I was born and raised in England. My three gorgeous girls are all bilingual and my husband Pat, myself, and our four cats consider ourselves very fortunate to have made such a lovely place our home.

KEEP READING TO DISCOVER MY OTHER BOOKS!

Other Works by Emma V. Leech

Wicked Sons



Wicked Sons Series

Daring Daughters



Daring Daughters Series

Girls Who Dare



Girls Who Dare Series

Rogues & Gentlemen



[Rogues & Gentlemen Series](#)

The Regency Romance Mysteries



[The Regency Romance Mysteries Series](#)

The French Vampire Legend



[The French Vampire Legend Series](#)

The French Fae Legend



[The French Fae Legend Series](#)

[Stand Alone](#)

[The Book Lover](#) (a paranormal novella)

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chirp



Acknowledgements

Thanks, of course, to my wonderful editor Kezia Cole with [Magpie Literary Services](#)

To Victoria Cooper for all your hard work, amazing artwork and above all your unending patience!!! Thank you so much. You are amazing!

To my BFF, PA, personal cheerleader and bringer of chocolate, Varsi Appel, for moral support, confidence boosting and for reading my work more times than I have. I love you loads!

A huge thank you to all of Emma's Book Club members! You guys are the best!

I'm always so happy to hear from you so do email or message me :)

emmavleech@orange.fr

To my husband Pat and my family ... For always being proud of me.

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Author's Note



I took a bit of a liberty with the wrecking ball imagery as this was not invented until 1888. However, I liked the title Wrecking Belle so much; I bent historical accuracy a tad. I hope you can forgive me. The first use of the wrecking ball is a bit of a mystery, but Henry Bath and Co recorded the first documented appearance of the apparatus. It appears multiple companies claimed credit for its invention during that time period, but the actual inventor remains a subject of debate.

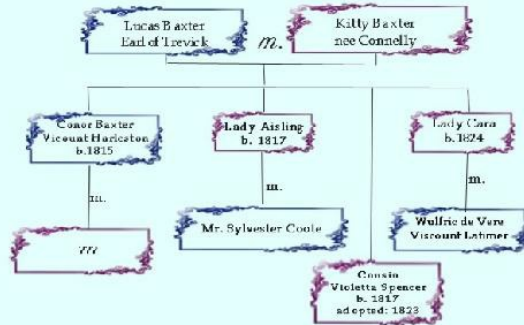
Xoxo,

Emma

Family Trees

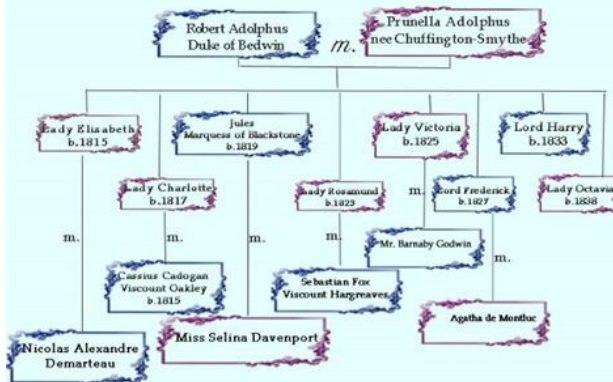
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To Follow her Heart



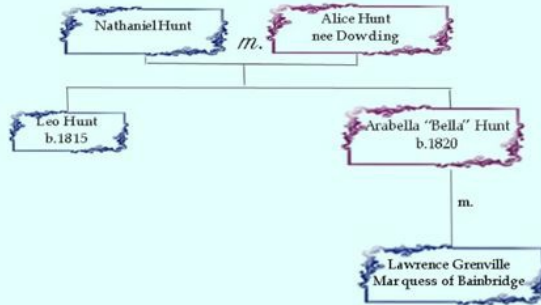
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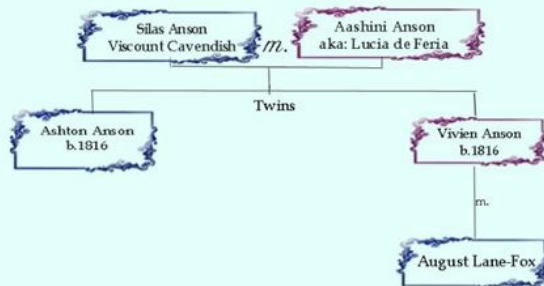
HOUSE OF HUNT

To Steal a Kiss



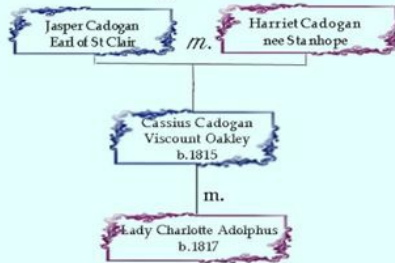
HOUSE OF CAVENDISH

To Break the Rules



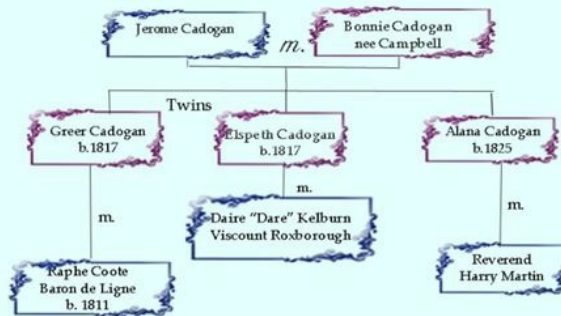
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To Wager with Love



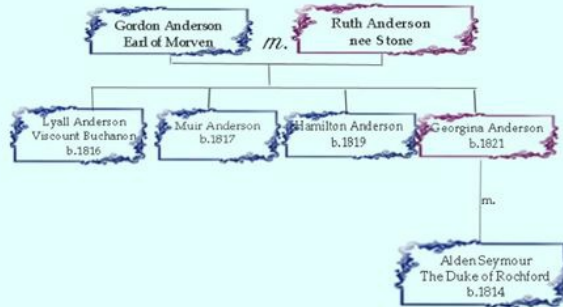
HOUSE OF CADOGAN

To Dance with a Devil



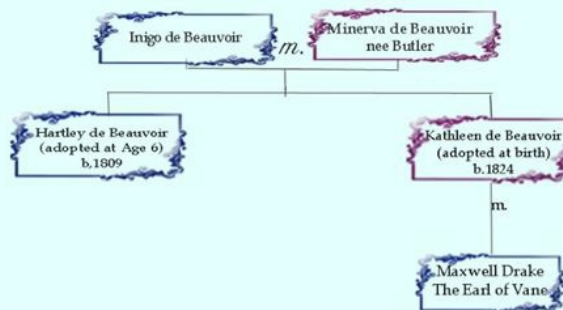
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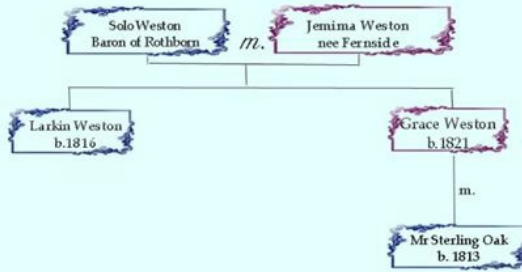
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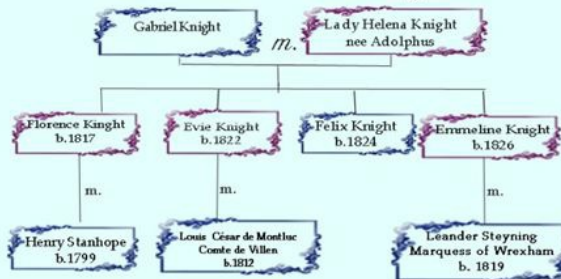
HOUSE OF ROTHBORN

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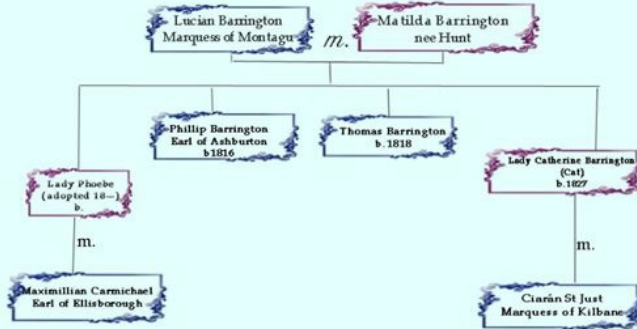
HOUSE OF KNIGHT

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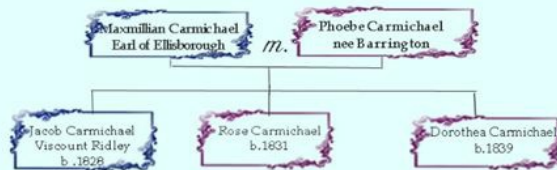
HOUSE OF MONTAGU

To Hunt the Hunter



HOUSE OF ELLISBOROUGH

To Dance until Dawn



Prologue



Harleston,

Are you mad? I just heard about the private event you held at Warwick Racecourse. Tell me the rumours are not true and you did not ride Drago? That animal is as insane as you are. I am told you rode like a demon and won by a mile. I swear there is nothing to choose between you and Leo. You'll break your necks one of these fine days. At least I confine my reckless impulses to the danger of getting my nose broken – and quite a risk it is when one is as handsome as I am. Still, I am skilled enough to make that a remote possibility. Have a care, will you.

—Excerpt of a letter from *The Hon'ble Ashton Anson (son of The Right Hon'ble Silas and Aashini Anson, The Viscount and Viscountess Cavendish) to Conor Baxter, The Viscount Harleston (son of The Right Hon'ble Kitty and Luke Baxter, The Countess and Earl of Trevick).*

11thOctober 1842, Trevick Castle, Trevick, Warwickshire.

“Conor, must you go? It's blowing a gale,” his mother said, looking anxiously out of the window. “It's bound to rain before you get there.”

“And if it does, I'll dry off. I can always stay overnight if it's too bad,” he said, giving her a swift kiss on the cheek and hurried across the expansive marble entrance hall towards the door.

“But that wretched horse is possessed. It tried to take a bite out of me last week and animals usually love me,” she persisted, trailing after him. “An evil fairy has cursed the beast, I swear it.”

“You've been listening to Bidy's wild stories again, Mama. I can only

tell you, Drago is a very discerning gentleman,” he teased.

“Conor!” she exclaimed crossly.

He chuckled as a footman hurried out with his coat and hat. “You know I didn’t mean it, Mama, so don’t give me that pout. You are trying to make me stay at home with you when you know very well I promised to go. Aisling will wonder where I have got to if I don’t leave now.”

“If you meant to go, you should have gone this afternoon, instead of leaving it until it’s so late in the day. And you know your father is in a meeting with that wretched steward of his today, and I will be lonesome until he finishes work. It’s so dull now Cara has left home too,” she said sadly.

Conor gave a bark of laughter. “Cara was here yesterday, and you fill the house with people constantly. I never knew a woman busier than you, so stop playing violins and making out you are sad and neglected.”

His mother gave a huff, nettled. “I still say that horse is not to be trusted. Even your father worries about you riding him and he is a fine judge of such things. If you must go, ride Phoenix.”

Conor looked back at her with a fond smile. “Mama, stop it. I’m not riding that slug, even for you. Drago is a little temperamental, I grant you, but he’s a fine animal. I’ve had him almost a year now, and he’s not unseated me yet.”

“Yes, but—”

“But me no buts,” he protested, laughing and tugging on his gloves. “Now, I must dash, or I won’t make it to Aisling’s for dinner before the rain starts.”

With that, he ran out of the door.

The light was waning but, if the clouds did not get too thick, there would be a full moon for his return journey. He needed to get back, for he wanted to leave early in the morning. Leo had arranged a huge boxing event in town that sounded like a lark, and Conor didn’t want to miss it. There was also a very pretty little opera dancer he had been flirting with before his Mama had forced him back to Trevick for a family get together. Unless he’d missed his guess, he had discovered a new mistress. About time too. He’d parted company with the last lady when she’d shown signs of getting too fond and expecting too much. It was a pattern he followed and made no secret of. Any

woman getting involved with him would be lavished with presents and treated like a queen for as long as it lasted. He made no promises and made no bones about the fact it was a short-term arrangement. Conor had no intention of breaking hearts, but neither was he about to get involved with a woman who wanted too much of his time. Not when there were so many other calls upon it.

Turning his collar up, for the wind was brisk and chilly and would whip around him sharply once Drago hit his stride, he urged the huge horse into a canter. He glanced up at the sky as a dark cloud swept overhead. His mother had been right: it would rain shortly.

“Curse it,” he muttered, and turned his mount away from the well-worn path, towards the shortcut that ran through the woods. There were several high jumps to be negotiated, but he’d ridden the track countless times, and it held no fears for him.

He’d been going for perhaps twenty minutes when the rain began. At first it was merely drizzle, but it soon settled into a drenching fall that made the ground sticky and soaked him to the bone. Annoyed, he toyed with the idea of going back the other way, but if he did so now it would take him even longer than usual to get there, and he might as well have stayed home with his mother.

“Come on, Drago. I know you want to get out of the rain, so let’s get a move on.”

Drago was only too happy to oblige, and pushed on.

They cleared the first jump with a mile to spare, Drago as surefooted as a cat, though the rain was falling harder than ever. Conor wiped his eyes with his sleeve. A dull rumble in the distance confirmed his suspicion that this storm was rather worse than he had bargained for. Drago shied sideways, bucked, and then tried to bolt, but Conor held him in check. The sooner they were at Aisling's and out of this foul weather, the better.

The rain fell harder still, a sheer curtain of water that made it impossible to see, and the next jump came upon them far faster than he expected. A clap of thunder exploded overhead, and Drago sidled and then shot forward in a panic. There was no time to correct him before he sailed over the jump, landing awkwardly and skidding in the mud. The enormous animal went down with a crash, well over a ton of horse landing on top of Conor’s leg

which hit rock as he fell. The crack of bone breaking was audible and sickening.

It felt like the next lightning strike had exploded inside him, pain, white hot and searing. The scream ripped from his throat before he even knew he had made the sound and he writhed in agony. Though he did not remember whether he had passed out or just slept, Conor woke sometime later in the dark, in a daze of agony. For a terrifying few moments, he had no notion of where he was or what had happened. It was nighttime; the rain pattered ceaselessly on his face and the only other sounds were those of the woods, small things scurrying and the creak and crack of trees in the wind. Slowly his wits returned, though sluggishly. Pain was the only thing he could think of.

Drago. The jump.

Regret was a useless emotion, but it hit him hard. Why the hell hadn't he gone the long way around, or better yet, stayed at home? It was a foul night and his mother had wished for his company. She had warned him to take care. Why had he not listened?

"Damned obstinate fool," he moaned. Bracing himself, he lifted himself onto his elbows and made an experimental attempt to move his legs. The pain was exquisite, like a knife blade digging in bone deep, and so overwhelming he subsided, sobbing in agony until he slept again, only to wake with no sense of time passing. He had never been so cold in his life, his body shivering so hard he could not keep still.

Had he been here minutes, hours? How long before they realised he was missing? Would Drago have been found by now? The horse was not here. His mother thought he was at Aisling's, but Aisling might believe he had been sensible and decided not to come. It might be tomorrow before they realised.

Conor gritted his teeth to stop them chattering. Misery and remorse wrapped themselves around him like a wet wool blanket. Would he die here? Fear settled in his heart. He thought of his parents' anguish, of his poor mother who had begged him not to go. How she would berate herself for not trying harder. She could not have stopped him, and he knew it, but she would suffer agonies of guilt and grief and that would be entirely his doing. His father would have lost his heir. What would happen to Trevick, to the people

who relied upon the earldom? Christ, but he had ruined everything for so many people, and for what?

The cloud cover overhead must be thick indeed, for he could not see the mess he'd made of his leg it was so dark, but he knew it was bad. The pale glimmer of bone was visible if nothing else though he did not have the stomach to reach out and investigate by touch. If by some miracle he survived this, would he lose the leg? Would he ever walk again? Ride again? His heart beat too fast as the appalling consequences of a moment of recklessness fell upon him like Drago had, crushing his spirit into the mud beneath him.

Never again, he swore. Never again would he gamble with his own safety and the lives of those he cared for. He *would* survive this. This was not the end of him. He would live, and he would walk, and he would ride again. But never again would he be such a damned fool and take such chances. Here, alone in the dark, in a world of pain and sorrow, Conor realised how precious life was, and how fragile. He would never again put it at risk. Not for anything.

Chapter 1



Dearest Aunt Sally,

I'm so sorry this letter is late again. I just don't know what happens to the days and then when I sat down to write yesterday, I managed to knock the ink over. I'm not sure how. I could swear I did not touch it nor jog the desk, but over it went and ruined five sheets of paper. Papa was very cross. Our housekeeper, Mrs Everly, was none too pleased either as a few drops splattered the carpet. So, I have been in disgrace.

I wish I was back with you. I think of you often and wonder what you are doing. It is comforting to me to know that at Inglenook Cottage all is going on just as it did before I came to stay with you, the same as while I was there, and shall always be the same. Here everything changes, moment to moment, and I find it dizzying. There are too many people and too much noise and the more people and the noisier it gets, the more likely I shall do something foolish and make everyone stare.

You'll never credit what I did on our last trip to Gunter's. I was out with Lady Bailey, and we were sitting minding our own business, sipping hot chocolate, for it was perishing cold that day, and then this man walked past us. He was neat as a new pin, without so much as a hair out of place, and I was just thinking how much I envied him the ability to stay tidy and wishing I could emulate it when...

—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Lucy Carleton to her

aunt, Miss Sally Jefferson.

11th March 1845, Berkeley Square, Mayfair, London.

Conor watched anxiously as his valet, Murphy, regarded the stain on his coat.

“Chocolate, you say, my lord?”

“I’m afraid so. Some ridiculous woman decided to throw it over me,” he said irritably.

The man’s greying eyebrows rose a little and Conor thought perhaps his lips twitched, but he otherwise restrained from commenting. That was worrying. Murphy was never usually short of opinions or comments.

“Would she have had a good reason for doing so?” Murphy asked, the picture of innocence.

Well, that was better. All the same, Conor narrowed his eyes. “No.”

“A pity,” Murphy replied with a sigh. “It’s about time you did something to get a cup of chocolate thrown in your face, I reckon.”

“What a vile thing to say,” Conor responded, nettled. “As if I would ever —”

“Ah, I’m only pulling your leg,” the fellow said with a soft laugh. “I just mean you ought to go and stir things up a bit. You’re not dead yet, you know. You used to be full of larks. When you started that club with your pals, for example, and—”

“And that was a long time ago. I’m not a green boy set on mischief any longer.”

“Aye, more’s the pity,” Murphy muttered under his breath before adding. “Well, a baking soda paste ought to put this to rights, but I’d best see to it before it sets.”

“Very good, Murphy, thank you.”

Conor made his way down to his study and sat at the desk. Everything was just as he liked it: neat, orderly, clean. Carefully, he removed the white cloth that covered the latest project he had begun. Laid out with precision on a thin tray upon his desk were pieces of a clock. The tiny silver parts glinted in the light and Conor smiled as he picked up the tweezers and selected a miniscule cog. He had always loved puzzles and figuring out how things

worked, but it had not been until a few years ago that he had rediscovered his passion for making things.

The injury had been bad. So bad the surgeon had wanted to take his leg. Thank God Mama and Aisling would not let that happen. His sister had a talent for healing, and she had taken charge. Between them, his mother and sister had nursed him, but the pain had been of a kind he had not believed it possible to survive. But he had, and he was well again. So, that was that. All was well.

Aisling's husband, Sylvester Cootes, was a decent fellow and seemed to make his sister happy. He was also the new estate manager of Trevick Castle. Conor had been raised knowing that he would one day be the Earl of Trevick, and so he had learnt all there was to know about the castle and the business of running it at his father—and his mother's—knee. Cootes, however, was full of new ideas and innovations, and it had been a huge relief to Conor to know the estate was in good hands, and some of the burden taken from his father. If that had not been the case, he would have stepped in himself, but only because it was his duty to do so.

As much as he loved the countryside and his ancestral home, he was glad to keep away from it since his accident, for there were too many memories of pain and regret. He was also fascinated by progress and Conor had spent much time with the industrialist, Gabriel Knight, who had fostered his interest in the railways and put him in the way of some sound investments. He owed the man a good deal and admired him tremendously.

Conor looked up as the clock on the mantelpiece chimed, a precise, bright sound to announce the hour of one o'clock. All through the house was the echo of that sound, and Conor smiled. He watched the door, and a few seconds later it opened, revealing his housekeeper, Mrs O'Brien. She nodded to the footman holding the door and carried in a tea tray, setting it carefully on the edge of the desk.

“Good afternoon, my lord. Did you have a pleasant morning?”

Conor glanced at her, amused. “I'm certain Murphy told you that I did not.”

“Ah, well. Accidents happen,” she said mildly, putting the delicate china cup the right way up in the saucer and adding a precisely cut cube of sugar.

The precision of the cut was down to Conor. He had designed and made a sugar saw, so that his footmen could make a better job of breaking up the sugar cone. Previously, using the sugar scissors, the lumps were all different shapes and sizes, so his tea was either a little too sweet or not quite sweet enough. It hadn't used to bother him, but of late such details seemed to drive him distracted.

Mrs O'Brien poured the tea and took the cover off a plate to reveal a generous slice of game pie, an apple cut into careful slices, and a large piece of cheese. "There's a lovely jam sponge too. I'll fetch you some up presently."

"Excellent, thank you," he replied politely as she nodded and made her way out again.

Conor sighed and reached for the tea, taking a sip. Perfect. Just as he liked it. The clock on the mantel ticked the seconds by with an accuracy that helped ease the tension that had been climbing down his spine since the incident at Gunter's Tea Room.

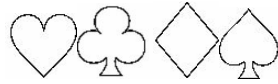
Sighing, Conor reached down and massaged his leg. It always ached when the weather was cold and damp, though he refused to acknowledge that fact unless it became unendurable. Unbidden, he remembered the face of the foolish girl who had ruined one of his best coats. Her hair had been blonde, so fair it was almost a shock to look upon it on a dull March day. As she had thrown the cup—there really was no other word for it, she *had* thrown it at him—her eyes had widened with horror. Crystalline blue eyes. Clear and bright and guileless. Quite lovely really.

Once the damage had been done, the teacup dropped to the floor and smashed, and she had sat there, staring at him as everyone whispered and exclaimed and chocolate dripped down his front. Not a word of apology, no hastening to hand him a napkin and try to remedy some of her handiwork. Not so much as a blink.

Conor could not quite remember what he had said or done, but he suspected it had not been his finest hour. His leg had been hurting like the devil and his mother, whose table he had just vacated, knew very well he was irritable because his leg hurt, and had been intent on scolding him for not looking after himself, for shutting himself up with his projects, for not getting out and seeing his friends, *and* for not finding himself a wife...

Ugh.

Ah, well. As Mrs O'Brien said, accidents happened. He ought to know. Still, Murphy seemed to think he could rescue the coat, and Conor never had to see the wretched girl ever again. So, there was nothing to worry about. His life could return to peaceful normality.



6th April 1845, Beverwyck, London.

Conor watched, rather bemused, as Jules got himself leg shackled. He had truly believed the fellow would remain a bachelor for years yet, but no, Jules had fallen, hook, line and sinker, as the saying went, and his bride was a surprise too. She was not what you would call pretty, though she was a fine-looking woman of ample proportions and had the air of a female who would not take any nonsense. Conor had to admit that it looked as if Jules had made a wise choice, which was astonishing really, when you considered all the terrible, heedless decisions he'd made up to this point. But then they all had to grow up. Conor had done it a few years earlier, that was all.

“Conor!”

Conor looked around and smiled as he saw Larkin Weston striding towards him.

“How are you?” Larkin took his hand, shaking it warmly. “You’re looking well.”

Conor forced himself not to give an acerbic comment, a habit he'd gained during the long months of his recovery to dissuade people from asking him how he was. Larkin was a good friend, though, and one of the first to visit him when he had been laid up for endless months with his leg in plaster. He'd visited often and at length and never seemed to mind when Conor was brittle and ill-tempered, which, if he remembered correctly, had been most of the time. Perhaps it was because Larkin's own father had a similar injury, though Baron Rothborn's had been gained heroically during the war, not because he was a blasted idiot who took a risk he'd not needed to take.

“I'm well enough,” Conor replied, seeing laughter gleaming in Larkin's eyes.

“You must be, you didn't bite my head off,” he said with a wink. “Well,

would you believe it? I never thought I'd see the day that Jules tied the knot. And before the rest of us, too!"

Conor snorted. "I know. We were halfway through the ceremony before I really believed it wasn't a prank of some sort."

"We're all done for now, you know that," Larkin observed wryly. "Mother has been in alt ever since the invitation arrived and has not stopped dropping hints I ought to be following in his footsteps."

"Good God," Conor groaned. "Not yours too. I swear—"

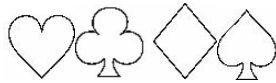
He broke off, eyes narrowing as he saw a glint of striking blonde hair on the far side of the room. *No*. Surely not.

"What is it?" Larkin asked, following his gaze.

"I don't know. I just thought I saw..." Conor craned his neck but could see nothing more. He shook his head. "No. Nothing. What was I saying?"

"No idea. Can't have been interesting. I need a drink. Coming?"

Larkin raised his empty glass, and Conor nodded, following his friend across the room.



"I feel like an imposter," Lucy complained, doing her best to blend into the elegant furnishings so no one would notice her. She was horribly self-conscious in her new finery and very aware of the shoes that were a little too big and kept slipping off her heels. If only Papa hadn't been so impatient to launch her immediately the opportunity arose, she might have had the mistake corrected. How the shoemaker had got her order muddled with someone else's and made everything the wrong size she could not fathom, but such events were not unusual in her life. Papa had no concept of patience, however, and had plucked her from the countryside without a by your leave and no more than a terse explanation that it was high time she married. The sense of waiting until she had shoes that fitted before thrusting her under the noses of the *ton* was beyond his comprehension. If Brian Carleton wanted something, he wanted it *now*. He usually got it, too.

Lady Bailey sent Lucy an impatient look and waved a gloved hand at her. "Stop slouching, stand up straight, and *do* take that hunted look from your face."

“But I wasn’t invited,” Lucy hissed, more mortified by this fact than she could quite manage to put into words.

“No, but I was, and the duchess is a dear friend. There are at least half a dozen eligible bachelors here and her grace will quite understand my feelings when I explain the *circumstances*.”

Lady Bailey sighed heavily, and Lucy winced.

The *circumstances* were things Lucy preferred not to think about. Not that there was any escaping the fact her father had blackmailed Lady Bailey into bringing his daughter out in the world. There was no other way of putting it, either. Lady Bailey owed Lucy’s father a good deal of money, lost to him via his exclusive gambling club, and Papa had refused to give her time to pay. Paying in full was impossible and would cause the lady a good deal of embarrassment. Papa would, however, overlook the bill entirely, if she got Lucy appropriately fired off and married to a man of fortune and good breeding. If he had a title, Papa would even give her a bonus. Lucy shuddered. The humiliation of those words ever being spoken made her stomach turn over.

It wouldn’t be so bad, but Lucy did not think Lady Bailey liked her overly much, and that made her anxious, and being anxious made her jittery, and when she got jittery, well, that was when things went wrong.

“Ah, there is her grace. I must just see if I can snatch a word with her. Now, sit there, and don’t move.”

“Very well,” Lucy said, not having a lot of choice in the matter.

Lucy watched the lady go and prayed no one would notice her. Everyone here seemed to know everyone else, and Lucy experienced the melancholy sensation of being alone in a crowded room. She rose, turning her back on the celebrations, and went to look out of the window at the formal gardens. If only Papa hadn’t been so ambitious, she might have stayed quite happily with her Aunt Sally at Inglenook Cottage and been perfectly content. The squire’s son had even taken something of a fancy to her, and whilst he was not terribly bright, he had been kind and rather sweet. It didn’t seem a terrible fate, to marry a man who would be kind to one and not shout if you broke his mother’s favourite bowl or caused a scene in a shop through no fault of your own or...

“You.”

This rather severe and unenthusiastic observation made Lucy yelp with surprise. She turned, taking a step back, and her shoe slid from her heel, making her ankle go over sideways. With a gasp, she clutched at the curtain and might have pulled the entire thing down upon her head, if the man who had spoken to her had not reached out a hand and steadied her.

Lucy righted herself, but her shoe was not on her foot, and she cast a despairing glance around the floor, turning in a circle to look for it.

“Whatever are you doing?” the man demanded.

Lucy glanced up to see him staring at her as if she was an escaped lunatic. Well, that was harsh. She might be clumsy, but she was not mad.

“Looking for my shoe,” she said, with as much dignity as she could muster.

The fellow rolled his eyes and crouched down, pushed the heavy layers of her voluminous skirts back, and retrieved her shoe.

“Oh,” Lucy said, flushing. “Well, I can’t see much of the floor with these dratted skirts taking up all the room, now can I?”

Being fashionably dressed seemed to mean an end to doing normal things as far as Lucy could tell. Even reaching for something from a shelf was off limits when one could not raise one’s arms above chest height.

The man said nothing, but he had that long-suffering look on his face that Lucy was accustomed to. Her father generally looked the same way. And this fellow didn’t even know her! Though he looked somewhat familiar.

“Give me your foot,” he said, with a tone that suggested she not argue with him.

With one hand on the window frame for balance, Lucy put out her foot, though only her toes showed beneath her skirts. The man took hold of her ankle, with strong, warm hands that made Lucy’s breath snag in her throat. He put the shoe firmly on her foot. It fell off again.

“It’s too big,” he said with a frown.

“I know that,” Lucy replied tersely. “That’s why it came off.”

“Why is it too big?” he demanded, looking rather puzzled.

He had tremendously blue eyes that blazed against his fair skin, and hair that was as black as... as... Lucy tried to come up with something original but only the words, night, ink and a crow's wings came to mind. All of which worked but were rather uninspiring. But it was certainly black.

"It's not mine," Lucy replied, shoving the thing back on her foot. "Oh, do get up before everyone stares at me."

"Why are you wearing other people's shoes? Who are you?"

"Cinderella," she shot back before biting her tongue. She must remember not to say whatever came into her head. The fellow looked singularly unamused in any case. "I beg your pardon. I am Lucy Carleton. How do you do?" she said brightly.

Lucy held out her hand to him, but he didn't move, his long fingers still curled around the glass of red wine he held. Instead, his eyes narrowed.

"You threw a cup of chocolate over me."

Lucy opened and closed her mouth. Now she remembered. She dropped her hand.

"Oh."

"Oh," he repeated, watching her with interest.

"That was you."

"It was."

Lucy chewed on her lip anxiously. "It was an accident."

"So I've been telling myself. Though how you did it, I still cannot fathom." He looked genuinely bewildered by this anomaly.

"Don't ask me," she said, laughing, though it was a rather high-pitched nervous sound she did not like in the least. "I never know how I manage these things."

He narrowed his eyes, studying her in a way that made the back of her neck prickle, like he was trying to figure out how she worked, or more likely – *malfunctioned*.

"Do things like that happen often, then?"

"Oh, all the time." She nodded, her eyes darting around the room, looking for an exit.

Not being terribly tall, it was hard for her to see much over his shoulders, so she stood on tiptoe, hoping to spot a door to freedom.

“What are you doing?” he asked suspiciously, glancing in the direction she was looking in.

“Beg pardon?” Lucy dragged her attention back to him. “I’m just standing here while you scold me.”

“I wasn’t scolding you, and you were doing something. You looked like you were searching for a hiding place or somewhere to run to.”

“Oh, you’re very perspicacious,” she said, looking at him with admiration. “I never have the faintest idea of what other people are thinking.”

“You astonish me,” he replied, his tone dryly amused.

“And you *were* scolding me,” she added as an afterthought.

“I was not,” he replied, looking rather indignant at the idea. “Besides which, you were making no attempt to hide the fact you were about to bolt. That’s very impolite.”

“You’re still doing it, you know,” she said, tilting her head to one side to look at him more critically. “Are you an only child?”

“No. And what difference would that make?”

Lucy shrugged. “Only children are sometimes spoiled and can be very judgemental of others. At least, I have found that to be so on occasion.”

“I have two sisters,” he said, sounding a tad defensive.

Lucy looked back at him doubtfully. “Oh.”

“I do!” he insisted, and then shook his head. “This is a ridiculous conversation.”

“You started it,” she pointed out.

He took a breath, looking rather exasperated, and replied with studied calm, “I did not.”

Lucy wrinkled her nose at him. “Now, that just isn’t true. I was here, minding my own business, when you came over and said *you!* in that imperious way you have, and startled me so much I fell over.”

“You did not fall over.”

“I would have, if you hadn’t caught me.”

“Then you ought to thank me, not insult me.”

“If you hadn’t been so rude, I would not have fallen over in the first place.”

He gave her a speaking look. “Somehow, I remain unconvinced on that point.”

Lucy sighed. She was always honest—rather too much so, usually—and she had to concede the point. “Well, I can’t blame you for that,” she admitted. “I’d probably have tripped over something sooner or later.”

He snorted and shook his head, the ghost of a smile playing around his lips. “Why have I never seen you before? Are you a friend of her grace?”

Lucy felt a blush rise from somewhere in her midsection, spread over her chest, and work its way up her throat to her cheeks. “Um. Not... exactly,” she admitted, twisting her fingers together.

The man scrutinised her with interest, which he did a lot, and which made her stomach feel rather odd and squirmy. He had the most piercing blue eyes, far darker than her own, which she considered a rather insipid shade of watery blue.

“Is everything all right?” he asked. “You look rather pale. Should I fetch the duchess? I’m sure she would find you somewhere to lie down if you’re unwell.”

Lucy swallowed hard, panic rising in her throat. Her heart was beating very hard now. If he spoke to the duchess, who she could see standing only a few feet away, it would embarrass Lucy in front of everyone when the duchess said she did not know who she was. Lady Bailey would no doubt straighten things out, but she was nowhere in sight and by then it would be too late. There was only one thing to do.

“Excuse me,” she squeaked, and tried to make her escape.

All might have been well, if not for the dratted shoes.

Chapter 2



Felix,

Sorry you didn't make it back in time for Jules' wedding celebrations. I think you'll like his new marchioness, though. She's an interesting and intelligent woman – astonishing when you think she's just married Jules! But I liked her a good deal. A plain-speaking, no-nonsense sort who won't let Jules get himself into any more foolishness, I warrant. He looked like the cock of the walk too, I can tell you. I think they'll do very well together.

The funniest thing happened after the ceremony. You know what a stickler Harleston is these days, and how fussy he's become of late? Well, he was talking to a young woman I've never seen before when...

—Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble Ashton Anson (son of The Right Hon'ble Silas and Aashini Anson, Viscount and Viscountess Cavendish) to Mr Felix Knight (son of Mr Gabriel and Lady Helena Knight.)

6th April 1845, Beverwyck, London.

Conor wondered what it was he had said as those china-blue eyes widened with panic. Before he had time to discover, however, she had taken to her heels. Or tried to.

It must have been the shoes, he supposed, but she had barely taken a step before she stumbled. Instinctively, Conor reached out a hand to save her, only to have her thrust it away in her desire to escape. Already off balance, she took a step to the side, arms flailing, and knocked a delicate-looking vase off the elegant consul table behind her. Alarmed, and fearing a scene, Conor had

lunged for it and just got it safely righted, when she grabbed at his arm with a little shriek as she finally went over. The wine he'd been holding splashed from the glass, most of it soaking his waistcoat. The rest puddled on the floor. Gentlemanly instincts overpowering his indignation, Conor reached for her again, admitted himself surprised that such a delicate-looking girl could weigh rather more than he bargained for, and slipped in the wine.

They went down with a crash, with Conor mercifully landing on his good leg, and with Lucy Carleton sprawled all over him.

She scrambled up with astonishing speed, stared down at him with panic in her eyes, and bolted, leaving her shoes behind her. Cinderella indeed.

“Want a hand?” asked an urbane voice, dripping amusement.

Conor looked up to discover Ashton Anson staring down at him, laughter glinting in his eyes.

“No, I'm enjoying a little siesta,” Conor shot back testily. “Of course I want a hand!”

“Now, now. Don't take it out on me. You were the one who let her go. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking of my own safety!” Conor muttered irritably. “With luck, I'll never have to see the dreadful girl again.”

Ashton, well aware of Conor's gammy leg, hauled him to his feet with surprising strength and stared at Conor's now sodden waistcoat.

“A kinder fate than I would have given it,” he observed mildly. “Whatever induced you to wear such a dull waistcoat? I mean, not even the tiniest motif. I despair of you, Conor, truly, I do.”

Conor glared at him and wordlessly accepted the handkerchief he offered. Not that there was the slightest use in trying to repair the damage. Red wine had splashed over his cravat and shirt and made a dark stain on his plain blue waistcoat. He attempted to at least soak up the moisture, as it was cold and damp and felt unpleasant against his skin.

“A pretty little thing. Rather delicate and ethereal.”

Conor snorted at the description, which was accurate providing you kept a safe distance from her. “Deadly and disastrous are the words you are looking for. She's not the least bit delicate, let me assure you. She could look

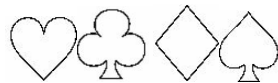
like Aphrodite herself and it still wouldn't be worth the risk. This is the second time she's attacked me with a beverage. Last time it was hot."

Ashton laughed, apparently delighted with this information. "What was her name?" he pressed.

"I've no idea," Conor replied, which was a lie, but Ashton needed saving from himself.

"Hmm," Ashton mused, pursing his lips. "Then I shall ask her grace."

Conor would have told him not to bother, for he had the lurking suspicion she ought not to have been here at all, but Ashton had already gone, and Conor needed to get home and get changed. He hoped Murphy had some wonder cure for red wine stains.



"I'm sorry, Papa."

Her father did not look up, his head bent, shiny pate gleaming in the lamplight as he carried on writing.

Lucy sighed. Even a scolding from her father must wait for his business to be concluded.

Mr Carleton signed his name with a flourish and finally aimed the intense beam of his focus upon her. With a large, bushy moustache, he had the look of a kindly walrus and his jovial laugh had put many a man at ease. More fool them. In business at least, he was closer kin to a shark. Ruthless and predatory, Brian Carleton had a nose for money and was interested principally in how best to gain large amounts of it.

"Let us recap," he said, leaning back in the large leather armchair and resting his hands atop a rather impressive stomach. "On your first meeting with Lady Bailey at Gunter's Tea Rooms, you threw a cup of chocolate at an unknown victim."

"Yes, Papa," Lucy said in a small voice. There was no point in trying to evade the truth. Lady Bailey had given her father a full and point-by-point account of the event in question.

"And today, on your first foray into society, you caused a scene, during which a glass of wine was spilled over Viscount Harleston and the two of you

ended up in a tangle on the floor together. Did I miss anything?”

“No, sir. Except that the previously unknown victim was also Viscount Harleston. That’s why he was there; he was scolding me.”

Her father groaned. “Why?” he demanded, raising his eyes to heaven. “Why would you give me a daughter who looked like an angel and causes nothing but destruction?”

“Penance?” Lucy suggested, only to snap her mouth shut on discovering that had been a rhetorical question.

“Lucy, my little lamb, I have been waiting for a chance like this all my life. If you can get yourself married to a titled gent, or someone with a bit of clout in the *ton*, then I have my way in.” Her father sighed, a dreamy look in his eyes. “Oh, the things I could do if you married a duke.”

Lucy pulled a face. “That’s not likely, Papa. Lady Bailey says there aren’t many dukes to begin with, single ones are like hen’s teeth, and all of those are old and decrepit.”

Her father waved this away as inconsequential. “A marquess would suffice, or even, at a pinch, an earl.”

“Papa!” Lucy protested. “Be reasonable. The only man I have met loathes me and he was only a viscount.”

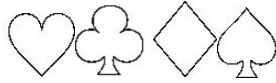
“Ah,” her father wagged a hand at her. “But his father is the Earl of Trevick,” he said, laying a finger beside his nose and giving her a knowing look.

“Well, it doesn’t matter if his father is the king of England. One look at me and he’ll be on the next boat to China, given half a chance.”

“Nonsense!” Her father got to his feet, rather ponderously, as his bulk did not allow for speed. Smiling beneficently and in a manner that filled her with alarm, he rounded the desk and stood before her. Patting her cheek fondly, he sighed. “Now, don’t you be a silly pea goose. No fellow with eyes in his head could hate you, little duck, no more than he could hate a kitten. You mark my words, he’ll be back, sniffing around, and when he does...”

His tone changed from caressing, doting Papa to something a touch harder and more ruthless.

“And when he does... you make sure you’re ready to catch him.”



Conor looked up from the clock he was making as the door to his study swung open.

“No, no, don’t trouble yourself Mrs O’Brien, I know the way,” Ashton said genially, closing the door behind him upon the indignant housekeeper.

“Do come in,” Conor said dryly.

Ashton ignored this, as he ignored many things he did not like, and said instead, “Lucy Carleton.”

Conor sighed, having gone to considerable trouble to erase the name from his memory. It had been harder than he liked to admit. Those clear blue eyes kept intruding on his peace of mind.

“What about her?”

“She is the daughter of one Brian Carleton. He is the owner of Coker’s Gentleman’s Club, among other enterprises. A very wealthy man, by all accounts. He has two sons, both much older than his daughter, and they are out in the world attempting to make their fortunes.”

Conor carefully set the little cog he was holding into place, and then looked up. “Why, in the name of heaven, would you believe I needed to know that?”

“Because that beautiful creature brought a bit of colour into your life,” Ashton said, arranging his elegant person in the chair on the other side of the desk.

Conor regarded him with disfavour. “Dousing me in red wine is not my idea of adding colour.”

Ashton shrugged. “Most days you dress like you’re going to a funeral; anything is an improvement.”

“I resent that,” Conor said, aggrieved. “What’s wrong with my wardrobe? Dark colours are de rigueur.”

“Yes, yes, but a little leavening is required, I assure you. Anyway, stop distracting me. What are you going to do about the girl?”

Conor’s eyes widened. “Do about her? Avoid her like the plague, I should think.”

Ashton rolled his eyes. That was clearly not the answer he wanted. “The girl needs entry into society. Lady Bailey brought her to the wedding, by the by. You know her, I think? Lady Bailey is one of the duchess’s pet projects you know. Trying to convert her to the idea that women ought to stick together like sisters and take their rightful place in society rather than being chattel. Too late for the woman’s daughters, sadly. Married them all off to frightful old men. Anyway, from what I can gather, Lady Bailey has rather impressive gambling debts from a private game Miss Carleton’s father ran, which allowed ladies to play deep. He’s called in her debts, with no time to pay, *or* she can launch the lovely Lucy—”

“On an unsuspecting public. Good God, Ashton. You can’t be serious?”

“Why not?”

Conor laughed, shaking his head. “Because the woman needs a bodyguard, not an escort, and I have no desire to be either.”

Ashton frowned and brushed something Conor could not see from the knee of his impeccably tailored trousers. “Conor. You’ve got to stop this.”

For once, Ashton seemed entirely serious, his expression grave.

Conor stiffened in his chair and sat back, steeling himself against whatever reproof Ashton was going to throw at him. Ashton regarded him steadily and sighed, shaking his head.

“I’m not going to say it. Who the devil am I to give you advice? But have a care, Conor. Life is passing you by while you shut yourself up here with your clocks and your—” Ashton waved a hand in a vague circle. “—thingummybobs.”

With that, he got to his feet.

“I’ll say no more, but you take my point.”

Conor glowered at him but said nothing. Ashton shrugged, returned a warm smile, and took himself off again.



Lucy sighed as her maid, Sarah, brushed out her blonde hair and began pinning and twisting it into a sleek chignon at the back of her head.

“Don’t look so glum, Miss. At least the rest of your new frocks have

arrived today, and those pretty half boots too.”

“Yes, so at least I might be able to run away without tackling any nearby peers to the ground,” Lucy muttered, wincing at Sarah stabbed her with a hairpin.

“Sorry, Miss,” Sarah said, before adding. “Though I don’t know why you look so wretched. You’ve got the chance to make a splendid match, and wear pretty clothes, and go to parties. It don’t sound so bad to me, begging your pardon.”

Lucy snorted. “That’s because you’ve never had to go into society and have them all look at you like you’re a slimy newt swimming with goldfish.”

Sarah tsked and made a sound of reproach. “I’m sure they don’t think no such thing. A pretty thing like you. Why the gents will be falling over themselves...”

Lucy sent her a withering look, and she blushed.

“W-What I meant was—” Sarah said hastily.

“I know what you meant, and you’re very sweet, Sarah, but you don’t understand. Oh, why couldn’t Papa have let me stay with Aunt Sally? He’s been content enough for her to have the raising of me since Mama died. I’ve been there for twelve years! But now, suddenly, I’m plucked from obscurity without a word of warning.”

“It was rather sudden,” Sarah admitted. “And he never said what he had planned for you before now?”

Lucy shook her head. “He made sure I had governesses and learned to dance and to sew and all those things—not that I’m terribly good at any of them—but he never said there was some grand scheme to get me married to a duke or something ridiculous.”

“Perhaps he didn’t want you to worry,” Sarah suggested.

Lucy snorted at the idea. “More like he didn’t want me running away and spoiling his plan before he could put it into action.”

“Oh, miss! You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

Lucy stared at the reflection in the glass before her. The young woman looked rather elegant, all neat and tidy. The picture of a well-behaved miss. In short, she saw a stranger staring back at her, and one with whom she did

not know if she wished to be better acquainted.

“No, I suppose not.”

Sarah sighed. “Well, that’s good. Now, let’s get these new boots on, shall we? We don’t want to keep Lady Bailey waiting for your outing.”

“Oh, no,” Lucy replied dully. “We wouldn’t want that.”

Finally polished and shone to Sarah’s satisfaction, Lucy made her way down the stairs to discover Lady Bailey waiting for her with obvious impatience.

“Come along, come along. I have a great deal to do today, and you have another fitting.”

Lucy groaned, earning herself a look of censure from Lady Bailey.

“Cows make noises like that, Lucy. Young ladies do not.”

“I beg your pardon,” Lucy said meekly. “Only, must I have another fitting? I seem to do nothing else but—”

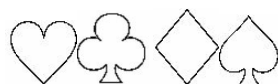
“Your father is spending an obscene amount of money on getting you properly turned out. If I were you, I should be in alt to have so many beautiful things bought for me.”

With a stab of guilt, Lucy realised the woman really meant that. Her father had told her the lady was experiencing financial difficulties and no doubt she resented seeing Lucy’s father shower money on his ungrateful daughter.

“Yes. I know that,” Lucy replied, feeling wretched as usual. “He is very generous. Only I didn’t ask him to do it. I was really quite happy before.”

Lady Bailey stalked to the door, which a liveried footman hastened to open for them. “If I hear one more word about your darling Aunt Sally and her dear little cottage, I shall scream,” she said, ignoring the footman as she sailed through the door.

“Thank you, Graham,” Lucy whispered as she hurried past. The footman winked at her, and she hid her smile as he closed the door behind her.



For once, they accomplished the fitting without bloodshed or tears—Lucy’s or the dressmaker’s—which was something. Lucy bought a length of

pretty Honiton lace and had it wrapped up to send to her aunt. Not that she mentioned that to Lady Bailey. They avoided Gunter's, much to Lucy's relief, but paused for refreshments in a neat little tearoom off Bond Street.

"Well, a successful morning," Lady Bailey said with a smile. "You behaved very prettily, Lucy. Well done."

Lucy returned the smile but said nothing. In her experience, it was best not to tempt fate. However, as the lady seemed rather more in charity with her than usual, perhaps she might get something out of this trip she actually wanted.

"As we have undertaken everything you wished to do, might we visit the bookstore we passed before we go home?"

Lady Bailey pursed her lips.

"Oh, please," Lucy begged.

"Lucy, it will do you no good whatsoever to be thought of as a bluestocking."

Lucy gave an unladylike snort, which she hastily turned to a cough on seeing her companion's glare of disapproval.

"I don't think anyone could believe that of me, at least," Lucy said with real amusement. "I really only enjoy novels."

This did not seem to reassure Lady Bailey. "Young ladies ought not to read such... such romantic nonsense."

"But you read them!" Lucy objected. "How is that fair?"

"I," the lady replied with icy civility, "am a married lady of many years and have sense enough to know the difference between fantasy and reality."

"Oh, so do I," Lucy exclaimed, stung. "I know nothing will ever happen to me like it does in those books. There are no such things as knights in shining armour, and real life is never as interesting. But that's why we read them. Isn't it?"

Lady Bailey regarded her for a long moment and then sighed. "Oh, very well."

Lucy's little yip of pleasure was hastily swallowed upon the warning look the lady gave her, and instead she replied most demurely, "Thank you ever so, my lady."

“Hmmm,” said Lady Bailey.

Chapter 3



Dear Lucy,

Thank you for your letter. It is always a pleasure to hear from you, whether the letter is late or early.

We are going on just as you would expect. Dear Molly has had her kittens, five in all, and each of them doing well. We had a big storm on Friday, and it made the most dreadful mess. I had to get Gem over to have a look at the thatch and I expect I shall have to replace it this year, but he's patched it up, so it ought to last until the summer.

I hope that brother of mine isn't bullying you, Lucy dear. You just tell me if he is, and I shall have a thing or two to say to him. I don't know where he gets these notions from, but perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing for you to marry well. I don't mean some titled gent like he seems set on, but you can certainly do better than the squire's son. Yes, I saw the way he was mooning about after you. Don't think I didn't.

You know, if you would just relax and be yourself and stop worrying so much, you wouldn't get yourself in half so many scrapes. You just need to find yourself a friend, and then you'll feel much better.

—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Sally Jefferson to her niece, Miss Lucy Carleton.

6th April 1845, Brampton's Book Store, Bond Street, London.

Conor perused the shelves, trying to find something that would hold his attention. Mr Waverly, the elderly owner, had greeted him warmly upon seeing him, for Conor often stopped and had a chat with him and passed the

time.

“I have the last first edition print of *The Lady Conquers All*,” Waverly said, waving an elegantly bound leather copy of the book at him.

Conor pulled a face. “I don’t know. I read *The Jewel and the Iron Key*, and it didn’t grab me. I was going to give that one a miss.”

“Ah, then you’ll be missing a treat. I read the entire thing in one sitting. I could not put it down.”

Conor regarded the man with amusement. Waverly was an enthusiastic reader to be sure, but that was high praise indeed.

“I’ll consider it,” he said with a grin.

“Don’t think too long,” Waverly warned him. “I’ll sell it to the first person who asks if you’re going to be stubborn about it.”

“You do that,” Conor replied with a laugh, and carried on searching the bookshelves.

The tinkle of the doorbell announced a new customer and Waverly turned to greet whoever it was, leaving Conor to make his selection. He heard Waverly’s dulcet tones as he bade the customer welcome, and then:

“Oh, sir, might you have a copy of *The Lady Conquers All*? I’m so desperate to read it.”

Conor swung around, scowling, as he discovered a petite blonde staring at Mr Waverly with an air of expectation. She was dressed with exquisite taste today, in a gown of petrol blue velvet. Her companion, Lady Bailey, sighed and took herself off to explore the shelves, apparently having no taste for the lady’s reading matter.

“Ah,” said Waverly, darting a mischievous glance at Conor. “Well, young lady. I do, and I don’t.”

“I don’t understand,” replied Miss Carleton, wrinkling her pretty nose in confusion.

Conor stepped forward, drawing the lady’s eye to him. “He means to say that he offered the book to me first, and he does not know whether I want it.”

“Oh, but my lord,” Waverly began. “You said—”

“I said I would be delighted to take it,” Conor replied firmly, though

what devil prompted him to do so he could not have said. Perhaps it was the way the girl was looking at him, or perhaps he was irritated to discover those clear blue eyes were just as lovely as he remembered. Either way, the desire to rile her was irresistible.

Miss Carleton stared at him. Despite her obvious annoyance, with her fair complexion and those wide blue eyes, she looked like nothing so much as a disgruntled kitten.

“That... was not very well done of you, my lord,” she said, with surprising rancour.

“No,” he mused, enjoying the moment more than he cared to admit. “I don’t suppose it was. But then neither is dousing a fellow in chocolate one day and red wine the next.”

“I apologised for the chocolate already. As for the wine, *that*,” she said icily, “was your own fault. You ought not to have stopped me.”

“I stopped you from smashing an antique vase and falling on your face!” Conor objected, a little taken aback that she could blame him for the debacle when he had done his utmost to save her. “You might thank me for the favour of having done so.”

She flushed—not a becoming pink but a fierce splotchy red colour—and her eyes flashed. “Well, you need not trouble yourself to do me any more favours in the future. You have earned my displeasure, sir.”

“*Lord Harleston*,” he corrected with undisguised enjoyment. He wasn’t in the least a snob and didn’t care whether or not she used his title but antagonising her was more enjoyable than he might have supposed. Now he’d begun, he couldn’t stop.

Her soft mouth pressed into a thin line. She stared up at him for a moment before saying, “You might be a lord, but you are no gentleman.”

“Oh, a hit. Nicely done, Miss Carleton. Perhaps you might deliver the coup de grace by hitting me over the head with the nearest book?”

“Don’t tempt me,” she shot back, turned on her heel, and stalked away to the other side of the shop.

Conor watched her go with amusement and then turned to discover Mr Waverly was watching him with interest. He opened his mouth to explain, decided it was beneath his dignity to do so—because he’d look like a right

twit—and carried on perusing the shelves.

He'd just selected a likely title when he experienced a sharp poke between his shoulder blades. Conor turned to discover Miss Carleton standing behind him, arms folded, expression mutinous.

“Are you really going to take that book, when we both know very well you told Waverly you didn't want it?”

“It appears so. First come, first served,” he replied with a smug smile he knew from his sisters to be deeply aggravating.

“I knew I would be unwelcome amongst your kind,” she said bitterly. “But I confess, I did not realise I would be met with such... such petty cruelty.”

With a toss of her lovely head, she stalked to the door, snatched at it, and slammed it behind her. The bell jangled rather than tinkled and, a moment later, fell to the floor with a thud.

Conor sighed.

Well, perhaps he had gone a bit far. Guilt squirmed uneasily in his belly. With an exclamation of irritation, he went to the counter and snatched up the book Waverly had left there.

“Charge it to my account,” he said tersely, and hurried out of the door, pausing only to pick up the bell and toss it to the old man. “Plus any repairs.”

Once outside, Conor slapped his hat back on his head and looked around, searching for the slight figure in the dark blue walking dress. She had made considerable progress, despite the crowds, and was marching out, arms swinging. Passersby glanced at her as she went, and Conor ran after her. He realised why she was garnering so much attention as he drew closer and heard the way she was muttering furiously under her breath.

“Stop that at once,” he scolded her. “Everyone is staring at you. They'll think you're barmy.”

She skidded to a halt with a little shriek and turned on him. “Oh! You... You... brute! And I'd rather be barmy than... than... whatever you are,” she retorted.

He could not help but laugh.

“Well, I'll think of something better when I'm not so cross,” she

explained, folding her arms. “I can never think of good insults when I’m cross.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think you did well enough,” Conor said wryly. “Here.”

He held the book out to her.

For a moment she stared at it, and he wondered if she would be missish and refuse to take it or demand an apology. He was wrong on both counts. Her face lit up, and she snatched the book from his hand with a little cry of triumph.

“Oh, thank you!” she exclaimed happily. “I just knew you couldn’t be as odious as all that.”

“Oh, I’m just odious enough,” Conor replied, amused despite himself. “My sisters can assure you of that, I’m certain.”

She grinned at him, flashing dimples that he refused to find endearing.

“Well. Odious enough, then, but you have redeemed yourself somewhat with this. Now, how much do I owe you?”

Conor shook his head. “No. Please. It is a gift to make up for my rudeness.”

To his exasperation, her expression clouded again. “Oh, no. That won’t do at all. My father always insists I pay my debts at once. I do not need charity, you understand. I am quite well provided for, I assure you...”

Conor pinched his nose. He ought to have known it would not be that easy.

“Please. Please, Miss Carleton. I would consider it a very great favour if you would just take the book.”

“But—”

“*Please.*”

She sighed, giving him an impatient glare. “Oh, very well, then. If you’re going to get yourself in a tweague over it.”

“I am not in a tweague,” Conor replied, feeling the last vestiges of his patience unravelling. “I just don’t wish to haggle over a book in the middle of the street.”

Her expression cleared, and she looked around, noticing the passersby watching them with interest. “Oh. Yes. I see,” she said, rather sheepishly. “I’m afraid I’m not very used to being in society. I keep making the most dreadful faux pas.”

“No. Do you really?” Conor replied, deadpan.

She flushed hotly, and he relented. He’d only have to apologise again if he wasn’t careful.

“Never mind, Miss Carleton. You’ll have our measure soon enough, though I think perhaps it is society that is not used to having you in it. Good day to you.”

Conor turned and retraced his steps, for he realised he still hadn’t chosen a book, and discovered Miss Carleton had fallen into step with him. He sent her an enquiring glance.

“Lady Bailey is still in the shop,” she admitted awkwardly. “I completely forgot when I stormed off.”

Conor gave a snort of amusement. “Do you make a habit of storming off, then?”

She shrugged, hugging the book to her chest. “Running away is usually what I’m accused of.”

There was a weary, rather defeated note to her tone and Conor was on the verge of asking her what she meant by that when a sharp voice snapped her attention away from him.

“Lucy!”

Lady Bailey stood, arms crossed, glaring at the girl, who quailed a little at the sight of her. Conor did not blame her. Lady Bailey was a powerful figure in society, and not always a kindly one. She had destroyed more than one young lady’s hopes, and promoted marriages which were bound to end in misery for the poor debutants. The Duchess of Bedwin had made it her mission to ‘re-educate’ the lady and give her a different view of what women were capable of and how they could help one another. As Lady Bailey held the duchess – or more precisely her title – in the highest regard, her grace was likely the only person who could have that kind of influence over her. Conor certainly hoped her efforts to soften the lady’s rather judgemental attitudes were having the desired effect, for at the moment, she looked positively

murderous.

“How dare you leave the shop unescorted,” the woman said, her voice low but furious.

“I b-beg your pardon, my lady,” Miss Carleton stammered. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Oh, you just found yourself outside the shop through no fault of your own, I suppose?” Lady Bailey demanded, her tone caustic.

“W-Well –”

“It was my fault,” Conor said at once, for the poor girl looked like a something small and helpless being cornered by a hungry cat. Surprising, when she had shown such spirit with him. “We were speaking about the book she was holding, and I asked her if she had seen another title in the window, so we came out to have a look.”

“Oh, yes,” Miss Carleton piped up. “And we were so deep in conversation we began walking and didn’t even notice.”

Conor sent her a sharp look, for surely Lady Bailey would not swallow that cock-and-bull story.

However, the woman was watching him, a considering glance that made him feel very much that his assets—financial and otherwise—were being mentally calculated. Hardly a new sensation, but one he very much resented.

“Well, I suppose I can understand that,” Lady Bailey said, not sounding as if she did in the least, but there was a gleam in her eyes Conor could not like. “But as you are so keen to speak of books and the like, I had better invite you to take tea with us, Lord Harleston. Shall we say four o’clock tomorrow afternoon?”

Conor bit back the reply he was tempted to give, which would have put Lady Bailey in her place, but had her taking out her wrath on Miss Carleton again. If he’d not acted like such a spoilt brat over the book, he’d not be in this position.

“Certainly. I shall look forward to it,” he said, without even a trace of sarcasm, which was something.

With a polite nod, he bade the ladies goodnight, noting the look of gratitude Miss Carleton sent him, and made good his escape.

Chapter 4



Dear Violetta,

Thank you for your last letter and the lovely painting of Trevick in the snow. You are exceptionally talented. I am having the picture framed and will find the perfect spot to display it.

I know I am making a dreadful imposition upon you, but I wonder if I might ask you a very large favour. Only if dearest Kitty can spare you, of course. I have recently become aware of a lovely young woman called Miss Lucy Carleton. Her father is rather notorious, sadly. A self-made man and owner of gambling clubs and the like. As I understand it, her entry into society so far has been a tad bumpy. She is desperately in need of a friend, someone calm and experienced with good sense, who could guide her and give her some much-needed advice. Do you think you might be so kind as to take her under your wing?

—Excerpt of a letter from Her Grace, Prunella Adolphus, The Duchess of Bedwin, to the Hon'ble Miss Violetta Spencer (cousin and adopted sister to Lady Aisling, Lady Cara and Conor Baxter – Viscount Harleston)

7th April 1845, Albany, Piccadilly, London.

“Good morning, Conor. What a lovely surprise.”

Conor’s mother, the Countess of Trevick, or Kitty to her friends, beamed at him as he entered her private parlour. She was sitting comfortably with her feet up, a book in one hand and a marzipan sweet shaped like an apple in the other. Upon seeing him, she cast the book aside, tossed the sweetmeat back

into the box it came from, and held her hands out to him. Two sleepy spaniels sat at her feet, tails thumping as Conor leaned down, taking her hands in his and kissing her soft cheek. There was a sleek black cat curled in her lap and the creature stretched lazily, indignant of the disturbance and eyeing Conor with distrust.

“You look younger every day, Mama, and more beautiful.”

She snorted and shook her head. “You’ve inherited a gift for blarney along with that black hair, my lad. As if I can’t see the streaks of white growing bolder each day, drat them.”

“It is nothing but the truth, and the white is very becoming. I’m certain my father must have told you so.”

“Hmph,” she replied, but she was obviously pleased all the same, so Conor grinned. “Ring the bell for tea, there’s a lamb. Now, tell me, to what do we owe the pleasure?”

“I was just passing. Actually, I am to take tea with Lady Bailey and her new charge this morning.”

As he’d known she would be, his mother was suddenly all ears. She sat up, dislodging the cat, who stalked off in disgust.

“Whatever for? Dreadful woman,” his mother added with a tsk of disapproval. “I don’t know how Prue has the patience to bear with her, especially the way Bailey fawns over her, *your gracing* constantly, but she insists that if she brings these harridans of society around to her way of thinking, that it will be all to the good for the girls coming into society next. That they’ll less likely be bullied into marrying fat old men. I wish I may see her succeed. But you say you’re taking tea with the woman, and she has a new charge? Is she pretty? Do you like her? How comes this about? Tell me everything.”

Conor was too used to his mother’s method of hurling a barrage of questions all at once to protest, but he hesitated before he replied. Much as he agreed with his mother’s assessment of Lady Bailey, he did not like nor approve of gossip. The woman’s difficulties were her affair and ought not to be fodder for an interested public. Whilst he adored his mother, who was loving and fun and full of spirit, he was not blind to her little foibles, and she did like to talk. To *everyone*.

“It seems she owes Mr Carleton a favour and so is bringing his daughter into society for him.”

“The Mr Carleton who owns half of London? Oh, and that gambling club! Hmm, she owes him money, more like,” Mama retorted, which ought not to have surprised Conor. “That woman never did a favour for anyone in her life, least of all her daughters, the poor dears. But tell me about her ward.”

“Miss Lucy Carleton. She *is* pretty,” Conor acknowledged, a touch grudgingly, for admitting Miss Carleton was pretty seemed like something he ought not to do for his own safety. “She’s also an accident looking for a place to happen. I’ve met her three times now. The first, she threw a cup of chocolate over me, apparently accidentally. The second, it was red wine, and she tackled me to the floor whilst she did it, and the third had me chasing her down Bond Street when she stalked off in high dudgeon, leaving Lady Bailey in the bookshop with no idea of where she was.”

“Oh, she sounds delightful,” his mother said, which also ought not to have surprised him.

“Delightful?” Conor repeated in alarm. “She’s like some dread disease, you never know when she’s going to strike next.”

“Conor Baxter!” his mother scolded, narrowing her eyes at him. “Don’t you be so unkind. When I think of that poor girl, alone in society, and with a father like that to contend with... for you know how everyone will treat her. Looking down their noses at her like she’s something nasty they stepped in. You might not know how that feels, but I do, and it isn’t pleasant. No wonder the child is a bag of nerves. And what have you done to help her, may I ask?” she demanded, with a fierce note to her voice he recognised from childhood and was somewhat alarmed to discover still had the power to discompose him.

“Um... I stopped her from breaking a valuable vase and her neck. And I gave her my copy of a book she wanted,” he added, sounding just a touch defiant.

“Hmmm.”

Conor fought the desire to squirm under her piercing gaze and reminded himself he was a grown man, yet her dark eyes searched his and his heart

sank. She could read him like a book.

“I will ask Prue to introduce me to the girl and we shall have her over for a visit, and you will come too.”

“Oh, no. Mama—” he protested, only to swallow down the words on encountering the look she shot him. “Fine.”

The tea tray arrived then, offering him a brief reprieve, and with it came his cousin and adopted sister, Violetta. He stood to greet her, smiling as she bestowed a sisterly peck on his cheek.

“Good afternoon, Conor. It seems an age since I saw you last.”

His mother gave a little sniff. “That’s because it is an age. He’s avoiding us as usual, Vi.”

“Oh, no, surely not,” Vi replied, laughing softly. She sat down and reached for a sewing basket by the side of her chair, taking out a complex-looking piece of embroidery on a tambour frame. “I’m sure he’s just been busy.”

“Oh, yes. Tinkering with his clocks and visiting foundries, discussing railways with Gabriel Knight, I don’t doubt. *Very* busy. Not so busy as to provide me with any grandchildren, though, hmm?” His mother sipped her tea, regarding him from over the rim.

Conor groaned and rubbed a hand over his face.

Relenting somewhat, his mother reached out and patted his hand, turning instead to Violetta. “Who was your letter from, Vi? Was it anything of interest?”

Vi brightened and put down her sewing. “Oh, yes. It was from her grace. She wants me to befriend a young woman she seems concerned about. A Miss Lucy Carleton. Apparently, she is all at sea and alone in society and Prue very flatteringly believes I might guide her. And smooth the way.”

Despite knowing better, Conor snorted. “Then I’ll give you a piece of advice, Vi. Don’t wear anything you’d be sorry to throw away, keep her away from anything fragile or valuable, and don’t take your eyes off her for a moment. You’ll regret it. Hell, you’ll regret it either way. The girl is a menace.”

Vi stared at him, open-mouthed.

“Conor, what did I tell you?” his mother cried. “Vi, take no notice. Conor has met the girl, and it sounds as if she desperately needs your help, for *he* offered her none,” she added scathingly.

“I resent that,” Conor replied, stung by the accusation.

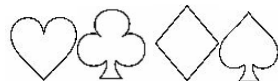
“You may do so with my blessing.”

Conor sighed and got to his feet. “I’m sorry, Mama, but don’t tell me I didn’t warn you when you discover the truth. Now, I must run.”

“But you’ve not drunk your tea,” she exclaimed crossly.

“No, but I’ve got to take tea with Lady Bailey and Miss Apocalypse as well, remember? I shall be awash in the stuff if I’m not careful. Take care, Mama. Good day to you, Vi. I’ll tell the little cataclysm to go easy on you.”

And before they could protest further, he made his escape.



Lucy sat in Lady Bailey’s icy parlour and suppressed a shiver. A meagre fire burned sullenly in the grate and only two lamps were lit. On a rather dismal afternoon offering only glowering grey skies, and with the wind howling around the building like a long dead soul, it was not exactly soothing to Lucy’s peace of mind. Her nerves were jittering, and she just knew this would be a disaster. She clamped her trembling hands between her knees, which served the dual purpose of keeping them warm *and* still and prayed for deliverance.

“Please don’t come, please don’t come,” she murmured under her breath, glancing anxiously at the clock, which had struck four.

“What was that? Don’t mumble, girl,” Lady Bailey said, stroking the fat pug named Doris, who sat panting beside her.

“Nothing,” Lucy replied, shifting further away from the nasty little dog. Doris was spoiled to death and bit anyone else who tried to pet her.

A soft knock at the door heralded the arrival of the butler, who announced their guest, arriving at the same time as a Mr Betony, who was a bosom pal of Lady Bailey’s. Lucy prayed this might distract the lady from watching her too closely, for she was clearly delighted to see him.

Lucy greeted the two men politely, trying to remember the two dozen

contradictory instructions Lady Bailey had schooled her on that morning.

The usual niceties were observed, and the ceremony of pouring the tea—which Lady Bailey undertook, thanks be to heaven—and then Mr Betony and Lady Bailey enjoyed a comfortable gossip. This left Lucy to entertain Viscount Harleston, excruciatingly aware that not only did he not wish to be there, but that for all her chatter, the lady was watching Lucy’s every move. Lady Bailey, though outwardly an intelligent woman, had the bizarre idea in her head that the viscount had shown a marked interest in Lucy, and she ought to encourage his advances without being forward. Lucy hadn’t the faintest idea of how to encourage him, without *appearing* to encourage him, and knew very well the only interest Harleston had in her was staying as far away as possible.

However, he had stepped in and saved her yesterday, when he’d had no reason to do so, and he had given her the book, for which she really was grateful. So, she had best try to entertain him, and at least thank him.

He was sitting in a chair to her right, and just far enough away from Lady Bailey that they could speak quietly without being overheard.

“I am so sorry you got trapped into this,” she said in an undertone, reaching for the plate of shortbread biscuits to offer him one. She glanced nervously at him. “You were very kind to step in like you did yesterday and —”

She stopped with a gasp as he reached out and snatched the plate of biscuits from her. Belatedly, she realised the plate was tipping, and he had taken it before she tipped the lot on the floor. Doris, having seen this sleight of hand, considered the possibility of crumbs worth the effort of heaving her solid little body to the floor. She snuffled around Lucy’s feet, licking at the carpet hopefully.

Lucy dared a glance at Lady Bailey to discover the woman glaring at her and sighed.

“Thank you,” she mumbled to the viscount. “For saving the biscuits today and me yesterday.”

“You’re welcome. Here, take one. They’re very good.”

Lucy glanced at the plate he offered and shook her head.

“Oh, go on. I don’t see what damage you can cause with a biscuit,” he

added with a crooked grin, which was actually rather endearing.

“You ought not to tempt fate,” she replied, only half joking, but took a biscuit. She bit into it with a little sigh as the sweet, buttery treat filled her mouth. She had been too nervous to eat much earlier and her stomach was growling. Though, now she realised that wasn’t her stomach, but Doris. The wretched dog was staring at the biscuit she held and drooling, a low rumble of displeasure coming from her pudgy body.

The viscount paused with his teacup suspended in midair and wrinkled his nose at the creature in distaste.

“The poor thing is horribly spoiled,” Lucy whispered to him. “Not her fault, of course, but she’s a vicious little beast now. She bit me last time I was here.”

Lucy raised the biscuit to her mouth, and the dog lumbered to its feet, growling menacingly. Biscuit in hand, Lucy froze and slanted a look of panic at the viscount.

“Don’t move,” he instructed, judging, as she had judged, that the dog, for all her obesity, had ideas of launching herself at Lucy to get at the biscuit. “If you throw it to the floor, hopefully that’s all she wants, and she’ll leave you be.”

Lucy swallowed hard. “I’m not good at throwing things,” she said, which was something of an understatement, as she knew to her cost. “And Lady Bailey won’t like it.”

“To the devil with her,” the viscount muttered. “She ought not to have an animal if she can’t treat it with respect.”

Lucy, whilst entirely in charity with this statement, was somewhat distracted by the menacing gleam in the dog’s eyes. Before the viscount could say another word, the pug leapt up at her, sharp little claws digging into Lucy’s knees. Startled, Lucy gave a shriek of alarm and flung the biscuit away from her.

There was a dull splash as the half-eaten biscuit landed, inevitably, in the viscount’s teacup. Doris, apparently intent on her quarry no matter what, was undaunted. She hurled herself at the teacup, knocking it from the viscount’s hand and launching hot tea over a remarkably wide surface area, most of which belonged to the viscount. Cursing with some vigour, the viscount got

to his feet, tugging at his sodden breeches which were no doubt burning his thighs as the tea soaked in. Doris slobbered at the now soggy biscuit and lapped up the tea puddled over Lady Bailey's polished wood floor.

"Lucy!" the lady cried furiously. "Oh, you stupid, stupid girl! How your father could ever believe I could find a place for such a clumsy, ignorant—"

"That will be quite enough."

The viscount's voice, far quieter than Lady Bailey's but somehow more furious, silenced the room so that only Doris' disquieting slurping could be heard.

"The fault, my lady, I am sorry to say, lies in the hands of an owner who cannot keep a dog from sitting quietly and behaving as it ought. That creature is a menace. I understand it often bites and would have bitten Miss Carleton then if she had not thrown the biscuit away. Her aim, as ever, is incomparable, but your wretched dog is entirely to blame. Now, if you will excuse me."

With a cold and very formal nod, he stalked from the room.

Lucy sat frozen for a moment, aware of Lady Bailey's simmering fury at being spoken to so in front of her friend. If she stayed, the woman would certainly return the favour.

"Excuse me, I must just..." What she must do she could not think, but fled the room before anyone could stop her.

Harleston was still in the entrance hall, donning his hat and his coat, which was thankfully long enough to cover his sodden breeches.

"I'm so terribly sorry," Lucy said, feeling utterly wretched, for he had actually been quite kind to her when he had no reason to be after everything that had happened.

He snorted and tugged on his gloves, eyeing her as if she were an unexploded bomb, likely to go off at any moment. "You were quite right, Miss Carleton. I ought not to tempt fate."

"I tried to warn you," she said, so mortified she could not meet his eye.

"Miss Carleton," he said, his voice so gentle she dared another glance at him. "As I understand it, the Duchess of Bedwin has noticed you and has seen fit to ask my cousin Miss Violetta Spencer to guide you. Violetta is a

lovely soul and very kind, you will like her excessively. I beg you will do *exactly* as she tells you. If you do, there is half a chance you will survive society. More to the point, it will give society a fighting chance of surviving you. I believe my mother also intends to invite you to tea, an event which I will be obliged to attend. Outside of that, I beg you will forgive me if I hope our paths do not cross again. Good day to you.”

With a polite bow, he strode to the door and hurried out. Lucy went to the window, watching him go. The wind tugged at his coat, and he turned up his collar, walking purposefully away. He limped, she realised, something she had not noticed before. Lucy sighed, a sick, heavy and far too familiar feeling settling in her stomach. Loneliness was a miserable companion and one which was wearing down her usually buoyant nature. A longing for her Aunt Sally’s neat little cottage and the comfortable life she had lived there struck her square in the chest. How she wanted to go home. Perhaps it was not an exciting life, but it was safe and familiar, and it was really the only home she had ever known.

The footman arrived with her cloak and bonnet, and she put them on, escaping the house the moment her father’s carriage was brought around. She was only putting off the inevitable scolding from Lady Bailey, and her father would be angry as usual, but for now, she could run away and hide in her room.

The lure of sitting by the fire with her new book and a cup of tea went a long way to restoring Lucy’s flagging spirits, and so with her usual optimism fighting to see the bright side, she made her way back home. The lingering sense of regret that Viscount Harleston wished never to see her again gnawed at her, but there was little she could do about it, so she did her best to forget about him.

Chapter 5



Dear Aunt Sally,

I am so glad you liked the Honiton lace I sent and thank you most kindly for the fruitcake. I confess I have hidden it in my room so Papa cannot eat it. Aren't I wicked! But I was so overcome to have a taste of home I almost cried and cannot bear to share it. I am sitting at my desk now, with a cup of tea and a slice of cake and remembering happy times with every bite.

Oh, Sally, when will Papa give up on the ridiculous scheme and let me go home? I am so miserable here. I don't know anyone and the list of things I do wrong grows daily. Still, at least I have not caused Viscount Harleston any bodily damage for a few days. His cousin Miss Spencer is to call on me today. Wish me luck.

—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Lucy Carleton to her Aunt Sally Jefferson.

10th April 1845, Hans Town, London.

Violetta entered the home of Miss Lucy and Mr Brian Carleton with interest. Someone had clearly decorated the house with exquisite taste and an open purse, and yet it felt like stepping into a museum or gallery, or at least a place never lived in. She suspected Mr Carleton had paid the best designers to arrange his elegant home, and yet it did not feel like a home at all.

A starchy butler greeted her with precise and cool civility, which amused her a little, as the butler at the magnificent Trevick Castle was still wont to slip her sweets as he had done when she was a small girl. This grand fellow led her silently through the house and Violetta followed, fascinated by the

fabulous paintings and artwork and eager to meet Lucy Carleton.

Vi had seen Conor the day before, and he had given her a most amusing recap of his disastrous visit to Lady Bailey's home and his encounter with the dreadful Doris. Vi had been in fits of laughter, for he had told the story so cleverly, but her heart had bled for Lucy. The poor girl must have been so mortified and, as kind and good-natured as Conor was, of late he had become remarkably closed off and rather blind to the lives of others. Indeed, ever since his accident, he had become rather staid and not at all the lively, enthusiastic fellow she had known for so long.

The butler opened the door into a formal drawing room. Violetta almost hesitated on the threshold, as the room before her was quite glorious. The large windows were draped with curtains of crimson velvet and the carpet was the same colour, with a quatrefoil pattern woven into it. Many ebonized chairs, the backs and seats also crimson and trimmed with silk lace, were placed strategically around the room. The sofa and armchairs were likewise of this stunning red and were arranged before a magnificent fireplace. Opposite this, on the far wall, was a huge console, heavily carved and displaying an extraordinary amount of fine porcelain. Indeed, there was furniture everywhere, small tables and large, all of them displaying some item of note, whether a potted fern or a glass-covered exhibit of stuffed birds or dried flowers. All in all, the impact was quite overwhelming, which she had no doubt was the intention.

"Would you like to lie down in a dark room?" offered a softly amused voice, and Vi's gaze finally settled on the petite blonde who rose from a chair beside the fire. "I always feel rather exhausted after an hour in here, but Papa insisted that I greet you formally."

Violetta smiled and hurried forward, hand extended, feeling at once that she would like this young woman, who returned her smile with a rather diffident one of her own.

"Miss Carleton. I have been so looking forward to meeting you," she said warmly, hoping to chase away the doubt she saw in the woman's expression.

"You'll forgive me if I look somewhat sceptical," Miss Carleton replied, laughing a little. "But I can imagine Viscount Harleston has armed you with a rabbit's foot and any other object to ward off evil spirits he could lay his hands upon."

“Oh, no,” Vi said gravely. “He had my sister make me an amulet. She’s a witch, you know,” she added, knowing it was naughty of her but desperate to put the girl at ease. Besides which, she would think it merely a jest.

It worked, and Miss Carleton laughed, a merry sound that Vi suspected would be heard often if she were not so anxious.

“Well, he was right to do so, I daresay. He was also correct about you, I do like you excessively,” the girl said, and led Vi to a seat by the fire before ringing for tea. “Thank you for coming. It was very kind of you.”

“Not at all, I was happy to do so. I remember my first season. Utterly terrifying. I’m afraid I am not much of a one for socialising, but I am quite capable of surviving the season these days, which I was not when I was young.”

“Young?” Miss Carleton repeated with an amused glint in her eyes. “But you are no older than I am.”

Vi laughed and reached over, patting her hand. “You are sweet, but I am eight and twenty, a veritable old maid by society's standards. Oh, don’t look so mortified, it does not bother me in the least. I have never had ambitions to make a great match. Perhaps I shall find a nice gentleman who I can be comfortable with one day, but if not, I shall be content too. You know, perhaps, that the Earl of Trevick and his wife took me in when my parents died? I was only six, the same age as Lady Aisling, in fact. So, her and Lady Cara and Lord Harleston are not only cousins but brothers and sisters to me. I shall be auntie to their brood of offspring, and Harleston has assured me I shall always have a home at Trevick, so I have nothing to fear for the future.”

Miss Carleton looked at her with interest. “You don’t wish for a home of your own?”

“Yes, certainly, but I shall not pine over it if it does not materialise,” Vi replied with a smile. “Now, however, we must concentrate on your future, and getting you through the season in one piece.”

The girl smiled cautiously, and in that instant, she did look only a girl, young and lost and unhappy. “You’ll have your work cut out. Lady Bailey would wash her hands of me if she didn’t owe.... That is... I am rather a trial to her.”

Vi hesitated, too polite to say exactly what she thought of Lady Bailey.

“I’m afraid I find her rather intimidating,” she said instead, “and I can guarantee I always say the exact wrong thing when I am feeling anxious.”

“I can’t imagine you ever feeling anxious or saying the wrong thing,” Miss Carleton replied glumly. “I bet you’ve never thrown red wine over a fellow and landed on top of him, too.”

“Well,” Vi said, somewhat daunted. “No, but with a bit of luck, we can avoid you doing such things again, Miss Carleton.”

“Oh, do call me Lucy, and if you can bring about such a miracle as that, I shall forever be in your debt.”

The tea tray came in then, and conversation stopped whilst Lucy prepared the tea. She did it very prettily too, Vi noted, feeling increasingly confident that it was only nerves that caused Lucy to get herself into such scrapes. Though, from what Conor had said, the incident with the dog had been sheer bad luck and not really her fault.

After two cups of tea, a plate of biscuits and a good deal of chatter, Vi felt very much in charity with Miss Carleton, who seemed to her a bright and interesting young woman who was the victim of an overly ambitious father. Lucy confided in her a good deal about her life with her Aunt Sally and, upon discovering she too had lost her mother at an early age, Vi felt she had met a kindred spirit and resolved to do all in her power to make a success of her. It ought not be difficult to find such a sweetly pretty girl with such engaging manners a suitable husband, and Vi was determined to help her find the perfect match.

Not wishing to end her enjoyable visit just yet, Vi accepted a third cup of tea she did not much want and sipped at it thoughtfully, running through the list of eligible bachelors she knew who might make Lucy a good husband. Felix Knight might be a suitable candidate, especially with his father being an industrialist himself. No snobbery there and, indeed, Mr Gabriel Knight might welcome the connection. But Felix was only one and twenty and rather too young to settle down yet. Thomas Barrington was a charming rogue, witty and beloved by all. He would certainly put Lucy at her ease, but his father Lord Montagu was enough to terrify anyone and perhaps that association would only frighten the poor girl. Leo Hunt—*No*. A shame the younger Anderson brothers had returned to Scotland, though Vi thought they were due back shortly. Perhaps when they returned, but then there was

Ashton Anson...

She was pondering this when Lucy spoke.

“Are you going to the Cavendish ball tomorrow? I should be so glad to have a friendly face in the crowd. I suppose your cousin, Lord Harleston, is very much in demand at such events?”

Vi studied Lucy with interest. Her eyes were downcast, her fingers nervously plaiting and unplaiting the long fringe of tassels on the cushion she had pulled into her lap.

“You had best warn the poor man I’ll be there so he can hide. I think he rather hates me, not that I can blame him, and he was very kind to defend me in front of Lady Bailey,” Lucy added, blushing a little.

Vi smiled. Normally she would not speak so candidly about Conor, who was a private man—too private, these days—but, in this instance, she rather thought she might do him some good by being more forthright.

“Well, he would be in demand if anyone could get him to attend. Sadly, he no longer dances. He had a terrible accident a few years ago which damaged his leg. Please don’t mention it, for you know what men are, with their pride. He’s a little sensitive about it.”

“Oh, that is why he limps. I did not realise. The poor man, and—oh, my *word!* I tackled him to the floor,” Lucy said in horror, putting her hands to her flaming cheeks.

Vi laughed and shook her head. “There was no harm done, I assure you. He’s not the least bit fragile. Far less than I think he realises, actually. He made an exceptional recovery. Astonishing, really, considering the doctor who first saw him wanted to amputate the leg.”

Lucy gasped, and Vi nodded gravely. “Thankfully, our sister is a remarkable healer, as is our old nanny. The two of them and Mama nursed him carefully, and once he was strong enough, Conor was determined not to let the injury stop him from walking properly. For probably the first time in his life, he did everything Aisling told him to without a word of complaint. So, whilst he does limp, especially in cold, damp weather for that seems to aggravate it, most people don’t know he was even injured. He’s terribly private so he won’t tell anyone either, so refusing to dance at balls makes him look rather stuffy.”

Lucy nodded. “Yes, I see. That must be awkward for him. The poor man. I had no idea.”

“Oh, he’s fit as a fiddle unless his leg is bothering him,” Vi assured her, not wanting Lucy to pity Conor. “Only ever since it happened, he has held himself somewhat apart. He used to be full of fun and when I think of the horrid tricks he played on us all as children, I can hardly believe it is the same man. But the accident was very serious, and he took a long time to recover. In truth, I think whilst the physical injury healed better than we could have hoped, I am uncertain he himself has done so.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lucy said, and Vi saw the sincerity of her words shine in her eyes.

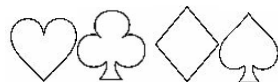
“Well, don’t tell him that, whatever you do, but that’s why he won’t go to balls now, for his injured leg makes dancing impossible, and refusing to do so is uncomfortable and even standing still can be problematic. Besides which, he loathes making polite conversation. So, you can see why he avoids such events.”

“That sounds wretchedly uncomfortable, and I can certainly understand him not wishing to talk about nothing for hours.” Lucy grimaced and began plaiting some more strands of tassel. “I can never think of an intelligent or interesting thing to say, polite or otherwise.”

“Oh, there’s a trick to that which I will teach you,” Vi promised, glancing at the clock. She had long outstayed the usual visiting hours. “I shall get to the Cavendish ball nice and early and make certain I hunt you out.”

“I would very much appreciate it if you would!” Lucy exclaimed gratefully.

Vi nodded and bade bid her new friend a fond farewell, promising to do just that, and wondering how she could blackmail Conor into going with her.



“Thank you so much for escorting me tonight, Conor. It is very good of you, for I know how much you hate these affairs.”

“Of course. It is my pleasure,” Conor replied automatically.

“Well, that’s a plumper if ever I heard one, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

He looked across at his cousin. Her grey eyes were entirely without guile, and yet he had the oddest sense he was being managed. His parents had been engaged to attend tonight's ball and Vi had been going with them, but they had cried off at the last moment and begged him to step into the breach. Well, obviously, he wasn't about to let Vi sit at home all by herself if she wanted to go to the ball. It was high time she was married and had a family of her own.

Though she never complained or showed even a glimmer of jealousy, it must rankle a little that Aisling and Cara were married and had families when she did not. Why she did not, he could not understand. She was lovely and intelligent and the kindest creature you could ever meet, and she had certainly had offers, but none had pleased her, and his parents would never press her to marry if she was not in love.

It took some time for the carriage to draw up in front of Cavendish House, for the roads were thick with guests arriving, and so the dancing had begun by the time they were inside.

Conor looked around, hoping to find a familiar face to pass the time. Ashton ought certainly to be here, as it was his mother's event. Vi towed him around the room, bidding good evening to everyone and stopping here and there for a chat. Conor endured with a sigh, wishing he was elsewhere. Perhaps there would be a card game set up, at least then he could sit down.

"Oh, Lucy, how lovely to see you here. I did not think to ask if you were attending."

Conor turned at Vi's excited exclamation, just in time to see a bewildered expression clear upon Miss Carleton's face and the young woman reply, "*Oh!* Oh, no, I didn't think to ask either, what a happy coincidence." Her gaze shifted to Harleston, and, to his surprise, a little glow of pink coloured her cheeks. "Good evening, my lord," she said, and dipped a very creditable curtsy.

"Good evening, Miss Carleton. You are looking well. I trust you have not been attacked by slathering pugs recently?"

Her lips quirked into a smile, revealing the little dimples that puckered her cheeks. "No, I thank you. Doris may no longer attend morning calls either, for which I owe you a real debt of gratitude."

"I'm glad to hear it and, as I see you have all your arms and limbs intact,

may I suppose you have not been out much? I have heard no reports of riot or catastrophe on the streets of the capital since our last meeting, so I cannot help but assume.”

Her colour heightened further, though this time there was an irritated sparkle in her eyes which rather pleased him.

“As it happens, I took a trip to my dressmaker. It was entirely uneventful.”

“You astonish me.”

She stiffened, her eyes flashing. They were remarkably pretty when they were full of fire like that. “I do not see why. I admit, I am a little accident prone, but—”

“A little?” Conor replied, unable to hold back a laugh. “If I were your father, I would hire a troop of people to scatter the area around you with cushions. Or perhaps someone to walk ahead of you, blowing a whistle and giving the public due warning. Both might be the most prudent.”

“Oh, *hahaha!*” Lucy exploded, pressing a hand to her chest and giving a peal of patently false laughter. The people on either side of her turned to look with raised eyebrows. Her expression returned immediately to one that was entirely unimpressed. “I do beg your pardon, Lord Harleston. Your wit is so sharp I quite forgot myself and succumbed to hysteria. I promise, I will not do so again.”

He stared at her with interest, rather enjoying himself now.

“Oh, I should not make a promise I could not keep, Miss Carleton. I am, after all, a very witty fellow.”

“That was not the word I would use,” the girl muttered under her breath.

“What was that?” Conor asked her, delighted by her indignation. “Are we descending to name calling, *Miss Apocalypse?*”

“Conor,” Vi said sharply, giving him a reproving look. “That’s quite enough.”

Conor refrained from rolling his eyes. Trust Vi to spoil his fun with her need for everyone to get along. “I beg your pardon, Miss Carleton. Forgive me.”

“It is of no matter,” she replied with dignity. “If you will excuse me,

Lady Bailey is hailing me.”

She hurried off, managing not to trip on her gown or lose her shoes. Progress, Conor thought with a smile.

“That was unkind.”

Conor turned to his cousin to discover her giving him a hard look.

“Nonsense, I was only teasing the girl, and she gave as good as she got,” he pointed out. “I thought she rather enjoyed sparring with me.”

“You embarrassed her and made her feel foolish, Conor, when I have been tasked with giving her confidence. Your mama was right, you know. You ought to help her too. At the very least, you ought not to make things worse. She doesn’t know a soul here except for us and that wretched woman, who I am certain is bullying her. The least you can do is to be kind, not make her feel even more of an outsider and a fool. I am very disappointed in you.”

Conor stared at her in alarm. Though she was no pushover, Vi was far more mild-mannered than either of his sisters. He could not remember the last time she had spoken to him so severely, but she looked entirely out of patience with him.

He opened and closed his mouth, uncertain what to say. Though he *had* only been teasing, he supposed he ought to have known the poor girl was scared to death. Drawing attention to all the mistakes she had made and taunting her so mercilessly was hardly gentlemanly of him.

“If you want to make amends, go over and offer to take her for a turn about the room. I trust you can manage that without frightening her into doing something embarrassing?” Vi folded her arms, her expression rather daunting.

“I can try,” he offered, privately thinking there wasn’t a power on earth that could stop Miss Carleton from doing that but feeling guilty enough to do his best.

“Well, that is a start, I suppose. You may bring her to me when you return, and I will introduce her to people. You might do the same if you can rouse yourself to speak to another human being for once.”

Conor watched as Vi turned on her heel, too startled by her words to say anything in his own defence. Not that there was much he could say. He knew many of his friends thought him a dull fellow these days, but Conor had just

assumed he had grown up when they had not. Was he really becoming callous, though, or as disinterested in other people as Vi had intimated? It was an uncomfortable notion.

A little out of sorts, Conor made his way to where Lady Bailey was sitting with a group of her cronies, a terrifying assortment of dowager ladies whose turbans and plumes made them look like a gaggle of colourful geese. They were just as intimidating too, and eyed him as if he were a fat, juicy worm.

Conor nodded politely to them and lost no time in addressing Miss Carleton.

“Would you care to take a turn about the room, Miss Carleton?” he asked politely.

She huffed out a sigh and sent him an impatient glare. “There’s no need. I know very well you’re only here because Violetta asked you. Well, you’ve done your duty, and I refused, so you may go now.”

The temptation to do so warred with annoyance at being so summarily dismissed and another, rather more insistent sensation of guilt.

“Oh, please don’t sulk,” he begged her, earning himself an expression of outrage he fully deserved. He held up his hands in a peaceable gesture. “I know I was horribly rude—*am* being rude. I don’t mean to be, I... I seem to have lost the knack for polite conversation. I beg your pardon for it, but I hate these events too, you know,” he added, a little aggrieved and somewhat surprised at himself for having admitted it.

Her expression softened a little. “Fine,” she said, rather ungraciously, but with apparent sincerity.

Conor let out a breath. “Well, then. Come for a walk around with me and I’ll see if I can introduce you to people.” He held out his arm to her, and she hesitated, regarding him for a long moment before accepting it. Finally giving in, Conor took her for a stroll around the room.

“Harleston! As I live and breathe, come here at once.”

Conor turned and grinned as he saw he was being hailed by Lady Bainbridge. Her bright red hair glinted in the lamplight, set off prettily by her shimmering green gown. She was a beautiful woman, and the birth of her fifth child just a couple of months earlier had done nothing to diminish her

looks.

“Bella, how lovely you are tonight,” he said, kissing her hand and bowing over it. “And where is that rogue of a husband of yours? Not far away, I’ll warrant.”

“No,” she said fondly. “The dear man has gone to fetch me a drink, but never mind that. Who is this ravishing creature?”

Bella’s curious gaze settled upon Miss Cavendish, who was hanging back a little, obviously a little overawed by the woman before her. Conor did not blame her. Since marrying the Marquess of Bainbridge, Bella had become quite a force to be reckoned with, for in her husband’s eyes she could do no wrong. As her husband was forever unwittingly causing chaos, the pair had become quite notorious and figures of great interest to the public at large. There was rarely a month that passed without some story about them doing something outrageous in the gossip sheets.

“My lady Bainbridge, might I have the pleasure of making known to you, Miss Lucy Carleton?”

Lucy paled at the introduction and Conor guessed she had not realised who he was speaking with. Bella, frank as ever, noticed her reaction and burst out laughing.

“Oh, don’t look so terrified. I’m on my best behaviour, I promise, and Bainbridge is desperate to get home to our little Ava, so we’ll not be here long enough to cause a scene.”

Miss Carleton laughed and seemed to relax at this forthright explanation, so Conor turned back to Bella. “How is your new daughter, and is it true?” he asked, lowering his voice. “Was she really born on a train?”

Bella snorted. “What do you think? Of course it’s true. I was determined to go to town to get some last bits of shopping before the baby came. I thought I had at least a fortnight and it would be quite all right, but I miscalculated. Bainbridge was hysterical, poor man. Quite certain I was going to die. Honestly, I had a harder job comforting him than bringing Ava into the world, who was the easiest little darling. She didn’t even cry, bless her heart, though who can wonder when her father was making such a fuss? Of course, we had a private carriage as always, so it was really not so extraordinary as everyone makes out. Happily, my maid, Lily, was on hand

too. I go everywhere with her, for she's such a dear creature, and quite marvellous she was, too. She was with me for all the other births and so knew exactly what was what."

Conor hid a smile as he glanced at Miss Carleton, who was wide-eyed with interest. She might not know much about the *ton* and society, but she certainly knew that discussing childbirth in public was shocking indeed, but Bella was a marchioness and a law to herself, so she might do as she pleased.

"Have you seen that dreadful brother of mine, by the way?" Bella asked. "Mama is worried about him, though I don't know why. He's always in great form when I see him."

"The last I heard, he was in some high stakes neck, or nothing race in a sporting phaeton from one end of the country to the other," Conor replied with a touch of disapproval. He too worried for Leo who seemed to relish putting himself in danger.

Bella sighed. "Yes, I heard that. He won, naturally," she said, with no little pride in her voice. "He writes sporadically and comes to visit when he's burnt to a socket, but Mama is desperate for him to settle down before he kills himself doing something reckless. He's inherited our papa's knack for gambling, but not his good sense, sadly."

"Bella, I warn you, I'm not doing that again," came a deep voice from somewhere behind them, announcing the arrival of the marquess. "I've brought you two glasses, so enjoy them. The place is a damned bear bait. There's a horde of old women in there. I was scolded by a dowager in a purple turban, for what I don't know—breathing, perhaps—and I've been elbowed and trodden on more times than I can count."

Bainbridge handed his wife two glasses of champagne, which she took with a smile. "Oh, lovely. Thank you, darling. You were very courageous."

"I was, those old women are terrifying."

"Bainbridge, good to see you," Conor cut in, drawing the marquess' attention.

"Oh, Conor, that you? How do? Been an age. Where've you been hiding yourself?"

"I've been here, in town."

"Why've you not called on us, then?" Bainbridge demanded crossly.

“Not seen you out and about at all. What’s it about? I know that leg of yours is a bit gammy, but it don’t stop you getting around, surely?”

Conor’s mouth opened, a little shocked even though he ought to be used to Bainbridge by now. “No,” he said firmly. “Not in the least. I’ve just been busy. I’ve been working with Gabriel Knight, and I have my own projects, too.”

“Hmm, still tinkering with clocks?” Bainbridge asked suspiciously, an uncomprehending look in his eyes. “You ought to get married. Put a stop to that nonsense. Far better things to be doing than making clocks when you’ve a wife to make—”

“Bainbridge,” his wife scolded, choking a little on her champagne. “Much as I appreciate the sentiment, perhaps not in front of Miss Carleton.”

“Oh.” Bainbridge looked around to the where Miss Carleton was clutching at Conor’s arm. “Well! That’s more like it. There’s a pretty girl, Harleston, so what are you waiting for? Miss Carleton, for heaven’s sake, set your cap at this sorry fellow before he sends himself mad tinkering with silly bits of metal. You’ll be doing him a very great—”

“Yes, darling, that’s quite enough. Miss Carleton, it was delightful to meet you, Conor, good evening to you both,” Bella said firmly, somehow steering her husband away and keeping hold of both champagne glasses as she did so.

“Bella, stop managing me,” Bainbridge protested. “Someone had to say it and—”

Their voices faded as they disappeared into the crowd and the orchestra struck up for the next dance.

Conor rubbed the back of his neck, cursing Bainbridge and very aware of a rush of colour to his face. He dared to glance down at Miss Carleton, certain she must be ashen with shock, and found her biting her lip, her cheeks pink, eyes sparkling.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, a little stiffly. “I perhaps ought to have prepared you.”

“C-Could you have?” she asked, her voice trembling with laughter.

Conor sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “No,” he admitted. “Not a chance.”

“Well, with the exception of your cousin, I think they are the nicest people I ever met,” she said frankly.

Conor laughed and nodded, guiding her through the crowd once again. “Then you’d be right. Bainbridge is exasperating for a whole host of reasons, but he’s a very good fellow, and Bella is the kindest creature on earth. They can just be a bit... much.”

“Can they?” She was looking at him a little oddly now and he didn’t know what she was getting at.

“Well, yes. They ask so many questions and make so many personal comments. There’s forthright, and then there’s Bainbridge.”

“He’s worried about you,” she observed.

Conor stiffened, disliking the implication. “He has no reason to be.”

“I beg your pardon,” she said quietly.

With annoyance, he realised he had offended her, though why he did not know. What did she care what Bainbridge thought? It wasn’t her business any more than it was the marquess’.

“Well, and here is Vi,” he said with a sigh of relief as he spied his cousin. Surely, he had done his duty for one night. “Enjoy the rest of your evening, Miss Carleton.”

Having deposited her with Vi, Conor hurried away, intent on finding the card room.

Chapter 6



Leo,

I ran into Bella last night at the Cavendish ball. It seems she and your mama are worrying over you. Might be prudent to call on them and assure them you are still in one piece and breathing – assuming that you are?

Larkin tells me you've been leaving the running of the club to him of late. What's that about then? I thought it was your baby? He seems to spend a good deal of time at Gillmont, too. People will talk if he doesn't take care.

I'll be at the club Friday night, if you care to make an appearance.

—Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble Conor Baxter, Viscount Harleston (son of The Right Hon'ble Luke and Kitty Baxter, Earl and Countess of Trevick) to Mr Leo Hunt (son of Mr Nathaniel and Mrs Alice Hunt)

14thApril 1845, The Sons of Hades, Portman Square, London.

The club was quiet tonight, Conor noticed, walking through the elegant lounge, the thick carpet muffling his footsteps. The scent of excellent brandy and expensive cigars lingered on the air but was not overpowering and rather felt welcoming and familiar as he settled himself at a table. Within moments, a waiter appeared, quiet and unobtrusive and immaculate.

“Good evening, my lord.”

“Evening, George, bring me a bottle of that burgundy Mr Hunt got in, would you, and is Weston in tonight?”

“He is, sir. I’ll let him know you are here.”

“Good man,” Conor said easily, and settled back in the comfortable, high-backed chair.

The Sons of Hades had begun as a gambling club for a set of over-privileged boys who liked to kick up larks. There was certainly still much in the reputation they had garnered over the years, but somehow the reality of their legacy had become somewhat obscured. The gambling was serious business and the members all sporting gentleman, the kind who took their chosen passion seriously, whether boxing, racing, fencing or sailing. Though the club itself was like any other men’s gambling club in town, the difference was that several times a year they organised outside events too. Various races and tournaments had been staged, with astronomical sums changing hands both in betting and the purse to be won. Naturally, all members could attend such events which tended to create scandalous headlines, and the members often brought mistresses or their favourite petticoat... and thus the legend of the Sons had been assured, as the parties afterwards could get somewhat lively. Not that outside of these events the members were paragons of virtue. Not even close, but neither were they all the jaded libertines and reprobates some believed them to be.

Leo was constantly being hassled by young men whose only desire was to join a club they believed would introduce them to a dissipated world of vice and inequity. As a fiercely competitive and keen sportsman, Leo had become increasingly disillusioned of late, and Conor wondered whether the man would turn up at all.

“Conor, this a surprise.”

Conor stood as Larkin strode up, raising the bottle of wine he held. He set it and two glasses down on the table before shaking Conor’s hand. “Thought I’d save George the trouble, though he’s not exactly run off his feet tonight.”

“What’s on?” Conor asked.

“Ashton is fighting Granger,” Larkin said with a smile. “I drew the short straw again. Damned shame, for Granger’s had it in for Ashton these past twelve months and I can’t wait for our boy to show him the error of his ways. If you want the truth, I’m sick to be missing it when the place is so quiet, but Ashton ought to win me a few quid, so I’d best be satisfied.”

“Could you not just let the manager look after the place?” Conor asked, for that was what usually happened. Neither Leo nor Larkin had the time to be at the place constantly, though Leo had almost done so by choice until recently.

Larkin’s expression became grave, and he shook his head. “We’ve been having a bit of trouble. I didn’t want to leave the place to Johnson, as efficient as he is.”

“What kind of trouble?” Conor asked.

Larkin sighed and gave him a hard look. “Well, if you bothered to speak to any of us, you might know.”

Conor scowled, irritated at discovering a knot of something that felt like guilt tighten in his guts. Vi’s and his mother’s words came back to him, not to mention Bainbridge’s complaints, and he wondered if he was really as antisocial as everyone made out. Surely, they were exaggerating, just comparing his behaviour to how he had used to be before... well, before he grew up and started acting like an adult.

“Fine, don’t tell me,” Conor grouched, but before Larkin could reply, there was a stir in the room and the few members that were in stood up to greet Leo.

“All hail the conquering hero,” Larkin murmured wryly, for it always seemed that way when Leo entered a room. He had a presence, a magnetic quality that drew people to him and made them hang upon his every word.

“So, you’ve decided to show your sorry face, have you?” Larkin said as Leo threw himself down in the chair opposite theirs with an unrepentant grin. “Where have you been? For all we knew, you were dead in a ditch. Could you not have written, you miserable sod?”

“Don’t fret so, Mama, dear,” Leo replied dryly, waving at George to bring him another glass. George, having seen his master come in, grinned with delight and hurried off. “As you can see, I am quite well and all in one piece.”

“And I’m missing Ashton’s turn up with Granger, thank you very much,” Larkin added irritably.

“Ah, that’s tonight, is it? Damn, I’d like to have seen Ashton teach him some manners,” Leo said with a sigh.

“Perhaps he can teach you some afterwards,” Larkin groused.

“Or perhaps you would like a go?” Leo asked pleasantly, though there was a challenging glint in his eyes.

Larkin sighed. “You are proper bastard sometimes, Leo.”

Leo laughed and reached over, ruffling Larkin’s hair. “I know it, and I’m sorry, Larkin. Truly, I am. I won’t do it again. I just needed a bit of peace and quiet.”

“Well, you might have just said so,” Larkin replied. “We would have understood.”

“Well, Conor would have,” Leo replied, eyeing him with interest. “I thought you’d given up on us, and why are you not cutting up at him, Larks, old man? For I’ve not heard a dickie bird from old Conor here in six months.”

Conor shifted uncomfortably, aware that was nothing but the truth.

“Well, that’s... understandable,” Larkin said, for it was in his nature to act the peacemaker and smooth things over when he wasn’t irritated himself.

“Why is it? Because he got himself a bit knocked about?” Leo said scathingly.

“A bit knocked about?” Conor repeated, aghast. “Is that what you said?”

Leo shrugged. “Oh, I don’t deny it was nasty. You’re lucky you kept that leg, and I don’t deny it causes you pain and difficulty on occasion. But for heaven’s sake, Conor! You’re not dead, man. You’re not old yet, either. Why have you shut us all out of your life? Do you resent us all so badly for *not* having a gammy leg?”

Conor flushed, a wave of anger and embarrassment rolling over him. He stood suddenly, glaring at Leo. “Damn you, Hunt. How can you think it?”

Leo just shrugged, aggravating devil that he was. “What else can I think? If you’ve another reason for giving us the cold shoulder, I’m all ears.”

“But Conor was never quite as involved as—” Larkin began uneasily, but Leo silenced him with a look.

“Conor arranged the fencing tournament in 1840 and people still talk about that. He also holds the record for the London to Brighton run, not to mention that mad race at Warwick. No, he didn’t live and breathe the place

like Jules and I have done, but he was hardly a silent member either. What changed, Conor?"

"Well, I can hardly compete in the same way," Conor shot back, incensed that he had to spell it out.

Leo made a scathing sound. "Not fencing or boxing, perhaps, but I'd lay money on you in a phaeton over anyone else."

"I'm much obliged to you," Conor replied with a withering gaze.

"Oh, sit down for God's sake," Leo said crossly, pouring out more wine. "If the entire point of what I'm saying has not entered that thick head of yours, I'll spell it out. We've missed you, you bloody arsehole. Though the Lord knows why."

Conor glared at him and then let out a sigh. Perhaps Vi and his mother had a point, after all. He sat down again and picked up his glass, staring into the wine with a frown.

"I don't know what happened," he admitted. "I just..."

To his alarm, Conor felt his throat tighten, and he took a large swallow of the wine to force it away.

"Just what, Conor?" Larkin asked.

Conor shook his head and gave a shaky laugh. "I had a lot of time to think, you know, while my leg was mending, and I kept thinking about how if I'd fallen just a little differently, I might have broken my neck. Life is so... fragile, and precious, and—"

"And that is what makes it worth living," Leo said, staring intently at Conor.

Conor flushed, annoyed. "Yes, and that is also what makes it worth preserving, instead of throwing it away in some ridiculous bet that doesn't matter a jot to anyone the moment it's won or lost. People depend on me, Leo, on my survival. That might not signify to you, but it does to me."

"And is locking yourself up at home and tinkering with clocks a better use of your life? Is that what those people demand of you? Does that satisfy you, sitting behind a desk and gathering dust?" Leo demanded.

"Steady on, Leo," Larkin warned him, for Leo's eyes were glittering dangerously.

“Why should I hold my tongue?” Leo asked him. “We’ve all been worried about him, we’ve all tried to find the old Conor, but he’s decided that man is dead and gone. Well, I for one, won’t stand for it. I want my friend back.”

“Perhaps that’s not your decision to make,” Larkin said quietly, his steady gaze upon Leo.

Leo downed his drink in one swallow and stood up. “No. I suppose it isn’t. Listen, Conor, I’m no good with subtlety, I can’t pretend to know what is in your head, but I’m not expecting you to come and risk your neck doing something foolish. I just want to know you’re living your life instead of avoiding it, that’s all. And that’s all I’m going to say or we’ll have a row, and I don’t want that. So, good night, gentlemen. I’m going upstairs to lose a shocking amount of money at cards.”

They watched him go as Larkin shook his head. “He won’t though. Leo’s got the luck of the devil.”

“I know it, though I wish he wouldn’t push it so hard.”

“Don’t we all,” Larkin said with a sigh. “He has a point though, Conor. Don’t you think?”

Conor swirled the remaining wine in his glass and shrugged. “Perhaps,” he admitted, though what he was supposed to do about it, he did not know. “I hear you were at Gillmont again today,” he said, keen to turn the subject away from himself.

Larkin’s expression tightened somewhat, a defiant glint visible in his eyes. For easy-going Larkin, that was akin to him slamming his glass on the table.

“Where did you hear that?”

“Doesn’t matter where, the point is that I did hear. You do remember the reason we opened Gillmont in the first place?”

“Naturally, I do.”

“Well then, it’s hardly a place you need to be seen frequenting. It won’t do anyone any good. Not them, and certainly not you.”

Larkin glared at him. “It’s not enough to just throw money at them and leave them be.”

“Is that what we’ve done?” Conor demanded crossly. “Is that *all* we’ve done?”

“No,” Larkin admitted, running a hand through his hair. He sat back, his expression one of frustration. “But it’s still not enough. They need help, Conor, they need... friends.”

Conor snorted. “I would say that’s the last thing they need if those friends look like you.”

Larkin flushed angrily. “What are you suggesting?”

Conor put his hands out in a peaceable gesture. “Nothing! Certainly nothing untoward. I don’t have the slightest doubt that your intentions are altruistic and thoroughly decent. Lord, it’s why we started the place to begin with, and I know you well enough to believe that without question, but to an outsider looking in?”

Conor said no more, believing his point had been made well enough and hoping Larkin would agree, but he just sat staring into his wineglass with an expression that made Conor uneasy.

“Larks, I’m not forbidding you to go there. I’ve no right to do so. You’ll make your decision either way, but just think of who will get hurt in the fallout if word gets out about our involvement. Think about how it would look for those who live there, and for us.”

Larkin nodded, which was apparently all the response Conor was going to get, so he left the subject alone. “When do you expect to hear the result of the fight?”

“Not before midnight,” Larkin said with a sigh, eyeing Conor speculatively. “Why don’t you come and have a few hands upstairs? We can let Leo fleece us while we wait.”

Conor laughed, relieved to see Larkin’s good humour had returned. Not that he was surprised, Larkin never stayed angry with anyone for above five minutes. “Oh, go on, then. Perhaps he’ll be less furious with me if I lose a large sum of money to him.”

Larkin poured out the last of the wine and got to his feet, carrying his glass with him.

“He’s not furious, Conor. You must see that he’s worried, and he’s missed you a lot. Christ, he must have done for him to tell you so. He’s not

exactly prone to speaking of his feelings, is he? And now Jules has gone off and got married with a readymade family in tow. I think Leo is afraid everything's changing, and he doesn't like it."

"Surely, he didn't think we could live like this forever? Did he think we could spend the rest of our days living at the club and ignoring our responsibilities? Gambling and drinking and arranging the occasional jolly little sporting event to get our blood racing until we were old and grey, perhaps? We've all got to get married and produce the requisite heir sooner or later."

Larkin shrugged. "You say that, but Leo doesn't have a title to consider, and his sister is producing children like shelling peas. There's nothing stopping him if he chooses to live this life forever."

"He can't want that!" Conor objected, but Larkin only shrugged.

"If you can tell me what Leo does want, you're a deal more prescient than I am, old man," Larkin said, laughing now as he led Conor out into the main hall.

Conor followed, wondering about that, about living a life where there was only himself and his own pleasure to consider, no wife, no children. He imagined it, imagined an empty house full of chiming clocks, and felt a shiver of unease roll down his spine. The realisation that he did not want that life was not exactly a shock, for he had never intended *not* to marry. But he had always considered it his duty to his lineage and the title more than a desire.

Now, however...

He did not want to be alone all his days. Rather to his surprise, he realised he wanted a house filled with children's laughter and noise, and a woman who loved him too. He thought about his parents, about how they had filled the vast Trevick Castle with their love and laughter and made it a home. Whyever would he not want that? Yet the idea struck him as something new and rather shocking. But Larkin was leading him upstairs and now was not the moment for an epiphany, so he tucked the revelation away to take out and examine in more detail when he was alone.

Chapter 7



Dear Mr Weston,

I was sorry that you did not visit today and hope that nothing is amiss. I felt I must write and thank you most sincerely for the huge parcel that arrived in your place, however. You have been so dreadfully kind, and I dislike feeling so indebted to you. I hope one day I may repay you properly, but for now please accept the enclosed as a small token of my thanks.

I do not know what was in that cough mixture you gave us, by the way, but little Arthur is doing wonderfully well now. With all the lovely warm clothes and blankets that arrived today, not to mention the delivery of coal, we shall be toasty and warm until summer comes, if it ever shows its face. I swear I have never known a drearier spring.

Joanie bids me tell you that you must come and try her steak and kidney pie, for she has perfectly mastered the pastry now, and Nan has finally learned how to milk the goat. Now we may finally make use of the book on cheese making! So, you see, we go on very nicely here.

Thank you again for everything you have done for us.

Sincere regards,

—Excerpt of a letter from Miss Elmira Hastings to The Hon'ble Mr Larkin Weston (Son of The Right Hon'ble Solomon 'Solo' and Jemima Weston, Baron and Baroness Rothborn).

15th April 1845, Albany, Piccadilly, London.

Lucy laughed, as delighted by the Countess of Trevick as the lady appeared to be by her, though heaven alone knew why. When she'd arrived, she'd been so nervous her teacup had rattled in the saucer, threatening to spill its contents until the countess had dropped her plate of biscuits with an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh, drat it," the lady said with a sigh before giving an indulgent smile towards the two spaniels who were sitting to attention, staring at the biscuits with longing, and drooling. With a merry laugh, she had invited the dogs to have a biscuit each, helped herself to another two and said no more about it. Lucy could not help but suspect she had done it on purpose to put her at ease, but whether by accident or design, it had done the job.

"And Lucy did splendidly at the Cavendish ball, Mama," Violetta said warmly, bringing Lucy's attention back to the conversation. "Not even a little slip. I was so proud of you, my dear, though to be honest, I felt quite redundant. I do not believe you need me at all."

"Oh, but I do!" Lucy exclaimed, horrified by the idea Vi might discontinue her friendship and guidance.

Vi laughed, shaking her head. "Silly goose, you don't think I would abandon our friendship because you didn't have any mishaps? I hope that is not the only reason you enjoy my company?"

"Of course, not. Violetta, how could you think it?"

"I didn't think it, but you thought I would run away the moment you were confident enough to stand alone. Which won't be long, I promise you."

Lucy pulled a face, not believing this for a moment. She might have endured the Cavendish ball without mishap, but there was an entire season ahead of her and the prospect filled her with dread.

"And what of Conor?" Lady Trevick asked pointedly, staring at the clock. "Who is late, I notice. Did he attend?"

Lucy remarked a twinkling look exchanged between the two women but did not know what it signified.

"Well, he came," Violetta said simply, "took Lucy for a turn about the room and then retired to play cards for the rest of the night. I didn't see him again until it was time to escort me home."

Lady Trevick shook her head. "That boy," she muttered.

“Oh, but he was very kind,” Lucy said, feeling the need to defend him, even though he had been frightfully rude to her. But he had taken the time to walk about with her and he clearly hated such events as much as she did, which was bound to put him in a temper. “He introduced me to Lord and Lady Bainbridge, who were the most delightful couple, and after all, it is difficult for him to stand still for too long. I imagine he must long to sit down at such events.”

Lady Trevick gave her a look of sudden interest, a gleam in her eyes Lucy did not quite trust. “Did he speak of his injury to you, dear?”

“Oh... n-no,” Lucy replied, mortified as she remembered Vi had told her in confidence.

“I told her,” Vi said at once, and again Lucy noticed a significant look pass between the two women.

“I see,” said Lady Trevick. “And you are quite right, of course. Such events are something of a trial to him, but he must get out and about. Since the accident, he shuts himself up alone far too much and for too long. It’s dented his confidence, I’m sure. The more we can induce him to go out into the world, the better.”

“He does exercise a good deal, Mama. Aisling told him he must in order to keep his leg strong and mobile, and I believe he heeds her.”

“And what is the good in that if he doesn’t go about in society?” the countess replied hotly. “No. We must do something. You and dear Lucy here must help me as well. I believe I shall arrange some outings.”

Lucy sat up, a little alarmed to have been included. “My lady, if you want Lord Harleston to attend whatever it is you have in mind, the very last thing you should do is include me. He’ll run a mile.”

“Indeed, he will not,” said Lady Trevick, a glittering look of determination in her eyes that made Lucy believe she could get anyone to do anything.

“Oh dear,” Lucy said, only marginally comforted by the sympathetic glance Vi sent her.

Before she could make any further protest, the door opened, and the dogs got to their feet, hurrying over to greet Lord Harleston.

“You’re late, Conor,” his mother said reprovingly, lifting her cheek for

him to kiss.

“I know it and I sincerely beg your pardon. I did bring you a little gift to make up for it, however,” he said with a charming smile, offering his mother a little posy of violets.

“Hmm,” she said, though she was obviously pleased with his gift all the same. “Very remiss of you to bring something for me and not for Violetta and Miss Carleton, though, don’t you think?”

“Oh, no, indeed,” Lucy said before she could think better of it, mortified and wishing the lady had not said so. For in the language of flowers, to be given violets was to indicate the givers thoughts were occupied with love. Which was all well and good for a fellow’s beloved mama, but made Lucy’s heart leap to her throat, for the idea he should take a fancy to her was ridiculous and made her feel rather flustered. Too late, she realised he might not think that was why she had exclaimed so.

Lord Harleston gave her an odd look as he sat down on her left, and she wondered if she had offended him in her swift denial of his mother’s words. For a moment, she could hardly breathe with anxiety and then Vi laughed, saying, “Good heavens, Mama, violets for Violetta. How nauseating.”

To her relief, the countess laughed, and the odd atmosphere dissipated. Violetta and the countess managed the conversation between themselves for a while, as Lucy’s tongue seemed to have nailed itself down and she could not think of a sensible thing to say. This was an infuriating state of affairs, as Harleston seemed to know she was nervous on his account and was looking amused. The wretch.

One of the sleepy spaniels got up and moved from its place before the fire and sat down at Lucy’s feet, panting up at her with a hopeful expression.

“I don’t have any biscuits,” she said to it apologetically.

“She isn’t begging,” Harleston said quietly. “Unlike Doris, Lacey here has beautiful manners. I believe she is hoping for a bit of attention.”

Knowing better than to make any sudden moves—for her own safety, not the dog’s—Lucy carefully set her teacup down and stroked her hand over the dog’s silky head, tugging gently at her floppy ears.

“Do you have any animals, Miss Carleton?” the viscount asked.

Lucy looked up at him. “When I lived with my Aunt Sally, there were

always animals. She usually has at least three dogs and two cats, though one cat has just had kittens. Not that I've seen them," she added wistfully. "And she has chickens and ducks and geese, a few sheep and a pig, too."

"You preferred life in the country?"

Suddenly sick with longing for home, Lucy shrugged. "Yes, I suppose I do. I don't seem to fare well in society, but I was happy there, before Papa got such odd notions in his head for me."

"Is wanting you to have a season and marry well an odd notion?" he asked, his expression curious. "Surely all fathers want that for their daughters? For their sons too, come to that," he added with a laugh.

"No, not at all odd, if it was for my sake. But it isn't, it's for—" Lucy swallowed nervously, aware she had said too much.

"I see," Harleston replied and, from the way his lip curled, she suspected he did, far too readily.

Her heart sank. She wondered if he despised her more than ever now he knew she was title hunting, though not from choice. She did not wish to question her feelings on the matter any closer, though, or to consider why the idea made her feel so melancholy.

"What would you have done if he had left you there?" Harleston asked.

Lucy wished fervently that her father had done just that, if for no other reason than to escape answering any more questions from a man who seemed to live in a gilded world she found incomprehensible and littered with dangers. "Carried on living with Aunt Sally. Perhaps married the local squire's son, for he seemed to be fond of me. He had a nice little farm only two miles from my aunt. It was a pretty place, though not in the least grand, but that won't do for Papa."

"Well," the viscount said, his tone decided. "Whatever his own ambitions, he's quite right. You could do better than that."

Lucy blinked, rather startled by this sweeping statement. "How do you know?" she demanded indignantly. For, as much as she was reluctantly coming to admire the man, he did not know her at all. "Perhaps that is exactly where I ought to be. Where I belong. I might have been happy with such a life. I still may, for there's nothing wrong with being a squire's wife."

"Of course there isn't," Harleston retorted. "I did not mean to imply

otherwise. But you have been raised and educated as a lady and could certainly aim higher. The idea of you squandering yourself on some... well, never mind that. Surely you would like more than a life of raising chickens and children?"

"Oh, ought I to forget the chickens and just concentrate on producing the next heir to whatever titled gentleman I'm supposed to lure into marrying me? Is that a better outcome?"

"That is hardly what I meant," he said, his tone brittle, blue eyes flashing.

For some reason seeing his temper spark only goaded her on.

"Well, what did you mean, *exactly*? For most of your kind would label me a social climber. My father is a Cit, remember; we come from trade. So how high exactly ought I to set my sights? Do you simply mean a gentleman of superior breeding, or could I perhaps go as far as snaring a baron? Only if their coffers were bare, obviously," she added with a tight smile. "And clearly I should not wish to consider anyone as elevated as a viscount, that would surely be aiming too high."

"Miss Carleton, you are being deliberately provocative," he remarked, glaring at her.

"Lord Harleston, you started it, you pompous a—" she snapped, and then closed her mouth with a gasp as she belatedly noticed the room had fallen silent some time ago. Lucy realised everyone was staring at her. She turned scarlet. What must they think? And after they had all been so kind. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me," she muttered.

Appalled by her dreadful outburst, she launched to her feet and promptly fell over the dog, which fled with a yelp.

It was inevitable, she supposed, that she should fall into Harleston's lap. At least he hadn't been holding a teacup.

Mortified, she struggled ineffectually, desperate to get up.

"Miss Carleton... do stop... I beg you... Lucy, hold *still!*"

The command rang out and pierced Lucy's panicked brain and she froze, staring up into eyes of an impossibly dark blue which were glittering suspiciously. The devil was enjoying himself.

"The lace on your bodice is caught on my coat button and you are going

to ruin both coat and gown if you don't keep still."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, mortified.

Curse the man, why did he make her act like such a lunatic? Biting her lip, she closed her eyes, not able to face the countess or Violetta, who must be so disappointed in her.

"There," Harleston said a moment later, before helping her back to her feet.

"I ought to go," she said, staring at the floor.

"Whatever for?" Lady Trevick asked.

Lucy turned around, for as much as she wanted to flee, she wasn't that much of a coward. "My lady, you have been so wonderfully kind, and as for you, Violetta, I am so grateful, but you must see that it's hopeless. I'm sure Lord Harleston warned you, and now you see he was quite right. I'm just... not fit for society. Perhaps if you explained this to my father too, I could make him believe I ought to go home, back to my Aunt Sally."

"Back to your squire's son?" Harleston said, his expression unreadable.

Lucy put her head up. "Yes. Why not?"

"Nonsense," the countess said decidedly. "I haven't heard such fustian talked in a long while. Lucy, I like you just as you are, and if you think you are the only girl to fall into such scrapes, you obviously haven't heard tales of myself and my friends at your age."

"Oh, yes," Violetta said, grinning now. "We must tell her about the hat."

"The hat?" Lucy asked in confusion.

Harleston groaned. "If you're going on a trip down memory lane, I'm leaving."

"Do as you please," the countess said with a wave of her hand. "Only be here tomorrow night in time to escort us to Verdi's *Ernani*. I've heard so much about this new Italian opera and I must see it. At Her Majesty's Theatre. Don't be late, Conor."

"But Mama," Conor began. "Surely Father—"

"Your father cannot abide opera. He'll only snore through it and, besides, I should like my son's company for the night. That's not too much to ask, is

it? I hardly see you from one week to the next as it is. I mean, if you do not *wish* to take me, that's quite another thing, and—”

“Mama!” Harleston exclaimed, throwing up his hands. “Don't try plucking at my heartstrings, for you know I have none. You're a manipulative baggage and well you know it.”

“But you'll escort us?” the countess said, looking entirely unrepentant.

“Yes, Mama. You know that I will.”

And with that, Lord Harleston bowed and bade the ladies a good day.

Chapter 8



Dearest Matilda,

Oh, why did we so desire to have sons? At this moment, I cannot think of a good enough reason. I am certain I never worried half so much about Vivien.

I paid a call on Ashton yesterday morning to discover him black and blue. The result of a fist fight, of all things, and not just any fight, but one arranged by that wretched club of theirs. I swear I shall go to Portman Square one of these days and give them all a piece of my mind. Naturally, Ashton does not see what the fuss is about because he won ‘very nicely thank you’ and it’s ‘only a few cuts and bruises’. Even his father does not seem to take it seriously, for he believes Ashton can take care of himself. I have the horrid suspicion he knew all about it and won a pretty penny on our son, too! Men!

I hope that you and Lucian are keeping well. How is Cat getting along? We miss seeing her out and about. I invited her to our ball, but she did not come. I was sorry that you missed it too, but quite understand. I hope we may see you both before the end of the month, however.

By the way, I was introduced to Prue’s new pet project at our ball. That dreadful Lady Bailey Prue has been trying to bring around has been given the launching of a certain Miss Carleton into society. She’s not exactly ‘taken’ so far, the poor dear. I thought her a charming creature, however, and today

I got a visit from Kitty. She is determined that her darling 'Lucy', for that is how she speaks of Miss Carleton, shall be a great success. She had a twinkle in her eyes when she said it, too. That wicked creature is up to something. You mark my words.

—Excerpt of a letter from *The Right Hon'ble Aashini Anson, Viscountess Cavendish, to her friend, The Most Hon'ble Matilda Barrington, The Marchioness of Montagu.*

16th April 1845, Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket, London.

"You're very quiet this evening," Harleston observed to Miss Carleton as he escorted her, his mother and Violetta from the carriage into Her Majesty's Theatre in Haymarket.

She glanced up at him and quickly away again. "I beg your pardon."

"It wasn't a criticism. I just wondered if anything was amiss," he added, unsure if she was still angry with him for what he had said about her beloved squire's son. Indeed, he didn't know why he *had* said it. Though it was entirely true that she could do far better, it was certainly none of his affair. That her father had sent her hunting for a title was distasteful to him, but no better or worse than any marriage-minded mother of the *ton* would do.

"Not a thing," she said with a polite smile.

Conor suppressed an oath, now entirely certain that she was cross with him. They paused whilst Vi and his mother stopped to speak with friends and Miss Carleton walked a little away to study a framed plan of the theatre layout with apparent interest. Conor followed her.

"So, you're giving me the cold shoulder, are you?"

"I don't know what you can mean," she replied serenely. "I am only doing my best to survive the evening without causing chaos."

"Not a chance," he murmured, winking at her when she turned an expression of indignation his way.

"Don't say such things, I'm nervous enough as it is," she admitted, and he saw now that she looked rather pale and tired.

Feeling like a brute for mocking her, he took her hand and placed it on

his arm. "I beg your pardon. I was only teasing but I ought not to have said it. Ignore me. No harm will befall you this night, I promise."

She snorted, shaking her head. "If only it were that simple. I thought I was safe in your mother's parlour, for I was quite at ease, but then—"

"But then I came in and made you angry and things went awry. I am well aware it was my fault."

She shot him a defiant glare. "You take a good deal on yourself, my lord. It was *not* your fault. I tripped over the poor dog, which I knew was there! I just... I don't know how I do it," she said with a sigh.

"You're spontaneous. Rather dangerously so," he added with a smile. "I used to be the same until I had an accident that I could have avoided if I'd thought about it for above a second."

"And now you think too much," she said quietly, and then flushed as he stiffened. "I beg your pardon. I ought not to have said that."

Conor studied her, realising she knew of his injury, and about the accident too, no doubt.

"Mother or Violetta?" he demanded, aware there was no one else who would have explained it to her.

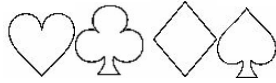
She swallowed hard, struggling to meet his eyes. "They worry about you."

Conor muttered a curse under his breath and then let out a sigh as his indignation dissipated. If even Leo had broached the subject, it could hardly be a surprise that his family were speaking of him, though that they had included Lucy... Why *had* they spoken to Lucy about him? Conor gritted his teeth as began to suspect what his mother was playing at, making him escort them *and* Lucy this evening. She really was devious, the dreadful creature.

"Come along, that's the last call. We'd best take our seats," he said, gesturing for his mother and Vi to hurry along.

Lucy slanted him a look of enquiry and he returned a wry smile. "I'll not be indignant and sulk if you return the favour, Miss Carleton."

"That seems fair, my lord," she replied, and allowed her to lead her to their seats.



Despite her nerves on every other aspect of the evening, Lucy had been looking forward to the performance. Much had been made of Verdi and his explosion upon the English operatic stage, much of it less than complimentary. His fondness for crashing cymbals and drums and a good deal of melodrama had not found favour with a rather more reserved English audience. Yet Lucy found a good deal to enjoy in the evening, despite the odd sensation of Lord Harleston sitting close beside her in the dark.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” The question, spoken so close to her ear his breath tickled her skin, made her jump.

“Oh, yes, very much. It’s rather invigorating,” she said, though she also had to lean close to him to make herself heard. “Are you, my lord? I am aware you would rather be elsewhere.”

“Would I?” he asked with an enigmatic smile. “And where would that be?”

She stared at him, rather surprised by the almost playful remark. “From all I can gather, in your study, making clocks.”

He snorted at that and nodded. “Perhaps, but I think, upon reflection, and after a deal of nagging, I should probably admit I may have given the clocks a little more of my time than they warrant.”

“You like puzzles?” she guessed, pleased when he nodded.

“I do. I like knowing how things work, and why they don’t work. I like building new things and fixing old things.”

“Could you fix me?” she asked, striving for levity and realising too late that it seemed a rather personal comment.

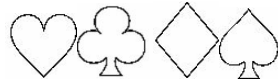
“No,” he replied, his expression softer than usual. “Because there is not the least thing wrong. You’ve had a run of bad luck, that’s all.”

She returned a sceptical expression. “Do you need me to remind you of all the things I have done to abuse your person? The chocolate, the wine, the tea... the dog.”

He laughed and shook his head. “No, I beg you will not. Though of all of them, the last was the one I objected to the least, though Lacey may not

agree.”

She stared at him, her heart picking up speed and he held her eyes for a moment too long, until a crashing cymbal made them both jump and returned their attention to the stage.



During the interval, Conor escorted his party back out to find refreshments and to meet with friends whose faces they had remarked in the other occupied boxes. The theatre was busy tonight, though not packed to the rafters, Verdi still being viewed with a good deal of suspicion by English music lovers. Conor noticed that Lady Bailey was here this evening and saw her send Miss Carleton a look of such loathing, he felt quite furious with her. She was in company with Mrs Verny, one of the spiteful dowagers known to be one of her little clique. They put their heads together, laughing, and Conor felt the urgent need to give them a piece of his mind, but it was neither his place to do so, nor the proper time. He glanced at Miss Carleton to see if she had noticed them. If she had, she said nothing, but he thought perhaps she was a looking anxious and strove to talk to her and ease her disquiet.

Once he had supplied them with champagne for his mother and Vi, and lemonade for Miss Carleton, they returned to the foyer. Here, Mr Gabriel and Lady Helena Knight, who were also attending this evening, greeted them with enthusiasm and Conor hurried to make introductions to Miss Carleton. Their son, Felix, was with them tonight, looking very handsome in his evening black, and rather more grown up than Conor remembered.

Gabriel had soon drawn Conor into a conversation about the Cambridge railway line, which was almost finished and due to open that summer. Progress on the railways across Britain was moving at a tremendous rate now, but Gabriel was concerned about the lack of regulation the government was imposing. Anyone could set up a company and find investment for such a scheme and the appetite for speculation was huge, with people pouring money into every proposed line, many of which were either fraudulent or doomed to failure.

“If something isn’t done and the share prices keep rising at the rate they are, the whole thing will collapse,” Gabriel predicted, shaking his head. “The government must step in and do something soon, for the situation is

untenable.”

Normally this was a subject Conor would talk about for hours with pleasure, especially with a man like Mr Knight. This evening, however, he discovered his attention wandering as he tried to listen in on Miss Carleton’s conversation with Felix. She looked far more relaxed than she had just moments earlier. The two of them were laughing together and seemed as if they had known one another for years, a situation which sat uneasily with Conor, though he did not understand why. He decided it was likely because Felix was young and did not know the danger he courted.

“And then we had to abandon the whole project because of the giant lizards,” Gabriel said.

“Yes, I see,” Conor murmured absently, turning back to Gabriel a moment later with a quizzical expression. “I beg your pardon, *what* did you say?”

Gabriel burst out laughing and shook his head. “Nothing of any importance. Why don’t you go and oust that young puppy if he’s treading on your toes? He doesn’t have a clue, of course, or he would not do so. He has excellent manners.”

Conor stiffened, shaking his head. “You misunderstand. I do not have any interest there. I was only a little concerned. Miss Carleton is a lovely young woman but prone to... er... accidents. I would not want Felix to get himself into a difficult situation.”

Gabriel gave him an odd look. “They’re only talking. In public, I might add. What on earth are you expecting her to do?”

“One never knows,” Conor muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. “Excuse me.”

He left Gabriel and moved to where Miss Carleton was talking to Felix. “Felix, how are you? Have you been in town long?”

“On excellent form, Harleston, but no, I’m only here for a few days. I’ve not seen you much of late.”

“Well, you’ve been at school, of course,” Conor replied with a smile.

Felix crooked an eyebrow at him and the twinkle in his eyes suggested he was aware of why Conor was giving him such a condescending smile and speaking to him like a very young man. Conor hastily rearranged his face,

aware he was being an arse.

“Are you to follow in your father’s footsteps?” Miss Carleton asked Felix.

“Yes, indeed. I am eager to finish my studies and begin working full time, but Pa insists I have a gentleman’s education, so I’m stuck for the time being.”

Lucy looked a little wistful. “I rather enjoyed my lessons, but I imagine my governess was a good deal different from being away at school and perhaps your lessons are rather harder. I was not allowed to do much in the way of the natural sciences, sadly. Papa thought it bad for a lady’s brain, though I could never fathom why. I’m very good at mathematics, though, and wish I could have done more.”

“Oh, yes, those subjects are fine,” Felix said with a grin. “It’s the classical education every gentleman must endure that grinds your soul to dust.”

“Is it very dreary?” she asked with concern.

Felix laughed and shook his head. “Lord no. I mean, yes, the lessons are dry as dust, but I’ve made some great pals, and we have a good deal of fun. It’s not so bad, even if I’d rather be making my own way in the world.”

Conor stepped in the moment there was a lull in the conversation. “I think we had better collect Mama and Vi, Miss Carleton, that’s the bell for the second act. If you’d excuse us, Felix.”

Felix bade them both a good evening and, rather to Conor’s irritation, promised to call upon Miss Carleton soon. Conor made a mental note to have a word with Felix and instruct him to take care where the lady was concerned before she led him off a cliff or into a ravine. Not that there were cliffs or ravines in London, but he did not doubt Miss Carleton would find something disastrous. Happy with this reasoning, he steadfastly ignored the fact he had not enjoyed watching Lucy laughing with Felix.

“Where are they?” Conor asked, craning his neck to see over the crowd. “They were here with Lady Helena a moment ago.”

He led Miss Carleton with him, against the tide of people all returning to their seats but found no sign of his mother or Violetta.

“They must have already gone up,” Miss Carleton suggested.

Conor nodded, for the foyer was almost empty now. “No doubt Mama was chattering and just allowed someone to guide her back as she talked. It wouldn’t be the first time. Well, we’d best go back, or we’ll be late. If they’re not there, I shall have to come out again.”

Hurrying back up the stairs, they were almost at the top when he heard a gasp and a tearing sound.

He turned back to Miss Carleton, who had gone a pasty white. “Oh dear,” she whispered.

Conor’s heart sank. “What?” he demanded.

Miss Carleton shook her head, colour bursting over her cheeks like a sunrise. “N-No. You go on, I... I shall be there presently.”

Conor gave her a quizzical look. “Miss Carleton, I cannot abandon you here, anyone could come upon you. Whatever is the matter?”

She licked her lips and gave a determined shake of her head. “Please. If you would just go,” she pleaded. “I shall be quite all right, only—”

Exasperated, Conor did not wait for her to explain, but went back down the stairs behind her and muttered an oath.

“Hell and the devil, how do you do it?” he demanded.

“It wasn’t my fault,” she said, her voice trembling. “You must see that it was not.”

Feeling like a brute for she was obviously mortified and close to tears, Conor hurried to agree. “Forgive me, of course it was not. It looks as if that post on the balustrade has been damaged for some time. Someone must have leant on it on the way up and it's finally given way.”

In doing so, it had splintered the wood, leaving a jagged edge, and the delicate pale pink skirts of Miss Carleton’s gown had become caught upon it. As she had gone up, it had torn the seam from the bodice, so the back of her gown gaped to display an expanse of white petticoat.

“I need to sew it up at once,” she said urgently.

“Yes, hold on. I’ll have to get you free first,” Conor said, bending to untangle the deep lace flounce that had caused the trouble. Viscerally aware of the damage this would do to her already shaky reputation if anyone saw her in such a state, Conor cursed under his breath as the lace resisted his

attempts to free it. Finally, the fabric came away, a little torn, but not too noticeably. The back of the gown was another matter. “Quick, this way,” he said, grasping her hand and towing her back up the stairs.

Glancing furtively behind them, Conor led her back along the corridor until he found a likely door. With one last look around, he opened it, assured himself it was some kind of storage room as it was lined with shelves, and pushed her inside.

They were instantly engulfed in darkness, and Conor muttered an oath. “Hold the door open a little, there must be a lamp or candles or... ah, yes, here we go.”

The smell of sulphur filled the confined space as he struck a lucifer match and lit two candles, giving them enough light to see what they were doing.

He turned to see Miss Carleton rummaging in her beaded reticule and taking out a soft material wallet. She opened this to display a variety of needles and knots of coloured thread.

“I’m glad to see you come prepared,” he said dryly.

She shot him a withering glance. “You think it is the first time I’ve had such an emergency? Though it’s only ever been a hem before. This... oh, this is... I can’t do it myself. I can’t reach!” she exclaimed.

Conor looked at her in consternation. “Well, don’t look at me. I can’t sew.”

She glared at him and threw up her hands. “Whyever not? Surely, the use of a needle and thread is a life skill anyone might require?”

“Not when one has a valet,” Conor replied austerely.

“Oh! Well, you’re a fat lot of help,” she said, and though he was tempted to reprimand her for scolding him when he was only trying to help, he could see her temper stemmed from frustration at being plunged into yet another ridiculous situation, and this one really had not been her fault. Fate just seemed to enjoy getting her into trouble. “I shall have to take my gown off to mend it,” she said, her voice constricted.

“*What?* You will not,” he objected, going hot and cold at the idea. Bad enough they were in here together alone when everyone else was watching the opera, but to divest her of her gown. Not a chance.

“Well, how else am I supposed to mend it?”

“Oh, the devil take it. Thread the blasted needle. I can’t promise it will be pretty, but I’ll do my best.”

“Oh, thank you!” she said, beaming at him.

It took her a few goes to get the needle threaded as her hands were shaking, but finally she handed it over to him and gave him a few brief instructions on how to go about it. Conor brought the candle closer to see what he was doing and knelt behind her. He soon discovered the knack. Perhaps all those hours tinkering with tiny cogs and mechanisms had paid off, for he felt he made a very creditable job of repairing the damage.

“Do hurry,” she urged him. “The performance began ages ago and people will notice we’ve gone.”

“Almost done,” he said, setting the last stitch with precision. “Scissors?”

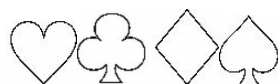
Miss Carleton handed him a tiny set of sewing scissors he could barely fit the tips of his fingers through. Carefully snipping the last thread, he regarded his handiwork with satisfaction.

“You’d never know,” he said, not beyond sounding a trifle smug.

Miss Carleton turned in a circle, craning her neck to see the repair. “Oh, Harleston!” she exclaimed, rather louder than she perhaps ought to have done. “That’s— Oh, how wonderful! How clever of you.”

She turned to face him, looking down at him with such a sparkling look of happiness in her eyes, Conor felt quite winded by it. He gazed up at her, an odd sensation stirring in his heart.

Before he could reply, the door opened and Conor realised at once how this would appear, with him on his knees before a lady in a private room. Lady Bailey stood in the entrance, a slow, satisfied smile curving over her thin lips. She turned to her companion, Mrs Verny. “Well, Joyce, did I not tell you I heard Harleston’s name called in such joyous terms, and now we see why? May I be the first to congratulate you, my lord,” she said with malicious satisfaction. “And you, Miss Carleton. Your father will be in alt.”



“You clever, clever girl! I knew you had it in you,” her father said,

embracing Lucy so hard she could hardly breathe. “Not a duke, nor a marquess, but not to worry, not to worry. One can’t have everything, but a viscount, and one day to be an earl!” Mr Carleton rubbed his hands together at the prospect. He was vibrating with excitement and had not stopped congratulating her, or himself, since the moment he’d heard the news. “I looked up Trevick Castle the other day, you know. After you said about him. Good Lord, Lucy, the place is vast, a veritable palace, and you’ll be a countess one day, and my grandson will be an earl.”

“Papa,” Lucy said, forcing the words out, though her throat was so dry she could hardly speak. “Papa, it was the most dreadful accident. Harleston was only trying to help me, and I cannot, in all conscience, hold him to such a marriage.”

“What?” her father stared at her like she’d gone mad. “Not marry him? Are you out of your mind?”

“I told him I would let him go,” she said, knowing he would be furious with her and bracing for the explosion. “We agreed between us that we would go through the motions for a few months, and then I would quietly call things off and let him go. That way, my reputation will not be damaged, and he can be free of me.”

There was no explosion. Indeed, her father’s quiet rage was rather worse.

“Now you listen up, Lucy, and you listen good,” he said, enunciating each word with precision. “You will marry that man. He is honour bound to take you to the altar now, and if you don’t—”

“I won’t, Papa!” Lucy cried, her heart hammering in her chest. “He does not even like me, let alone love me and I simply cannot—”

“Love? *Bah!*” Mr Carleton said in disgust. “Who gives a tinker’s cuss for that? You’ll make good on this marriage, Lucy. I’ve spent good money on you and educated you, dressed you like a lady, all for this moment. If you throw it away, you may go back to your Aunt Sally with my blessing, but you can tell her I shan’t be paying her another penny for her keep, nor yours, and then see how comfortable that dear little cottage is, for Sally ain’t got a ha’penny to her name, I know.”

“Papa!” Lucy said, aghast, hardly believing her ears. She had always known her father was ruthless in the pursuit of his desires, but she had never

realised he would sacrifice his own family on the altar of his ambition. “You don’t mean it. You can’t!”

“Oh, can’t I?” he said, his expression grim. “You dare throw the viscount over and you’ll see just what it is I can do.”

Chapter 9



Conor,

You sly dog. I knew you must have more sense than I gave you credit for. Congratulations! Miss Carleton will suit you down to the ground. I knew it the first time I saw you together, sprawled across the floor. I wish you both happy. I would have come in person, but Mama says she will murder me if I go about displaying my bruises in public. She's taken rather a pet over the fight, I'm afraid.

Still, I'd just as soon wait until I am resplendent in my usual perfection. Is it to be a large wedding? I shall have a special waistcoat made for the occasion.

—Excerpt of a letter from *The Right Hon'ble Ashton Anson (son of The Right Hon'ble Silas and Aashini Anson, Viscount and Viscountess Cavendish, to The Right Hon'ble Conor Baxter, The Viscount of Harleston (Son of The Right Hon'ble Luke and Kitty Baxter, Earl and Countess of Trevick).*

18th April 1845, Albany, Piccadilly, London.

“Well, and about time!”

Conor's mama threw aside the magazine she had been perusing and got to her feet, hurrying across the room to greet him. “What is the meaning of this? Two days since the night at the theatre and not a word from you.”

“I was just keeping my head down,” Conor said wearily, he had slept little the past two nights and was feeling weary and irritable.

His mother snorted, shaking her head. “And what of poor Lucy? You

ought to have called on her, taken her out in public before people talk more than they are doing.”

“Oh, they’re talking enough, Mama. Lady Bailey saw to that.”

“Yes and collected a fat bonus from Mr Carleton for her hand in it,” his mother said in disgust. “How that shark produced a lovely girl like Lucy, I do not know. Still, we all have our crosses to bear when it comes to family. He cannot be worse than my mother-in-law was, God rest her wicked soul. You’ll learn to manage him in time.”

“No. I won’t.”

His mother sat down, arranging her skirts carefully, but at that she darted a look at him, her keen eyes suspicious.

“Oh?”

“We’re not marrying, Mama. We agreed we would act out the engagement for a few months, and then she would let me go.”

His mother opened and closed her mouth. “You did what? You great *lummo*!”

Conor stared at her rather reproachfully. “I never believed that you, of all people, would force two people who did not love each other to marry.”

His mother put her head in her hands and groaned, muttering under her breath in Irish. Never a good sign, that.

“Praise be to Heaven, but it has taken me this many years to realise I have birthed a fool,” she said, glaring at him, arms folded.

Conor flushed, indignant. “Mama! There is no need for that. It will be quite all right. We will go through the motions, and then quietly end things. Her reputation ought not suffer at all if you help us and remain on good terms with her.”

“Oh, is that right, and what of Mr Carleton? Did you think of that? Do you really believe he’s going to let you go without a fight? What do you think he might threaten Lucy with? What do you think will happen to her? Not to mention whatever retribution Lady Bailey will wreak, for I don’t doubt he’ll demand her fat bonus back again and cause a stink, so she’ll be fit to be tied. And why in the name of everything holy do you not wish to marry Lucy? Tell me that. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but if ever there was a girl more perfect for

you, I have never seen her.”

Conor opened and closed his mouth, uncertain which bit of that diatribe to address first. The idea that her father might punish her for letting him go had not occurred to him. He didn't expect the man to be pleased, naturally, but he had not considered that he might exact revenge on his own daughter. But what the devil did his mother mean?

“Perfect for me? Are you out of your mind? In what universe could that... that incarnation of destruction be perfect for me?”

“Miss Carleton, my lady.”

Conor froze, for he had been so incensed he had not heard the butler's quiet knock. He turned, hoping that perhaps she had not heard his words, but the stricken look on her face put paid to that notion.

His mother sent him a look of such volcanic fury he felt a wave of well-deserved shame and hurried to his feet. Miss Carleton approached, looking like a sacrificial lamb and avoiding his eye altogether.

“Lady Trevick, I beg you'll excuse the interruption.”

“Interruption, indeed,” his mother said crossly. “You are family now, dearest Lucy, and I shall never consider you an interruption.”

“Oh, but my lady...” Rather to Conor's surprise, Lucy hurried over to his mother and sank to her knees in front of her. “Please forgive me. I... I've made such a wretched mess of everything.”

“There, there, child, don't take on so. It will all work out, I promise.”

“But how can it?” Lucy demanded, tears sparkling in her eyes. “Papa will stop paying for my Aunt Sally's upkeep and turn me off without a penny if I don't go through with it. I'm so... so sorry, Lord Harleston. I don't blame you for hating me.”

Conor's mother sent him a look that reminded him forcibly of an occasion when he'd been quite horrid to both his sisters and made them cry. His father, being a gentle soul, had never laid a hand on him when he misbehaved but he'd not the least need to do so when that look of his mother's—part fury, part disappointment—stung far harder than a dozen strikes with a cane or a belt.

Conor cleared his throat. “I don't hate you, Miss... *Lucy*. I like you very

well. I just don't think we ought to be married. Do you?"

Lucy gave a hiccupping laugh that verged on hysteria. "Good Lord, *no!*" she exclaimed.

Conor was a little taken aback by this. He'd expected her to agree, but perhaps not quite so vehemently. The words stung more than he could credit.

"Well, then," he said, as if that answered everything, which he knew well it did not.

"Never mind 'well, then,'" Lucy said scathingly, showing that burst of spirit she had revealed a time or two before. "What the devil are we to do?"

"First of all, we shall not fall into a fit of the dimals," Kitty said firmly. "We have time enough to figure things out, for there is no need to rush into making any decision in either direction," she added, giving Conor a look that dared him to contradict her.

"I suppose not, but I do not see how delaying the problem will make it go away," Lucy said wretchedly.

"Because fate has a tendency to intervene and things that looked like insurmountable problems at first can dwindle to quite manageable proportions once one has a little perspective."

Conor sighed, agreeing with Lucy that there would be no magical solution to this problem, but he knew better than to rile his mother any further.

"Come, Lucy," he said, moving to her and helping her to her feet. "I may call you Lucy, as we are engaged? At least temporarily."

She returned a wry smile and nodded. "You may, of course, and I am so dreadfully—"

Conor silenced her, interrupting before she could launch into an apology. "This was not your fault. If I had been quicker witted, I would have gone to fetch my mother. I simply cannot fathom why I did not do so. You did not tear your gown on purpose, and I guided you into that room. I hate to admit it, but the blame is mine, though I give Mama her due for forcing me to escort you all," he added, sending his mama a significant look which she waved away.

"It is very good of you to say so, my lord, especially when you know

very well how trouble follows me about,” Lucy said sadly, though she looked a little less as if she bore the weight of the world alone now.

“That, I cannot deny,” he said with a smile. “But I believe you must address me as Conor, if you please.”

“Oh,” she said, a tinge of colour rising to her cheeks. “Very well. Thank you, Conor.”

She stood staring up at him and Conor noticed the gown she wore today was pink once more, but a duskiest shade in a heavy silken fabric. It had a delicate pattern of leaves that curved like a small chain back and forth across the material and was very becoming, accentuating the curves of her slender frame.

Conor jumped as his mother cleared her throat. “Perhaps you ought to take Lucy on a walk to the Green Park,” she said, though the look in her eyes suggested there was no *perhaps* about it. “You need to be seen together to allay any gossip, and we have a glimpse of sunshine this morning at long last, so you should enjoy it while you can. I hear the daffodils are very fine this year. You may send your maid home too, Lucy. Now you are engaged, there is no need for her to trail you around when you’re in public.”

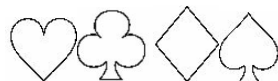
“It looks like rain to me, Mama,” Conor said dubiously, staring out of the window at the sky beyond.

“Then take an umbrella,” she replied serenely.

Knowing when he was beaten, Conor turned back to Lucy with an enquiring expression. “Would you do me the honour of accompanying me for a walk, Lucy?”

She nodded, a tentative smile at her lips. “I would be pleased to, thank you, my— thank you, Conor.”

“Good day to you, Mama,” Conor said, ignoring the smug look in his mother’s eyes as he closed the door on her.



Lucy looked up at the increasingly heavy clouds scudding about in the blue sky and had to agree with Conor. A shower looked likely, though perhaps it would hold off for long enough that they could take their walk. In any case, he carried an umbrella under his arm, and they would not melt

under a little rain. In the countryside, Lucy had often walked in the rain, and whilst she preferred a lovely sunny day like any sane person, it did not bother her in the least.

It was a short five-minute walk to the Green Park from his parents' home and the daffodils were indeed a spectacle to behold. Swathes of yellow swept over the park, vivid against the lush spring green surrounding them.

“Do you live all year in town?” Lucy asked him, for the sight of the park was like a balm to her nerves and she could not imagine wanting always to be among the bustle and noise of the city.

“Of late, yes, mostly.”

She looked up him, studying his profile as they walked. He was not precisely handsome, at least, not what most people would hold up as an example of masculine beauty. But Lucy already knew that she liked looking at him. When he was in a good humour and smiled, his eyes took on a boyish, mischievous glint that made her feel a little silly, as if she might do something as obnoxious as giggle for no reason. She told herself sternly that under no circumstances would Lord Harleston hear her giggle, and she had no business looking at him at all, even if they were engaged. For it was a sham engagement, bound to end, no matter what she must do to make that happen, and she did not want to go getting fond of the man now. How inconvenient that would be.

It was only then she realised she was still staring at him, for he turned and gave her a quizzical smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. Her heart gave an agitated thump.

“Why?” she asked, wrenching her gaze from him and returning to the conversation. “I mean, not that it is any of my affair, but from what everyone says, you do not go out into society much, so why do you stay? Surely you would have more peace and quiet to work on your clocks and projects in the countryside.”

He snorted, shaking his head. “I do not spend all my days locked in a dark room, making peculiar clocks by the light of a single candle, you know. You make me feel like a Gothic villain, plotting nefarious doings by means of some fantastical mechanical device.”

Lucy gaped at him in horror. “I beg your pardon! I did not mean...”

“Lucy!” he said, laughing. He stopped walking and turned to her, taking her hands. “Do you not know when someone is teasing you?”

She let out a sigh of relief. “I think I used to, only I am always so on edge these days I hardly know myself at all. I feel like I am wearing a mask and praying it doesn’t slip, except that you know very well it falls off five times a day,” she added ruefully, staring down at his large, gloved hands holding hers. An odd, fluttery sensation erupted in her belly, making her feel breathless.

“Well, you need not be on edge with me, at least,” he said, and with such kindness she wished fervently he would stop being nice to her. At least when he had obviously disliked her, she had been safe from falling... from feeling quite charitable towards him. “We are, quite literally, in this together. So, a united front, do you agree? And somehow, we will untangle the threads of the mess we have got ourselves into.”

“I agree,” she said, relieved when he put her hand back onto his arm and walked on.

They meandered in agreeable silence for a while, nodding greetings to others, also taking advantage of this little glimpse of spring that had seemed so far away after weeks of dismal weather. It took Lucy a little by surprise to discover how far they had gone, and she opened her mouth to suggest they turn back when Conor spoke.

“It makes me angry,” he blurted, and Lucy darted a look at him, wondering what she had done now. “When I go home to the countryside, I mean,” he added, staring straight ahead of him.

“Because your accident happened there,” she guessed, realising now what he was speaking about. That was why he stayed in town.

“Yes,” he sighed and shook his head. “It’s stupid. I’ve recovered well, far better than anyone expected, even Aisling, and she never heeded a word the doctor said. Sometimes the pain is a trial, but I don’t limp terribly and perhaps I can’t dance, but I can walk perfectly well, and I do—for miles, as it is part of my regime for keeping the leg mobile. I can still ride, though I would attempt nothing more than a modest jump these days. But when I go back, I cannot forget it or pretend it away. It’s... It’s like I’m choking on regret. I go over that day again and again, wishing I could go back to that moment and make a different decision, a sensible decision.”

“But you cannot go back, you can only go forward,” she said softly.

He nodded. “Except I cannot seem to do that either. I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” he added crossly.

She hid a smile, privately delighted that he had confided in her.

“Well, we may not be properly engaged, but I believe if are to help each other, we must at least be friends, and friends tell each other their secrets. I would like to be considered your friend, Conor. If you are not too terrified to make the attempt after all I’ve done to you.”

He laughed and shook his head. “No, I am becoming accustomed to living dangerously again. Life is certainly livelier since you exploded into it.”

“That did not sound like a compliment,” she observed mildly.

“Did it not?” he replied, his lips quirking into a crooked smile. “How odd.”

“Ah, and I believe you are teasing me again, my lord.”

“I am, but I told you to stop ‘my lording’ me,” he reproved her.

She nodded, allowing him to guide her around a large muddy puddle. “I know. Forgive me, but it is a hard habit to break. You always look like *my lord*, rather serious and forbidding, unless you smile. Then you look like a naughty schoolboy with mischief in mind.”

He slanted a curious glance at her, and Lucy hoped he would put the sudden colour in her cheeks down to the chill wind that had picked up.

“And what secrets do you have, Lucy?” he asked her softly, a warm look in his eyes that made her heart skitter about.

She blinked, startled by the question and the rather seductive tone. “I beg your pardon?”

“You said that we were friends, and that friends tell each other their secrets. Well, I have told you my darkest secret, as foolish as it is. So now you must reciprocate.”

Lucy smiled at him a little ruefully. “My life up to this point has been so sheltered and blameless that I am afraid I do not have a single one.”

Except she had the unsettling feeling that was not true, for as she came to know him better, the man beside her was becoming increasingly dear with

every moment that passed. With every conversation, he moved farther away from the stuffy young lord she had assumed him to be. That was a secret that he could never know, for she would be a fool to consider their engagement could be anything but a sham. He wanted free of her and had not tried to shield her from the truth.

“Well, that sounds dull,” he said in disgust. “No wonder you have been making up for lost time since you came to town.”

“Now, *that* was teasing,” she replied with a laugh, and felt a little burst of pleasure as he winked at her.

They walked on in companionable silence for a while longer until Conor spoke again.

“That looks a little ominous,” he said, staring up at a heavy bank of grey cloud that had appeared out of nowhere and loomed ahead of them.

“More than a little,” Lucy replied, as a rumble of thunder accompanied the cloud bank that was stealing the daylight and plunging them into gloom with remarkable speed. The already chilly wind picked up, tugging at Lucy’s pelisse and making her shiver. She put a hand to her bonnet as a sudden gust threatened to remove it entirely.

“Mama, you wretch, why did I listen to you?” Conor grumbled, looking around him. He tried to put up the umbrella, but the wind was too fierce, almost turning it inside out, so he abandoned the attempt.

“We’d best hurry back,” Lucy said, though a soaking was now unavoidable as she felt the first freezing touch of rain upon her face.

“No, we’ll get drowned and there’s no keeping an umbrella up in this wind,” he said decisively. “We’d best take shelter. With luck, it will be short-lived.”

He took her hand, pulling her urgently towards a thick copse of trees.

“Isn’t it dangerous to stand under a tree in a storm?” Lucy shouted over the din of wind and the patter of fat raindrops that were hurling themselves to the floor with fury.

“A single tree, yes, but I think we ought to be safe enough in the centre of this copse,” he called back, tugging her on.

The heavens opened a bare moment before they reached the canopy of

the trees and icy water trickled down the back of Lucy's neck. They ran through sodden grass, and in moments her boots were wet through, the water splashing up under her skirts and soaking her petticoats, so they stuck to her legs. Conor hurried her on, though, and a moment later the rain eased as the trees sheltered them.

Guiding them to the densest part of the copse he could find, Conor stopped under the canopy of an enormous chestnut tree.

"We'll wait here and hopefully avoid the worst of it."

Lucy nodded, shivering, and hoping that would be sooner rather than later. Her feet were already frozen, and the damp petticoats were horridly chilly. Conor took his hat off, giving it a shake and rubbing a hand over the wet ends of his hair before putting it back on. He turned to look at her, his eyes narrowing a little.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course. It is only a little rain. I'm a country girl, remember," she added brightly.

He snorted. "You would make a more convincing argument if your teeth were not chattering quite so enthusiastically."

"Well, if I were at home I'd be dressed in sensible clothes and walking boots, not these silly things," she said in annoyance, holding out her foot for inspection.

"You're soaked through," he muttered, sounding just as aggravated.

"Well, it isn't my fault. It's all fashion and frivolity over practicality and comfort in town. I like wearing pretty things as much as the next lady, but why fashion can't achieve both ends is beyond me. Lady Bailey was laughing at how the Duchess of Bedwin told her women's fashion was designed to oppress us, but I think it's quite true," she added hotly.

"Well, I don't know about that, but those daft boots are sodden. You'll catch pneumonia at this rate."

"Well, we're stuck now. If we go out in it, we'll be soaked to the skin. There's nothing to do but wait."

He nodded, his expression grim, but there was clearly no other option. The two of them stood pressed close to the tree trunk, dodging the worst of

the raindrops that fell when the wind shook the boughs. Lucy wrapped her arms around herself and tried her best not to shiver but she really was frozen. As much as she liked and admired the countess, she could wish she had been a little less keen to send them out walking together on such a day.

“Lucy.”

Lucy turned back to Conor to see him giving her a resigned glare.

“You’d best come here.”

She looked at him askance. “Where?”

“Here,” he said, opening his arms to her. “You’re freezing and this isn’t letting up anytime soon.”

Lucy shook her head, panic tightening her chest at the idea of him putting his arms around her.

“Oh, come now. I never took you for being missish,” he said gently. “I have no nefarious plans for you, Gothic or otherwise, I promise. I would just prefer you not to catch pneumonia as a result of this little outing.”

Lucy swallowed, wracking her brain for a reason she could not simply walk into his arms and rest her head on his chest. How badly she wanted to do so was a revelation to her and proved just how foolish she had been already. Knowing how it felt to be held close to him, secure in his embrace—well, that was knowledge that would torment her from the moment they figured a way to disentangle each other from the mess they were in.

“We are engaged, Lucy. It won’t make a jot of difference now if anyone sees, and besides, no one else was lunatic enough to still be out. We ought to have noticed they had all gone, and the weather had turned.”

But Lucy hadn’t noticed, too charmed by his company, by the simple pleasure of walking beside him.

“Lucy, don’t be a silly goose, come here,” he said in exasperation, and reached for her, pulling her into an embrace. “Imagine I’m your brother, if that helps.”

Lucy’s mind boggled at the idea of her brothers ever doing anything as fond as embracing her, and she almost allowed a mortifying giggle of hysteria past her lips at the idea of Conor being any kind of relation. Whatever feelings were whirling around in her foolish heart, they were

certainly not sisterly in origin.

He stood behind her, his chest to her back, his arms circling hers and within moments she could feel his body heat radiating through her clothes, warming her. Lucy's breath caught, for she had never in her life been this close to a man before. The squire's son had dared to steal a few pecks on the cheek, and once on the lips, but he had otherwise never done more than hold her hand or stand up to dance with her. This was something else entirely. To her chagrin, Lucy discovered that despite the warmth of his body chasing away the cold from her bones, she was shivering harder than ever.

"You're freezing, you poor thing," he said, his voice gentle with sympathy.

Lucy could only be glad he was behind her and not able to see her face as her bonnet hid the scalding blush she was wearing. She half expected steam to rise whenever a stray raindrop pattered through the leafy boughs overhead. There was nothing to do but endure it, though, not that it was a hardship. The only difficulty was that now she did not want the rain to stop, did not want to leave the shelter of the tree, nor his arms. Her feet were blocks of ice and her petticoats clung damply to her calves, yet she would have stood here all day without a murmur of protest. Which only went to prove she really was a blithering idiot with terrible timing.

Chapter 10



Dear Miss Hastings,

I am so glad to hear that your son is going on prosperously. I don't have the slightest idea of what was in the cough mixture, but it is a recipe my mother makes, given to her by a friend. I begged a bottle from her and am so glad it did the trick.

The spring has indeed been wet and dull, but never fear, the sun is just around the corner and will shine again soon.

I must thank you most kindly for the present you were so kind as to make for me. You have a very clever hand with a needle and thread but there was no need to thank me. I was happy to help and shall always be. I have been reminded that I do you no favours by spending time at the house when you are trying so hard to keep gossip to a minimum. So, whilst I would be delighted to taste Joanie's steak and kidney pie and see the spectacle of Nan milking the goat, I must regretfully decline.

I remain, however, at your command if there is the slightest thing you might need, so do not hesitate to contact me. I promise you I will see it done.

I remain, as ever, your friend.

Sincere regards,

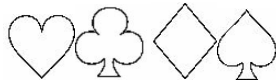
—Excerpt of a letter from *The Hon'ble Mr Larkin Weston (Son of The Right Hon'ble Solomon 'Solo' and Jemima Weston, Baron and Baroness*

Rothborn) to Miss Elmira Hastings.

18thApril 1845, Berkeley Square, Mayfair, London.

Much to Conor's relief, he handed Lucy into the care of her maid and deposited her safely back home without seeing her father. An interview with the man was inevitable and he really ought to have attended to it at once, but Conor was in no frame of mind for it now. He was cold and damp and irritable, his leg was complaining vociferously to the point he felt sick and, worse, he could not rid himself of the feel of Lucy's slender frame held fast against his chest.

If not for the dratted bonnet, he could have rested his cheek against that soft blonde hair, could have smelled the scent of whatever soap she used lingering in the silken strands. Her body had been pliant in his arms, unresisting, and he could not help but wonder if she would have let him kiss her. He had noticed her mouth too often as they walked, pink and soft and inviting. Would she have welcomed his kiss, encouraged it even? The desire to find out had gnawed at him, his will power unravelling by the moment. She was in a vulnerable position, though, his fiancée but not his fiancée and he did not wish to take advantage of her. Yet it would have been so easy to turn her in his arms and tip her head back and... And that was *not* why he was irritated, he reminded himself severely. Good Lord. He was in desperate straits here. If he did not come up with a solution, he might find himself married to a woman who had crashed into his life with the strength of a wrecking ball and created chaos in his nicely ordered world. Whilst he was quite prepared to admit that Lucy was not responsible for all the disasters that befell her, there was no denying her propensity for attracting trouble, and that was something he did not need or want.



Once he had changed and allowed Murphy to supply him with a generous tot of Irish whiskey, 'to keep out the cold' he went down to his study, intending to carry on with the clock he was putting together.

Conor sat down at the desk, studied the mechanism, and picked up the next piece to be fitted... but then just sat there, turning the tiny cog back and forth in his hands. A moment later, he frowned down at it and shook his head, for it was not the piece he needed at all. He searched through the neatly

arranged components for what he wanted but discovered himself staring into space again a few moments later. With an exclamation of annoyance, Conor surged to his feet and experienced a stab of pain in his leg in protest at the sudden movement. Growling with irritation, he strode out of the study again and called for his coat and hat, then hurried outside with a glance up at the sky. It was grey and leaden, but the rain seemed to have stopped for now.

Conor hailed a hackney cab, gave the driver an address in Chelsea, and climbed in. His nerves were jangling, and he needed them soothed, and perhaps to talk to someone who was about as down to earth and blunt as it was possible to get.

On arrival at his destination, Conor saw huge wrought-iron gates spanning an elegant driveway and pronouncing his entry into De Beauvoir Nurseries and Landscaping. The hackney drove up to the doors of a remarkable building. Conor climbed down and paid the driver and then stared with some shock at the scene before him. It had been some time since he had last visited Hartley De Beauvoir at his place of business. Then, it had been a series of large glasshouses and acres of trees and plants with a main building and conservatory in construction. Things had changed.

The building, which had been in progress at the time of Conor's last visit, was now complete. It was single storey, with an elegant balustrade running around the top of a flat roof upon which could be seen large topiary bushes and trees. Built in the centre of the roof was a small pagoda building, which must give an extensive view out upon Hart's impressive new kingdom.

Conor was not the only one visiting, for the place was bustling with activity. Just ahead of him, a party of fashionable ladies had entered the building under the striped awning that covered the path from carriage to front door.

He followed them in and discovered a smart young man had greeted the ladies and led them to a seating area where they were swiftly supplied with refreshments and what looked like printed catalogues. Conor ventured farther inside and then stopped in his tracks. The elegant stone building was open at the back and before him stretched a vast conservatory. Conor walked on, impressed and proud to think that his friend had created this beautiful place, that he'd had the vision and imagination to create something of such splendour. The damp air was heavy with the scent of greenery and unfamiliar

perfumes and Conor walked slowly through the tropical paradise, trying and failing to take it all in. The telescopic view ahead of him through the long glass building ended with a high domed ceiling, which towered overhead. At its centre was a huge bronze vase, six feet in diameter from which a fountain sprung, the gentle patter of water adding to the warm, damp feel of the air against Conor's skin. Striped camellias encircled the fountain, covered in blooms. They gave Conor the oddest sensation of having stepped into another, far more exotic world.

He stood before the fountain, staring in wonder, and gave a soft laugh. Well, Hart had certainly made a success of himself. Not that the man would admit it. He was a modest fellow, and never one to trumpet his achievements. Though in his younger days he had been just as likely as any of them to kick up a lark, and the most likely to end up in a fight, Hart had never been interested in the Sons of Hades. For a man born in the workhouse, he took a dim view of wealthy young men whose only ambition in life was to indulge in pleasure. He had been driven in an entirely different direction, to make something of himself, and in doing so to show his gratitude to his parents, Minerva and Inigo De Beauvoir, who had adopted him and saved him from a different fate entirely.

“May I help you, sir?”

Conor turned to discover a smart young man smiling at him with an enquiring expression.

“Yes, I'd like to see Mr De Beauvoir, if you'd be so good as to take me to him.”

The man's face furrowed. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but he'll see me.”

The man shifted uncomfortably. “I beg your pardon, but Mr De Beauvoir is a very busy man, and he only ever receives visitors by appointment.”

Conor handed him his card. “I'm an old friend,” he said with a smile, assuming his title would change things.

The fellow blushed and cleared his throat. “I'm so sorry, my lord, but if you would care to come to the office, I could see if it is possible to make an appointment for you. I believe there may be an availability in June.”

“June!” Conor exclaimed in outrage. “But it's April.”

“As I said, he is a very—”

“Busy man, yes, yes. Look, I grew up with Mr De Beauvoir and if he hears you sent me away, you might get yourself into trouble. Just tell him Harleston is here. If he doesn’t want to see me, I’ll go away without a murmur, I promise.”

The fellow hesitated but must have glimpsed the impatience simmering in Conor’s eyes and hurried away. Conor kicked his heels for the next ten minutes, which in such a beautiful place was not such a terrible fate. Finally, the man returned with a sheepish grin and asked Conor to follow him.

Back outside, gardeners thronged the place, and there was a bustle that suggested both enthusiasm for the work and that business was good. Conor was led past the glasshouses, most of which had been here on his last visit, but one new one, smaller and exquisite in design, caught his eye.

“That’s new,” he observed to the young man.

“Yes, the orchid house was finished last year. It’s the best and most beautiful in the country,” he said with obvious pride.

Conor nodded, believing it. Outside of many of the glasshouses were covered carts, and men loaded plants and shrubs into them as carefully as if they handled their firstborn child, tucking them up with straw. Conor followed the man into one of the smaller glasshouses, which turned out to be an orangery. The temperature in here was balmy and the scent of citrus and orange blossom lingered delicately on the air.

Hart was standing at the far end of the glasshouse, peering intently at the blooms on a small citrus tree, which he appeared to be drawing. Not much to Conor’s surprise, Hart was dressed like a labourer, in work trousers and a cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up. A wool waistcoat had been slung carelessly over the side of a wheelbarrow, though Conor could not blame him for that. He was feeling rather warm himself and he’d only just walked in. The young man who had escorted him gestured for Conor to go on and made himself scarce.

“Good afternoon, Hart,” Conor said, walking up to his old friend.

Hart glanced up briefly and returned his gaze to what was a remarkably detailed drawing of a single blossom. “Conor. This is unexpected.”

Hart was never one for saying ten words when one would do, and he

rarely shared his thoughts, but Conor detected a reproachful note.

“I’ve been meaning to visit for ages,” Conor admitted, guilty at having been a bad friend once again. “I don’t really know where the time went. I can’t believe it’s been so long.”

“Hmph.”

“This place is magnificent, though, Hart. I could not believe my eyes when I arrived. What a tremendous success you’ve made of it. You must be thrilled.”

Hart’s pencil paused, and he frowned, as though considering this. “It’s well enough. Sales are good,” he added thoughtfully.

“Good?” Conor exclaimed. “Judging by what I see here, you must be as rich as a nabob.

Hart shrugged. “Building is expensive,” he said noncommittally and carried on drawing.

Conor sighed and sat himself down on a low wall. Hart would not pay him the least bit of attention until he’d finished what he was doing, he was remarkably single-minded, so he settled himself to wait. About ten minutes later, Hart closed the sketchbook and tucked the pencil behind his ear, fixing his solemn gaze on Hart.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. Why should anything be wrong?”

Hart shrugged. “You tell me.”

“Can’t I just visit an old friend when I feel like it?”

“Certainly.” Hart picked up his waistcoat and shrugged it on, doing up the buttons haphazardly.

“You’ve done that wrong,” Conor observed with a sigh. “And your sleeve cuff is fraying. Do you still not have a valet?”

“What in the name of God would I do with a valet?” Hart demanded in disgust.

“Oh, I don’t know, leave the house looking like a gentleman instead of a farm hand,” Conor remarked with a laugh, knowing the comment would not offend Hart in the least.

Hart snorted. “Yes, I’m sure my plants would all be most impressed.”

“Didn’t I hear Aunt Harriet is consulting you about the garden at Holbrook?”

Hart nodded at this and actually looked rather pleased. “Yes, she has done me that honour. She is planning a new garden on the south side of the house. To work with a woman with such a keen understanding of science and horticulture is a great opportunity, and Holbrook is a magnificent place. I hope it will cement my reputation as a landscape designer and lead to bigger projects.”

Coming from Hart, this effusive speech was the equivalent of him turning cartwheels.

Conor had to smile. “Don’t you have enough work?”

Hart looked at him as if he’d gone mad. “What do you mean?”

“Well, do you do anything other than work?”

“Like what?” Hart asked suspiciously, as if sensing a trap.

“Like... er... don’t you have a lady friend? You’re not walking out with anyone?”

Hart rolled his eyes.

“You don’t ever intend to marry?” Conor demanded.

“Whatever for? I work all hours and I’m never at home. It’s hardly fair on a wife, is it?”

“But children and—”

“Kathleen has that covered,” he said, his tone brooking no argument. Hart re-buttoned his waistcoat and gave Conor a hard stare. “Who is she?”

Conor bristled. “Who is who?”

“The woman who has riled you up enough to visit me and make me feel guilty about not getting married. You have a title to consider. I don’t.”

“I’m not making you feel guilty, and there is no woman—” Conor paused as Hart quirked an eyebrow at him and let out a groan. “Damnation.”

“I thought as much,” Hart said with a smirk. “Come on. I’ve not eaten yet and I’m famished.”

Conor followed him outside, past neatly planted rows of bushes and shrubs, to a small stone building.

“This used to be a potting shed, but I’ve built a bigger one. I spend so much time here I’ve requisitioned this for my own use,” Hart explained, leading Conor inside.

It was hardly luxurious, but the inside was warm and cosy, with a couple of armchairs next to a pot-bellied stove, a rough wood floor, neatly swept, and an enormous desk covered in books and seed catalogues, journals, and sketches. There were shelves and shelves of books, and tucked against the far wall, a cot-bed.

Conor set a kettle on the stove to boil and picked up a large tin box. Once opened, he offered it to Conor, who looked inside to see what looked like an entire loaf’s worth of sandwiches.

“Cheese and pickle or ham and tomato,” Hart said.

“Living the high life as usual,” Conor observed with a smile and took a cheese sandwich.

Hart sat down and began working his way through the rest as Conor turned the sandwich back and forth in his hands.

“You didn’t hear, then?” he asked eventually.

Hart gave him a speaking look.

Conor shook his head. Stupid question. “No. Of course you didn’t. I’m engaged. I got caught in a compromising position with a young lady—through no fault of our own,” he added hastily. “But now I’m caught, and I can’t see a way free.”

Hart paused, his eyebrows going up as he chewed. “Is she not to your liking? Bracket faced? Temperamental?”

“No, nothing like that,” Conor admitted. “She’s lovely. Slender, pretty and blonde, though don’t let that fool you. Who was that Greek fellow, the god of destruction?”

Hart frowned, considering. “Perses?”

Conor snapped his fingers as the name registered. “That’s the fellow. Well, she could be his sister.”

“Sounds like fun,” Hart replied with a grin.

“Liar. You’d run a mile,” Conor objected.

“True, but we’re not talking about me, we’re talking about you. You like fun. Or you used to.”

Conor stared at the sandwich morosely. “People keep saying things like that, but I feel like they’re talking about someone else. I don’t think I know how to be that person anymore. I’m... I’m feeling a bit lost,” he admitted, feeling like a twit for saying such a thing, and to Hart, of all people. The man was about as emotional as a plank of wood.

Hart’s gaze upon him was unnerving, and Conor braced himself for whatever observation was coming.

“Well,” Hart said. “If I were you, I’d get up off my arse and do something, rather than hiding away and pretending you’re not wandering about in the dark. If you’ve no way of not marrying this girl, get to know her. Perhaps it won’t be the disaster you think it will be, or... and I admit this is a stretch for you—find some bloody work to do!”

Conor laughed and let out a breath. Hart’s advice was always bracing. “Thank you, Hart. You are ever a kindly and compassionate advisor.”

“Get stuffed,” Hart muttered and crammed another sandwich into his mouth.

Chapter 11



My Lord

I think it's about time you and I had a little chat about marriage settlements. Tomorrow at 9am, if you please.

—Excerpt of a letter from Mr Brian Carleton to the Right Hon'ble Conor Baxter, Viscount Harleston.

20th April 1845, Hans Town, London.

Conor did his best to hide his irritation at being summoned like a recalcitrant schoolboy, but Mr Carleton's manner was not one to endear him to the viscount. That he *had* been acting like a recalcitrant schoolboy and avoiding the inevitable hardly helped. It was all business with Mr Carleton, though, from the moment Conor stepped into the office. There was no consideration as to his daughter's future, of where she would live and what kind of life she would have. There seemed to be a complete absence of interest in whether she would be happy. For all Carleton knew, Conor could be a vile abuser of women, or an opium eater, and the fellow would still have handed her over without a blink.

"Well, that's that, then, my lord. I think I have been most generous," the man said, folding his hands over his large girth and sitting back with a satisfied smile.

"Too generous," Conor replied tightly, for he felt very much as if he had sold Lucy's soul to the devil, even though her father had done the selling and Conor would never treat her ill. "One wonders what I have done to deserve such beneficence."

"Ah, now, don't be coy. There's not the least bit of good in dressing the truth up in fine linen. I want my family to rise in society. I've the blunt, but not the connections, but with your bloodline joining mine, my grandson will

be an earl. Now that is something I could not achieve for myself, but my little Lucy... she managed it right and tight.”

He grinned, without the least glimmer of shame for his own ambitions being paid for by his daughter’s marriage to a man she barely knew.

“And what if we do not suit? What if Lucy will spend her days in regret for marrying me? Does that not weigh with you at all?” Conor demanded, incredulous that the fellow could be so blithe about what amounted to the sale of his daughter for a title. In many aristocratic families this was the norm, of course, but this man was not an aristocrat and Conor had been raised differently.

“Regret?” Carleton’s booming laugh filled the room. “Lord, what’s to regret? She’ll have a lovely home, clothes and jewels, her every need taken care of, and you’re not a bad-looking fellow. I’ve no doubt you can give her a parcel of children to keep her busy. No, no. Lucy’s not the kind of girl to sit and mope. She’ll make the best of things, you mark my words.”

Conor left the man’s office feeling like he’d been caught in a sticky web and, the harder he tried to untangle himself, the worse it would get. A starchy butler glided up to him, a footman lingering behind holding Conor’s coat and hat, but he hesitated.

“Is Miss Carleton at home?”

“I will make enquiries, my lord.”

A few moments later and he was climbing the stairs before being shown into an elegant, if rather overstuffed, parlour. Knickknacks and ornaments, plants and statuary jostled for position and the dark green walls and matching curtains created a dim, rather oppressive atmosphere. Conor walked farther into the room, to discover Lucy curled up in a huge armchair before the fire. She was wrapped in a blanket, her feet tucked up beneath her, and the potent smell of camphor permeated the room. She looked pale and wan, about eight years old, and very sorry for herself.

“Good morning, C-Conor, how—*atchoo!*” Lucy paused to give her red nose an enthusiastic blow before finishing. “How kind of you to call on me.”

“Good heavens, Lucy. You’re sick. What on earth did you let them send me up for? Surely you ought to be in bed?”

“Oh, no. I never retire to my bed unless I have no choice, too dull,” she

said, her voice scratchy. “Besides, Papa would be cross if I had refused to see you, and if you want the truth, I’m bored to tears. I was never more pleased to see anyone.”

Conor smiled and took the chair opposite hers. “Well, in that case, I should be charmed to entertain you, if you’re sure you’re up to it?”

“Charmed? Yes, I must present a *charming* prospect,” she said with a sarcastic laugh, which rapidly deteriorated into a cough.

Watching her in alarm, Conor poured her a glass of water.

She took it gratefully and while she sipped, Conor reached for the shawl which was slipping from her shoulders, tugging it carefully back into place. “There, that’s better. Just you wait until I tell Mama what the results of her meddling have been.”

“Oh, no!” Lucy exclaimed. “Don’t you dare. The countess has been nothing but kindness to me and I shan’t let you scold her.”

“Shan’t let me, eh?” he replied, amused. “Well, how shall you stop me?”

She wrinkled her nose, considering, and he saw a sly twinkle sparkling in her eyes. “By making you feel horribly guilty. If you do such a dreadful thing, I shall be mortified, fall into a decline, and *die*,” she said tragically.

“Good lord! You manipulative wretch,” he said, laughing.

She grinned at him, surreptitiously tugging the blanket over her lap and, in doing so, uncovering her feet, revealing dainty bare toes. There was a footstool before her chair, and he suspected she had been warming her feet in front of the fire before he arrived, but the realisation she wore no stockings made something in his brain shudder to a halt. He stared at her bare feet for a moment before deciding scolding her was his safest option.

“Where are your slippers?” he demanded.

“Under the chair, but my feet were freezing even with them on,” she said with a sigh. “They still are. I can’t seem to warm them up.”

“Well, if you go around with no stockings on...” He pressed his lips together before he could say more, aware he ought not to have mentioned such a thing. He ought not to be thinking about it, either—about those pretty little feet and slender ankles—but that seemed to be beyond him too.

Conor eyed the table beside her, and its collection of medical bottles.

“Is that camphor oil?” he asked, nodding towards the small apothecary she had amassed.

“Yes. I’m sorry, it’s a rather overpowering smell, isn’t it?”

“It’s fine,” he assured her and got up, pushing the footstool to one side and kneeling on the floor in front of her.

She stiffened, watching him in alarm. “What are you doing?”

“My nanny used to do this whenever I had a cold,” he said, taking the camphor oil and pouring a little into his hand. With the other, he reached for her foot, tsking as he found it cold as ice. “Lucy, Lucy, whatever am I to do with you?”

She stared at him, her blue eyes wide, her mouth open in a little ‘o’ of astonishment, as he pulled her foot towards him and began massaging the oil into her frozen foot.

“M-My lord!” she squeaked in protest.

“Conor,” he corrected automatically, too intent on his task to have any patience with her embarrassment. “Such pretty toes you have,” he murmured, a husky note to his voice he was somewhat surprised by. And lovely, slender ankles, too, he noticed, using his thumbs to press gently into the arch of her foot. He heard a choked gasp and assumed that was the right place, and so did it again.

“This... This is most improper,” she said, with such a tone of outrage he glanced up at her. She was pink, her eyes glassy—though that was likely a touch of fever.

“Most improper,” he agreed easily. “But it’s helping warm your feet, is it not?”

She hesitated for a moment and then nodded.

“And I assume you expect no other visitors?”

“No,” she admitted.

“And, as we are engaged, and your father seems to have dispensed with propriety....”

She snorted at that. “Much he’d care. You could despoil me right here and—”

Conor stilled at her words, and she clapped a hand to her mouth, realising too late she had been betrayed into speaking with too much candour. He glanced up at her, something hot and devilish and long forgotten stirring to life inside him.

“Could I?” he asked wickedly.

She swallowed hard, something flickering in her eyes that might have been panic or perhaps something else entirely. Desire, perhaps? The idea made his heart kick in his chest and though there was no answer, she did not tell him no.

“Don’t look so anxious. I am a gentleman, might I remind you.”

Though Conor had to admit he needed the reminder himself as his hands slid back and forth over her elegant foot. He dared to allow his hand to glide a little way up her leg, over her ankle, to a shapely calf. Her breathing hitched and his own chest suddenly felt somewhat constricted too, not to mention stirrings elsewhere in which he had no business indulging. Reaching for her slipper, a thick knitted affair in blue wool with little pink roses embroidered over the toe, he put it on her now warm foot and reached for the other. This time he was a little more businesslike, or tried to be, but he was far too aware of the bare legs under her morning dress, of the silken skin that was warming beneath his touch, soft and supple. The scent of camphor was a little overpowering now, though his sinuses had never been so clear. His mind was another matter entirely, caught in a deliciously erotic fog of improper imaginings. The idea that he might allow his hand to steal farther up her leg, beneath her skirts, to find the delicate, feathery curls between her legs made his mouth dry. He imagined it, imagined pushing her skirts up and exploring with his mouth and... *curse it!*

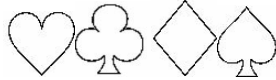
Hurriedly, he stuffed her foot into the other slipper with rather less grace and lurched to his feet.

“There,” he said, tugging a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping the oil from his hands. Who knew camphor oil could be so enticing? Certainly not him. “Toasty and warm, eh?” he said, too aware of the slightly frantic note to his voice.

Lucy nodded. She did indeed look warm. Feverish, in fact.

“You...” he began, and then cleared his throat. “Go to bed, Lucy. I pray

you feel better soon,” he managed, and fled.



Despite Lucy’s dire warnings, Conor told his mother that her machinations had stuck the poor girl with a vile cold, but he did not need to scold her. She was all mortification and immediately wrote to his sister, Aisling, to ask her to send whatever medicines she deemed proper for the invalid.

It had been his intention to stay away from Lucy, certainly until she was well again, but he only lasted a day, and then he could only imagine her bored and alone with no one to entertain her and felt like a brute. Yet those moments he’d spent with his hands on her bare skin had proven to him that Lucy was not just a danger to herself and the world at large, she was dangerous in ways he had not given her credit for. At odd moments, he would recall the sensation of his hands gliding up and down her calf, of the soft sound of her breath hitching. So as much as he did not wish to abandon her whilst she was feeling so poorly, he did not wish to risk being too much in her company. For if she could entice him reeking of camphor oil and thick with a head cold, things were worse than he could have anticipated. So, he reached a compromise.

On Monday he arrived at her house and asked for news of the invalid, leaving in the butler’s care a large posy of daffodils. They seemed safe enough, as in the language of flowers they represented hope, joy, and good luck. He also included a note.

Dear Lucy,

I thought you might like a nicer reminder of our walk in the park than the one you are suffering presently. Do let me know if there is the least thing I can do for you.

Yrs etc. C

On Tuesday, he took her a selection of his favourite novels from his own library, and on Wednesday, the medicines that Aisling had sent, along with a small box of macarons from Gunter’s.

Dear Lucy,

I hope you enjoy the macarons and that they help the nasty medicine go

down. As I knew you were confined to your bed, I felt safe to frequent Gunter's for long enough to buy them. If you promise not to attack me with hot chocolate – or any other beverage – I shall take you there for tea when you are better.

Yrs etc. C

On Thursday and Friday, he did not visit in person but sent her a cashmere shawl in a soft shade of blue, and then a sturdy but smart pair of leather walking boots.

By Saturday he was feeling unaccountably gloomy and out of sorts and he did not know why. He could not settle for long enough to work on his clocks, so he visited Gabriel Knight to get an update on what was happening with the various projects he had an interest in. He left an hour later, furious to realise he couldn't remember a word of what Gabriel had said because he'd been too distracted to pay proper attention. Irritated, he stalked around to his mother's home and found Vi in the parlour, writing letters. She looked up when she saw him and smiled.

“Good afternoon, Conor. What a nice surprise. Why, you are becoming a regular visitor of late.”

Conor bent and kissed her cheek before going to tug on the bell pull. “Where's Mama?” he asked, pacing to the window.

“She's gone to call on Alice Hunt. Bella has brought the children to town for a visit, and you know how your mother adores children.”

Conor grunted. He did indeed, and he also knew how his mother had longed for more babies of her own. She had accepted the fact that she had been blessed with three healthy children with equanimity, however, and been grateful for them. Instead, she had adopted Violetta as her own and busied herself with the children of all her friends and family. Conor also knew she was dying for him to marry and give her a parcel of grandchildren to dote upon.

“If that's supposed to be a reproach,” he began crossly, only to catch sight of the look of surprise on Vi's face. He groaned and rubbed a hand over his face. “I beg your pardon. Ignore me, please, or throw me out if you wish. I'm not feeling exactly sunny today.”

“This dreadful weather does not help,” Vi said kindly. The patter of rain could be heard against the parlour windows. She got up, lighting the lamps for the room was growing gloomy, and glanced at him as she moved around the room. “Is there anything in particular on your mind, Conor?”

“This business with Lucy,” he said, knowing he sounded irritable but unable to stop it. “We must find a way to end this ridiculous engagement as soon as possible. It’s... It’s dashed awkward, Vi, for both of us.”

Vi turned as the door opened and a footman appeared. She looked at Conor, for he had rung the bell.

“Tea, please, and if there’s any cake...?” he added hopefully.

The footman nodded and went away.

“I understand it is a rather delicate situation,” Vi said carefully.

“Delicate!” Conor exclaimed, pacing the room.

“Conor, forgive me for saying so, but you do seem dreadfully agitated. More so than when it happened, for you took it very well at the time. Has something happened to make you believe you must escape the engagement with all haste?”

Conor almost shouted, *yes! Yes, I must escape because I can’t stop thinking about putting my hands on her and I’m going to run mad!*

“I just don’t like things being out of my power,” he said gruffly, which was all he dared admit to.

Vi nodded. “I understand that. I called on Lucy yesterday, as it happens.”

“How is she?” he asked at once, for getting information out of their snotty butler was a thankless task.

“Much better, though very tired. She asked after you. Though she would never have said so, I think she’s a little disappointed you haven’t been to see her.”

“I sent flowers, and books and—”

“Yes, yes, she was quick to tell me how wonderfully kind you had been, how very thoughtful,” Vi replied with a smile. “But I think she misses you.”

Perhaps it was only that he was feeling guilty already, or perhaps it was because he simply could not leave it any longer, or perhaps it was the

startling discovery that he was pleased she had missed him, but Conor decided there had been reproach in Vi's sweet smile and sprang to his feet.

“Oh, very well! If you're going to make me feel bad, I'll visit the wretched girl. Now. This instant,” he said furiously, getting up and stalking toward the door.

Vi watched him go in confusion. “But Conor... I never... I did not mean... You've not even had your tea and—”

He didn't hear the rest, already on his way out of the house.

Chapter 12



Dear Mama,

Thank you for your letter of the 17th. Yes, I am well, eating properly and taking care of myself. There is not the least need for you to come and visit me, though I will always welcome you, as you very well know.

Georgie has been visiting often with baby Isla and Jamie, who is a bonnie little lad now. And don't tell me you have nae set them to spy on me, for I shall call you a liar. Wildsyde goes on prosperously, I assure you and I am not about to throw myself into the loch.

Lady Buchanan is much the same as last time you asked me. She is cross as a scalded cat and hates me with a passion. I have apparently ruined her life by burying her in the wilds of a godforsaken land of heathens. What she expected in trapping me into marriage, I cannot fathom. It's hardly a secret I'm Laird of Wildsyde Castle. I counselled her to do better research about her quarry if she were ever given the opportunity to try it again and she threw the coffee pot at me. Happily, I have always been quick on my feet.

In truth mama, I am worried. There is a look in her eyes that I do not like, one that promises retribution. She is plotting something; I am certain of it.

—Excerpt of a letter from *The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan* to his mother, *The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of*

Morven.

27th April 1845, Hans Town, London.

Lucy stood by the window and stared out at the people hurrying past, umbrellas up, as the rain slicked the streets. Rivers of muck and rubbish bracketed the road and Lucy wondered if she had ever felt so miserable in her life. How she wished to return to her Aunt Sally, though she was forced to admit even that redoubtable lady would struggle to lift her spirits today. Despite knowing that she ought not to wish for it, because it would only make this ridiculous situation even harder to endure, she wished that Conor would call upon her.

The gifts and little notes he had sent had touched her deeply, and whilst she had written to thank him, she wished to tell him in person how much she had appreciated his thoughtfulness. Except she had the lowering feeling it was the kind of thoughtfulness one offered a friend or a favoured aunt. For if it had been more than that, surely he would have asked to see her. But he hadn't, and she must suppose he did not wish to.

Her thoughts returned, inevitably, to the moments when he had put his strong, warm hands on her feet and ankles and massaged the camphor oil into her skin. He'd warmed her feet, that was for certain. They had glowed for hours after he'd left, but the rest of her had been tingling too. As much as she had revelled in his touch, glorying in it like a sleek cat stretching under a caress, she wished he had never done it, for now she could not rid herself of this impatient, restless sensation that plagued her at all hours. She was sorely tempted to put on her hat and coat and take herself over to Albany in the hope he would be calling upon his parents or Vi. If she'd not felt so very weary, and the weather had been a little less appalling, she would have done so, but the influenza had left her out of sorts and lethargic, her spirits lower than she could ever remember.

A soft knock at the door caught her ear, and she turned.

"Come in."

The butler appeared in the doorway. "Lord Harleston is downstairs, miss. Are you at home?"

"Yes!" Lucy with a gasp, annoyed that the man hadn't just sent him up.
"Yes, of course."

The butler nodded and slowly closed the door. Lucy bit her lip and refrained from telling him to get a move on with difficulty. Suddenly agitated, she ran to the nearest mirror and checked her reflection. Her hair was tidy at least, and though she looked pale, her nose no longer resembled a beacon. She gave her cheeks a quick pinch and bit at her lips, which gave her a little more colour. At the sound of the door opening, she ran from the mirror and stood in front of the fireplace.

Conor walked in and smiled as he saw her.

“Good afternoon, Lucy, I’m a little late for calling upon you, I hope you can forgive me.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, before realising how breathless that had sounded. “Yes, of course,” she added in a more normal voice, but her wits had scattered with the realisation that *this* was why she felt so wretched.

It was not the fact she had been ill, nor the dreadful weather, it was the absence of him in her life. With a sense of hopelessness sweeping over her, she realised she had been a greater fool than she had known. This was the man she wanted, and unless she was prepared to trap him into a marriage he did not wish for, this was the man she must let go.

He took both her hands in his and raised one to his lips. He barely touched his mouth to her fingers, but she shivered at the brief contact. His hands were large and strong, and as warm as she had remembered when he had caressed her feet. Reluctantly, she tugged her hands free of his and smiled in response to his enquiring look.

“It is so good to see you. I have been wanting to thank you personally for all the gifts you sent me. I cannot tell you how it cheered me to have each day lightened by the arrival of such a thoughtful present, and as for those boots, why they are splendid. Wherever did you find them, and in my size, too?”

“You are most welcome, and the size was easy enough: I asked your maid. As for where, I enquired of the most fashionable lady I know.”

“Oh?” she replied, wondering with a stab of unwelcome jealousy if this lady was the one he would rather marry.

“Yes, Lady Helena is always at the forefront of fashion, but she is also a practical woman, so I knew she would advise me.”

Lucy let out a breath, recognising the name. “You work a good deal with

Mr Knight, I believe?"

"Yes, I have been fortunate enough to have been given the benefit of his advice and to be included in a few of the many projects he is working on."

"You admire him," she said with a smile.

Conor nodded. "Very much. A man who was born in the workhouse but has risen to such heights deserves everyone's admiration. Especially as he is a thoroughly decent, modest, and likeable fellow. Having said that, I should not like to be on the wrong side of him," he said wryly, before slanting her a curious glance.

They were still standing, and she realised belatedly she had not invited him to sit down. She was about to do so when he spoke again, reaching and taking her hand in his.

"What is it, Lucy?"

His hand grasped hers, warm and reassuring, and the desire to cling to it, to raise it to her cheek and press it to her lips made her chest ache with sudden longing.

"What do you mean?" she asked, laughing a little, though it sounded horribly fake. "Nothing in the world. I expect I am a little out of sorts still, that's all."

"You are pale," he said, concern in his expression, his fingers firming upon hers. "But I am not certain that is it. Are you quite sure you are glad to see me?"

She did laugh at that, for the idea she could be anything other than glad was ridiculous. "I am perfectly certain," she said, for it was not seeing him that caused her anguish but his absence.

He gave her a long look. "Come, let us sit down and I shall see what I can do to take that sorrowful look from your eyes."

"Sorrowful?" she repeated, surprised he was so observant, or perhaps that she was so obviously miserable. "You make me sound like a basset hound. My aunt has one she bought from a French lady, and it is the most doleful looking animal you ever did see."

He laughed, shaking his head. "I meant no such comparison, I assure you. I would surely allude to swans or white doves in that case."

She gave him a look of pure revulsion. “I beg you will not. Besides, *me*, in the guise of a swan or a dove? Do be reasonable. An uncoordinated duck I might accept, I suppose,” she added thoughtfully.

Conor looked at her blankly for a moment and then burst out laughing. He laughed so hard tears glittered in his eyes. “An... uncoordinated d-duck,” he spluttered, whooping with laughter. “Oh, L-Lucy, you are priceless.”

She watched him, a hopelessly fond sensation uncurling in her chest, pleasure at having made him laugh so unreservedly breaking down any last guard she had put around her heart. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve and grinned at her. She did not know what he saw in her face when he looked at her, but his grin faded, replaced by something else far more serious. He still held her hand, a fact she was viscerally aware of. He squeezed it gently, and when he spoke, his voice was soft.

“We must find a way to end this engagement, Lucy,” he said, not looking at her.

Though she had not allowed herself any illusions or fanciful notions that he might change his mind, the words still stung, and it took her a moment to trust her voice to reply to him. “Yes. We must.”

He glanced at her and smiled. “I knew you would understand. It’s just... it’s dangerous to both of us, this... this...”

“I know,” she said hurriedly, not wishing him to explain that he did not want her getting any foolish notions when she already had a head and heart full of them.

He nodded. “But we will do it without harming your reputation. I promise you that. You’ll make a splendid match, I know you will. Someone who will love and appreciate you as you deserve.”

She made a scoffing sound at his words before she could think better of it, and he frowned at her.

“Well, really,” she protested, pulling her hand free of his grasp, for she could not think at all when he touched her, and he had no business doing so when he did not want her in the least. “What kind of titled gentleman would consider marrying me? A woman with no breeding, no particular talents and a propensity for making a spectacle of herself. I don’t doubt they will be queuing up to lay their hearts at my feet,” she said bitterly.

“Lucy...!” he said, sounding rather shocked.

Lucy got to her feet, her temper fraying, for there was anger or there was sorrow, and she could not let him see she was wretched at the prospect of letting him go. “Conor, be reasonable. I shall marry some impoverished baron who needs my money. I shall pray I can find one who is kind towards me and will leave me to live my own life. What you are describing simply isn’t in the cards and, whilst I was too naïve to realise it before now, it never has been.”

He stared at her, his expression troubled. “You are being deliberately pessimistic.”

She gaped at him. “I am not. If anything, I am looking on the bright side.”

“I assure you, there are many respectable gentlemen who would give their right arm to marry a woman like you, and rightly so. They’d be damned lucky to do so.”

“Name one,” she demanded, folding her arms.

He stared at her, and she could see him thinking. His jaw set and she gave a snort of derision.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, shaking her head.

“No, that’s not...” he said in a rush. “I can’t simply pluck names out of thin air. I need to think about it, to consider who would be a good match for you. I shall think on it and make a list and—”

“You do that,” she said, her throat constricting as tears threatened. “Make me a nice long list. Include everyone you can think of, young or old, fat or toothless. Anyone, so long as it isn’t you.”

Somehow, she choked out the words, even though she knew better than to say such things to him. She ran for the door, but he was too quick for her.

He sprang to his feet, intercepting her and catching her in his arms.

“Lucy! Whatever is the matter?”

Lucy shook her head, too wretched to speak.

“Why, I think you are not as recovered as you would have me believe,” he said crossly and, before she knew it, he had lifted her into his arms.

“Oh, put me down,” she said wearily, for the desire to just lean into him, into his strength and warmth and to pretend, just for a moment, that this was something she could keep, was a dangerous temptation.

“Not until I am certain you won’t do anything foolish. In this state, you are bound to trip and fall down the stairs. I shan’t have your broken neck on my conscience,” he said sternly.

He carried her back to the settee and laid her down upon it, arranging pillows carefully behind her head. Kneeling beside her, he regarded her critically. “I think you are still worn to a thread. Have you been eating?”

“Yes,” she lied, for her appetite was not what it had been, and nothing appealed to her.

“Don’t tell fibs,” he scolded, and she glared at him, annoyed that he could read her so well.

He got up, rang the bell, and when a footman appeared, ordered tea, cheese and apple, and a selection of cakes and biscuits.”

“You must eat, Lucy,” he told her, such concern in his eyes. “You’ve lost weight, I am sure of it.”

“I am not your responsibility,” Lucy said waspishly, for she refused to allow herself to feel giddy and pleased that he wanted to care for her.

“We are engaged, so you are certainly my responsibility.”

“Yes, but you don’t wish to be engaged, neither of us do, therefore, we may set aside such notions of responsibility, and I am quite capable—”

He knelt beside her again and pressed a finger to her lips. “Hush, or I shall be forced to take extreme measures to shut you up,” he said with a teasing smile.

Lucy found her temper flaring once more, her emotions raging out of control. “How dare you!” she exclaimed, shoving his hand away. “You have no right to—”

The press of his mouth against hers silenced her quite effectively. Lucy was certain it silenced the whole of London from St Pauls to the Regent’s Park Zoo, everything except the agitated thud of her heart. It lasted only a moment, or perhaps a lifetime, Lucy was too dazed to be certain of anything. Conor lifted his mouth from hers and stared at her. There was an oddly

uncertain look in his eyes, and she wondered just how badly he was regretting having done such a foolish thing.

“There,” he said, his voice rather scratchy.

He got to his feet and walked to stand by the fire. The two of them remained silent, an odd, prickling atmosphere in the room that brushed over her nerves like sandpaper.

The tea arrived and Conor instructed the maid to pour it out, which was just as well as Lucy would have undoubtedly dropped or spilled something in such a nervous state. Then he selected the best of the cakes and fruit and biscuits and arranged it with a remarkably artistic eye on a plate. He set the plate upon her lap and the tea upon the table at her elbow.

“Please make certain she eats properly,” he instructed the maid, who bobbed a curtsey and promised to check in a little while.

Lucy glanced up at him, uncertain whether to demand he kiss her again or to throw the plate at him for his high-handed manner.

“As soon as the weather is better, I shall take you to the seaside for the day,” he announced. “Mama and Vi have been trying to take a trip for the past sennight, but this weather has ruined their plans. It cannot endure much longer, however. As soon as it improves, we shall make a day of it, and the sea air will put the bloom back into your cheeks. In the meantime, please be so good as to take care of yourself.”

She did not know how to respond, and very much feared she would say too much if she tried. So, Lucy held her tongue. Conor sent her a rather anxious glance and then walked over, giving her shoulder an awkward pat.

“Good afternoon, Lucy. I shall hope to find you in better spirits the next time we meet.”

Chapter 13



Dearest Lyall,

I am glad to hear Georgie has been visiting. It has been too long since I have seen my lovely grandchildren so I shall come to stay. You may expect me on the 3rd of May. Your father will arrive a week after me and stay for a few days. Now, don't protest, he worries for you and the pair of you need to talk. Whatever you may believe, he does not think you a fool, but you will not believe that for yourself unless you look him in the eyes. Avoiding him is only making him wretched and more worried than ever. So, you will do it for my sake, for I must live with him when he is in a state of anxiety.

I never doubted that Wildsyde is prospering under your care. It will be good to spend some time there again, however. It has such happy memories for us all and I pray it will do so again.

As for Lady Buchanan, don't you turn your back on that woman. Despite the appalling manner of your marriage, I hoped to find some trace of shame or a desire to make amends in the creature's eyes, but I have never in my life met a woman I felt to be entirely calculating. As for her father, I wonder he has lived this long, for a man riper to be hanged I have never met. If you believe she is plotting, then I say you are right. Heed your instincts, son, and leave nothing to chance.

—Excerpt of a letter from *The Right Hon'ble Ruth*

Anderson, The Countess of Morven to her eldest son, The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan.

3rd May 1845, The London to Brighton Train Line.

To Conor's relief, the weather changed the next day, though it wasn't until almost a week later that the promised trip took place.

In company with his mother and Violetta, they picked Lucy up in his carriage and made the journey across the river to the south of the city and Norwood Junction. The train line to Brighton had been completed four years earlier, and the exodus of people desperate to escape the city for a day at the seaside had given the town a new lease of life.

The train today was packed, no doubt with everyone thoroughly sick of the dreadful weather, snatching at the first glimmer of sunshine and wanting to make the most of it. Conor had taken care to reserve a first-class compartment, however, and so they avoided the bustle and jostle of the other passengers and settled themselves to the journey.

Conor studied Lucy surreptitiously. He had not seen her since that ill-fated visit and had confined himself to writing to her in order to arrange today's outing. Part of him believed it was a stupid idea to take her out today, and yet she had seemed so out of sorts he had been worrying about her ever since. Truthfully, he had worried that it was not the illness at all depressing her spirits, but the situation of their engagement. The idea gnawed at him and would not let him go. Did she wish it was a real engagement? And was that for her own sake, or so that her father would leave her in peace?

Sometimes he caught a look in her eyes, something that was warm and inviting, and made his thoughts wander in directions they had no business going. Not unless they were really engaged. Yet that was a ridiculous notion. He was not the raucous boy of his youth but a man, and one who appreciated quiet and order, and a world that did not blow up in his face at regular intervals. Whilst she did seem remarkably unlucky, he did not doubt much of Lucy's difficulties arose when she was anxious, she had spirit, too. Conor would never wish to marry an insipid female, but Lucy... Lucy... Damn it, Lucy would drive him to Bedlam.

Yet the memory of that too brief kiss kept intruding upon his thoughts. Why, in the name of heaven, he had done such a ridiculous thing, he could

not fathom. Yet in that moment it had felt right, so right it had been impossible not to do it. He had spent the days since reminding himself he was trying to untangle himself from this engagement, not get in deeper, so kissing her had not only been disrespectful, it had been cruel. Not that he had any over-inflated notions about his own appeal. He did not believe the touch of his lips was enough to send any woman into a swoon or cause her to fall passionately in love with him. But if Lucy believed some penniless baron to be her best option, he must compare favourably.

Conor sighed and gazed out of the window, only to discover a few moments later that he was staring at her again. Her skin was flawless, and whilst she was still a little pale, there was a delicate tinge of pink in her cheeks. Her mouth of rose satin, with its plush, kissable bottom lip, looked rather downcast, and his heart ached. The sparkle had gone from Lucy since she had been ill, and he needed to get it back again. She looked up then and caught his eye and her colour heightened. Hurriedly, she looked away again, and Conor did not know whether to smile or to beat his head against the carriage wall.

Staring resolutely at the passing scenery, Conor wracked his brain for a way out of the engagement. If he could find her someone else, someone she approved of and her father could accept as a substitute, all would be well. He began running through all the single men of his acquaintance and found his temper flaring at the idea of any one of them putting their hands on Lucy. Worse than that, he realised he was staring at her again.

He muttered a curse inwardly, but really, he was not made of stone. She looked especially fetching today, dressed in a gown of lavender blue with a matching short velvet cloak. Little rosettes of lavender blue ribbon studded the sides of her bonnet and seemed to make her blue eyes brighter than ever. Her beautiful hair was mostly hidden by the bonnet, but a few stray blonde curls had escaped the sleek chignon to curl about her face. Sitting still, with her hands tucked demurely in her lap, she looked young and fresh and achingly lovely, and not at all as if she would tackle a fellow to the ground or throw a cup of chocolate over him. Conor's lips twitched despite himself.

Some sense of his perusal of her must have alerted Lucy, for she looked up again to see his smile. She frowned, and he grinned at her. Sending him a look of ill-concealed indignation, she huffed and turned back to the window. Conor sighed. If things were different and they were alone, he would move to

sit beside her and coax her into his arms. It would not take much to make her smile, he knew that. She had a sweet nature and smiled easier than she scowled, or she had done before they'd got themselves into such a fix. But if he kissed her, would she sigh and cling to him? He thought she might – *hoped* she might. He imagined it, imagined running his hands over the impossibly slender waist. That was not enough, he discovered, his senses hungry for more of her. In his mind's eye, he imagined his hand running up her stockinged leg, beneath the flurry of petticoats. He saw a pretty garter tied above her knee and the warm silken skin of her inner thigh, for in his imagination there was no impediment of drawers to hinder his roving gaze. In the dream, Conor tugged the skirts and petticoats higher and there, the soft little thatch of—

“Conor!”

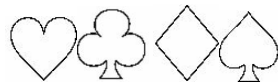
Conor jumped about a foot in the air as his mother's voice pierced his ill-considered daydream.

“Yes, what?” he said irritably, furious with himself for allowing his imagination such liberties, and furious with his mother for interrupting just as it was getting interesting.

“Well, finally. You were miles away,” his mother said, giving him a look of such scrutiny, he felt the back of his neck grow hot. “I asked what time we would arrive?”

Conor reached for his pocket watch. “At half past ten, so another twenty minutes.”

“Thank you,” she said and, giving him one last curious glance, returned her attention to the passing countryside.



Once the train had shuddered to a halt, Lucy gathered up the old scarf with which she had covered the plush velvet cushion she had sat upon. Vi, who was apparently a seasoned traveller on the railway, had told her the cushions were often thick with dust and smuts from the engine and to take precautions. Looking at the state of the scarf, this had been wise advice. Conor leapt down from the carriage and helped each of them to step down to the platform. Lucy hung back, reluctant to do so much as take his hand. She had known this day was a terrible idea but could not think of a reason to

refuse to come. If she said she was ill, they would all be concerned, and the countess was already feeling dreadfully guilty that Lucy had caught such a vile cold. So, all she could do was to endure.

The train journey had already tried her limited patience. Having Conor sitting directly before her was an exercise in self-discipline as she tried to keep her gaze from wandering to him. The only thing that had stopped her was that he kept looking at her at the precise moment she looked at him. The second time that dreadful smirk he had worn had made her blush horribly. Did he think she was infatuated with him? How could he not, she thought gloomily, when she was in such a sad state? She had let him kiss her without even a murmur of protest, too. Still, believing she was infatuated was better than the truth, for if he knew she was in love with him, things would be awkward indeed, and there was no point in denying the fact. Not now. Not when her thoughts had become consumed with him.

The only time during the journey when she had turned her thoughts from him was when the train crossed the Great Ouse Viaduct. To Lucy, the train seemed to rattle over a precariously narrow road, hundreds of feet in the air, and she had closed her eyes until the ordeal was over, only to feel Conor reaching over and giving her hand a squeeze. She opened her eyes to discover such a fond look in his eyes her heart had ached.

“It’s perfectly safe,” he had assured her, and stupidly she had felt perfectly safe at once.

Though there were hackneys for hire outside the station, the countess declared she was sick of sitting still and they would walk down to the front. Having done so before, they assured Lucy it was only a twenty-minute walk, though Lucy would have happily walked ten times farther if she could have done it without speaking to Conor.

“We’ve a fine day for it.”

Fortune was not to favour her today, it seemed. Lucy turned her head to discover the cause of her perturbation walking beside her. He offered her his arm, and she pretended not to notice.

“Yes, it is perfect. Warm, but not too hot. We are lucky indeed,” she said politely.

Lucy turned her head to discover his mother and Vi walking some

distance behind them.

“We ought to wait.”

“No, they’re dawdling, but they know where we are going.”

“Where *are* we going?” she asked curiously, for she had never been to a seaside resort before.

“Well, we shall walk along the front and admire the sea, visit the chain pier, eat ices, and have a splendid lunch, which will make us want to take a nap,” he said, smiling at her.

Lucy avoided his eye. His boyish smile set off an ache of yearning in her chest that made her want to cry. “That sounds very nice.”

“Nice?” he repeated in disgust. “This is a rare treat, and you know it. Lucy, what is the matter?”

“Noth—”

“And don’t tell me nothing, for I shan’t believe you.”

“Then I won’t,” she said primly, and firmed her lips.

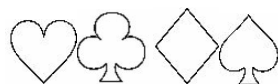
If he thought he was getting a declaration from her, he was to be disappointed. She would let him go, because she must, but she would do it with as much of her dignity intact as she could manage.

He sighed and took her hand, placing it firmly on his arm. “I know this is a wretched situation, but can’t we just enjoy the day together?”

She could not help but look at him then, searching his gaze. It must be easy for him to take or leave her company as he chose. How she wished she could do the same, to simply enjoy this brief interlude and move on once he had discovered a way to rid himself of her.

Well, she must at least make a show of doing the same, or he would keep badgering her, wanting to know what the matter was.

“Certainly,” she said, with the brightest and sunniest smile she could manage. “I intend to enjoy it enormously.”



The words were enthusiastic enough, but there was something in her eyes that Conor did not believe, a brittle quality to the smile that did not ring true.

Lucy was unhappy, and the knowledge tore at his heart. He determined he would make her smile today, for real, if it was the last thing he did. Today was one she would always remember with pleasure, she would remember *him* fondly, long after their engagement was over, and they had both moved on.

They arrived at the front to discover a stiff wind blowing but the air was warm, the sun hot upon Conor's back. Lucy stared at the sea in wonder, and Conor realised she had never seen it before.

"It's so blue," she said, astonished.

He could not take his eyes from her, tempted to tell her the sea was not so blue as her eyes, but that would be trite and untrue. Her eyes were a pale blue-grey and usually alight with interest and laughter. There was a glimmer of that spirit again now, as she gazed upon the vast expanse of water before her.

"Do you see those little wooden sheds on wheels?" he asked, pointing out to sea. "Those are bathing cabins."

"Oh," she said, immediately captivated. "I have read of such things. And people, even ladies, bathe in the water. Is it not dangerous, though? The waves are rather high. I'm not sure I would dare."

There was such longing in her eyes, Conor knew that to be a fib.

It was on the tip of his tongue to promise he would take her sea-bathing in the summer when the sea would be a few degrees less icy. He stopped himself just in time, as he remembered he could do nothing of the sort if things went well. He needed to be free before the summer, or... or he did not know what, but his nerves prickled with alarm just considering it.

Instead, they stood watching the beach. People of all walks of life were here today. Many middle-class families settled on blankets on the sand, enjoying picnics. Children paddled and splashed at the water's edge as parents shouted warnings not to spoil their good clothes.

"Come, I'll take you to the chain pier," he said, and they walked on together. He felt her move, as if to withdraw her hand from his arm, and he laid his own atop hers, stilling her retreat. Conor looked down at her, waiting for her to look up at him and protest, or glare at him for his temerity, but she turned her head away, staring at the sea instead.

The Pier head was a bustle of fashionable people, having become a

popular place to meet and promenade. Here, there was a sundial and a telescope for looking out to sea and watching the packet boats as the bell under the arch of the southern tower proclaimed the departure of the next crossing to the continent.

There was a reading room and library at the land end of the pier with a tower on top housing a camera obscura. To the side of it sat the small piermaster's house. On the pier itself, the large pylons holding the chains were elegant affairs, and each housed kiosks or souvenir shops. Some sold French wine by the glass, the bottle or the crate, others sold prints of Brighton and the pier itself, or flowers, snacks, and hot food.

Conor watched, charmed, as Lucy stepped carefully over the pier, staring down at the gap between the planks to where the water seethed and crashed against the supports below them. She looked fascinated rather than anxious, and he guided her towards a kiosk selling ices. His mother and Vi quickly chose their favourite flavours, leaving Lucy to dither, as she could not make up her mind.

“Which do you want the most?” he asked her, amused.

She sent him a look of frustration. “I can't decide between pineapple and pear. I've had pear before and thought it the most delicious thing I ever ate, but I've never tasted pineapple ice cream before.”

“Then have the pineapple,” he said decisively.

“But what if it is not as nice as the pear?” she demanded, frowning at him.

Conor laughed, squeezing her hand. “Then I shall buy you pear ice cream on the way back.”

She brightened at this, and he congratulated himself on having pleased her a little.

They walked the pier, which was not especially easy as the walkway was quite narrow, perhaps only thirteen feet across, and the sunshine had brought out hordes of tourists. A good deal of time was spent negotiating the path and waiting for people returning to land to give way.

Flags and colourful bunting fluttered overhead, and they listened to a brass band playing merrily as they traversed the length of the pier. They were almost to the end when Conor's mother called out to him. He turned to see

she had fallen into company with someone she and Vi clearly knew well. She waved at him to go on, promising to catch up.

Conor nodded and guided Lucy the rest of the way to the end of the pier.

“How did the pineapple ice fare? Disappointing, or a revelation?” he asked.

He watched as she pursed her lips, considering. “Not quite as good as pear, but good enough that I am not the least bit disappointed. Thank you for making me try it,” she added, darting him a swift smile.

It was a shadow of the smiles he used to get from her, but at least it seemed genuine.

She stood, leaning against the railing, and peered down over the edge at the sea beneath them. The wind tugged at her bonnet, threatening to send it flying, and she raised a hand, holding it in place. Looking up, she stared out at the sparkling expanse of blue, crinkling her eyes against the glare. Lavender blue silk ribbons fluttered around her face and more of her blonde curls had escaped the confines of her pins. Conor watched her, entranced, and his heart gave a sudden lurch at the idea of letting her go.

Was that what he really wanted, to leave her and see her go to another man? Confusion flooded his heart and mind, and he recalled all the reasons Lucy would be a disastrous companion to him. The reasons still seemed valid and his decision the only sensible one, and yet...

“What is that delicious smell?” she demanded, nose in the air, turning in a circle as she followed it around.

Conor turned and nodded towards the kiosk, which was doing a brisk trade.

“Fried potatoes,” he said, chuckling at the hungry look in her eyes. “You’ll spoil your lunch,” he warned her, to which remark she stuck out her tongue and hurried over to the kiosk.

Conor followed and obliged her by buying a small portion of the fried potatoes, wrapped in paper and liberally sprinkled with malt vinegar and salt.

“Be careful, they’re dreadfully h—” he began, only to sigh as Lucy bit into one and began dancing around, mouth open, waving a hand helplessly in front of her. She blinked and spluttered and finally swallowed.

“Goodness, were they cooked in a furnace?” she demanded, but did not hesitate to take another. “Mmm,” she said with a soft moan, having waited the appropriate time for the golden slice of potato to cool down.

“Good?” Conor asked her, finding himself riveted to the sight of her pink tongue darting out to lick the salt from her lips.

“So good,” she said with a greedy sigh as she took another piece from the paper. “The best thing I ever ate.”

“Better than pear ice cream?”

She hesitated, considering this. “I think, if I had to choose my last meal on earth, I should order fried potatoes followed by pear ice cream.”

Conor snorted, shaking his head. “And what monstrous crime have you committed to be given such a final indulgence before you meet a grisly end?”

“Oh, with my track record, it could be anything,” she said with a rueful smile. “Perhaps I tripped and tackled the queen to the floor. They might think me a vile traitor, intent on ending her reign.”

“In the first place, I should never let you do such a foolish thing and, in the second, I think you may have fried potatoes and pear ice whenever you desire them. I shall ensure my cook learns the trick of it and makes them for you whenever...” he broke off, realising he was making foolish plans for a future that did not exist. “Whenever you visit,” he finished, an oddly hollow feeling in his chest.

Tension gripped him as he saw Lucy’s expression, wiped clean of emotion, all the pleasure he had seen in her eyes moment before gone in an instant.

“Here,” he said, offering her the paper parcel so she might take another.

Lucy shook her head. “No, thank you. You’re right, I will spoil my lunch.”

With that, she strode off ahead of him and he was momentarily frustrated by two elderly ladies who blocked his way. By the time he had made his way around them, Lucy had walked some distance ahead of him. Conor muttered an oath and pressed the packet of potatoes into the hands of a delighted boy, who took them with fervent thanks. Hurrying after Lucy, his good manners forced him to wait for ladies and children and hampered his efforts to catch her. Now and then he glimpsed her bonnet among the throngs of people, but

she seemed to get farther and farther away from him. Inwardly frustrated, he did his best to push past people without causing offence and got rapped on the shoulder with an elderly lady's umbrella as she complained about rude young men.

Finally, bursting out of the narrow confines of the pier, he turned in a circle, searching for Lucy, but found no sign of her.

Certain she could not have got that far ahead of him, he hurried back up the path, only to take a glimpse at the beach and see she had climbed down the wooden stairs and was walking on the pebbled shore. With a sigh of relief, he retraced his steps and went after her.

His relief was short-lived as he noticed she was walking too close to the edge of the sea. A buffeting wind had the waves crashing against the shore and, whilst she was keeping her distance, he knew that now and then a bigger wave would hit and come much farther up the beach than expected. With visions of seeing her skirts soaked and the weight of her sodden dress pulling her down into the water, he hurried on.

"Lucy!" he shouted, but the sound of children playing and the waves rushing over the shingles was loud enough even without the wind snatching the sound away.

Cursing under his breath, he ran and grasped hold of her arm. In hindsight, he ought to have given her some warning it was him. Lucy gave a little shriek of alarm and snatched her arm from his grasp, pushing him away. Conor took a step back, just as the sea swirled around his foot, dragging the pebbles away from under his heel. He swayed backwards, arms windmilling.

"Oh, Conor!" Lucy cried, eyes wide, and made a grab for him.

Too late. Conor landed on his arse in an undignified sprawl whilst salt water soaked into his trousers. Children gathered, laughing and pointing as Lucy stared at him in horror. She gave a little yelp as she gestured to the next wave.

"Quickly, get up, get up!" she exclaimed, reaching down a hand to pull him to his feet.

Conor took it, hauling himself up and squelching unpleasantly as he made his way up the beach. Lucy hurried after him.

"Are you terribly wet?" she asked anxiously.

He sent her an unloving look and held his tongue because the answer was patently obvious. This was why he needed to get away from her. It had been an accident, not in the least her fault, and yet if she had not been here, it would not have happened.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, her voice tight.

Conor bit down his annoyance and shook his head. “It wasn’t your fault. It’s only a bit of water. I didn’t drown.”

Between the wind and the warmth of the sun he would no doubt dry off quickly enough, and yet his temper would not quiet. The salt water had likely ruined his shoes, and he felt like a fool. He wanted to shake her for the trouble she caused him.

They made it up the beach to the front, where Vi and his mother caught them up.

“There you are!” the countess said cheerfully, before looking more carefully at Conor, her eyebrows going up. “You’re all wet,” she observed.

“I am,” Conor agreed with a deceptively mild smile.

His mother, knowing him well, understood the smile was one that did not invite amusing comments. Her lips twitched a little.

“What happened?”

“I was worried Lucy was walking too close to the sea and would get wet, I stepped in to prevent her having an accident and had one myself,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, dear.” His mama looked sympathetic but there was a suspicious tremor to the words. She pressed her gloved fingers to her lips and glanced at Vi, who looked as if she was about to burst under the strain of not laughing at him.

“Well, I shall leave you to your amusement, and see if I can buy some dry trousers. If you would excuse me. I’ll meet you at the hotel for lunch.”

With that, he stalked off, needing to get away from Lucy, from the stricken expression in her eyes, for she had not been laughing. She had known, as he had, that he’d been given a timely reminder, and that he would end this engagement if it was the last thing he did.

Chapter 14



My love,

I arrived safely at Wildsyde yesterday, and not a moment too soon. Our boy is wretched, just as Georgie said. He is putting a brave face on, naturally. All of you are pig-headed and would rather die than admit you are hurt and unhappy, but a mother knows these things. His dreams of building a life and having a family at the home he has always loved have been shattered, and he doesn't know how to tend such a wound.

Oh, Gordy, I have never in my life wished to do violence, but that dreadful woman has ruined our son. I could wish he had been a deal less honourable and left her to her fate. I have met no one in all my days who more thoroughly deserved it. Lyall believes she is plotting something, and I have to say I agree with him. I visited her this afternoon, just to reassure myself that I had not painted her in colours she did not truly deserve, only to discover she is every bit as dreadful as I remember. Worse even, for there is an air of suppressed excitement about her, like she knows something we do not.

—Excerpt of a letter from *The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of Morven* to her husband *The Right Hon'ble Gordon Anderson, The Earl of Morven*.

4th May 1845, Albany, Piccadilly, London.

“What are you plotting, wife?”

The Countess of Trevick looked up from the breakfast table to discover her husband's blue eyes trained upon her. His red hair glinted in the early morning sunshine in shades of copper and gold, and a touch of white was visible too now, which only added to his appeal. She smiled, admiring him, and her heart swelled with happiness. How handsome he was, and how fortunate she had been to spend her life with her best friend. She wanted that for her children, too. Aisling and Cara had managed it, but Conor was about to mess everything up.

"Plotting?" she repeated, picking up her teacup and looking at him over the rim. "I cannot think what you mean."

The earl snorted and put down his paper. "Kitten, when you get that look in your eyes, I know I shall either be dragged hither and yon on some mad adventure, or you are making plans for the good of others... whether they like it or not."

Kitty shrugged. "And what if I am? Yesterday's trip started out so well but, by the end, the two of them could barely look at each other. It breaks my heart, Luke. That son of ours is about to wreck his life and I am not prepared to sit back and let him do it."

"It's not your choice, my love. He's a grown man, and he will not thank you for interfering in his life."

"Oh!" Kitty said, setting down her teacup with a clatter. "Spoken like a man. Do you not like Lucy? Did you not think she is just what the foolish boy needs to bring him back to life?"

"Yes," he agreed cautiously. "But if Conor does not fancy her, then—"

"Not fancy her? *Ha!*" Kitty exclaimed in exasperation. "Good lord, you should have seen him on the train down to Brighton. He could not tear his eyes from her, and I have a fair idea of the directions his thoughts were running in, too. He turned as red as a beet when I had to shout at him to gain his attention," she added, laughing and shaking her head.

Her husband sighed, knowing better than to think he could sway her from whatever ludicrous plan she had in mind. "Very well then, Kitten. Let's have it. What do you want me to do?"

Kitty clapped her hands with pleasure and leapt to her feet, rounding the breakfast table and throwing herself in his lap.

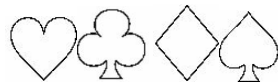
“The very best of husbands,” she said with enthusiasm, and kissed him to show how much she appreciated his support. “I have the most perfect plan. It is bound to work like a charm.”

“Of course it is,” her amused husband replied, without even a trace of irony.

Kitty gave him a narrow-eyed glare. “It will, just you wait and see. Now there is just one thing I need you to do for me. Track down Leo Hunt and tell him I wish to call in that favour he owes me.”

The earl pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m not even going to ask,” he said with a sigh.

“Probably for the best,” Kitty replied with a grin, and kissed him again.



“You wish me to accompany you to Trevick Castle?” Lucy repeated, looking at the countess in surprise. “That is indeed kind of you, my lady, but I don’t think—”

“Nonsense!”

Lucy jumped as her father’s booming voice drowned out her words.

“We’d love to come, wouldn’t we, Lucy?”

Lucy sent a panicked look between her father and the countess. Her father’s expression dared her to contradict him. He had been wild with the desire to see Trevick for himself ever since this ridiculous engagement had happened. As for the countess, that the invitation had been for Lucy alone was perfectly obvious, but the countess only smiled kindly at her and nodded.

“I would be so glad if you could both come. Indeed, Lucy, I will not go if you do not accompany me, and then I shall be in the basket, for there are a dozen things I must attend to.”

Lucy laughed, uncertain whether to be charmed or concerned by the countess stooping to blackmail to assure her compliance. “Well, if you put it like that, then of course I shall come. When were you considering?”

“Oh, did I not say? We leave this afternoon,” the countess said, getting to her feet in a flurry of fashionable purple satin and flashing a dazzling smile. So, you must hurry if you do not wish to have us miss the train. It’s at one

fifteen, just so you know.”

With this, the countess began walking to the door.

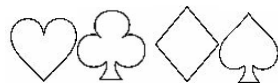
“This afternoon,” Lucy repeated in astonishment. “But—”

“But we will be there on the dot,” her father agreed, grinning. “Good day, Lady Trevick.”

The moment the front door closed, he began bellowing orders until the staff set too, packing for their trip to Trevick Castle.”

Lucy sighed. The last thing she needed was to see the place where Conor had grown up, and to spend more time with his family, of whom she was becoming terribly fond. The earl was a quietly spoken, gentle man with a twinkle in his eyes and a lively sense of humour and, as for the countess, she was a mischievous creature who made Lucy laugh a good deal. She would love to have them in her life, as well as dear Vi, who had become a friend to her. His sisters, Lucy did not yet know, but she suspected from all she had heard that she would like them too. If only Conor could bear the sight of her, they might do very well. But Conor could not wait to be rid of her and, after yesterday, she could hardly blame him.

She had not seen him again until lunchtime—dressed in new trousers and shoes, when he was as charming and affable as she had any right to expect—though he never spoke to or looked directly at her again. At least the countess had not mentioned his presence at Trevick, so if Lucy was lucky, she could at least look forward to a few days in which she could indulge her curiosity about him without having to spend a moment in his company. It was the best she could hope for.



His mother was up to something.

Conor frowned at the clock pieces in front of him. The dratted thing looked just the same as it had a month previously. Either he had not had the time to spend on it, or he’d been too distracted to concentrate. Like now.

With an oath, he set down the tweezers he held and considered what the woman could be plotting. She had mentioned to him she would be returning to Trevick Castle for a few days and taking Lucy and Vi with her. Fair enough. His mother liked Lucy and would enjoy spending time with her. But

then he had heard via his valet, of all people, that Leo Hunt was going too, and that was harder to account for. Irritated, he got to his feet and decided to pay a call on his father, who was not travelling down until the following morning.

He found his sire in his office, perusing the latest update from Sylvester Cootes regarding Trevick's large and impressive farm. Conor made himself comfortable in the chair in front of the desk and bided his time.

"All's well?" he asked once his father had finished reading.

"Going from strength to strength," the earl replied with a nod. "I'm lucky Aisling married the fellow, for I don't know where I'd have found anyone half as good as he is."

Conor nodded, but for once was not the least bit interested in crop yields and plans for the next season. "What's Mother up to?" he demanded, and then cleared his throat, aware he had blurted that out rather more forcefully than he'd intended to.

His father raised his eyebrows. "How the devil should I know? Your mother is a law unto herself, as you ought to have realised by now."

"Yes, yes, I do know," Conor replied testily. "But she *is* up to something. What the devil is she about inviting Leo Hunt to Trevick when Lucy is there?"

"Ah," his father said, removing his spectacles and folding them carefully. "You heard about that."

"Yes, I dashed well did. What is it all about?"

The earl sighed and pursed his lips. "Well, son... the thing is, we rather think Lucy has fallen in love with you."

Conor stared at him. "You think she's..."

He found he couldn't say it out loud. The words swam around in his head, an odd, giddy feeling erupting in his chest. He had not expected such words from his father, who was a sensible man. Lucy? *In love* with him? He considered this, remembering things she had said and done of late. She was certainly in low spirits, and he had wondered if breaking the engagement was at the heart of it. Conor had thought perhaps she was a little infatuated with him, or perhaps she wished to marry him because he was a better option than any other she might get, but that she might actually be in love with him had

not crossed his mind.

No. Surely not?

His father nodded. "I know, most inconvenient for you when you are so set on ending the engagement. Not that I blame you. She's a lovely girl but an absolute nightmare if the scrapes you've told of us are true. I mean, if you can't even go for a day out without being half drowned—"

"That wasn't her fault," Conor cut in with a frown. "Most of it isn't her fault, she's just unlucky, either that or she gets nervous and... and sometimes she simply doesn't see what is coming."

His father shrugged. "Well, whatever the reason, she's not a suitable bride for a man of your retiring nature, certainly not fit for the next countess, but she is a lovely girl, and your mother has become very fond of her, so she has decided to try her hand at a spot of matchmaking."

"Matchmaking?" Conor exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "With Leo Hunt? Is she out of her mind?"

His father considered this. "I would have to say no, for your mother is the most sensible woman I know, flights of fancy notwithstanding. She seemed to think Leo would suit her very well. He's dreadfully handsome for one, so he ought to have no difficulty in turning her heart in his direction, and after all, he is rather a dashing fellow. A daredevil even, one might say, so he ought to handle Lucy with no trouble."

"She's a young woman, not a horse," Conor objected irritably.

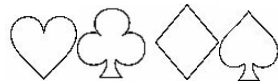
"Yes, a young woman who gets herself into scrapes at regular intervals. She and Leo ought to deal admirably together. Personally, I think your mother is terribly clever to have thought of it. I suspect a *coup de foudre*," he added cheerfully.

Conor glared at his father in disgust. Love at first sight indeed. Yet an anxious prickle of alarm tiptoed down his spine and set his nerves leaping. His mother was setting Lucy up with *Leo*? Handsome, charming, golden Leo. Good God, the poor girl would be a lamb to the slaughter if Leo took a shine to her. An awful, sick sensation swirled in Conor's guts, the realisation that he had made a terrible mistake sitting in his belly like lead. A mistake he could no longer deny. He had known it on the pier yesterday but had been too stupid to allow himself to accept it. Then that stupid accident and his own

dented pride had conspired to make him ignore what he had known in that moment. Lucy was his. She was not what he thought he wanted or needed, but that didn't matter any longer. His heart had recognised something in her and it was not about to let her go. The terrible foreboding that his mother's machinations might actually work made him rush for the door.

"Oh, are you going so soon?" his father said mildly. "By the by, if you're interested, you've just missed today's train. It left five minutes ago."

"Thank you," Conor muttered, and closed the door behind him with rather more force than was necessary.



"This is a terrible idea," Violetta said as they were handed down from their carriage, wondering what on earth Mama could be thinking of, inviting Leo Hunt of all people.

"Vi, darling. I adore you, but if you say that once more, I shall not be responsible for the consequences."

Somehow, the countess growled the words without diminishing the sunny smile on her face as she hurried to their guests as they emerged from their own carriages and led them into the magnificent entrance hall of Trevick Castle.

"Lucy, darling, and Mr Carleton, welcome to our home. It's a terrifying old place, full of draughts and spiders, but we rather love it. Leo, I've had your usual room made up and you know where everything is," she said, beaming at him. "Leo spent many holidays with us. He's practically family," she added for the benefit of Lucy and her father.

Vi repressed the desire to snarl with frustration. Leo winked at her, which did not help. That he was only too happy to aid Kitty with her ridiculous plan in no way diminished Vi's irritation, nor her sense of foreboding. Whenever Leo was involved, things got out of hand. He simply could not help but push whatever situation he found himself in to the limit, a character flaw which Vi detested. But the two of them had never got along, being far too different in temperament.

"By Jove," Mr Carleton said in awe, turning in a circle, his neck craning upwards as he took the place in.

“Built in the fourteenth century,” Kitty said, looking up at the huge, vaulted ceiling, bristling with massive oak beams. “Of course, there would have been a chimney in the centre of the roof then, and it would have been a place for feasting. It was rebuilt in the seventeenth century but is generally freezing no matter what the weather is like. Do come along into the family rooms. Far more comfortable.”

Vi sighed but took pity on Lucy, who looked as if she was wondering what on earth she was doing here. For a moment, Vi was tempted to tell her of Mama’s harebrained plan but decided against it. Kitty would be furious and perhaps there was a chance it might work. If it brought Lucy and Conor together, that had to be a good thing. So, she held her tongue.

“I cannot imagine living in a such a place,” Lucy whispered as Vi took her arm.

“The things you can get used to would surprise you,” Vi replied with a smile. “I know this is a vast and rather intimidating building, but to me, it is simply home. I have been very happy here, and the family rooms are rather less daunting, too.”

“They couldn’t be more so,” Lucy replied with a strained laugh. She sent Vi a look of enquiry, adding. “Are there to be other guests?” There was a rather desperate note to her question.

Vi nodded firmly. “Yes, Aisling and her husband will join us for dinner, and I expect the world and his wife will descend upon us once everyone hears the countess is in residence. She’s very popular.

Lucy nodded, chewing at her lip. “And Mr Hunt. *Leo* Hunt? Is he the Mr Hunt who—”

“Yes,” Vi said with a sigh. “If there was something to bet on and win at, climb up, jump off, run to, swim to or ride over, you can bet he’s done it.”

“I see,” she said faintly.

Vi smiled at her. “He’s a pain in the neck, but a charming one. I’m sure you’ll like him enormously.”

“If you say so,” Lucy replied, and followed Vi up the stairs.

Chapter 15



Dearest Torie,

I should be delighted to visit you at Beverwyck for tea on Friday. It has been an age. I shall have Lady Cordelia with me for Wrexham and I brought her to town with us. Delia is a dear creature and has become a true friend to me in such a short time. I know you will love her too. I am trying to introduce her to as many of my friends as I can before we leave for our honeymoon to Italy in July, so she won't be lonely. Rex's horrid father has kept her so isolated she knows no one and has hardly been in society at all. She's so very lovely, but a little eccentric because of it. We must do our best to find her a husband worthy of her. Her Aunt Lucinda had tried her best but as she's rather less than respectable, it hasn't helped a great deal. I rely on you, my dearest friend, to aid me with this.

—Excerpt of a letter from The Most Hon'ble Emmeline Steyning, The Marchioness of Wrexham (daughter of Lady Helena and Mr Gabriel Knight) to The Lady Victoria Godwin (daughter of Their Graces, Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin)

4th May 1845, Trevick Castle, Trevick, Warwickshire.

Lucy sipped her wine, wondering at the machinations of fate that had brought her here this evening. She ought to feel entirely out of her depth. In usual circumstances, the very notion of facing a dinner in such a vast and

opulent setting would be enough to have her jittering with nerves. Yet, so far at least, she had not dropped her cutlery with a clatter, or knocked over a wine glass, or said anything to make anyone blush—least of all herself. It was a miracle of sorts. But then everyone here had been so very kind and welcoming that she could not be nervous. The countess mothered her shamelessly, ensuring she was served the best of everything, while Vi was on Lucy's left, guiding her quietly if ever she seemed uncertain, and giving explanations if the conversation mentioned people she did not know.

Leo Hunt sat on Lucy's right and, on first meeting him, she had thought him bound to be the kind of fashionable, suave gentleman to make her do something appalling out of nerves. He was gloriously handsome, his dark blond hair glinting with shades of old gold and copper in the lamplight. When he spoke, he was every bit as charming as she had feared. More so, for within moments her nerves had been forgotten, and he had coaxed her into conversation. They chatted amiably about life in the countryside versus life in the town, about books they had read, about cats—of which he was extremely fond—and about some of his adventures which he told her about in such a way as to make him look less than heroic. In short, she liked him very well indeed.

“I hear you have been giving poor Conor a hard time, not that he doesn't deserve it,” Leo said with a grin as the fish course was taken away. “He's one of my oldest friends, but he's become the most dreadful stick in the mud of late. How such a neck or nothing fellow can become such a bore in such a short time, I cannot fathom. I wonder you can bear with him.”

“Oh, no. I cannot allow that,” Lucy said at once, bristling a little in Conor's defence. “He's been so very kind to me, and he's not in the least bit boring. I think perhaps he's lost a bit of confidence, is all.”

Leo snorted and shook his head. “If you fall off a horse, you get back on or you lose your nerve entirely.”

Lucy frowned at him. “But he has done. I understand he rides exceptionally well.”

Leo shrugged. “Yes, but he doesn't go anywhere other than a sedate trot around town. Lord, my mother rides harder than he does, and she's never liked horses over much.”

“And I expect she never fell and broke her leg so badly either,” Lucy

retorted, nettled.

Leo eyes sparkled. “Well, it’s a pity for Conor’s sake that you are not his fiancée, for you defend him like such a woman ought to.”

“I may not be his fiancée, but I hope I am his friend,” Lucy replied quietly, aware her cheeks were blazing.

“He’s a damned fool if he leaves it at that.”

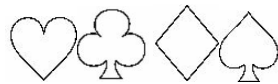
Lucy turned her head, startled by the vehemence of the comment. Leo smiled at her and reached out his hand, covering hers and giving a gentle squeeze.

“He does not deserve such a lovely creature, though, if he cannot see what good fortune has fallen into his lap. And so, I shall tell him, I promise you.”

Lucy smiled, touched by his gallant words. “I think you are flattering me, Mr Hunt.”

Leo shook his head, and she saw sadness in his eyes and wondered at it. “I promise you, I am not. If Conor does not marry you, he is the biggest fool on earth. A bigger fool than I am, and that is saying something,” he added, with a self-deprecating twinkle of laughter.

It never seemed far away, that smiling laughter, but she wondered if perhaps he used it to hide the truth. Leo Hunt was unhappy. He was also something of a rogue, as Lucy discovered when he lifted her hand and pressed her fingers to his lips.



4th May 1845, Cirencester, Gloucestershire.

Conor might have missed the train to Coventry, but he was not going to sit about twiddling his thumbs when his Lucy might be getting the full force of Leo Hunt’s charm and magnetism. Instead, he took the first train to Cirencester, which got in at four thirty, and then hired a horse to take him the remaining four-hour journey to the castle. At least, it was a four-hour ride if he took the roads. Going cross country would be a deal quicker. He didn’t even think about it, just pointed the horse toward home and rode like the

devil.

It was many hours later when Conor gazed down at the magnificent splendour of Trevick Castle. The last of the sun glinted off the dozens of windows, sparkling as if a fire blazed within. It was only then that he caught his breath, realising what he had done. In his haste to get to Lucy, to save her from falling into the arms of a man with far more charm than he could ever claim, Conor had ridden a route he had not taken since before his accident, and had taken several quite challenging jumps along the way too. Admittedly, his leg was screaming in protest and would need a deal of pampering to make up for such treatment, but he had done it. He had not thought about it, and he had done it, and the world had not crashed down around his ears. There had been no disaster. Why should there be? He was an excellent horseman, riding over terrain he knew like the back of his hand, and he was not such a fool as to take needless risks.

He let out a shocked laugh as he felt a weight lift from him, fear and foreboding that had been his closest companions for so long dissipating like the mist rising over the surrounding fields. But there was no time to dither. He had yet to find Lucy and discover if his parents were right about her feelings for him. The closer he got to the castle, the less inclined he was to believe them. He had barely been civil to her for much of their time together, and he cringed inwardly as he remembered things he had said and done which she could only hold against him. By the time he was striding through the entrance hall, waving away an agitated footman who informed him the family were already at dinner, he was in a sweat of apprehension.

If he had thought more about it, he would have gone up to his apartment and changed, for he was here often enough to make it a home from home. But he could think no further than inserting himself between Lucy and Leo before his old friend did irreparable damage to Conor's chances for happiness. So, he burst into the dining room, sweaty and travel-stained, to find all eyes turned in his direction with varying degrees of surprise and amusement.

And Leo—the bastard—was kissing Lucy's hand! He met Conor's eyes and winked, like the insouciant devil he was.

“Well met, Conor. Dear me, did you miss the train?” he asked, not bothering to hide his amusement.

“As I was not invited, I did not know I had to catch it,” Conor replied

tersely, glaring at his mother, who blinked back at him, the picture of innocence.

“But Conor, I told you I was bringing Lucy for a visit,” she replied, sounding far too reasonable.

“Yes, Lucy and Vi. You mentioned nothing about a party,” he retorted, gesturing to the rest of the table, which only included his sister Aisling, who was watching him with interest, and her husband, Sylvester, who was struggling to hide a grin.

“Conor, this is hardly a party,” Aisling said, looking at him like he’d run mad. Perhaps he had. “We live on the property and often eat here when Mama and Papa are home, as you well know.”

“Anywhere *he* goes is a party,” Conor replied, sending Leo a look that could not be misinterpreted.

Leo only laughed. “I shall take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t one,” Conor muttered.

“Francis, set another place, would you?” Kitty asked of the footman, who hurried to set another place at the end of the table.

Conor ignored this, picked up a chair, and set it between Lucy and Leo.

“Move up,” he growled to Leo, who looked so delighted by his obvious antagonism Conor was strongly tempted to punch him in his perfectly straight nose.

“Anything to oblige, old man,” Leo said easily, shifting his table setting haphazardly further along to the distress of the footman dancing about behind him, who at once began straightening everything.

Conor sat down, aware he was behaving like an arse and not caring in the least.

“You’ve missed the soup and the fish, I’m afraid,” his mother said. “But you always make such a fuss about the bones in fish, I doubt that will bother you.”

“I do not make a fuss,” Conor replied, bristling.

Was his mother trying to make him look like a twit in front of Lucy? Because he really did not need the help. He was doing splendidly all by himself.

Conor dared a look in her direction to see her sitting rigidly upright, her face expressionless. A bad sign, that. He cleared his throat.

“Good evening, Lucy,” he said, too aware that everyone was watching him and that his voice sounded overly loud.

“Good evening, Conor,” she replied politely, but he could see the too fast rise and fall of her chest and knew she was anxious, uncertain of what was happening and of why he was here.

She had not expected to see him, that much was obvious. Was she disappointed? Had she been hoping to be free of him? Perhaps Leo had already charmed his way into her heart, and she was irritated with Conor for intruding. He told himself he was reading too much into her lukewarm reception. She must be able to sense the atmosphere in the room the same as everyone else. Lucy knew he was angry, but she might not understand why.

Conor sent his mother a meaningful glare and, to her credit, she immediately commanded everyone else’s attention and began a long and involved story about an adventure she had led his father on before they were married. Aisling had heard it many times, as had Conor, but she still looked riveted to the tale, as did Sylvester and Leo.

“How are you?” Conor asked softly, taking advantage of the moment as best he could.

“Well, I thank you, and you?” she replied mechanically.

She stared straight ahead of her, only turning her head to accept a few slices of chicken from the footmen who were moving around serving the main course. Conor wished they would all go away, but his mother always kept a lavish table and the devils kept coming with tray after tray, and then topping up the wine and the water until he thought he would scream with frustration.

“Lucy,” he said. “Can I talk to you, please?”

“Of course,” she replied, picking up her knife and fork.

Conor sighed, aware he could not declare himself at the dinner table and a little daunted by her less than enthusiastic responses.

“You’re angry with me,” he observed.

She darted a glance at him, her blonde brows tugged together. “I am not.

Whyever should I be?"

That, at least, was a genuine response, which gave him courage. "Because I've behaved very badly, Lucy. Yesterday... when we were on the pier, and you ran away from me."

"I did no such thing," she objected, sitting up a little straighter.

He sighed. "Yes, you did, and I don't blame you. I was a clumsy fool, speaking as if we had a future together and then trying to correct my error so I did not hurt your feelings. No wonder—"

"I assure you," she said, and this time her voice was clipped and cold. "That I harbour no illusions about us having a future together. We don't and could never have. We don't suit. You have made it abundantly clear, and I agree. Why, it's obvious to anyone."

Conor stared at her, stung by her words, but she looked only at her plate or straight ahead, refusing to look at him. Was that just anger speaking, or did she really mean it?

"It isn't obvious to me," he said quietly.

Lucy dropped her knife with a clatter as she turned to stare at him, exasperation in her eyes.

"Lucy," he said, reaching for her hand, which she withdrew, and in doing so shifted sideways, pushing her plate, which knocked into her wineglass.

Conor leapt up, reaching to steady it and sending his own over with a crash. Red wine flooded his plate and splashed up at him, spattering his clothes and dripping onto his shoes. He gave a soft laugh and shook his head.

"I beg your pardon, Lucy. That was entirely my fault," he said, and got to his feet as the increasingly distressed footmen sprang to repair the damage.

Conor strode from the room, leaving it in as much a state of agitation as when he had entered it.

He had not gone far when a disgusted voice called after him. "You bloody arsehole."

Conor swung around, temper flaring as he saw Leo bearing down on him.

"Me?" Conor retorted, immediately furious. "I wasn't the one flirting with his friend's fiancée."

“Neither was I, you pillock, because you’re too bloody stupid to see what’s in front of you,” Leo shot back.

“Oh, *I* see,” Conor growled. “I see a good deal, and you can stay away from her, Leo. I’ll bloody kill you else, friend or no.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Leo jeered, and danced back out of reach as Conor took a swing at him. “Better luck next time old—”

There was a heavy thud as Conor tackled him to the floor and they skidded across the polished surface into a suit of armour which fell with an almighty crash that was enough to wake generations of the Trevick line right back to William the conqueror.

Shrieks of alarm and the sound of chairs scraping back informed them they had drawn the attention of the diners. Leo and Conor stared at each other, suddenly eight years old and in an almost identical predicament.

“Run,” Leo suggested, scrambling to his feet. He paused, holding his hand out to Conor, who could not get up so easily. Leo grinned.

Conor shook his head, exasperated, and allowed his old playmate to haul him up, and they both disappeared behind a hidden door which had saved them both more than once before, while his mother and sisters' exclamations echoed after them.

They followed the darkened passage by feel alone, finally emerging, blinking like moles, into his father’s study. Conor brushed the worst of the cobwebs and dust from his person before heading for the decanter of brandy that was calling his name. His leg was throbbing like the very devil, and he had every intention of numbing it. Pouring himself a large measure, he turned to Leo. He still wasn’t feeling very charitable towards the devil, but good manners won out.

“Please,” Leo said with a nod.

Conor poured the drinks, taking a large swallow of his own before topping it up again. Leo sauntered over and helped himself to his own glass, as it had not been offered to him.

“For the record, I wasn’t flirting with her,” he said.

Conor snorted. “You could have fooled me.”

“Well, as that was precisely what I was attempting to do, I should think

so.”

“What?” Conor turned to regard him with a frown and Leo rolled his eyes.

“Lord, Conor, you are a prize twit sometimes. That girl is an absolute sweetheart, as anyone can see. Your mother is breaking her heart because she’s within amesace of getting the daughter-in-law of her dreams, and you’re bollocksing it all up.”

“What are you saying?”

Leo shook his head and threw himself into the nearest chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him. “I’m saying your mother blackmailed me into coming down here and playing the wicked seducer in the hopes you would see sense. I’ve got to give it to her, it worked like a charm. I had the devil’s own job keeping my countenance as you strode in, all dust-covered and enigmatic, looking like you wanted to knock my block off.”

“I damned well nearly did!” Conor shot back, incensed at having been manipulated so thoroughly.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Leo replied with a smirk.

Conor ignored this with the contempt it deserved. He’d put Leo on his back a time or two before his accident and didn’t doubt he could do it again with the right incentive. He really was lucky Conor hadn’t broken his pretty nose.

“I am going to murder her,” he said through his teeth. “I knew it! I just knew she was up to... and my *father!*” he added, incensed, as he realised the old man must have been in on it.

“Et tu, Brute,” Leo said, amused.

“Stow it,” Conor replied, sitting down opposite his friend.

They sat in comfortable silence for a long while as Conor drank his cognac and considered all the ways he would make his parents pay for their machinations. He had just got up to refill their glasses when Leo spoke.

“Conor.”

“Hmmm?”

“I don’t like to interfere, old man, but ought you not be going off and winning fair maiden before she decides you’re not worth the effort?”

Conor glanced at the clock. Dinner would be over by now. His mother would retire to her parlour for tea. Would Lucy go with her, or would she go up to her room? He hurried to the door.

“Happy hunting,” Leo said with a grin as Conor rushed from the room.

Chapter 16



Lady Victoria,

Thank you so much for your kindness on Friday. I was so delighted to meet you and your darling children, and your husband, Mr Godwin, was so very entertaining. You made me feel like part of the family and I was sorry to leave, though I am certain I outstayed my welcome.

I have today received your invitation to dinner, and I shall be delighted to attend. I am so looking forward to it and thank you again for your efforts on my behalf.

Emmeline has introduced me to Mr Larkin Weston, who was very charming, and I shall be delighted to further our acquaintance, but I have not yet been introduced to Mr Anson. Emmeline tells me I shall adore him, though, and she is always right. As I suspect she has told you, I have been little in society, and I know very few people.

—Excerpt of a letter from The Lady Cordelia Steyning to The Lady Victoria Godwin (daughter of Their Graces, Robert and Prunella Adolphus, The Duke and Duchess of Bedwin)

4th May 1845, Trevick Castle, Trevick, Warwickshire.

Conor found his mother alone in her parlour, sipping tea. She gave him an enquiring look as she glanced up.

“You... You...” he began, torn between venting his feelings and

insulting the mother he adored.

“There’s no need to thank me, darling,” she said with a placid smile. “So long as you’ve come to your senses, there is no point in apologising for your silliness. A waste of time. Run along now and tell that young woman you want to spend the rest of your life with her.”

Conor opened and closed his mouth before throwing his hands in the air. She was incorrigible.

“She’s in the pink bedroom, by the way,” she murmured, winking at him. “And one of the footmen is keeping her maid busy.”

With a laugh that was half amusement, half frustration, he closed the door on her and hurried up the stairs.

Once outside Lucy’s room, his nerves returned full force. She had not the least reason in the world to want to speak to him, and he had no reason to believe she was the least bit in love with him, as his parents clearly thought. Was he about to make a colossal twit of himself? There was a sick, anxious feeling churning in his guts and the sudden desire to walk away and save himself the possible humiliation crashed over him like a wave. No. There would be no more taking the safe option. No more hiding himself away so that nothing could hurt him. He’d wasted enough time playing it safe. He didn’t want safe, not for himself at least. He wanted Lucy, but he wanted Lucy to feel safe with him. Conor wanted to protect her from the world and from herself, to give her the assurance she needed that all would be well and there was nothing to fear, and for the first time since his accident, he thought perhaps he could do it.

He knocked on the door.

It could only have been a matter of seconds before she opened it, but it was time enough for him to break out in a sweat and to hear his heart thudding in his ears like the bass in a marching band.

“For heaven’s sake, Sarah, where have you been? I had just about—”

Lucy stood in the doorway, her blonde hair tumbling around her shoulders, a pale pink lace robe hugging her slender form.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, hugging her arms about herself.

“I beg your pardon, Lucy, but I must speak to you,” he said urgently.

A stubborn, slightly mutinous expression lit her eyes, and she lifted her chin. “Well, I do not wish to speak to you. Perhaps in the morning—”

His patience at an end and fearing the servants would gossip if they spied him standing here at her door, he pushed the door open and walked in.

“How dare you!” she said, scurrying away from him. “Go away.” She flung out her arm, pointing to the door, which he closed, holding her gaze.

“I will go,” he promised. “After I’ve had my say.”

“I believe we have said everything that needed saying,” she retorted, folding her arms tightly. She turned her back on him and walked to the fire.

“Not by me,” Conor said firmly, gathering his nerve. “Because I have never told you how much I like you, Lucy. I have never told you how enchanting I find your company and how much I enjoy laughing with you. I have never told you that the sight of your beautiful face does odd things to my heart and that I think of you the moment I wake up in the morning and go to sleep with your image in my mind. Whenever something interesting or amusing happens, I think ‘I must tell Lucy,’ and yet with all this evidence before me, I was too afraid to see the truth. It took my wretched mother manipulating me and making me believe Leo Hunt would steal you away from me to do that.”

She turned to stare at him, her mouth open, her cheeks flushed a far darker shade than the lovely robe she wore. It wasn’t exactly an encouraging reaction, but there was no turning back now. It was all or nothing, and he wanted it all.

“I have been a fool, Lucy. I have been hiding from everyone and everything and it took you crashing into me, into my world, to jolt me back to life. But I am awake now, I am ready to live now, with *you*... if you think there is a chance, that we might suit after all?”

Conor watched her intently, but she appeared to be frozen. Whether with horror or simply surprise, he did not know. Moving slowly so as not to startle her, he edged nearer, holding his hands out as if she were some wild thing he must coax to him. He almost smiled as he realised how apt that was.

As he got closer, he noticed her chest was rising and falling far quicker than normal, her breath coming in short little gasps. He stood before her now and saw her crystalline blue eyes wide and astonished as she stared up at him.

“Lucy? Darling, say something. I’m dying here,” he pleaded.

She licked her lips, and his gaze tracked the movement, the sight of that little pink tongue darting out making desire spike in his blood.

“Lucy?”

Praying that he was not misreading her response, he put his hands on her waist. Her breath hitched, but she did not object, so he took that as a positive reaction. Slowly, so slowly that she had ample time to refuse him, he lowered his mouth to hers. It was nothing more than a gentle brush of lips, but she gasped again and closed her eyes, swaying closer. That was *definitely* encouragement. Hardly daring to move in case he did something wrong, Conor risked pulling her against him, closing his arms around her. The breath left her in a shuddering sigh and her eyes fluttered open.

“Conor,” she said breathlessly, staring up at him.

“Yes, Lucy, my own little darling.”

She gave a soft laugh, and he smiled down at her, anxiety still thrumming through him.

“You are *my* Lucy?” he queried, needing to be certain.

“I’ve been your Lucy since the day you lied to Lady Bailey and told her you had asked me to leave the bookshop,” she whispered.

“Lucy,” he said, anguished by the idea he had hurt her with his all-consuming desire to end their engagement with haste. “I’m so sorry. For everything. I’ve been such—”

She pressed a finger to his lips, her expression grave. “Don’t say it. There was not the least reason for you to wish to marry me. It was such a silly mess to have got ourselves into but... but you really *don’t* wish to end it now?”

“I would rather die,” he said, his voice fierce. “I’m afraid I’ve been very slow, Lucy, and I would not blame you for being angry or frustrated with me, I am with myself, I assure you.”

A smile curved over her lips, shy at first and then so wide and joyful it lit her face and something inside him that had been gone for such a long time sparked to life.

“Darling,” he breathed, and pulled her close, kissing her fervently.

She melted against him, her hands coming up to his chest as he moved

his lips over hers. Lucy sighed, responding instinctively to the press of his mouth. She had clearly never been properly kissed before, a fact that pleased him more than he wished to consider.

He pulled back, a little niggle of doubt assailing him.

“I suppose you liked Leo very much?” he said, doing his best to sound nonchalant.

She blinked, looking a little hazy, which mollified him somewhat.

“Leo? Oh, Mr Hunt. Yes, very much indeed. He was so very kind to me, and most charming.”

“Hmmm,” he replied, telling himself he would not behave like a jealous schoolboy. “He is *very* charming indeed.”

He glanced back at Lucy to discover her watching him with an odd look on her face.

“What?” he asked.

She bit her lip.

“What?” he demanded again, a little unsettled by the delight in her eyes.

“You’re jealous,” she said, sounding ridiculously pleased.

“I am not,” he objected at once. “I’m only... I...”

She raised her eyebrows at him, and he groaned.

“Horribly jealous,” he admitted gruffly. “Bloody Leo. He’s too handsome, too easy to like, too charming. If he wasn’t one of my closest friends, I would hate him intensely.”

“Oh, C-Conor,” she said, putting a hand to her mouth to smother her laughter.

“It’s not funny,” he grumbled, squeezing her tighter. “Your betrothed is suffering under the comparison to the *ton*’s golden boy. I should not blame you for liking him better, not when I’ve been such an arse.”

“You have not been an...*arse*,” she almost whispered the word, looking as though she might be struck by lightning for daring to repeat it.

Conor knew then that he was hopelessly in love with her, for it was the most ridiculously wonderful thing he’d ever heard.

“You have been very patient, and so very kind, and under very trying circumstances,” she said, soothing him.

He shook his head sadly. “You make me sound like a doctor, not a lover.”

She shrugged, darting a provocative glance at him. “Well, I’m not pretending you’ve been perfect, but then I have fallen a very long way short, too. But I shall give you plenty of opportunities to make up for the lack of... of romantic interludes. If you like?” she added shyly.

“I think I should like very much indeed,” he said, grinning. He took her hand and drew her to the armchair by the fire. Conor sat down and tugged her into his lap. She looked rather scandalised and shot a nervous look at the door.

“I can’t think where Sarah has got to, but she’s bound to be back soon.”

“And what if she is? I shall simply be accused of compromising you and we shall be forced to marry. As I’m planning on doing that anyway...”

“You really mean it?” she asked him, an uncertain light in her eyes. “You *are* sure?”

“I am sure,” he repeated, “And I shall prove it to you, if you will give me the chance. I will court you, as I ought to have been doing from the beginning.”

She bit her lip, saying in a rush, “Then, you had best hurry and start now, for I can’t believe Sarah will be much longer.”

Conor chuckled. “Well, that depends how much time my mother has allowed us,” he said frankly. He grinned at her uncomprehending expression. “She’s bribed one of the footmen to keep your Sarah out of the way.”

“Oh, but—” Lucy exclaimed in alarm.

“I’m sure she is quite safe,” he hurried to assure her. “My mother would have given very strict instructions about what was permissible or not. For all I know, he’s got her helping him clean the silver.”

She relaxed at his words, and he reached out, cupping her cheek with his hand. Her skin was so soft, her silken hair brushing his skin. “You ought to worry less about her and more about yourself. I’m going to take a few liberties, I’m afraid, love,” he teased her.

Interest sparkled in her eyes. “Are you?”

“Mm-hmm,” he said, trailing a fingertip down her neck to the place where her dressing gown began, high on her chest.

She looked down, watching as his hand moved lower and tugged on the sash. It fell open easily, and he pushed the fabric aside. Beneath, she wore a simple nightgown with pretty lace and satin ribbons that emphasised her bust, and narrow lace-edged straps. The fabric was the finest cotton, soft and so delicate it was almost sheer. He could easily make out the dark shadow of her nipples. His mouth grew dry.

“So lovely,” he murmured, nuzzling at her ear.

She giggled, shivering as he nipped at her earlobe. He trailed his mouth over her cheek, kissing her hungrily as she reached for him, winding her arms around his neck. It was no hardship to treat her tenderly, to teach her the different ways their mouths could meet, whether with simple gentle presses of their lips or with the delightful slide and tangle of tongues. She followed his lead without hesitation, eager to learn what he was only too willing to teach her.

It was not long before Conor was aware of the burning in his blood, of his breath coming faster and the urgent clamour of desire that reminded him there was a bed close at hand.

“We ought to—” he began reluctantly, but Lucy halted the words by kissing him again.

He sighed, allowing his hand to slide up from her waist to cup her breast. Her breath stuttered, and he pulled back to see if she objected, but she only closed her eyes and pressed herself into his hand. Conor swallowed, knowing he needed to put a stop to this but not wanting to, or knowing how to do it when he was so beguiled by her attractions. What a bloody fool he’d been to waste so much time.

His thumb toyed with the taut little bud beneath the soft cotton, and she sighed with pleasure, her head falling back. Conor trailed kisses down her neck, luxuriating in her touch as her hand stroked his hair, her fingers sifting through the short locks and making him shiver.

“How lovely,” she murmured happily.

“I’m very pleased you think so,” he said, ducking his head lower and

taking her nipple into his mouth. The thin cotton was not much of a barrier, though he wished fervently to tear it from her, to feel his mouth upon her skin. The sensation of the hard little peak beneath his tongue was enough to make his body taut with wanting her; he must try to put an end to this before things got out of hand.

He was saved—though he immediately lamented the fact—by a knock at the door.

“Miss?”

Lucy sighed regretfully, which made Conor feel a good deal better about the interruption.

“Miss Carleton? It’s me.”

“Sarah,” she whispered to him.

Conor shook his head. “I don’t know what footmen are coming to. You’d think he could have kept her occupied rather longer than that.”

Lucy put up her chin. “Sarah is a good girl, and not likely to be swayed by some sweet-talking fellow up to no good.”

With a chuckle, Conor pressed a last, swift kiss to her mouth before he could be tempted to tell Sarah to go the devil. He got up and made quick work of tying her gown tightly again.

“I’ll see you in the morning, sweetheart, and then we shall talk some more,” he promised.

“Yes, please. I should like that very much.”

He nodded, bowed over her hand in an old-fashioned gesture of respect, pressing his lips to her fingers, and then forced himself to go to the door.

Sarah squealed with alarm as he opened it, staring through at her mistress with shock in her eyes.

“Hold your tongue, or once we are married, I shall find my wife another maid. One who is more discreet,” he warned her.

“Yes, my lord,” Sarah said at once, bobbing a curtsey. “I shan’t breathe a word to no one.”

Nodding his approval, Conor winked at the girl and walked off, feeling rather pleased with himself.

Chapter 17



My love,

That scheming little minx has gone! She's run away with Rory Stewart, but not only that, she has stripped the house he gave her of every item of value in it. It is all anyone can talk of and poor Lyall has shut himself in his office. He's so humiliated, Gordy, I cannot bear it.

He followed them to the coast, but they had a boat waiting and were long gone by the time we discovered what she had done. To make matters worse, she has left a letter, blackmailing him. She says she will sue him for divorce, citing cruelty and adultery and making the biggest scandal she can if he does not settle a large sum of money on her. If he does this, she agrees to divorce him with no fuss. Not that I trust her as far as I could throw her. She'll not let him go so easily once she has the means to squeeze more money from him.

Oh, that Rory Stewart should have a hand in this, after all the times I have been kind to him. But he always was a little sneaksby, tattling on the other boys. His father at least feels the shame of it. I felt so sorry for him I could not hold him to blame when he came to call upon us, though Lyall refused to see him. I told him his son's actions were his own and I would not hold him to account. For that pretty little schemer must have wrapped the fool around her finger with ease.

Gordy, darling, come at once before I do murder. I am so angry I cannot think what ought to be done, but I cannot make Lyall speak to me. I have half a mind to call his brothers back from London, but I know he will be furious with me for doing it.

Whatever are we to do?

—Excerpt of a letter from *The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of Morven* to her husband *The Right Hon'ble Gordon Anderson, The Earl of Morven*.

4th May 1845, Trevick Castle, Trevick, Warwickshire.

Lucy blushed at the look Sarah gave her once they had closed the door on Conor.

“Miss!” she exclaimed with awed tones.

Lucy covered her mouth with her hand to hide a smile and Sarah giggled.

“Oh, miss, are you really going to marry him, then? For real this time?”

“Yes,” Lucy said, hugging herself tight. She was in a daze. So happy she was floating around in a little cloud of pleasure. “Yes, I really am.”

She sat down at the dressing table and let Sarah brush out her hair, giving the girl a curious glance.

“Where did you get to, Sarah?”

Sarah blushed and avoided her gaze. “Oh, I just got talking to one of the staff here and lost track of time. I do beg your pardon. It won't happen again.”

“That's all right,” Lucy said, hiding a smile. “Was he handsome?”

Sarah opened her mouth, no doubt to protest, but then she saw the amusement in Lucy's eyes and sighed. “Too handsome for his own good,” she said with a little sniff, which made Lucy laugh.

They both looked around at a knock on the door.

“If that's Lord Harleston again, I shall send him away with a flea in his ear this time, fiancée or no,” she warned, wagging the hairbrush at Lucy to

emphasise the point. Lucy heard a few murmured words before her maid returned. Flustered, Sarah hurried back with wide eyes, accompanied by Lady Trevick. “Her ladyship wants a word,” she said breathlessly, before making herself scarce.

“My lady?” Lucy said, getting to her feet. “Is anything the matter?”

“I believe I asked you to call me Kitty, and now we are to be family, I simply must insist upon it, unless you prefer to call me Mama, for I shall look on you as a daughter, I assure you.”

Lucy smiled, hardly able to believe she would finally have a family like she had always dreamed of, people who cared and wanted to be with her. Her brothers barely acknowledged her existence, and whilst she knew her father loved her in his own way, she came a poor second to his work. “I should be honoured, Kitty, and I never dreamed of being so fortunate as to have a mama like you.”

“Oh, you dear creature,” the countess said, a catch in her voice as she pulled her into a hug, enveloping her with an excess of ruffles and the faint scent of lily of the valley.

“He told you, then,” Lucy said once she had been released.

“No, but I saw the look on his face as he passed me on the way to his room. The poor boy was in such a daze I don’t think he noticed me at all, but he was clearly walking on air. He has told you he doesn’t wish to end the engagement?”

“He has,” Lucy said, though speaking the words out loud felt like tempting fate, for such a thing was too good to be true.

“And about time, too,” the countess said with a sigh. “Foolish boy. Still, we got there in the end.

“Did you really invite Mr Hunt to make Conor jealous?” she asked, not quite believing the countess could be that Machiavellian.

“Of course I did,” she replied at once, her expression defiant. “I warn you now, Lucy, if I see people I love making a mess of their lives, I *will* interfere.”

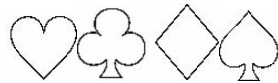
“I believe you, and I consider myself warned,” she added, a little daunted but touched by the woman’s fierce sincerity.

“Ah, all’s well that ends well. So, now you are all sorted, we can start planning the wedding properly. I have made a few *tiny* arrangements already, but nothing that can’t be changed,” she added casually.

“How tiny?” Lucy asked, more amused than exasperated.

The countess evaded answering and made a small measuring gesture between her thumb and forefinger. Lucy laughed, certain that everything was already in place, and she’d have nothing to do but turn up.

“Well, I shall look forward to seeing what you have arranged for us,” Lucy replied, too happy to care how or where she married Conor, so long as it was soon.



Conor was up early the next morning, and in an excellent mood. He sauntered down the main staircase of the castle, into the grand hall, just as his father arrived. The earl must have taken the early train, eager to discover the results of his meddling.

He watched in amusement as his mother flew across the hallway and almost knocked his father down in her enthusiasm to greet him.

“Darling!” she said, kissing him before the poor man could speak a word.

It was a moment before Luke extricated himself from her embrace to reply. “Good morning, Kitten. Am I to take it our little ruse met with success?”

She opened her mouth to reply but did not get the chance to speak.

“Yes, it did, you devious old devil. I shall never trust you again!” Conor said, causing his parents to turn to look at him. “I expect such machinations from Mother, at least, but from *you*? Father, how could you?”

Conor stood on the bottom step, arms folded, and attempted to glare at his father.

“Ah,” the earl said, his expression rueful. “Well, I know I make it a rule not to interfere in your and your sister’s lives if I can help it, but on this occasion, I’m afraid I had to agree with your mother. You were behaving like a bloody fool, son. Someone had to do something.”

Conor snorted. “Fair enough. I suppose I can’t deny it.” He crossed the

hall and took his father's hand, shaking it warmly. "Thank you, sir."

Laughing, the earl pulled him into a hug. "Your happiness is all the thanks I have ever needed or wanted. Now, where is my new daughter-in-law? I'm eager to get to know her properly, now I know she's staying."

"She's not down yet," his mother replied, before adding in an undertone: "But *he* is."

"Oh, well," the earl replied. "We cannot choose our in-laws and I have been most fortunate in my new daughter-in-law so I shall not repine. Surely, he's not so bad as that?"

Conor exchanged a glance with his mother. His father sighed and escorted his wife to the breakfast parlour as Conor followed.

"What news is there, Kitty? I suppose we have a half hundredweight of invitations, since everyone must know you are in residence now. It usually only takes an hour or two for the news to circulate."

Kitty beamed and nodded. "Two dozen came this morning," she replied proudly. "I've already rejected those I was certain you would object to, but there are a couple I think we are duty bound to accept."

"Duty bound?" Luke replied dubiously. "I don't like the sound of that."

"No," Kitty admitted, darting him an apologetic glance. "But the Duke of Alcester, Luke."

"Oh, no!" Luke exclaimed, with unusual heat. "I thought he was dead. What the devil is he about? I refuse to go to dinner with that old—"

"No, no, not a dinner. A ball, and everyone is going. I swear London will be empty of society for the duration."

"A ball? But the last I heard, the house had been shut up, and the staff let go because he had pockets to let. How the devil is he funding a ball?"

Kitty sighed and gave a little shrug. "A run of luck on the horses, from what I gather, not that it will last long, and obviously I had refused the invitation before, as we had planned to take that little trip abroad."

"Ah, yes, Paris," Luke said with a wistful smile. "Well, let's go there instead. We would have gone by now if not for..."

"For me," Conor finished for him. "I beg your pardon, sir. I did not realise I had spoiled your plans."

His father waved this away. “I don’t mind a button missing Paris if you are happily settled. I do mind very much missing Paris because the Duke of bloody Alcester is holding a ball.”

“Luke, be reasonable. It’s tomorrow night and we cannot possibly arrive and leave the next day when we clearly planned to be here for a week or more. Especially as I already invited the vicar and his wife and Mr and Mrs Fortescue for dinner on Tuesday,” she added sheepishly.

His father groaned, a heartfelt sound with which Conor was entirely in sympathy.

“Never mind, Father. It will soon be over,” he said, patting the man’s shoulder.

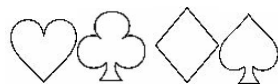
The earl shot him a narrow-eyed look and returned an evil grin. “So it shall, for both of us, for if you think you are escaping, you have another think coming.”

“Oh, no... I don’t...” Conor began, but his mother took his arm, patting his hand fondly.

“Don’t you dare make excuses. We shall all go, and you can show off your lovely fiancée.”

“That’s all well and good, Mama, but Lucy doesn’t like balls and crowds. It’s bound to make her nervous.”

“That was before,” his mother assured him. “With you by her side, it will be entirely different.”



Conor endured breakfast, tantalised by the arrival of his betrothed who sat opposite him, looking heartbreakingly lovely in a gown of pink organdie, trimmed with velvet ribbons. How he could ever have thought her anything less than perfection, he could not now fathom. He was heartened to discover she was in much the same state and so nervous she knocked over her teacup, thankfully before it had been filled, and dropped two bread rolls, one after the other. The first disappeared under the table, and the second rolled over it. Conor caught it with a grin.

“Let me guess, strawberry jam?” he asked.

She nodded, smiling at him, and Conor carefully buttered and spread jam over the roll. He put it on his own plate and handed it back to her.

“It seemed safest,” he said quietly.

“Thank you,” she replied, taking it from him and taking a neat bite.

Conor forced himself not to stare and to attend the conversation. Vi was explaining the design she was working on for a new embroidery.

“I’ve chosen some lovely shades of blue and green which are most attractive. It’s a tree of life design with floral motifs, bluebirds, and a serpent,” she said with enthusiasm, for Vi was exceptionally talented at both drawing and embroidery.

“Ah, the serpent must be me,” Leo said, strolling in late to breakfast and looking as handsome and at ease as always. “I knew you would not leave me out of such a work of art.”

Vi’s lips compressed, and she lifted her teacup, taking a small sip before she replied. “Good morning, Leo. How kind of you to join us.”

Leo’s lips quirked as he sat down beside her. “Yes, a lovely morning it is too, though chillier than I imagined.” He grinned at Conor before turning to Lucy. “Good morning, Lucy, and how charming you look. That colour becomes you very well. Don’t you think so, Violetta?”

“Lucy always looks charming,” Vi replied, picking up her knife and cutting a slice of plum cake into even little squares with a precision that would have made Conor nervous if she had aimed her irritation in his direction. Leo, however, appeared blithely unaware of the danger.

“Oh, and you look very well too, Vi,” he added carelessly, accepting the footman’s offer to fill his plate with sausage and bacon.

“You are too kind, Leo,” Vi said from between her teeth, and chewed vigorously on a small piece of plum cake.

Conor glared at him, never having understood why the two of them must endlessly pick at each other, but so it was. Leo returned a blankly innocent expression Conor did not believe for one moment.

“Is my father not joining us this morning?” Lucy asked Conor in an undertone.

Kitty, having overheard her, whispered back. “Sylvester was a dear and

offered to take your father on a tour of the castle grounds, as he took such an interest last night.”

“Goodness, that was very kind of him,” Lucy said, looking rather pained by the idea. “Does he know what he is in for? I’m afraid my father will interrogate him about every detail about the running of the place. Papa does like to know how things work,” she added faintly.

How things worked to make the most money, Conor translated mentally. Not that he begrudged the man his ambition. Conor would need to make a great deal of money over the coming years to keep this huge pile solvent for future generations and he was not shy of admitting it. Doing it at the expense of his family’s happiness, however, was another matter entirely.

“So, Leo, it seems we are to have a wedding in the family. I hope you will congratulate Conor and Lucy on their nuptials,” Kitty said with relish.

Leo put down his knife and fork and grinned. “Well, you lucky dog, Harleston. I shall congratulate you, indeed, for you are a fortunate man. I commiserate, however, with the lovely Lucy. Are you quite certain, my dear?” he asked, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Shall we give him the go by and elope to Gretna before it’s too late?”

“Leo, for heaven’s sake,” Vi said impatiently. “You’re putting the poor girl to the blush. Ignore him, Lucy, it’s usually safest.”

Lucy, who was indeed blushing, did not have a chance to say a word before Leo turned back to Vi.

“Like you do, you mean?” he replied, laughing. “You’ve never yet succeeded in ignoring me, Vi, darling.”

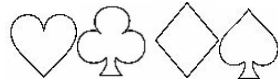
Vi got to her feet. “In the first place, I am not your darling,” she said coolly. “And in the second, I promise I shall try harder in the future. If you would excuse me, Mama, I am going to embroider a serpent. It’s always so soothing to stab that pristine piece of fabric with a sharp needle, don’t you think?”

Kitty murmured a non-committal reply, unusually daunted by Vi’s rather violent riposte.

“And she’s usually such a quiet, gentle girl,” she said, once Vi had stalked out. “Why do you do it, Leo?” she asked, her tone pained, for Mama could not stand it if everyone wasn’t getting along wonderfully.

Leo shrugged, cutting cheerfully into a thick sausage. “I don’t know, Kitty. For the same reason I climb mountains, I suppose. Because it’s there.”

He sent her a wicked grin before stuffing a large piece of sausage in his mouth and chewing complacently.



Breakfast seemed interminable but, finally free, Conor lost no time in inviting Lucy for a stroll around the castle grounds. The morning was mild, the weather having remembered what spring looked like, and the sun shone tentatively over a landscape wreathed in soft mists after so many weeks of rain.

“How magnificent it is,” Lucy said, staring around her in awe. “Too magnificent. I feel like an imposter, like I shall never belong in such a grand and historic place.”

“You belong with me,” Conor said firmly, placing her hand on his sleeve and covering it with his own.

“You say that now,” she said anxiously, growing paler by the moment. “But what about when I’ve knocked over some priceless antique, or set fire to bedroom curtains? Actually, I’ve never done that. I’m terribly careful around lamps and candles, but you know what I mean. I do not know how to live in your world. All the rules and the proprieties to be observed, the social solecisms to be avoided, hundreds of little things you must know instinctively which I don’t have the least clue about.”

Conor leaned over and kissed her cheek, aware she was working herself up into a frenzy of nervous anxiety. “Don’t be so daft. You make us sound like royalty, which we are certainly not. We are not in the least grand, you know. It’s sheer chance that Father inherited the title. There were hordes of sons, grandsons, and cousins between him and the earldom, but the lot of them died through illness, war, or stupidity. So don’t go thinking we’re high in the instep, for we aren’t. Father hates all the pomp that goes with his title and avoids it as much as possible. As for this place, well, it may look grand, Lucy, but it’s a full-time job is what it is. Just as you get one bit of it refurbished and ready for the next century, another bit of it falls down. We’re nothing but glorified caretakers, preserving history for the next generation and praying we’ve got the money to do it,” he added with a laugh.

Lucy seemed to relax somewhat at his words and gave him an admiring glance, which he did not feel he deserved in the least, but in which he was perfectly willing to bask.

“You love it, though, don’t you?” she said with a smile.

Conor nodded. “I do. For a long time it felt like a millstone around my neck, but now, with you beside me, I think I see it as my parents do. As our home, and as a place to preserve for our children and grandchildren.”

Lucy went a little pink at the mention of children, but she looked pleased. “I think I could manage to be a glorified caretaker,” she said with a cautious smile. “But you will guide me, and teach me what to do, won’t you?”

She looked terrified all over again and Conor slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her closer to him as they walked.

“Darling, there’s not the least thing to fear. Of course I will, and Mama and Vi will be there for you too, remember? And Mama is in fine fettle and will live to be a hundred, you mark my words, so there’s no need to work yourself up over it. There is plenty of time.”

Lucy nodded, but she still seemed rather tense. Conor squeezed her. “What is it?”

She shook her head, but he gave her a stern look.

“Lucy, I don’t want you to keep things from me. No secrets. If there is something troubling you, even if it’s something silly, don’t keep it from me.”

Lucy sighed. “Must we go to the ball?”

Conor groaned and rubbed a hand over his face. “I wish I could tell you no, but yes, it seems we must. Mama does not wish to upset Alcester, for he’s a prickly old goat. Happily, he doesn’t spend much time here, for his seat is in Yorkshire and he can’t afford to keep the house here going any more. It’s the first time he’s entertained since his wife died, though. His sister is playing hostess, I believe.”

He glanced down at her to see her blonde brows tugged together, her expression troubled.

“What is it? You won’t be alone this time, love. I’ll be by your side the whole evening, I promise.”

She smiled at that and a little of the anxiety left her expression. “I’m just

afraid I shall do something shocking, and you'll change your mind," she said, and he heard the truth of it in her voice.

"You never could," he assured her.

Conor led them to the highest point in the gardens, and they stood admiring the view which stretched for miles, the River Avon glinting in the distance. Lucy laid her head on his shoulder, and he experienced a jolt of sheer happiness. He glanced down at her, but her bonnet impeded the view he wanted to see most, so he put his hand to her chin, tilting her head back.

Those clear blue eyes met his, trusting and open, and his heart gave the most peculiar little jump in his chest. So, this was what love felt like, he thought, feeling a little dazed and somewhat terrified, but it was, in general, very pleasant indeed.

Before he could bend his head, Lucy took the initiative and pressed her mouth to his. She drew back at once, giving him an uncertain glance.

"Was that terribly bold?"

"Terribly," he replied, his lips quirking. "Do it again."

She laughed, delighted, flashing him a swift grin before doing as he suggested. Conor caught her to him, pulling her close, and she twined her arms about his neck. They were hidden here, a small copse of trees shielding them from prying eyes, and Conor deepened the kiss, too aware of the press of her slender body, the fragrance of her perfume tantalising his senses. He released her with a groan.

"We must speak to Mama about bringing the date for the wedding forward."

"Is there a date?" she asked breathlessly.

Conor took a moment to enjoy the sight of her, lips reddened from his kisses, before replying. "It could be tomorrow, and it still would not be soon enough," he said darkly.

Lucy grinned and hugged him tightly. "You say the nicest things," she said with a sigh.

"How can you say that?" he demanded. "When I was so horribly rude to you when we first met?"

"I can hardly blame you for that. I have been rather a trial to you, I'm

afraid.”

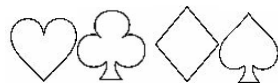
“And I made up for that by being a blind fool. I think we are more than even, love.”

“Pax, then,” she said, staring up at him.

Unable to resist, Conor stole another kiss. “We must get married,” he growled once he could bear to tear his lips away.

“Mmm,” Lucy replied dazedly.

With a snort of amusement, Conor took her arm and guided her back to the castle. They were going to have a word with his mother about dates.



Vi found her favourite spot by the fire in the green sitting room. It was the smallest and least grand of all the rooms in the castle, and needed redecorating if one was being honest. The furniture was all well-worn and a touch on the shabby side, but she rather thought that was why she liked it. The room invited one to relax and kick one's shoes off and never mind propriety.

Being the smallest room, it was also the cosiest, and Vi allowed the peaceful crackle of the fire to soothe her irritated nerves as she sorted the coloured silks she would use for the beginning of her design.

“My eyes are a darker shade than that.”

Vi jumped at the sound of the deep voice and looked up with annoyance.

“Yes, I know. I have the perfect shade of scarlet for them,” she replied with a smirk which she was aware did not become her.

Leo laughed, lounging nonchalantly against the bookshelf opposite her.

“I was thinking of going for a ride. Would you like to accompany me?”

“You know very well I don’t like to ride, Leo,” Vi replied, doing her best to ignore him and concentrate on her task.

“But that’s because you’re nervous. If you were not...”

“But I am, and therefore I find it a trial, and so I would rather not,” she replied impatiently. “Just because you enjoy something so much does not mean the rest of the world must do so.”

He shrugged, pushing away from the bookshelf and thrusting his hands into his pockets. "Suit yourself. It just seems a shame to me. It's such a lovely day, and the countryside is beautiful. I thought it would be more fun than..." He waved a hand toward her embroidery.

Vi looked up at him and sighed. "I love doing this, but I can sit still for over five minutes without climbing the walls with agitation."

He laughed at that, shaking his head. "True. Well, if you are certain. I shall go on my own."

"I am certain." Vi watched as he walked to the door before adding, "Leo?"

He turned, looking at her curiously.

"Thank you for asking anyway," she said, for as much as he aggravated her, it had been a kind thought.

"Think nothing of it," he said with a smile, and left her alone.

Chapter 18



Lyall,

I'm on my way back. I'm so sorry this has happened. I know you'll not want your annoying little brother under foot, but you'll just have to deal with it.

—Excerpt of a letter from *The Hon'ble Hamilton Anderson to his older brother, The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan, (sons of The Right Hon'ble Ruth and Gordon Anderson, The Countess and Earl of Morven).*

6th May 1845, Alcester House, Warwickshire.

The ball was a lavish affair, but no amount of greenery and flowers could quite conceal the fact that Alcester House was in desperate need of repair. It was a fine Tudor mansion, grand and imposing, but the paint was peeling and the scent of damp and rot still discernible, even over the hot press of too many bodies and too much perfume in an enclosed space.

Lucy clung to Conor's arm, wishing they could be anywhere else but here. Though it seemed a good deal less daunting with him beside her, she had never faced the challenge of society with her father by her side. Usually, he was wise enough to know his presence would not aid his daughter's cause. However, having 'Harleston in the bag,' as he rather inelegantly put it, changed things, and he was beyond curious to get a glimpse of the Duke of Alcester.

Why the old duke was of such interest, Lucy could not fathom. According to Kitty, he was a miserable old devil who was a regular pinchpenny unless it came to betting on the horses. Then he won and lost vast sums with apparent heedlessness.

“Shall we dance?” Conor asked her.

“Is your leg not bothering you tonight?” she asked in concern.

He shrugged. “A little, but I would like to dance with you, though it will only be the once, I’m afraid. If you can bear to do it. I’m not terribly elegant these days, an odd kick in my gait like an old horse bound for the knacker’s yard,” he added ruefully.

Lucy suspected it hurt him more than a little, but read the determination in his eyes, and knew he really did wish to dance with her. “I would love to dance with you, more than anything, and I shan’t dance with anyone else either.”

He smiled at that. “I wouldn’t stop you from enjoying the evening. You must dance as much as you wish to, you’ll have plenty of partners looking as lovely as you do. Have I told you tonight how very beautiful you are?”

“Yes,” she said with a sigh as her heart gave a little kick in her chest. How wonderful he was, and how handsome in his black evening wear. That he was truly to be her husband seemed like a dream, as if she were living in a fairytale.

Conor steadied her as she tripped, having been paying rather too much attention to his beloved face than where she was putting her feet.

“Steady, love,” he said, smiling at her.

“Sorry,” she replied, wondering if he would grow tired of a wife who was such a clumsy creature.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. I shall always steady you if you need me to.”

Lucy sighed helplessly.

“What?” he demanded, giving her a curious look.

“If you keep saying such lovely things, I shall be in a puddle at your feet,” she said, shaking her head sadly.

“Ought I to stop, then?” he asked, pulling her into his arms as they reached the dance floor.

Lucy gazed up at him, into blue eyes, into a face that had become so very handsome to her biased view. He was splendid, and so kind and clever and...

“Lucy?”

Lucy blinked to see Conor staring at her with amusement. Startled out of her reverie, she discovered the dance was beginning and she stood frozen, gazing up at him like a love-struck fool. Well, it was accurate enough. With a gasp, she shook herself and allowed Conor to guide her into the dance.

Rather to Lucy’s astonishment, the evening was wonderful. Everything was different with Conor by her side. She did not trip or spill a drink, no one was tackled to the floor, and she made it through the lavish supper without so much as a dropped napkin. Whenever she felt the least bit uncertain or out of her depth, all she needed was to turn and see Conor standing beside her, to feel the steadying touch of his hand on the small of her back, or to feel his fingers lacing through hers, and everything was fine. He seemed to know instinctively when she needed that reassurance and gave it without hesitation. If she had not already been madly in love with him, by the time the ball was winding down, she would have been in a sorry state indeed.

It was only as the earl began muttering about going home that it occurred to her she had hardly seen her father all evening.

“Conor, where is Papa?”

Conor shrugged, looking around them. “I don’t know. I’ve not seen him since supper.”

“Neither have I,” Lucy said, chewing at her lip.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, frowning at her. “He’s a grown man. I’m sure he’s perfectly all right.”

“It’s not him I’m worried about,” she muttered anxiously. There was an odd, unsettled sensation in her stomach, a sense of foreboding that she could not shake off.

The earl called for the carriage and sent out the duke’s staff to look for her father. The carriage arrived promptly, and everyone made their weary way out, smothering yawns. They had just settled themselves in place when a footman returned with a note from her father, bidding them to go on. He was well occupied and would return when he was ready and not to worry.

“He’s probably found a card game and got caught up,” Kitty said with a reassuring smile. “The gentlemen who don’t dance often amuse themselves with gambling and Alcester is one of them, so there’s bound to have been a

game.”

Lucy nodded, but still could not shake the sense of alarm, of something lurking in the darkness, waiting to spoil things.

“Can we be married before June?” she demanded abruptly as the carriage rolled into motion. They had set the date for the seventh, but it seemed suddenly a long way off.

Conor sought her hand in the dim light of the carriage, but she was staring at his parents. The countess laughed.

“Ah, young love. Do you remember being that eager to marry me, Luke?” she asked her husband fondly.

“Indeed, I do,” he replied, his voice warm. “But put the poor girl out of her misery and answer the question, Kitty.”

“Well, we decided on the seventh of June, did we not? It’s barely a month away.”

“Yes, but could we do it sooner?”

“How soon?” Kitty asked, a troubled note to her voice.

“This week,” Lucy said, uncertain why she felt so agitated but unable to fight the jittery sensation assailing her.

“But Lucy, there is so much to arrange,” she said gently, and Lucy could feel her concern in the weight of her gaze.

“Lucy?” She turned to Conor, who was clasping her hand, squeezing her fingers. “What’s wrong?”

Lucy shook her head. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “But I have a bad feeling, like everything will go wrong. Papa... I don’t trust him,” she blurted out, wondering if they thought her an unnatural daughter for saying such a thing.

“You think his absence is significant?” Conor replied slowly.

She nodded, relieved he hadn’t laughed at her and called her fanciful. “He doesn’t gamble,” she said, clinging tightly to Conor’s hand. “He despises the idea of losing money in games of chance, and he doesn’t know anyone there. You didn’t introduce him to anyone, did you, my lord?” she asked the earl.

Trevick shook his head. "I meant to, but he didn't give me the chance. Though, obviously, I introduced him to our hostess, and Alcester."

"The duke," she replied, her voice faint as she realised what had been nagging at her brain. "The duke who is recently widowed, and in desperate need of funds. Is he, by chance, also in need of an heir?"

"No," the earl replied slowly. "But his son is a wastrel and looks likely to turn up his toes before his father does. Alcester despises him."

"Damnation," Conor said, his voice cold and hard. He turned to Lucy, taking her hands. "You think he's aiming higher? That he thinks to make you a duchess?"

Lucy's certainty of this strengthened upon hearing Conor say it out loud.

"I think my father's ambition knows no bounds, and if he sees a chance, he'll take it. I would never consent to it, Conor, *never*, but I know he will not give me a moment's peace all the time there is a chance for his plans to come to fruition."

Conor pulled her closer, kissing her forehead.

"The papers are all signed, the settlements in place," Trevick said, frowning. "He must know we could sue him for breach of promise."

"With a dukedom in the balance, he'll break them, even if he must honour the settlements and go to court, though he'll rely on your not wanting to make a fuss I don't doubt, but he'll do it any way he can. No matter the scandal," Lucy said, her chest heaving now.

"No," Conor replied. "He won't."

"Conor, you don't know him," Lucy began, her voice breaking. "You don't know what lengths he'll go to..."

"Lucy," Conor said, his voice firm. "I'm not letting you go. You are of age, so there is no legal impediment. If he doesn't like it, that's his problem. We will be married, and no one, least of all your father, is going to stop that from happening."

"Oh! Well said, Conor," Kitty said, with a little sigh of pleasure. "You sounded just like your father, though of course, he is quite correct, Lucy dear. You are a Baxter now, and we stick together. So just take a deep breath and stop fretting. All will be well."

“I might add that this is mere speculation,” Luke said mildly. “Mr Carleton might be doing business with someone, and we are all maligning the man for no reason. He has seemed remarkably pleased with an earldom in his future and, though I hesitate to mention it, the earldom is of far greater seniority than Alcester’s dukedom. He is only the fifth duke, I believe.”

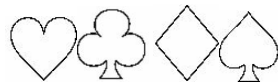
“Luke is the fourteenth earl,” the countess added with a smile.

Lucy nodded. “I understand, and in your world that will mean everything, but to my father, an ace is an ace, and a duke trumps all else.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re marrying me. As if I would see you go to that disgusting old man. Over my dead body,” Conor said savagely.

He slipped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him. Lucy went willingly, touched and somewhat reassured by their words, which she knew were sincere. But she also knew her father, a man who had gone from not having two pennies to rub together to being a modest accountant and then recreated himself as a man who was rumoured to be among the wealthiest in the city.

She did not trust him, nor underestimate his ambitions, and she needed to be certain that Conor did not either.



It was the early hours of the morning before Lucy was alone in her room. Sarah bade her a sleepy goodnight and closed the door as Lucy made a show of settling herself in bed. For a few moments she pretended to doze, just in case Sarah had forgotten something and darted back in as she often did. The minutes ticked by, however, and Lucy flung the covers back, stuffed her feet into her little woollen slippers and pulled on her dressing gown.

Relighting the lamp that Sarah had extinguished, she padded to the bedroom door and opened it a crack. The corridor beyond was dark and silent, the only sound that of Lucy’s heart, which was thudding with far too much enthusiasm. Opening the door fully, Lucy stepped out, holding the lamp high and looking back and forth, certain someone would appear at any moment and demand to know what she was up to. No such person made themselves known, however, so Lucy hurried down the corridor, her heart in her throat.

She had always known old houses made noises, especially at night. Her aunt's cottage had sighed and groaned and made the most peculiar sounds as it settled for the night, but that had been a dear little place and entirely friendly. Though the inhabitants of Trevick were as warm and welcoming as anyone could wish for, the castle itself was ancient and, like all historic properties, had seen its share of violence and bloodshed. The handsome footman had regaled Sarah with stories of murder and mayhem. The bloodiest had been the ghost of a servant, tortured by one of the previous earls after being found guilty of theft. If Lucy had been a fanciful girl, it might have given her nightmares, but even a down-to-earth creature, as she assured herself she was, could be forgiven for feeling a prickle of anxiety in the circumstances.

Weapons and suits of armour loomed at her out of the darkness, and the portraits of generations of the Trevick line glowered as she passed. They all seemed to glare at her with reproach for even considering that she could be a part of this illustrious family. Increasingly impatient with herself for being so birdwitted as to become agitated by a painting, Lucy paused to stick her tongue out at a fellow who seemed to be the most supercilious devil of all. He was stern and forbidding, with iron grey hair and eyes that seemed to dare her to sully their grand name with her humble bloodline.

“Lucy?”

With a little squeal of combined shock and mortification, Lucy leapt back, and would have fallen on her behind if powerful arms had not caught her tightly.

“What are you doing?” Conor's amused voice rumbled in her ear and Lucy tried her best to answer, but her heart had climbed to her throat, making speech a little difficult.

“He... He was sneering at me,” she said hotly, feeling utterly ridiculous but then that was hardly a new experience.

“He sneered at everyone, love. Especially Mama.”

Lucy turned in his arms to look up at him and the lamplight illuminated his face, casting it in gold and highlighting the firm line of his jaw and the fierce sweep of his dark eyebrows.

“He did?”

“Oh, yes. That’s Mr Derby, the late earl’s younger brother. The earl is over there, and a pretty piece of work he was too. They both despised my mother and did everything to keep her and Papa apart.”

“No! Really?”

Conor nodded, holding her close. “My parents have known each other since they were little children. My father proposed to her when he was thirteen. She accepted, naturally,” he added with a smile, before his expression sobered. “Then Derby came and spirited my father away. Mama did not know where he had gone, nor why he had disappeared, but she never gave up hope. She knew they were meant to be together, and she kept searching for him, praying for him to be returned to her. Until one day, he appeared back in her life. The result was inevitable, though far from plain sailing.”

“Oh, how romantic,” Lucy said with a sigh.

“It is a very romantic story, adventurous too, but I shan’t tell you more, for Mama will be cross with me. She loves telling it, and she does it far better than I ever could,” he added with a soft laugh.

“I hope to hear it one day,” she said, and perhaps there had been a note of uncertainty behind the words for Conor held her tighter and she looked up at him.

“No one is going to stop us marrying, Lucy,” he told her firmly. “If I have to bundle you in a carriage and race to Gretna Green, then I shall do so.”

She perked up at the idea. “Oh, could we?” she exclaimed.

“I don’t think it’s necessary, sweetheart,” he replied with a smile in his voice. “Is that why you are wandering the corridors in your nightgown?”

“In part,” she admitted, not quite ready to explain the rest of her plan for fear he would be dreadfully shocked. “But we cannot speak here, someone is bound to come along and see us.”

“It’s two o’clock in the morning,” he pointed out.

Lucy gave a huff. “Stop being so unromantic and take me to your room, you heartless creature.” She struck his chest lightly with her fist to illustrate the point.

“Unromantic, am I?” he demanded, sweeping her up into his arms.

Lucy gave a little squeak of surprise as the floor disappeared from beneath her and his muscular arms held her to him as he strode away from the sneering Mr Derby.

“What were you doing prowling the corridors, anyway?” she asked, lifting the lamp to illuminate the way for him.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he admitted. “Whilst I have no intention of letting your father spoil our plans, your words gave me pause. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. The idea of you married to the vile—”

He broke off and shook his head, as if he could shake the image from his mind, too.

This was a good sign, Lucy thought with relief. It meant that he was not quite as sanguine about the situation as he made out, which she hoped would make her task easier.

“Did you even know which room was mine?” Conor asked her, pausing outside the door.

“No,” Lucy confessed. “I knew it was down here somewhere, but as there’s only you and your parents here at the moment, I figured I couldn’t get into too much trouble.”

Conor snorted at that. “How you underestimate yourself, my love.”

“Funny,” she grouched, until he pressed a kiss to her mouth, and she forgot everything else.

Kicking the door shut behind him, Conor carried her into the room and stood by the fire, letting her down slowly, and never breaking the kiss. He took the lamp she still held and placed it on the mantelpiece as Lucy leaned into him. His arms stole around her, gliding up and down her spine with slow, caressing strokes that made her feel a little giddy.

“You really ought not be here,” Conor whispered, though he did not let her go.

“You’ve already ruined me,” she reminded him. “It’s a little late for worrying now.”

“Er... no. You ruined me,” he corrected her, smirking.

“I did not!” she objected. “You were the one that took us to that storeroom. You know very well you admitted you should have gone and

fetches your mama instead.”

He affected a theatrical expression of shock and dismay, and it was hard to keep her countenance. “What, and have left you unattended for five minutes? I’ve done some reckless things in my life, darling, but I’m not *that* foolish.”

Lucy narrowed her eyes. “I’m not sure I am going to marry you. You’re very rude.”

“Horribly rude,” he agreed, pressing his mouth to hers again and kissing her with enthusiasm. His tongue caressed the seam of her mouth and she sighed, pressing closer. It was only now she realised that, like her, he was dressed for bed. The robe he wore was of dark green velvet and her hands smoothed over the soft nap of the fabric as she followed the contour of hard muscle on his chest. The kiss deepened and his hands fell to her behind, pulling her hard against him as she felt the jut of his arousal. Pleased rather than daunted, for she was a country girl and had no illusions about how babies were made, she tilted her hips against him and was thrilled by the answering growl that issued from deep in his throat.

“Stop that, you little minx, or we shall both be in the basket.”

“Perhaps I want to be in the basket,” she ventured, her hands dropping to the sash of his robe.

His hands clasped hers before she could untie the knot and she looked up to find him watching her with concern. “Lucy? What are you playing at, love?”

“Nothing,” she said, though she knew very well she had never been able to tell a successful lie. Her every thought seemed to show on her face. It was most inconvenient.

“Lucy,” he said again, his tone stern now.

“Well, couldn’t you ruin me properly? Please,” she added with a hopeful smile.

Conor shook his head. “Lucy, it won’t work.”

“It couldn’t hurt,” she objected. “And I don’t believe that would be the only reason for it to happen.”

Lucy attempted a winsome look, but he only let her go and stepped away,

so it can't have been up to much. Disgruntled, she wrapped her arms around herself, watching as he paced up and down, sending her occasional glares of... of... was that frustration? Lucy perked up, feeling a little better.

"If it came down to it and we were forced to tell the duke I had taken advantage of you, it would either work and make you an object of scandal, for the old devil would see to it the gossip would spread like wildfire. Or, and this I think only too likely, the duke would not give a damn. He's not a man noted for his scruples and he's expensive. The lure of a dowry that could solve his problems would be enough to overlook any er... other complications."

Lucy must have looked dejected indeed, for Conor went to her, pulling her into an embrace.

"Darling, I don't want our first night together to be for any other reason than that we love each other."

"But I *do* love you," she said plaintively, staring up at him.

A tinge of colour touched his cheeks, and he smiled, his eyes shining with happiness. "You do?"

"Oh, Conor, don't be so daft. You must have known it," she said with a sigh. "It's hopeless, and I cannot endure the idea Papa will ruin everything."

"We don't know for certain he will. My father is right, this is only speculation. We may be worrying for no reason."

Lucy snorted, unconvinced by this argument.

"Come here," Conor said, leading her to the armchair by the fire.

He sat down and pulled her with him. Lucy snuggled against him, burying her face against his neck.

"You've got a cold nose," he said, laughing and squirming a little.

"I must be in perfect health, then," she replied, looking up at him with a rueful smile.

He stared down at her, tracing a finger over her cheek. "I love you too, Lucy," he said solemnly. "Thank you for crashing into me, into my life. I'm so glad you did."

"So am I," she whispered, and closed her eyes as he bent his head to kiss her.

It was the softest of kisses, his lips tender, brushing hers back and forth and pressing again, gentle and sweet. Little sparks fired in Lucy's blood, and she wrapped her arms around him as best she could, wanting more, wanting to get closer. The kiss deepened by slow degrees, his tongue sliding against hers as she welcomed him in, his hands caressing her back. The sparks had set fires by now, burning beneath her skin, and Lucy grew restless, wanting more, wanting to be closer. She wriggled on his lap, fighting her nightgown, which got tangled about her knees, and very nearly doing him an injury judging by the muttered oath he gave. Finally, she straddled him, and she grasped his face in her hands, kissing him hard as he sighed and put his hands to her waist. Emboldened by her success, Lucy kissed him with more enthusiasm, delighted by the slow glide of his hands down her sides to grip her bottom. He tugged, suddenly, making her sit down on his lap, and the breath escaped her lungs as his arousal pressed firmly against her sex, sending a jolt of exquisite sensation lancing through her.

"Oh," she said in surprise, eyes wide.

"*Oh*, indeed, you little wretch," he growled, and kissed her again, fervently.

Lucy was just wondering if she would get her own way after all, when there was a sharp knock at the door.

"*Miss?*" came a desperate sounding voice. "Oh, miss, are you in there? It's Sarah. Please, miss, it's dreadfully urgent. I won't breathe a word if you are, I swear it."

Lucy and Conor stared at each other, shocked and breathless, before Lucy scrambled from his lap and hurried to the door. She opened it a crack to see Sarah holding a bulging carpet bag. Before she could ask her what was wrong, the woman barged in.

"Thank the Lord, I found you. He's here," Sarah said, sounding as breathless as they did.

"My father?" Lucy guessed, her stomach sinking.

Sarah nodded. "Woke me up without a by your leave, telling me to get you dressed and out of the house without waking anyone. Well, as if I would act in such a shabby manner after all Lady Trevick has done for me, and you too, miss. I don't know what he's planning, but he's up to something, I don't

reckon it's your happiness he has in mind neither, for he never paid it much mind afore now."

"Oh, Sarah! You absolute darling," Lucy cried, hugging her tightly.

Sarah hugged her back. "Now, none of that. I'm looking after myself too, you realise, for I'd rather work for a happy mistress than a miserable one, and any fool can see you ought to marry his lordship here, and quick sharp if I'm any judge," she added, giving Conor a hard stare.

"We are much obliged to you, Sarah," Conor said. "But we had best hurry, Lucy. He's your father and as such you are still under his control. We must get you out of here before he gets suspicious. Where is he now, Sarah?"

"Lurking in the entrance hall, I reckon," she said grimly. "I brought as much as I could stuff in this bag. Reckoned you might need to make a quick getaway."

With assurances of being forever in her debt, Lucy thanked Sarah profusely as the woman helped her dress and Conor hurried to his dressing room and did likewise. He emerged while Sarah was doing up Lucy's corset. Lucy stood in her petticoats with her hands braced on the bedpost. He stopped in his tracks, staring with undisguised interest at the picture she made.

"Were you doing something, my lord?" Sarah demanded tersely, blocking his view.

Conor cleared his throat. "Er... yes. We need the marriage papers, the settlements, etc. If I leave them here, we risk him getting his hands on them and destroying them. Not that I care about the money, but it proves he consented. Somehow, I need to get to my father's study without him seeing. Lucy, you stay here until I get back."

"But what if he comes here?" Lucy demanded, agitated.

"Love, he has no idea where my room is, and no one will volunteer the information, I assure you. With the size of Trevick, it will take him hours, days even, before he finds you. Just sit tight. I'll be back as soon as I can. Sarah, the moment you can, run down the back stairs and rouse John. I need the phaeton ready to go but tell him to keep it out of sight in the barn and do it as quietly as he can."

"Yes, my lord," Sarah bobbed a quick curtsy and Conor hurried over to

press a swift kiss to Lucy's mouth.

“Don't fret, love. I'm getting you out of here and we're getting married, even if I do have to carry you off to Scotland.”

He laughed at the look in her eyes, as it must have shown her pleasure at this suggestion. She could hardly deny it. To Lucy, it seemed the most romantic thing she had ever heard in her life, and if her father hadn't been set on ruining her plans, she would have been delighted.

“Oh, do hurry, Conor, and be careful.”

“Don't fret, Lucy, love. I'll be back before you know it.” And with that, he ran out of the door.

Chapter 19



My Lord Buchanan,

It is with deep regret that I write to inform you that the bodies of your wife and an unidentified male were this morning found off the coast of Rattray. We believe they ran into difficulties and the boat broke up on the rocks there. The necessary arrangements are in hand to restore your wife's body to you for burial.

With my sincere condolences,

—Excerpt of a letter from Mr Hamish McDonald, Justice of the Peace, to The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan, (sons of The Right Hon'ble Ruth and Gorden Anderson, The Countess and Earl of Morven).

Early hours of the 7th of May 1845, Trevick Castle, Trevick, Warwickshire.

Conor padded along the corridor in his stockinged feet. He had decided stealth overrode comfort and had left his boots in his room. He felt ridiculous, acting like an intruder in his own home, but he would leave nothing to chance. Lucy had the odd fanciful notion, but she was an intelligent woman, and she knew her father better than anyone. If she was that afraid of him and believed him capable of causing them real trouble, then Conor believed it too and would take no chances.

Hurrying to his valet's room, he quickly woke a bewildered Murphy and told him succinctly what was afoot.

"Why the grubby old muckworm," Murphy said in disgust, his nightcap askew but his eyes gleaming with indignation. "Right, what do you need?"

“Pack light. Just enough for a few days. I need to get Lucy away from here and marry her before he can stick his oar in.”

“Consider it done,” Murphy said promptly.

Conor laughed and patted his shoulder. “Good man. Now I just need to retrieve all the marriage documents he signed before he can burn them and deny they ever existed. I’m going to have to break into Father’s office, I reckon.”

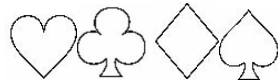
“You’d best run along, then,” Murphy said, giving him an indulgent and amused grin.

“What?” Conor asked suspiciously, wondering what that look meant.

“Nothing, my lord,” Murphy replied with a smile. “Only, it’s good to have you back again.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Conor asked in confusion.

Murphy would not answer but hurried him out of the door and on his way.



Conor stared down at the dimly lit entrance hall to see Mr Carleton pacing up and down, his hands behind his back. Cursing, he considered his options. Getting downstairs was one thing, but getting to his father’s study without going via the hall was another. He needed a distraction. Preferably something that would rouse the household and bring his parents down, for they would know how to keep the old devil at bay. He considered letting a pig or possibly the cockerel loose indoors, but catching the thing and bringing it here would take too long. Hopefully, something would occur to him on the way to the study.

Hurrying back along the corridor, Conor found the door to the west tower and wrenched it open, hurrying up the stairs and outside in the chilly night. With relief, he saw that the sky was clear, and a bright moon illuminated the landscape with an ethereal silver sheen. An ideal night for an elopement, he thought with a chuckle. He ran along a path on the open roof, beneath the battlements to another, smaller tower, and followed the staircase down and around until he got to the ground floor and exited out into the castle grounds.

The gravelled path was not ideal whilst wearing only silk socks and his

leg was already protesting after rushing about and the dancing earlier, but he persevered, muttering silent oaths as sharp stones stabbed into the soles of his feet. He made his way around to his father's study but was still presented with the dilemma of what to do next. He had never learned how to pick a lock, an omission he felt he really ought to put right but it was hardly a useful observation now. With little other choice at hand, he picked up a small rock and broke the glass on one of the many windows. The sound seemed ear-shattering, echoing around the castle like a gunshot, but there was no time to worry about it. Reaching his hand through the opening, Conor turned the handle and swung the window open. Mindful of the broken glass, he hauled himself up onto the sill, and swung himself through into the darkened room. He landed with a sharp intake of breath as his leg almost gave way under him, but his mind was too occupied to dwell on any discomfort.

This, at least, was simple. Conor knew where his father hid the key to his desk and knew where the papers were kept. It was the work of minutes before he had the papers in hand, and he stuffed them down his shirt to keep his hands free. He escaped the same way he had entered and was considering whether he ought to cause a commotion to rouse the household or whether to simply wake his parents up before he left, when a shout rang out behind him.

"Oi! You there! Stop, thief!"

Conor froze, momentarily so diverted at the idea of being thought a thief he almost laughed. Then he heard the dogs. "Bugger," he muttered, and took to his heels.

Uncertain of whether it was Lamprey or Matthams on duty tonight, he simply shouted out. "It's me, Harleston!"

But the increasingly enthusiastic barking of the dogs drowned the words out. Conor kept moving as best he could, half hopping and half running, then limping with a fast paced if awkward gait as his leg throbbed and complained with more vigour. Cursing expressively, he picked up his pace as he realised the dogs were gaining on him, finally escaping through the door he'd exited from just in time to hear their sharp claws scrabbling at the wood. Breathless now, he dragged himself up the stairs and got to the top, only to hear the door opening below and the dogs charging up the stairs behind him.

"Hell and damnation!" he exclaimed, closing the next door behind him and pushing on as fast as he could manage over the turreted roof, retracing

his steps. Sweating now, as much from the pain in his leg as from the exertion, he refused to let it stop him though he feared he might throw up if hurt so badly. Lucy was relying on him, and nothing was going to get in his way. When he finally reached the interior corridor once more, he spared a glance at Mr Carleton to see him staring out of the window, trying to discover what the commotion was about. With sudden inspiration, Conor stripped off his socks and threw them down the stairs before carrying on. With a bit of luck, the dogs might be distracted for a moment at least. He turned a corner, moving as fast as he could, and almost knocked his father flat.

The two men collided with a muttered curse, his father staggering back a step before he righted himself.

“Conor?” he said, alarmed. “What the devil...?”

“Mr C-Carleton,” Conor wheezed, mindless with pain and now having had some of the breath knocked out of him. “K-Keep him busy. Going to elope, with L-Lucy.”

“Right you are,” the earl said mildly. “I’ll wake your mother. She’s always far better at these sorts of things than me. Run along now and leave him to us.”

Conor laughed, hugged his father impulsively and did what he suggested, as the previously muted sound of the dogs exploded into the corridor.

“I’ll deal with them too,” his father said with a sigh, and waved him on.

Conor fell through his bedroom door, pushed shut and leaned upon it, breathing hard and taking the weight from his sore leg with an expressive groan. He leant down, massaging it and wincing.

“Conor!” Lucy exclaimed, running to him. “Are you all right? We heard dogs and shouting, whatever happened?”

Conor shook his head. “No time,” he managed, though no breath was more truthful.

“Darling, you’re hurt,” Lucy said, putting her hands to his face, her eyes filled with concern.

“I’m fine,” he bit out, which was a damned lie, but he wasn’t about to tell her otherwise.

“We’re ready when you are,” Murphy announced, holding up a

portmanteau in one hand and Conor's money purse in the other. "And I packed the liniment for your leg too. Make sure you use it."

"Oh, he will," Lucy said, firmly, still regarding him with worry in her eyes.

"And John said the phaeton would be waiting for you," Sarah said, her expression just as anxious as she looked between them.

Conor smiled at them. "I'm so glad to have both of you on side. Needless to say, we will reward such loyalty generously."

"Seeing you happy and in spirits again is all the reward I need," Murphy said stoutly, a suspicious glitter in his eyes that he dashed away with his sleeve.

"Thank you, Murphy. I confess, I am rather enjoying myself," Conor said wryly, which was oddly true, despite the pain he was in.

"Well, I'm not. I want to be married at once!" Lucy exclaimed with an exasperated laugh.

"I know, love," he soothed her. "So, we had best get going. Sarah, you run down to Mr Carleton and tell him that Lucy is sick, something she ate, and that there's no way she can go anywhere tonight. Do your best to be convincing."

"Oh, I will, my lord, don't you worry," she said, grim but determined.

"Excellent. We will send for you the moment we can," he assured them, pulling on his boots with some relief. "Come along, Lucy. You wanted an elopement, so it seems you're going to have one."

With that, he took her hand and let her out of the bedroom door. The sound of a commotion, dogs barking and howling eagerly and the distinctive crash of something that could only have been a suit of armour rang out and Conor snorted with laughter, pulling Lucy behind him as he led her – slowly this time – back to the tower, along the turreted rooftop, and down the spiral staircase to the gardens below.

As promised, the phaeton was waiting for them, hidden safely in one of the larger barns, the two sleek bay horses tossing their heads, impatient to be off as they sensed the excitement in the air. A groom hurried to open the barn doors wide as Conor saw Lucy and their bags safely settled before hauling himself up and taking the reins. Sitting down at last was so welcome he

groaned with relief. Turning to Lucy, he regarded her, pale but resolute.

“Ready, love?”

Lucy leaned over and kissed him hard. “I am.”

Conor grinned at her.

“Let them go, John,” he said.

The horses surged forward, impatient to be on their way. They exploded from the barn and onto the driveway, taking very little urging to pick up their pace further still.

Lucy turned in her seat, staring behind them.

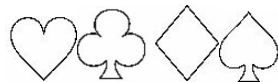
“Do you think he saw us go?” she asked anxiously.

“Doesn’t matter, sweetheart. There’s no one on God’s green earth who could catch me in this rig with these horses.”

The remembered pleasure of driving at speed and his own skill with these horses came back to him with a rush and he glanced at Lucy to see her staring at him with such admiration that heat rushed to his cheeks.

“Oh, Conor, I am so glad to be marrying you, and this is the most exciting thing that ever happened to me.”

Conor laughed, leaning over to give her a swift kiss before returning his eyes to the road. “You’d best get used to it, darling. I’m beginning to remember why I enjoyed this nonsense so much. Hold on tight now,” he cautioned, before sweeping them around the bend, out of the gates and on, towards the moonlit hills beyond.



They had a good run into Birmingham, though they arrived far too early for the first train. Conor arranged a private parlour in a local inn where they could wait the hour and a half until it left. It was a small room which smelled powerfully of cooked cabbage and furniture polish, but it was clean and cosy and so Conor counted them fortunate to have it. They huddled together on the settle by the fire, having been chilled to the bone on the journey.

“You’re sure he won’t follow us here?” Lucy demanded for the tenth time.

“What kind of madman would take you off to Scotland when he could

marry you in Warwick with no problem whatsoever?” he asked with a shake of his head. “Besides, Mama and Papa and Murphy, and your Sarah, are all conspiring to keep him at Trevick. So even if he gets away from them, by the time he’s roused the local vicar and discovered we’ve not gone straight to him, we’ll be well on our way, and him none the wiser.”

Lucy gave him a long, worried look, studying his face intently, and he sat up.

“What’s wrong?”

“This is just the kind of mad adventure you wanted to avoid, though, wasn’t it?” she asked anxiously. “You wanted a peaceful life and—”

Conor hauled her into his arms and kissed her with such force she could be in no doubt about his feelings. Gradually, he relaxed his hold on her, gazing down into the depths of her eyes.

“I thought I knew what I wanted,” he said softly. “But I was wrong. I was hiding, Lucy, from the world, from life. My family and my friends tried to tell me, but I wasn’t ready to hear it. I hear them now. There is a risk in getting out of bed in the morning, in getting on a horse whether or not you ride hell for leather. You might unwittingly put yourself in danger just going for a walk or setting foot on a train, but the chances are you’ll be quite safe. I’m not about to return to my rather reckless lifestyle, but neither am I going to sit at home in the hope I won’t hurt myself or, by default, anyone I love.”

“Then you don’t mind?” she asked with a tentative smile.

“Mind?” Conor replied with a laugh. “No. I’m enjoying myself. What better way to begin our lives than fleeing from your father and running away to Scotland? I admit waiting for a train to arrive is hardly as thrilling as driving nonstop through hell and high water for days on end, but it’s a dashed sight quicker and more comfortable. We can always embellish the story when we tell our grandchildren. Mama does it all the time,” he added, grinning.

Lucy laughed, leaning into him. “Where exactly are we going, though, Conor?”

“First, wherever we can get married the minute we set foot there.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “And then, to see an old friend.”

Chapter 20



Dear diary,

Lilith is dead.

We received the news this morning. I have tried my best to feel pity for her, but it is hard to muster any tender emotion for a woman who was always hateful to me and to Jack. My father is furious, for with her goes his golden goose, though her husband seemed to have her measure and was not the kind to be bled dry. A cold sort of man, from what I can gather, though one can hardly blame him when Lilith trapped him in such a vile manner.

How I wish Jack and I did not belong to such a family of thieves and con artists. For Papa may claim an earl as his uncle but it does not change the truth. We are no better than the confidence tricksters on street corners and Papa is a regular Captain Sharp. I wish, too, that it was not so tempting to follow in their footsteps, but we shan't. Jack and I will find a different way to live, a decent way. I only wish I knew how.

I just heard breaking china downstairs, which means we will now have even less of a tea set than we currently do. If Papa does not stop ranting and raging, he will have an apoplexy as the doctor warned him, and so I've told him, but he does not listen to either of us. I suppose I had better try to calm him before he wrecks the house or turns up his toes.

—Excerpt of a diary entry from Luella Fulbright,

cousin to the late Lady Buchanan.

9th May 1845, en route to Scotland.

From Birmingham station they took the early train to Manchester, from Manchester they went to Leeds, and then changed again to get to York, finding, much to Conor's disgust, there were no first-class compartments available for love nor money. It was a rude awakening to how the other half lived, for gone were the upholstered seats and views of the passing countryside. A bare wooden bench sufficed and there was only one grimy window in the door, giving travellers the impression of being confined in a jolting box. Added to the joys of second class were minimal legroom, especially considering the amount of space required for Lucy's skirts. From that point on, the journey became something of an ordeal as Conor endured the rattling compartment and cramped quarters that only aggravated his protesting leg. Still, upon hearing from a fellow traveller that second class carriages often only had a roof and were open to the elements on both sides he supposed they ought to thank their lucky stars.

"Are you in a lot of pain?" Lucy asked him anxiously.

"I'm fine, love," he assured her, wishing she would not fret over him so even as he was grateful for her consideration.

"Just think, in years to come, we will look back upon this journey with fond amusement," Lucy said with a bracing smile.

Conor squeezed her hand, concentrated on the notion that his wedding night was not far off instead being in a deal of pain, and hoped to heaven she was right.

From York they travelled to Newcastle, arriving well after midnight. Lucy was dead on her feet. She had endured the journey gamely, without ever complaining, but having had no sleep on the night they eloped and only having dozed fitfully on each of the trains they had taken, she had earned a rest. Conor felt none too chipper himself but, bearing in mind this had been his hare-brained scheme, he did not feel entitled to own the fact. He booked a room for her in a respectable hotel, signing the register as Mr and Mrs Baxter, and escorted her upstairs.

"But where are you going?" she demanded, almost swaying with fatigue

as he guided her inside.

“To check the train times for tomorrow and, if I can, secure tickets in a first-class carriage, for I’m damned if I’m travelling second class again.”

Conor did his best not to look at the bed, which looked soft and comfortable and very inviting. He was weary to his bones and his leg had gone from protesting to being downright belligerent about the trials he had put it through.

She grasped hold of his lapels, blinking up at him through heavy eyelids. “You’ll come back afterwards, though?”

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry,” he soothed.

“Conor,” she said, her tone surprisingly firm. “You are just as exhausted as I am, and what’s more, you are in pain. No, don’t try to tell me otherwise, I can see it in your face. Either you come back here and get some rest, or I shall come with you and not get any either.”

She let him go and folded her arms, such a mutinous expression on her lovely face Conor could not help but laugh.

“Lord, but you’re stubborn,” he observed, putting his hands on her waist and pulling her back into his arms. “Well, I suppose we’ve created scandal enough already. Very well, love. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Shall I help you before I go?”

Lucy nodded sleepily, apparently having used up her last store of energy with that little outburst. Conor undid her bonnet and cast it aside before undoing the buttons on her coat. He knelt then, to undo her bootlaces, and had a sudden memory of rubbing camphor oil into her slender feet. Smiling, he wondered why he had been so foolish as to run away like he had. If he’d come to his senses sooner, they might already be married, but he was remedying his idiocy now. By this time tomorrow, she would be his wife.

Conor pulled his exhausted lady to her feet and unfastened the bodice of her gown and then the skirts, before helping her to step out of them and laying them carefully over the nearest chair. He did his utmost to behave himself and not pay too close attention to the glorious arrangement of slender limbs and soft curves he was revealing but he was only flesh and blood. His fingers all became thumbs and his breathing sped but he worked on gallantly, determined to behave just as he ought... though he *ought* not be doing this at

all, so that was a moot point.

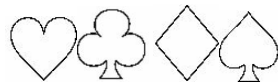
Lucy glanced at him, pink with embarrassment, as he turned her around and began loosening her corset strings. Tenderness swelled in his chest. He knew how much trust she had put in him, and Conor bent his head, pressing a soft kiss to her bare shoulder.

“The loveliest vision I ever did see,” he murmured against her skin before saying resolutely, “Now, tuck yourself into bed before I get ideas I mustn’t act upon.”

Lucy wriggled her way free of the corset and shed her petticoats in a feminine pile of lace before she did as he suggested, burying herself under the covers, though in truth it was already too late. Conor had plenty of ideas he could not act upon just yet, though only a brute would have done so when the poor girl was worn to a thread.

She peered out at him from under the covers, her pale face haloed by her soft blonde hair which she had not taken down but was escaping its pins on all sides just the same. “You will come back?” she pressed him, adding plaintively, “You promised.”

“I did not,” he replied, certain returning to her was a bad idea but unable to deny her anything or resist the temptation of at least sleeping beside her. “But yes, I will. Sleep now, love. I’ll be back soon.”



Lucy suspected she fell asleep before Conor even made it to the door, but she awoke again, perhaps only an hour later, to discover he had not yet returned. She sighed, impatient despite her exhaustion to have him beside her, for she did not feel she could rest again before he returned. Nervous energy thrummed through her and her limbs felt tense no matter how tired she was.

Dazed, she considered the events of the past hours, or days, as it was now. She found she could not feel anger towards her father, who had acted entirely in character and just as she expected of him. He had mostly ignored her for the first one and twenty years of her life, content to let her aunt have the raising of her and doing his duty in providing governesses and money for dresses and fripperies. He had occasionally bestirred himself to visit, if his sister’s home was on the way to wherever he was going, at least, and he sent

her presents for birthdays and Christmas. But it had only been when she had become a useful tool in furthering his callous ambition that he had wanted the least thing to do with her. No, it was not anger she felt for him, only sadness that he did not know her at all, nor did he care to. She thought about Conor's parents, of how they had interfered so ruthlessly in his life in order to make him happy. They would move heaven and earth for him and be glad to do it, if only to see him content and secure. The contrast was remarkable, but Lucy decided it was far more worthwhile to feel gratitude for her inclusion into that loving family than for lamenting a relationship which she had never had.

Drowsily, her mind wandered as she dozed and woke, stirring at the slightest sound, until finally she heard the door open and soft footsteps. Lucy feigned sleep, fearing Conor would spook and sleep elsewhere if he believed she was still awake. She heard the rustle of clothing and could not resist the urge to crack her eyelids just a little to watch. The room was dark, only the firelight illuminating the place where Conor stood, stripping off his waistcoat. The orange glow gilded him, glinting gold in his dark hair. Rather to her disappointment, he kept on his shirt and small clothes before padding barefoot to the bed.

She held her breath as the mattress dipped and he climbed in, settling himself down with a weary sigh of relief. Lucy lay still, trying to make her breathing sound deep and regular as in sleep, which was extremely difficult when her heart was skipping about behind her ribs.

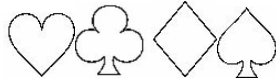
He was so close she could feel warmth emanating from his body, and the desire to cuddle up to him gnawed at her. Deciding it was now or never, she heaved a great sigh, and turned over, as she might if she were really asleep, and sprawled over his chest.

"I know you're awake, you little devil," he said mildly.

Lucy raised her head, glaring at him in the darkness. "Oh, drat you."

He laughed, his arms stealing around her. "Go to sleep, sweetheart. The train is another early one. I've asked for them to wake us in time, though, so you need not worry."

Finally able to relax, now he was safely beside her, Lucy sighed luxuriously against the warm body she was snuggled against and gave in to the lure of sleep.



She awoke again to the sounds of the inn coming to life, of the bustle of carriages and people on the street outside, and the faint glow of the new day through the thin curtains. The fire had died to a few glowing coals but there was just light enough to see. Lucy sat up, staring down at the man who was soon to be her husband with interest.

His countenance was relaxed in sleep, the rather grave expression she had often remarked upon him chased away. It made him look younger and gave her a glimpse of the naughty boy he had undoubtedly been, according to his mother. Was that just sleep, or was that the new, or rather the *old* Conor reasserting himself? She hoped so, for as much as she had given herself entirely to the rather serious young man who had first scowled and chastised her, she had wanted to ease his heart and mind and give him back his enjoyment of life. To think she might have achieved that gave her a sense of profound happiness, and she found herself still smiling idiotically at him as he blinked awake.

He started—not doubt horrified to see her leering at him in such a peculiar fashion— and to cover her embarrassment did the only thing she could think of and kissed him. The gambit seemed to work as he did not ask her what the devil she meant by watching him sleep in such a creepy fashion but kissed her back. His hands slid down her back, caressing, and she shivered under his touch, pressing closer. Turning onto his side, he pulled her flush against him, and she gasped as she felt again proof of his desire, yet this time through only the thin cotton of his small clothes and her chemise. The heat of him burned her, making her wonder at the fierce temperature of his skin compared to hers. Lucy found herself so beguiled by his closeness, by the new and exciting discovery of how his body felt against hers, that she quite forgot about the train. Her only thought was how to get closer to him, and so she hooked her leg over his hip and pressed closer.

Conor swore, a low, desperate sound that made shivers dance over her skin.

“Lucy, you wretch, there’s no time for this, even if I would allow it.”

“Allow it?” she repeated, a wicked glint in her eyes. “Do you think you could stop me?”

He regarded her solemnly, considering this. “No,” he admitted. “But there still isn’t time, no matter how I want there to be.”

She sighed, giving an experimental arch of her hips, which made his breath catch in the most intriguing way. Lucy grinned at him, and he laughed.

“I can see I shall have trouble with you, my Lady Harleston.”

“Oh,” Lucy said, much struck by this. “That’s me, or it will be. Lady Harleston,” she repeated, a little startled by how grand it sounded. Since Conor had told her he truly wished to marry her, she had of course known that she would have a title, but she had not heard it said out loud before.

“It will.” He watched her, amused, as she repeated it a few more times.

“Lady Harleston. *Lady* Harleston... goodness, Conor. I don’t feel ready to be a lady,” she said anxiously.

“Silly goose,” he said, and with such fondness in his voice, she melted back against him. “You already are a lady.”

Lucy kissed him in thanks for being so lovely and the kiss grew deeper and hotter with astonishing speed. Conor turned her onto her back, his weight pressing down on her in the most delightful way. Inevitably, there was a knock at the door and a call to tell them it was six thirty and time to get up.

Lucy groaned.

“Serves you right for being wicked to me and trying to lead me into temptation,” Conor said with a smirk, so Lucy grabbed the pillow and hit him in the head with it. He laughed and snatched it away, wrestling with her until they lay in a tangle of covers and limbs, breathless and both wishing there was no train.

“Tonight,” he promised her, brushing his mouth against hers. “Tonight, there will be no trains, no servants, no interruptions of any kind. Tonight, you will be my wife, and we will be together always.”

“I never wanted a day to go by quicker in my life,” Lucy said dejectedly.

“Then we’d best get on with it, before we miss the train.”

With obvious reluctance, Conor untangled himself from the bedsheets, and Lucy, and got to his feet. He reached for her hands, pulling her to her feet.

“Come along, sleepy head, rise and shine,” he said, laughing as she made

a face at him.

“Are you always this cheerful first thing in the morning?” she grumbled. “It’s unnatural.”

“Yes, actually,” he replied, tugging on his trousers. “I take it you are not a morning person?”

“Not if that morning begins before eight,” she replied, stifling a yawn and stretching. She sighed and straightened to discover Conor watching her with a rapt expression.

“Get dressed, Lucy,” he said, his voice firm.

With a grin, Lucy did as he asked.

Chapter 21



May God forgive me, my love, but I'm not sorry.

—Excerpt of a letter from The Right Hon'ble Ruth Anderson, The Countess of Morven to her husband, The Right Hon'ble Gordon Anderson, The Earl of Morven.

10th May 1845, Carlisle to Gretna Green.

They arrived at Carlisle station late morning and Conor lost no time in hiring a carriage to take them on the last leg of the journey. It was only an hour to their destination now, according to Conor, and Lucy sat beside him, contemplating the box containing the slim gold band he had bought her before they left Carlisle.

“I’ll buy you an engagement ring when we get home,” he promised, sliding an arm around her waist. “Something pretty.”

Lucy looked up at him, eyes shining. “This is all I want. It’s perfect. I just can’t believe it’s real, that this is really happening.”

“Well, love, you best had, look.”

Lucy looked where he gestured and saw a signpost announcing Gretna Green, two miles.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, almost bouncing out of her seat with excitement. Conor had said they would be married in Scotland, for anywhere in Scotland would do, but he had not told her precisely where. “Gretna Green and an anvil wedding.”

Conor laughed, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “I thought that would please you, dreadful girl.”

“It does, very much. Thank you, Conor.”

He shrugged. “To be honest, it is just the nearest place to get to, which is why it has such a reputation, of course. Generations of angry fathers and brothers have pursued fleeing brides to this location.”

Lucy fell quiet, an unsettling sensation in her stomach.

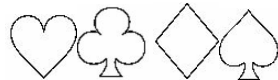
“Lucy?”

She forced a smile, which was obviously unconvincing, as Conor only frowned at her.

“I’m being silly, perhaps, I just... what if he *has* followed us? I know he may have been delayed, but then so were we at times. Gretna Green is the obvious place to come looking.”

Conor nodded. “I know, but we will marry at once and then—”

Lucy kissed him hard, not wanting to wait another moment for any of it. “Hurry,” she said.



With an increasing sense of urgency, Conor led Lucy into the little whitewashed cottage. In part, this was because the imprint of Lucy’s lithe body lingered against his, making his skin ache with the desire to make her his own. No more interruptions or delays. But it was also Lucy’s pale face and jittering nerves that were working upon him and making him wonder if her wretched father really was in hot pursuit. He could not help but glance over his shoulder before he closed the door behind them.

The ‘anvil priest,’ a Mr John Linton, greeted them and took their details with ruthless efficiency. Conor rather suspected he was in a hurry to get to his dinner. Still, he was kind to Lucy and spoke to her gently, smiling at them both as he led them to the notorious anvil. The low-ceilinged room was of whitewashed stone and hung with framed paintings of wedding days and happy, smiling faces. Tokens of good luck and straw dollies bedecked with ribbons adorning the beams, and letters—presumably from happy couples thanking the priest—were stuck up around the place too.

The words of the service were familiar, which struck Conor as odd somehow. In his mind, he had vaguely imagined some pagan ceremony to go with their escape and scandalous elopement, and the more conventional

words soothed his erratic nerves somewhat. Lucy clung to his hand, darting anxious glances towards him at intervals as the priest, sensing urgency or perhaps just scenting his dinner, picked up his pace.

Finally, it was done.

“I now pronounce ye man and wife,” Linton called out, and brought the hammer down on the anvil so hard that Lucy jumped in shock. “Well, kiss her, then, man,” the bluff Scotsman said with a grin.

Conor laughed and had no problem doing as instructed. Lucy gazed up at him, looking a little shocked.

“It’s done?” she asked, as if she could not quite believe it.

“Not yet, lass,” Linton said with a grin. “You’ve yet to consum—”

“Yes, thank you,” Conor said hastily. “Where might we book a room?”

“Why, at my own fine establishment, Graitney Hall, just up the road. Come along, I’ll take ye there.”

Obediently, Lucy and Conor followed him the short walk to the hall, which was indeed a fine establishment. A whitewashed manor house with neatly kept grounds, it was a welcoming sight after the past twenty-four hours of fraught travel. Inside was no less inviting, with comfortable and elegant furnishings suggesting they were used to catering to a well-heeled clientele.

Linton went behind the desk and perused the ledger. “Ah, we have one room which is available today, but the guests have only just checked out. If I could suggest ye avail yerself of the splendid dinner we serve here while ye wait, we’ll make everything ready for ye.”

“Very well,” Conor said, not having much choice in the matter.

“Perhaps we ought to try another hotel,” Lucy whispered, her cheeks pink.

Conor patted her hand. “We’re here now, and it will only be an hour, I’m sure. Besides, you hardly ate any breakfast. You must be famished.”

Lucy conceded this was true and so they followed Linton, who took them to a private parlour and left them with assurances everything would be done in a trice.

Dinner was as splendid as promised. They were presented with a succulent roast loin of pork stuffed with black pudding and served with

golden roast potatoes and cider gravy. This went a long way toward settling Conor's apprehensions about Mr Carleton. Surely, the man would have seen sense and accepted the situation. Lucy, however, was still picking at her food.

Conor opened his mouth, about to give her some words of reassurance when Linton returned and announced their rooms were now ready, but that there was a delicious apple tart and thick cream for dessert.

"No, thank you. No dessert," Lucy said firmly. "Please, just show us to our room."

Linton chuckled and gave them both a knowing wink. "Right ye are then, lassie. Best to get to it, aye?"

This confiding speech had a profound effect on Lucy, who was already jittery with nerves. Leaping to her feet, she moved so quickly the chair she sat on toppled backwards, landing with a crash. Startled, she gave a cry of dismay and turned to see what had happened. In doing so, her hand hit the wine decanter, which fell on Conor's plate, spilling what remained of the contents in a flood of red liquid. Conor stood hurriedly as the wine dripped off the edge of the table, spattering his trousers.

"Ah ha!" exclaimed a booming voice from the doorway. "I knew once I heard the crash, I was in the right place. Confound you, Lucy! How dare you lead me on such a merry dance?"

Much to Conor's dismay, the bulky figure of Mr Carleton stood in the doorway, his face flushed, his chin unshaven and his clothes a rumpled mess. He really had been determined to catch them, after all.

"It's too late," Lucy cried, running to Conor and taking his arm. She thrust her hand out to show her father the ring. "We are married."

"That," her father said dourly. "Can be remedied."

"But it won't be," Lucy said, her eyes glittering with tears. "I won't let you do this to me. I love him, Papa."

"Oh, pooh," Mr Carleton said with a dismissive shake of his head. "Who needs love when you're a duchess? A duchess, Lucy. Just think of it. Everyone bowing and scraping and calling you 'your grace.'"

"I don't want that!" Lucy cried in distress. "I am terrified enough of the idea of being a viscountess and, one day, a countess. Can you not be satisfied, Papa?"

“When my grandson could be a duke? I should say not,” her father said in disgust.

Conor watched the man, his blood boiling. The desire to simply knock him down was sorely tempting, but Carleton was only a fat old man, besides which it would upset Lucy and not solve the problem.

“Mr Carleton,” Conor said, interrupting before her father could launch into a speech designed to bring his errant daughter to heel. “If I were to offer you two watches, one of solid gold, the other of brass, which would you choose?”

Carleton stared at Conor, his small eyes narrowing. “Do you take me for a fool? The gold one, naturally.”

“Then why are you choosing brass now?”

He frowned at that. “If you mean Alcester hasn’t two pennies to rub together, I know it. That’s how I was able to get him.”

Conor’s lip curled with disgust, but he held onto his temper. “No, sir. Though Alcester is an inveterate gambler and will run through any amount of money you give him in a matter of months, I assure you. However, I was not speaking of that, but of seniority of rank.”

“What of it?”

“I mean to say, Mr Carleton, that the Duke of Alcester is a relatively new title in terms of the peerage, and the name has been thoroughly blackened through years of immoral and scandalous behaviour. The current duke is the least vile of his line, as far as I can tell, being only a drunken sot and a hardened gamester. My father, by contrast, holds one of the oldest and most respected earldoms in the country. His name carries weight, especially in matters of politics and business,” he added meaningfully. “Think about where your bread is buttered, sir.”

Mr Carleton did indeed seem to consider this. He stared at Conor through narrowed eyes. Mr Linton, too, was watching with considerable interest until Conor sent him off with instructions to clean up the mess and bring a fresh bottle of wine.

To give him his due, Linton complied at once and maids darted in and out, restoring the room to normal and setting out a decanter and glasses on the table. Before Conor could suggest they all sit down and talk like rational

human beings, the door flew open, and his mother appeared.

“You miserable old goat!” she cried, eyes flashing fury as she whacked Mr Carleton repeatedly with the delicate beaded bag she held. Tiny coloured missiles flew in all directions and scattered over the floor. “How dare you interfere after everything we did to see them happy! How dare you!”

“Kitty!” The earl ran in after her, grasping hold of his wife and holding her to him. “Kitty, that’s enough, love.”

“But Luke, he’s ruining everything!” she said furiously, struggling in his grasp.

“You see, Papa?” Lucy flung her hand in the countess’ direction. “That is what a parent looks like. Conor’s parents have followed him all the way here to ensure he got the happy outcome he hoped for, not to ruin it with their own self-interest. You have never shown the smallest desire to know me or to have a place in my life, but now, when it suits you, you think you can marry me to some disgusting old man just to further your own interests. Well, I shan’t,” she said, folding her arms. “You may have the power to ruin my happiness and annul my marriage, but I shall never consent to marry anyone else. Not in a million years, and how will that suit all your ambitious plans, I ask you?”

Mr Carleton’s face darkened with mingled embarrassment and anger. “How dare you speak to me so, you ungrateful brat? Haven’t I given you everything you ever wanted?”

Lucy gave a bark of laughter. “No, Papa, you haven’t, and that you could think it only goes to show how little you know me. I wanted a family, a home, a father who loved me and cared for my happiness. The only home and security I ever knew was given to me by your sister, not you, and so it will be her I invite to stay with me at Christmas in the future, for you may huddle up with your ledgers for company and I wish you much joy of them in your old age.”

“Oh, well said, Lucy!” Kitty exclaimed, running to her and pulling her into a fond embrace. “I am so proud of you, love.”

Lucy, quite overwhelmed by now, burst into tears.

“That’s it,” Conor said, stalking towards Mr Carleton. “I’ve had just about enough. You’ve made my wife cry, sir and that I will not stand.”

Mr Carleton backed up, his hands held out before him. “Now, now, young man, let’s not be hasty. After all, we are all here and the deed is done now, I... I suppose perhaps I could be persuaded to leave things as they are.”

“Oh, I’ll persuade you, all right,” Conor growled, only halting when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder.

“All right, son. I think you’ve made your point,” his father said. “I believe Mr Carleton has seen the wisdom of joining his family with ours. Haven’t you, Mr Carleton?”

The earl favoured Mr Carleton with a hard look that gave Conor a turn, for it reminded him of a portrait of one of the less friendly faces in their family gallery. It must have had a similar effect on Mr Carleton, for his florid face paled and he returned a sharp nod.

“Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. I believe perhaps I was mistaken in Alcester. As you say, bad business to get caught up with a gamester. You’re not a gamester, are you, my lord?” he asked, giving Conor a dubious look.

“No,” Conor said curtly. “And now, if you will excuse me, I am sure Mr Linton will see to your needs. The pork loin is excellent. Lucy, come along, my love. My parents will ensure your father finds his way home again. Good afternoon, Mama, Father, Mr Carleton.”

And with one last warning glare towards her avaricious papa, he towed Lucy out of the room.

Chapter 22



My Lord,

I write to you this day to inform you of the details of a will which I made out some weeks ago for a Mr Francis Fulbright, your late wife's uncle. In this document, Mr Fulbright gives you full guardianship of his two children. Miss Luella and Master Jack Fullbright, until such time as they turn four and twenty and come into their inheritance. For your information, Miss Luella is one and twenty and her brother, twelve years of age.

Having no funds with which to continue their stay at their father's temporary lodgings, and being now your responsibility, I am sending them with their belongings to you at Wildsyde Castle. Please be so good as to expect them on the 13th day of this month.

—Excerpt of a letter to The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan from Burke, Scaly and Privet, Solicitors.

10th May 1845, Graitney Hall, Gretna Green, Scotland.

Conor closed the door behind them and leaned on it with a sigh of relief.

“Thank God,” he said with feeling.

“Oh, Conor!” Lucy exclaimed, still finding it hard to believe they had really won.

Her father would leave them be, they were truly married, and their lives could begin together. She was so overcome with emotion and relief, Lucy ran into his arms so hard she heard a thud as he banged his head on the door.

“Ouch!”

“Oh, my! Conor, I do beg your pardon. I’m so sorry, only with everything I am in such a state of—”

He didn’t let her say another word, only hauled her into his arms and kissed her hard. She softened in his embrace, all the tension leaving her body in a rush until she was pliant and unresisting.

“I think the safest place for you is in bed,” he said severely, though his lips twitched as she returned a guilty expression.

“I’m so sorry about your head, *and* the wine. Has it... oh, yes, I see I have ruined your trousers again,” she said sadly.

Conor gave a snort of amusement. “I don’t give a damn about the trousers, love. You have been an absolute Trojan through all of this, and I was never prouder of you than when you stood up to your father like that. I think perhaps you have wanted to say those things for some time.”

“I suppose I have,” Lucy admitted with a sigh, realising the truth of it. She had resented her father’s absence and his lack of interest, and whilst it had long ago ceased to surprise or hurt her, it was about time she’d told him as much.

“Well, love, nothing and no one can part us now,” Conor said, pulling her closer and kissing her. It was a sweet kiss at first, soft and achingly tender, and Lucy gave herself over to it, to the touch of his mouth that stirred such strange and primitive emotions inside her.

“I think we are wearing too many clothes,” Lucy murmured dazedly, when he finally released her.

“I bow to your wishes, love,” Conor replied with a wicked quirk to his lips. With ruthless efficiency, he unbuttoned and unhooked and had her down to her chemise and drawers in less time than Sarah had ever managed. Admittedly, all the items he had removed were thrown in an untidy pile on the floor, but Lucy was in no mood to quibble. Especially not when he ran fingers up and down the back of her neck, making her shiver with pleasure.

“I’ve been longing to see your hair down again,” he said, his voice a low rumble of sound from behind her that made her stomach flip as he reached for the pins securing it. One by one he found and removed them, until her hair spilled down her back.

“So lovely,” he said reverently, sliding one thick lock between his fingers.

He pressed a kiss to the back of her neck and Lucy closed her eyes as his arms wrapped about her.

“Happy, love?”

“So happy,” she replied, discovering to her chagrin that tears pricked at her eyelids. There must have been a catch to her voice, for he turned her around, gazing down at her with concern. Lucy blinked hard, hurrying to reassure him. “It’s just when we got caught in that room at the theatre, and then I realised I really did wish to marry you, and you didn’t want to, and I thought I had to let you go but now I don’t and... and... Oh, Conor, *yes!* I am so very happy.”

“That’s a relief,” he said with a grin. “And would you mind very much if I took the rest of your clothes off? I’m about to lose my mind.”

Lucy sniggered, which was most unladylike of her, but he didn’t seem to care. So, she let him have his way and felt her face flame as he stripped off her chemise, drawers, and finally her stockings.

Despite the room being perfectly warm, Lucy shivered, staring down at the carpet rather than meeting his eyes.

“Lucy?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“Look at me, sweetheart.”

Lucy swallowed and steeled herself, doing as he asked. He was gazing at her with such love and reverence that any shyness dissolved at once.

“My beautiful wife,” he said, and there was a tremor to his words that made her own throat tighten. “I am the luckiest man on the planet.”

“Even if I ruin your trousers and break things quite often,” she said cautiously.

“Even if you ruin every pair of trousers I own,” he said with perfect gravity. “Who needs them, anyway?” he added with a wink, before sweeping her up into his arms and carrying her to the bed. He limped as he covered the short distance, and his expression was somewhat ridged, but she held her tongue, having learned by now he did not like her fretting over him when he

was being bold and romantic.

“Well, you are still wearing yours,” she pointed out instead, as he laid her carefully upon the mattress.

He looked down at himself with a frown. “So I am. How foolish of me. Give me a moment.”

Lucy watched, amused, as he tugged one boot off and then hopped about on his good leg while he tried to remove the other. Casting them aside, he peeled off his coat and waistcoat in quick succession before shucking trousers and small clothes in one go. He paused for a minute as she regarded the ugly, ragged scar that ran from his knee to his ankle.

“It’s not a pretty sight, is it?” he remarked ruefully.

Lucy could only smile at him, knowing she looked utterly besotted. “It’s a part of you, and so I love it, as I shall the rest of you for all my days.”

He blushed a little, but looked more than pleased by this before he tugged off his shirt and cast it down with everything else. He hurried over to her.

“There, sorry to have kept you,” he said, sounding a trifle breathless as he climbed onto the bed beside her. Lucy gasped as he pulled her against him. The first touch of his naked skin pressed to hers was hot and smooth and perfectly wonderful. He kissed her, and the kiss was so much more when experienced this way, with bodies touching, so intimate that it was rather overwhelming. Yet Lucy was not afraid, only eager to learn and experience everything that he wished to teach her.

She slid her hand down his back, revelling in the feel of silken skin covering hard muscle, enjoying mapping the lines and curves of his body.

“Show me how to please you,” she whispered against his mouth.

He made a choked sound, burying his face in her hair.

“You do please me, so much,” he said, kissing a path down her neck. “And I shall teach you what you wish to know, never fear. But for now I only want to please you. I want to make you my wife, Lucy. I want no one to doubt that you are and always will be.”

She sighed, relenting, for she had no real objection to make, and he carried on kissing her neck and shoulders. She held her breath as he moved lower, and shivered with anticipation as he traced the valley between her

breasts with his tongue. Her eagerness mounted as his lips brushed the soft curve of her breasts, and then he took her nipple into his mouth and suckled, and her she could think of nothing at all but how exquisite it felt.

He made his way down her body, pausing here and there to lavish attention on places he thought deserved extra consideration. There were the oddest sounds in the room, overlaying the crackle of the fire in the grate. Soft gasps and little cries, decadent moans of pleasure that she could not imagine... Oh, it *was* her. Surprised but undaunted, Lucy let herself go, uncaring what sounds she made as he turned his wicked attentions to the delicate place between her thighs. Though she was rather shocked to admit it, even to herself, she was so eager for him to give her such attention, she did not bother with feeling a trace of embarrassment but only gloried in the splendid sensations. The secret place he worked upon throbbed and clamoured for more as he did dreadfully intimate things with his mouth and tongue, so she gave herself over to it, trusting in him to lead her where she ought to go. The delicious sensations stopped abruptly, however, and Conor smiled as she made a vocal sound of protest when he raised his head.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he promised, taking his place between her legs. “I swear I will, Lucy but there have been too many interruptions and I shall lose my mind if I can’t... if we don’t...”

He groaned as he pressed against the now slick skin and the strange throbbing sensation began again with the silken slide of his arousal against her delicate flesh.

“Oh,” she said, startled as those delightful sensations came again, hotter and fiercer than before. “Oh, Conor,” she said on a gasp, clutching at his shoulders.

“Let me in now, love,” he said, and she became aware of an insistent pressure, of his body pressing inside hers, a strange invasion she had no defence against, not that she wished to stop him, only... it was so peculiarly intimate.

Lucy took a deep breath, calming her erratic heart, attempting to relax, and then he was fully inside her and she hardly knew what to think. It had not hurt precisely, but it was an odd sensation, so full and... and then he moved.

She gasped.

“Lucy?” he said, a strangled note to his voice.

But Lucy was too struck by everything she was experiencing to reply at once.

“Lucy?” he said again, more urgently this time. “Are you... is everything...?”

“Oh, yes, splendid. Don’t stop,” she added hastily.

Conor made a muffled snorting noise but did as she asked and didn’t stop, so that was all right. She suspected he was laughing at her, but she didn’t mind that, because it was a fond sound and full of love.

“Is this good?” he murmured a moment later, and she nodded.

“Lovely,” she whispered. “You are lovely, Conor.”

The realisation that she was finally here with this man, her *husband*, was more than she could have imagined. Tears pricked at her eyes as happiness and sensation overwhelmed her, the moment so perfect she was almost afraid it would be spoiled somehow, but she trusted in him to guide her, and she followed where he led.

Even so, it was a shock, if a marvellous one, as the pleasure gathered inside her: a demanding, hectic sensation building and building until she hardly knew what to do with herself. It was at once too much and not enough.

“Relax, sweetheart. Stop chasing it. Let it happen,” he urged her gently but Lucy was so frustrated she almost shouted at him to help her before she lost her mind. Perhaps she did shout, she was beyond caring if she had or not, or perhaps he knew anyway, for he reached between them and sought out that previously secret place between her thighs. Gently but firmly his fingers circled the delicate pearl of flesh and suddenly she was flying, scattering into a million pieces in some far-off sky as something joyful exploded inside her. Lucy cried out, her body shuddering out of control as she was fragmented and thrown to the four corners of the earth, only to return to herself entirely whole and more complete than she was before.

Lucy held tight to her husband as the pleasure broke through him, too. The sound of his climax rang through her, pleasing her as she knew she had pleased him, delighting in the helpless way he clung to her in that last, exquisite moment. She caressed his back, her palms sliding easily over passion-dampened skin, knowing she would never forget the way he had

made her his for all time.

As his breathing steadied, Conor stared down at her.

“I love you,” he said, his voice hoarse but entirely sincere.

Lucy met his gaze, blinking back tears. She put her hand to his cheek, knowing her heart was in her eyes but giving him the words too, so he could be in no doubt.

“I love you too, Conor.”

Chapter 23



Dear diary,

I truly cannot believe what Papa has done now. What in heaven's name was he thinking when he made that wretched will? And now we are to live in the wilds of Scotland with a man who makes no bones about despising us. His mother has been kinder, but she too looks at us with great suspicion, and I cannot blame her for it either. How peculiar it must seem to them to have us thrown into their lives without a by your leave. From a family with a reputation such as ours, and after their treatment at Lilith's hands, I can hardly expect a warm welcome. They must believe we are up to no good and there is nothing I can do to prove otherwise.

Somehow, I must get hold of this inheritance we are due at once so I can take Jack and find some means of supporting us by myself. I am one and twenty after all, not a child, and if Papa hadn't made that stupid stipulation in his will, of age. The idea of living here with this angry man as our guardian for the next three years fills me with dread and I won't do it. No matter what I must do to escape such a fate.

—Excerpt of a diary entry from Luella Fulbright, cousin to the late Lady Buchanan.

16th May 1845, Mulcaster Castle, Cumbria.

“And then there was an awful crack, and the world turned upside down,” Kitty said with the dramatic flair Conor expected of his mother.

“Oh, I love this part,” said the Duchess of Rochford, who had taken to his new bride at once and insisted that Lucy call her Georgie, just as everyone else did.

Conor’s parents had by some miracle packed Mr Carleton back to London the morning after the wedding, and had then made themselves scarce, enjoying something of a honeymoon themselves if Conor was any judge. On their way home, they had decided it was high time they visited Georgie and Rochford and met their children. Lucy had been a little daunted by the duke, who was admittedly a terrifying looking fellow. It had only taken a few minutes in his company, however, for her to discover he doted on his beautiful wife and their children. James was a sturdy little boy of three years old, and Georgie held baby Isla in her arms. They made a contented family picture, and, after a very fine lunch, they were sitting by the fire—which was still very much needed in the castle despite a fine day—and Mama was entertaining them with the story of her and his father’s elopement.

“Well,” Kitty continued. “We were thrown upside down and the carriage reduced to matchsticks, but apart from a few bruises, we were both unharmed, which was a blessing. So, there’s Luke trying to figure out how the devil we were to get to Aylesbury before Mr Derby caught up with us, when good fortune fell into our laps.”

“Ah, yes,” the earl said with a smile. “Mr and Mrs Scripps from Ballymena.”

“Ach, ’twas fate, sure and certain,” Kitty said, her Irish accent growing stronger by the moment. “So, I tell Mrs Scripps, we’re going to see my husband’s poor mama, sick she is and all alone. Not a soul but servants about her. And she’s wide-eyed, is Mrs Scripps, seeing as how my Luke is such a fine gentleman and me nothing but a little Irish maid. So, I tell her a rare tale about how my beloved husband’s older brother is heir to a grand inheritance, but he’s a bad ’un,” she added with relish.

Conor chuckled as his father mouthed the words ‘the bottle,’ and mimed drinking from such an item.

His mother snorted and carried on in a theatrical voice. “The wicked man cares for nothing but spending his inheritance, and my own darling husband won’t get so much as a farthing, though it’s him his mama loves with all her heart,” she said, clasping her hands to her bosom. “Obadiah, I said—that’s

his name, see—Obadiah... we must tend to her ourselves, for 'tis our Christian duty.”

“I can see you as an Obadiah,” Rochford said thoughtfully.

His father gave the duke a dry look as Georgie burst out laughing. “Oh, don’t listen. You certainly do not.”

“And what happened next?” Lucy asked eagerly.

Conor watched her, happiness swelling inside him so fiercely he didn’t know how his chest could contain the feeling. To think he had been desperate to free himself of the shackles he saw binding them together when those ties only strengthened him. Since they had married, Lucy had not tripped or knocked anything over or caused any disasters, minor or major. She told him not to get comfortable because she was bound to do something dreadful eventually, but Conor suspected such events would happen far less often now. She too had changed and was calmer and more settled, safe in the knowledge that he loved her and would always support her, for he had been certain to ensure she knew that with no doubt in her mind.

“Well, they took us to Aylesbury, of course,” Kitty said with a smug grin. “And I repaid them for their trouble with an entertaining tale.”

Luke sent his wife a fond look of amusement. “Yes, as I recall, I was blessed with a lurid past that included a villainous father, a rake for a brother, my poor dear mother at death’s door, and a mad grandmother. We were bundled into the cart among a good many very unhappy fowl and smelled ripe, as you can imagine, by the time we reached our destination.”

Everyone, much amused by this tale, greeted the duke’s suggestion of a little drop of whisky as a tremendous idea and the party was merry indeed, until Kitty enquired after Georgie’s brother, Lyall.

Georgie’s face fell, and she shot a glance at her husband, who grimaced.

“Oh, dear,” said Kitty, looking between them. “I’ve said something I ought not. I do beg your pardon.”

“Oh, no, not at all,” Georgie said in a rush. “Only it’s so dreadful, but you won’t have heard, having been travelling the past days.”

“That awful wife of his has been up to her tricks, I suppose. Ruth told me what she thought of her, and she must be bad indeed, for Ruth never has a cross word for anyone, such a dear creature she is,” Kitty said stoutly.

Georgie nodded. “Indeed, she has, only she paid a high price this time. She ran away with a young man who was once a friend of Lyall’s. They got to the coast and took a boat. We believe they thought to get to Aberdeen before commencing a journey to France. They didn’t make it.”

“Oh, my word,” Kitty said, pressing her fingers to her mouth. “Oh, that poor boy. After everything she put him through, too. Still, I suppose he is free of her now, that at least is a blessing.” She shot her husband a defiant look when he murmured a protest. “Well, it’s true, and we’re all thinking it, are we not?”

“I’m afraid so,” Georgie admitted. “But it’s taken a toll on Lyall. He’s... He’s taken it badly, all of it, but that’s not all.”

Conor listened in astonishment as he heard of the disreputable Fulbright family, who were notorious for being con artists and gamblers, and how Lyall’s wife’s uncle had one last throw of the dice when he turned up his toes, leaving the care of his children to Lyall in his will.

“They arrived yesterday,” Georgie said, soothing the baby, who had begun to fuss and fidget. “So, we are waiting to hear what they are like and what will happen next.”

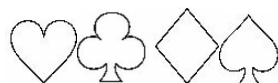
“They’re a rum lot, the Fulbrights,” Rochford said grimly. “Always looking for a way to turn others’ misfortune to their own advantage. I would not trust them an inch.”

“But the boy is only twelve,” Lucy protested, and Conor took her hand, touched by evidence of her sweet nature. “Surely we cannot condemn him, at least.”

“True, but in a family like that they would have been taught from the cradle to swindle and connive,” Rochford replied with a shrug.

Georgie sent him a despairing glance. “Oh, don’t say so. I am holding out hope that they are not in the least like Lilith was.”

Rochford bent and kissed her forehead before sitting beside her. He took baby Isla from her and bounced the child on his knee. She giggled excitedly as the duke grinned at her. “Well, hope springs eternal, love. You never know.”



Conor took Lucy for a walk in the grounds later in the afternoon. Mulcaster Castle was a hulking great place and the surroundings more wilderness than garden, but it was beautiful too, in its own way.

“I prefer Trevick,” Lucy admitted, as she stared up at the vast stone walls. “For all its size, it’s somehow a little friendlier than Mulcaster.”

Conor nodded. “It is rather austere, but Georgie has made the inside into a home for them.”

“Oh, yes, indeed. What a lovely family they are. I liked her very much.”

“Everyone does,” Conor said with a smile, though his thoughts were with Lyall.

“You are worried for her brother?”

He nodded. “Lyall was always a quiet soul, unlike his brothers. He doesn’t open up easily. This will have been hard for him. But I don’t wish to speak of that now. I will write to him when we get home and see what, if anything, I can do for him. Now, though, I am too happy and too selfish to think of anyone or anything but you, sweetheart.”

Lucy smiled at him, dimples flashing in her cheeks. “I’m happy too, Conor. More than I could ever have imagined. I... I don’t know how to explain to you just how I feel, but perhaps...”

She threw her arms about his neck and with such enthusiasm he staggered backwards, lost his balance, got his feet tangled in Lucy’s voluminous skirts and went down, crashing to the ground with a thud.

“Oof!” he exclaimed, as the breath was knocked out of him.

“Oh!” Lucy stared down at him with dismay. “Oh, Conor, I—”

Conor laughed and halted her apology by kissing her soundly, holding her tight to him and making no attempt to regain his feet. He kissed her long and deep and tenderly, so that when he finally released her, she gazed down at him, flushed and glassy eyed.

“Conor,” she breathed, her voice husky, then glancing up at the glowering castle that loomed over them. “Good Lord, anyone might be able to see us!”

“Let them see,” Conor said, and kissed her again.

Lucy gave a squeak of protest that was of short duration before melting

into his arms once more.

“Scandalous,” she murmured, when he let her up for air.

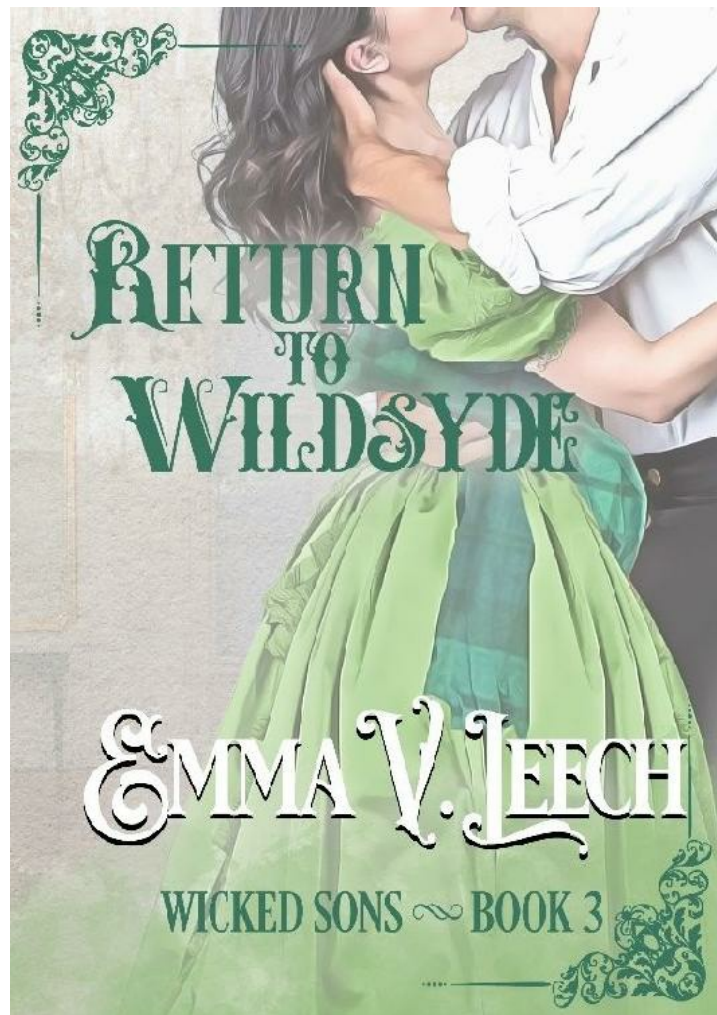
“What is? A married man kissing his wife. Pfft,” he said with a chuckle. “Let them see how much I adore you, I don’t care. Come here and let’s give them something to really scandalise them.”

And, much to his delight, Lucy let him.

Coming next in the Wicked Sons series...

Return to Wildsyde

Wicked Sons, Book 3



Turn the page for an ‘unedited’ peek at ***Return to Wildsyde***, Book 3 of Wicked Sons...

Prologue



My Lord Buchanan,

It is with deep regret that I write to inform you that the bodies of your wife and an unidentified male were this morning found off the coast of Rattray. We believe they ran into difficulties and the boat broke up on the rocks there. The necessary arrangements are in hand to restore your wife's body to you for burial.

With my sincere condolences,

—Excerpt of a letter from Mr Hamish McDonald, Justice of the Peace, to The Right Hon'ble Lyall Anderson, Viscount Buchanan, (sons of The Right Hon'ble Ruth and Gorden Anderson, The Countess and Earl of Morven).

6th May 1845, Blythe Tenement, Tottenham Court Road, Camden, London.

“Come now, my precious darling, we're not going to get anywhere if you don't cooperate with me, now are we? That's the way, lovely boy,” Luella crooned, her tone one that generations of Fulbrights had used to wheedle their own way. “If you'd just come a little closer, we could... *Drat you!*”

The cat edged farther back along the ledge, out of grabbing distance, and Luella groaned.

“Have you got him?” Mrs Wilkinson asked eagerly.

“No, the dam—dear creature is being a little stubborn.”

“Oh, dear.”

Luella pulled her head in from the window to see the sparse, bent figure

of Mrs Wilkinson wringing her handkerchief, her watery blue eyes heavy with reproach. “But you promised, Lulu.”

“I did,” Luella said brightly, cursing herself for having done so. “Just... give me a moment.” Running to the door, she went out, running down the stairs of the dingy tenement building and out onto the bustle of the street beyond. She hurried past the pawnbrokers –where she had spent far too much time of late – past Barney’s Coffee Shop, avoided a drunk intent on dancing with her outside the rag and bottle shop and made it to the butchers who gave her a baleful glance and folded his arms.

“No,” he said.

Luella shot him her most winning smile and said brightly, “It’s all right, Mr Tucker. I’m not here to ask for more on tick.”

“No, and you ain’t here to pay, neither,” he said, a knowing glint in his eyes.

Luella sighed, unable to deny it, but cast her wide grey eyes in his direction. Her eyes were her best feature, everyone said so, and Papa had made her practice this melting look in the mirror until it was perfect. None of the Fulbright line – except for her cousin Lilith – could lay claim to beauty. Though they were all well enough to look at, and Luella was a pretty girl, it was true, this was not their strength. Papa called it *animal magnetism*, but whatever it was, they had a way about them that left people with the impression they were stunning indeed and ought to be believed without question or followed to the ends of the earth.

Luella knew she had this ability, but much to her father’s fury, rarely practised it. She felt disgust for the way of life her father and many of their close kin favoured he found unaccountable. The idea that she wished to make a respectable living, he thought laughable. Still, now and then there was no other option than to bat her eyelashes, and it wasn’t as though she was trying to con the man.

“Please, Mr Tucker. Mrs Wilkinson’s cat is stuck out on the ledge outside her window and she’s on the third floor. It won’t come in, and she’s beside herself. Don’t you have just a little bit of fat, or even gristle, that I could take to temp him back inside?”

Mr Tucker sighed and shook his head. “Pull the other one, it’s got bells

on.”

“No, it’s true, I swear it,” Luella pleaded. “Look, that little scrap of fat you just cut off there, that’s all I need. Oh, please, Mr Tucker. She’s just a lonely old lady, and the cat is her only company. She’s so worried she’ll probably have an apoplexy and turn up her toes if I don’t...”

“Oh, bleedin’ hell, go on, take it,” Mr Tucker protested, wrapping the sliver of fat in a bit of newspaper and handing it over the counter to her. “Go on now and take your violins with you.”

“Thank you!” Luella said merrily, grabbing the thin parcel and blowing him a kiss before running out the door again. She hurried back to the apartment block, a tall, neglected building with soot coloured brickwork and hardly a window without a broken pane of glass. Mrs Heeley, a woman who might have been anywhere between forty and sixty, sat on the steps, watching the world go by and taking desultory swigs from a gin bottle.

“Good afternoon,” Luella said as she sidestepped something disgusting and gave a little squeak as a rat ran over her foot and behind the step Mrs Heeley was sitting on. The woman didn’t so much as blink. With a shudder, Luella hurried into the building and on up the stairs, avoiding the rotten tread which had fallen through and stepping over the one which would go any day now.

“Where have you been?” Mrs Wilkinson cried, still wringing her handkerchief.

“You’ll see,” Luella said, breathless now as she unwrapped the newspaper and hung out of the window again to see the big ginger tom glaring at her. “Now, my fine fellow, look what I have.”

Luella held the thin piece of fat out, and the cat sniffed the air.

“Ah, now I have your attention, you stubborn fool. As if you want to spend the entire day out here. Come on now,” she coaxed. The cat craned its neck towards the fat, licking his lips, but did not move. Luella drew the fat back towards her, farther out of reach. The cat inched closer, and closer still.

“Got you!” she exclaimed, grabbing hold of the cat, who was heavier than she had expected. It yowled and swiped at her, catching her hand. Luella yelped and dropped it to the floor where it sat, contentedly chewing on the fat while she inspected a livid red scratch on the back of her hand. “There’s

gratitude,” she muttered with a sigh.

“Oh, there you are, my wicked boy,” the old lady crooned, bending to stroke the cat’s head. “Ah, thank you, Lulu, you’re a good girl.”

“You’re welcome,” Luella replied with a smile, leaving the old lady to the company of her cat and climbing two more sets of stairs to her father’s apartment. Happily, the old man was out, no doubt spending coin they didn’t have in much the same way as Mrs Heeley on the front step. Jack was here, though, and her little brother looked up at her with a grin, setting aside the book he’d been reading.

“Did you rescue him?”

“Of course I did, though I was slain in battle,” she replied, holding her scratched hand up for inspection.

“Ouch,” Jack replied in sympathy. “I was going to make tea, so the water is hot if you want to wash it.”

Luella nodded and ruffled his hair. “But *is* there any tea?” she asked with a rueful smile.

“A bit. We’ll have to use the leaves three times soon though, if Pa doesn’t come up with something.”

Luella’s stomach twisted, wondering just what her father might have in mind if he couldn’t pay the ever-increasing bills that were piling up on the kitchen table. When her cousin Lilith had married Lord Buchanan, Papa had been in alt. This, he said, was the sort of triumph Luella could achieve if she only bestirred herself a little. The idea of trapping a man into marriage made Luella’s stomach turn, more so the idea of living with the poor fellow for the rest of her days. But Lord Buchanan had been a disappointment to his wife and their family when it turned out he was no fat pigeon for plucking. Her new husband was a far cannier man than Lilith had bargained for. He didn’t give a hoot for scandal, and whilst he had done the honourable thing and married her – fool that he was – that was as far as he was willing to take it. He’d not have her live in his house, nor give her free range to spend as she pleased. Lilith was furious, and Luella could only pity the poor fellow. She did not doubt her cousin’s revenge would be diabolical. She might have a face that could make an angel cry, but her heart was black as pitch.

Luella tended to her scratch and made a pot of weak tea to go with the

bread and cheese they were having for supper. She tried to remember the last time she'd eaten a piece of meat and her stomach growled so audibly she decided it was better not to think of it at all.

Afterwards, Jack took himself off to bed to read his book and Luella sat quietly at the table in the corner of the tiny room they shared, writing in her diary as she did every night. The candle flickered, sending odd shapes dancing around the room and she paused. In her mind's eyes she tried to imagine a castle in the wilds of Scotland, a big draughty place with vast fireplaces and views that looked out upon miles of wilderness, instead of no farther than the next brick wall. She wondered why Lilith hadn't simply made friends with the man she had trapped, had made him *want* to marry her, for no doubt she could have done so easily enough. Everything had always come easy to Lilith, and she was spoiled because of it. Her father was cleverer than Luella's pa, though. He had made a large sum of money on a fraudulent railway scheme that had never happened, but all the investors' money had miraculously disappeared. Luella was uncertain if she wished her father was that clever or not. At least she wouldn't have dresses that were in such a sorry state and only bread and cheese for supper, though.

She heard the front door slam and jumped at the sound. Papa was home early. Not a good sign that. If he caught sight of her, she would be in the line of fire for all the ills Papa felt had befallen them. Everything would be her fault and he would work himself up to a pitch. She tried to remember the father of her childhood, when her mother still lived. Then she had no notion that their way of life was immoral and saw only her fun-loving parents who drifted through life intending to wring every ounce of joy from it with as little effort as possible. That man had died with his wife, for he had loved her dearly, and Luella suspected her mother had been the brains behind all their schemes, for nothing had worked since.

Her father had written to Lilith over a month ago, asking her to send for them, to demand of her husband that she needed a lady's maid and asking for Luella, but no reply had come. He had made himself so furious he had collapsed, hardly able to breathe and clutching at his chest. Luella had been forced to send for the doctor who had warned him his heart was not strong. Another such temper fit could be the end of him. Of course, seeing the doctor's bill arrive had done just that and it had forced Luella to agree to pawn her silver locket to pay for it before he killed himself out of spite and

fury. Not wanting another such scene, she decided retreat was the better part of valour. Closing her diary, Luella padded to the bed and lay down, tugging the covers over her head and feigning sleep.

Chapter 1



Dear diary,

Lilith is dead.

We received the news this morning. I have tried my best to feel pity for her, but it is hard to muster any tender emotion for a woman who was always hateful to me and to Jack. My father is furious, for with her goes his golden goose, though her husband seemed to have her measure and was not the kind to be bled dry. A cold sort of man, from what I can gather, though one can hardly blame him when Lilith trapped him in such a vile manner.

How I wish Jack and I did not belong to such a family of thieves and con artists. For Papa may claim an earl as his uncle but it does not change the truth. We are no better than the confidence tricksters on street corners and Papa is a regular Captain Sharp. I wish, too, that it was not so tempting to follow in their footsteps, but we shan't. Jack and I will find a different way to live, a decent way. I only wish I knew how.

I just heard breaking china downstairs, which means we will now have even less of a tea set than we currently do. If Papa does not stop ranting and raging, he will have an apoplexy as the doctor warned him, and so I've told him, but he does not listen to either of us. I suppose I had better try to calm him before he wrecks the house or turns up his toes.

*—Excerpt of a diary entry from Luella Fulbright,
cousin to the late Lady Buchanan.*

7th May 1845, Wildsyde Castle, The Highlands of Scotland.

Lyall registered the knock at the door but didn't answer, the fire he was gazing at had died some hours ago, but it didn't register. He was numb. Shock and too many other emotions overwhelming his senses until he felt the need to shut down. The whisky had done the job right enough, and now he was paying the price for that too. There were always consequences to actions, some more painful than others.

"Lyall?"

His mother's soft voice reached him through the fog of pain and confusion, and he turned his head, feeling as though he'd been asleep a thousand years as he blinked at her.

"Ma?"

"Oh, Lyall, look at the state of you, love. Mrs Baillie is bringing you coffee and some breakfast."

"Ach, Ma, stop fretting," he said, rubbing a weary hand over his face and discovering he'd not shaved for some time. How long? He could not quite recall.

"Don't say such utterly idiotic things," his mother replied with a tut of impatience. "I am your mother, it is my job to worry about you. Did this make you feel better?" she asked, picking up the empty bottle that had rolled over the floor and rested before the dying fire? She quirked an eyebrow at him, and he grunted.

"Aye, for an hour or two."

"And now you have a headache and a sick stomach for several more," she said with a sigh.

"Ma, don't nag, I beg ye," he pleaded, massaging his aching temples.

She sighed and said nothing more and he felt a gentle hand stroke his hair. The tender touch made his throat tight, and he swallowed hard, determined not to make more of a fool of himself than he'd been made of late.

“Is Da here yet?” he asked, uncertain if he was dreading the answer or not.

“Not yet. I expect he’ll arrive soon though, and don’t look so wretched. He’s on your side, Lyall, surely you know that?”

“Aye, but that does nae mean he’s proud of the mess I’m in.”

“That woman...” his mother began, and then took a breath for whenever she spoke of his wife – his *late* wife – she got a bit het up. “Lilith made this mess, Lyall, and a woman like that could turn any man inside out. When I think of the things she might have achieved if she had not been so shallow and spiteful, it makes me furious. I suppose I ought to pity her, for her parents created her in their own image and she stood little chance of being anything but what she was. I admit I am struggling to do so, though now she has met such a sorry end it is rather easier, I suppose,” she added with her usual blunt honesty.

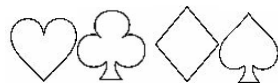
She turned then and looked at him directly and he knew she was going to ask him how he felt, what was going on in his head, but he did not know how to answer her questions. Relief was a big part of it, and that he should feel such a thing when a beautiful young woman had lost her life, not to mention a man he had known since he was a lad, well, that surely did not reflect well on him? More than that, though, he was angry. He was angry that he had been trapped and manipulated and that she had continued to do so or tried to. Her parents had tried as well, constantly haranguing him for cruelty to their daughter. Apparently, giving her a beautiful home and a generous allowance was not enough. She ought to have a place in London and a carriage of her own and money enough to entertain and... the list was endless. As if they believed Lyall was fool enough to allow her to run wild among the *ton* bearing his name, taking lovers as she pleased and making him a laughingstock. Not in this lifetime.

He supposed his mother was right. Lilith had been as much a victim of her parents' ambitions as he had. It was they who had chosen him as her mark – as she had bitterly informed him when she realised she had met an immovable object who could not be twisted about her finger. The whole family were an ignominious band of confidence tricksters, liars and adventuresses. He could only thank God he was done with them now, though he did not doubt her parents would try to make this his fault and demand

compensation. Though it made him sick to his stomach, Lyall knew he would pay them a sum, just to make them go away and keep them out of his life. He just wanted to be quiet for a while, to go back to the life he had lived before Lilith had ruined everything. It had been only five months since she and her parents had staged the little scene which had caught him so neatly, and yet he felt he had aged fifty years in the interim.

“Lyall,” his mother began, and he knew she was going to do it, to attempt to make him speak of his feelings, of what had happened, of the future that ought to stretch out brightly before him when all he could see was a fog of confusion. He sprang to his feet, instantly regretting the action as his head spun and his stomach twisted.

“Ma, if you’ll excuse me...” he managed, and fled the room before he boked in front of her. Ah well, at least he had a valid excuse for avoiding her questions. Every cloud...



By the time his father had arrived, the devil had stopped using Lyall’s head as an anvil and the pain had subsided to a dull thud. At his mother and Mrs Baillie’s insistence, he had eaten a plate of sausages, eggs and fried potatoes and, rather to his astonishment, it had stayed put. So, he had washed and shaved and put on clean clothes and done his best to look like a man in charge of his own destiny instead of the wreck he was feeling before he faced the Earl of Morven.

Making his way down the worn stone treads of the staircase, Lyall was unsurprised to find his mother waiting for him. She was a tall woman of generous proportions and handsome rather than beautiful, for her features were strong and her dark hair threaded with silver. The Countess of Morven was also the fiercest and most capable woman he’d ever known, and he was proud of her. His father adored her and though the two of them were more than capable of arguing loud enough to rattle the rafters, there had never been a moment when Lyall had not been certain of their devotion to one another. Strange, really, when one considered the circumstances of their marriage.

His mother, the daughter of a wealthy Cit, had despaired of finding the titled husband her father had wished her to marry. His father had been desperate for money. So, his mother had proposed to his father, offering her

hefty dowry as the incentive. She said it was his knees that gave her courage, an attribute she found unaccountably alluring. An unlikely beginning to a love story that seen them through the intervening years, four children, and the pressures of inheriting an earldom. But they were as strong and committed to each other now as they had always been, and Lyall wondered at the amount of luck involved in such a union, or perhaps it was fate. Either way, luck or fate had deserted him, and he was damned if he'd get caught in such a trap ever again. From now on, he'd have his eyes wide open, and no pretty face or sweet words would ever tempt him again.

"He's waiting in your study," she said, her smile warm and encouraging. Lyall nodded, bracing himself.

"Oh, and... Hamilton is here too," she added in a rush.

Lyall groaned. "Ma! I told ye I dinnae want the eejit here, blethering at me from dawn until dusk. Why did ye no stop him like I asked?"

His mother's usually placid face darkened. "Your brother has come all this way because he was worried for you, because he wanted to be with you in your time of trouble. You damn well be grateful for that or you'll have me to answer to."

"Aye," he said uneasily, knowing better than to take that threat with anything less than seriousness. "I beg your pardon."

"I should think so, though it is Hamilton you had better be civil to. I suppose you threatened Muir with dire consequences, should he show his face?"

"Aye, reckon I might have done," he admitted. He'd written to Hamilton too. Sadly, Hamilton was stubborn as a mule when the mood took him and did not recognise danger when presented with it. "I'd better go in then," he said, gesturing to his study door, which never felt like his study when his father was in it, seeing as how it had been his for most of Lyall's childhood.

He almost knocked, only stopping himself at the last moment as he reminded himself that Wildsyde was his now and his father a guest in his home.

Lyall walked in to discover his father staring up at a stag's head with a fine rack of antlers. Tied to the antlers were half a dozen faded pink ribbons.

"I never had the heart to take them off," he said as his father turned to

look at him.

“I’m glad,” the man said, smiling. “They always served as a reminder to me that your ma was nae only the love of my life, but a terrifying adversary should I be fool enough to put a foot out of line.”

Lyall laughed and crossed the room to shake his father’s hand. “’Tis good to see ye, da.”

His father held his hand in his firm grip and gave a snort before pulling him into an embrace. “Haud yer wheesht,” the man said, when Lyall protested and made to pull away. “Ye may be as big and ugly as I am, but ye are still my boy and ye are hurting. It does nae make ye less of a man or less worthy of my respect because things went awry.”

Lyall’s chest hurt, with both gratitude and shame, for his da was being kind when he had every right to call him a fool. His father relaxed his hold and put his hand to his face, looking him in the eye. “Ye are nae the first to be fooled by a pretty face, as I told ye at the time, but God has delivered ye. Now ye have a second chance, and that poor wicked child has paid a high price for her shenanigans, but ye are free, son. Don’t squander the chance ye have been given, aye?”

“Aye,” Lyall said, nodding. His father smiled and patted his cheek affectionately.

“Are ye nae gonna offer me a drink? Where’s ye manners?”

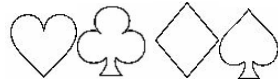
Laughing now, Lyall turned and made his way to the whisky decanter, pouring them both a generous measure.

“That’s more like it,” his father said, sprawling comfortably in a chair before the fire and taking an appreciative sip. “Now then, tell me how things are going at Wildsyde, I miss the auld place, ye ma does too. ’Tis all well and good being an earl, but life was good here, simpler, aye? I must be getting on in years for I feel nostalgic for the days when you and your siblings were children and ye scrapes nae more serious than a skinned knee. Well, except for Muir, that laddie could get himself in tae trouble in an empty room.”

Lyall smiled wryly, for he too had been feeling the loss of those years, which seemed so long ago now.

“Drink up, Lyall. Ye are looking a tad peely-wally. Hair of the dog that bit ye, aye?” his father said, his tawny eyes twinkling.

Lyall looked down at his glass of whisky apprehensively. “Aye,” he said, and took a large mouthful, praying it didn’t bite him again.



Lyall closed the study door behind him, leaving his father dozing contentedly in the chair by the fire. He’d had a rather arduous journey to get here and deserved a nap before dinner, so Lyall had left him in peace.

“Ye survived with ye skin, then?”

Looking around, Lyall observed his youngest brother, Hamilton, sitting on the cold stone steps of the castle stairs.

“Ye will get piles, sitting ye arse on that cold stone,” he said by way of reply, as it was a refrain their mother told them often, though she put it more politely.

“Nah, just a cold arse,” Hamilton said with a grin, getting to his feet and coming over to embrace Lyall. Lyall endured it stoically, never having been a hugger. Why everyone felt the need to do so now, he could not fathom. Lilith was dead, not him. “I dinnae know quite what to say, truth be told,” his brother said seriously.

“There’s nothing that needs saying,” Lyall said, his voice firm as he strode to the front door.

“Ach, Lyall, don’t do that,” Hamilton protested, hurrying after him.

“Do what?” he demanded, for his temper was fraying now. He’d had about as much sympathy as a man could stomach.

“Act like there’s no a problem and ye have nae a care in the world.”

“Well, I don’t, do I?” Lyall said, turning to face his brother. “She’s dead. I’m free and I had a lucky escape. There’s an end to it, Hamilton. I dinnae need a shoulder to cry on. ‘Twas good of ye to come and I appreciate it, but there’s nae need to stay.” And with that, he went out and closed the door.

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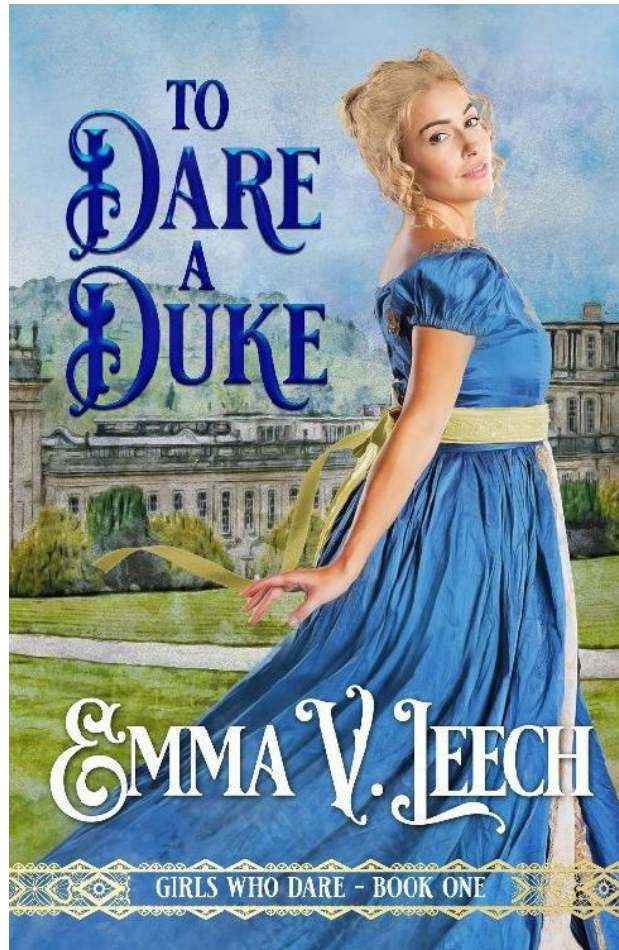
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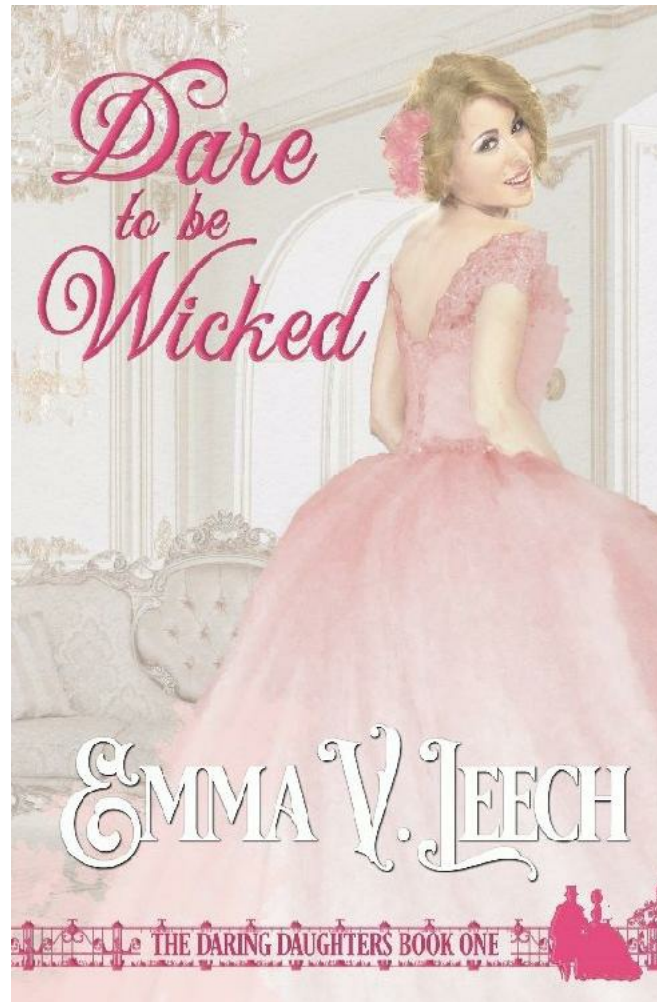
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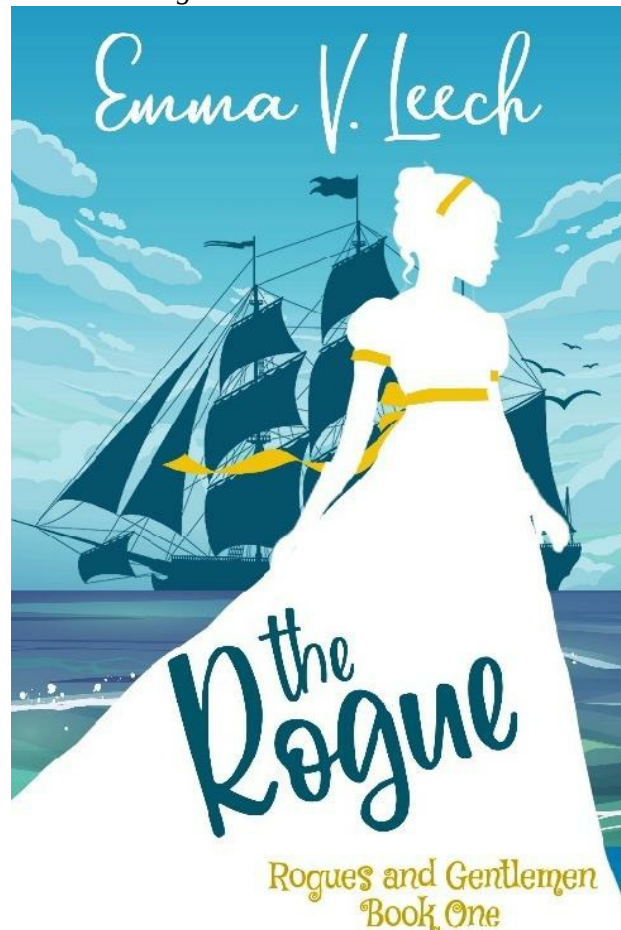
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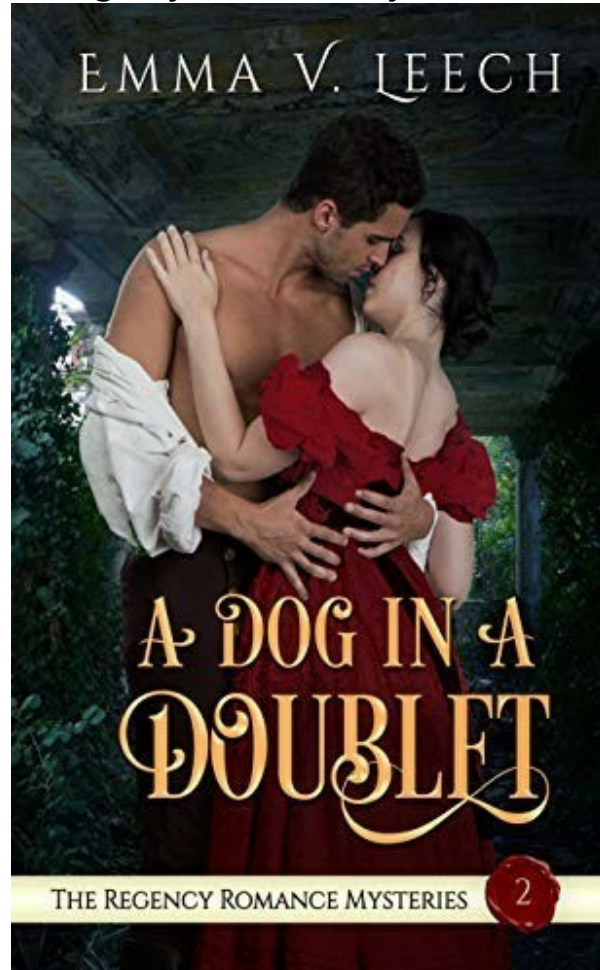
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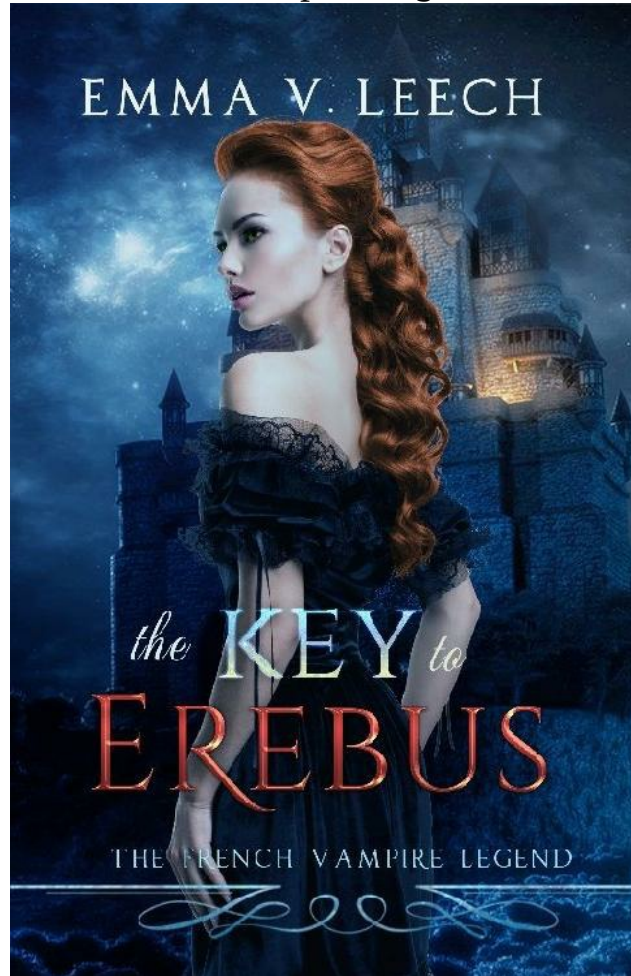
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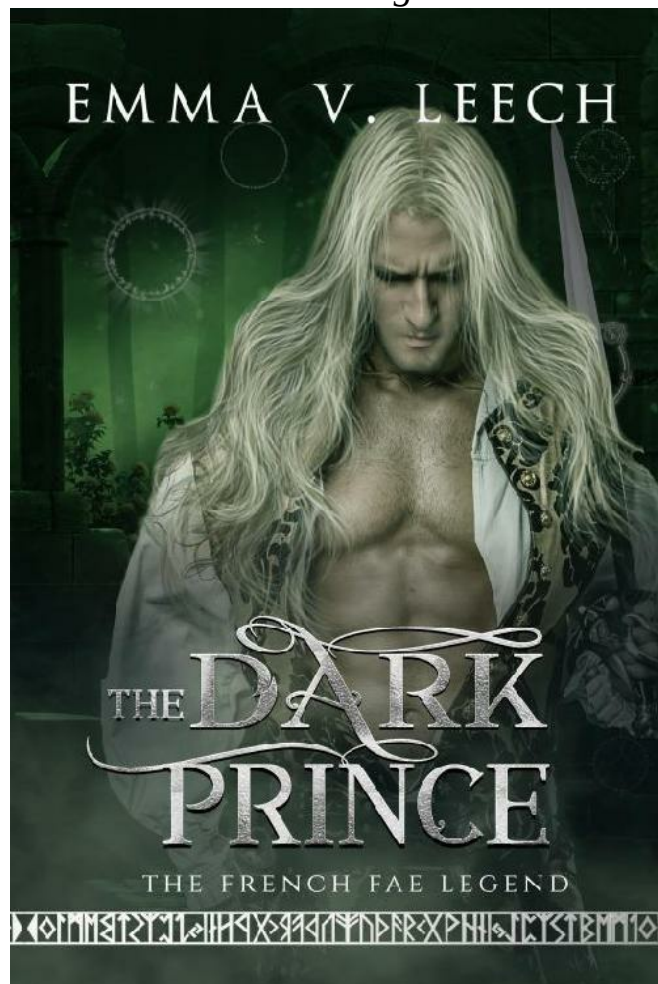
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