

A woman with blonde hair in a braid, wearing a yellow Victorian-style dress with a red scarf, is reading a book in a library. The room has bookshelves, a window with sunlight, and framed portraits on the wall.

THE
MAYFAIR
LITERARY
LEAGUE

A
MISTAKEN
IDENTITY

LANA
WILLIAMS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A Mistaken Identity



Book 3 of



A Victorian Romance

Lana Williams

USA Today Bestselling Author

A Mistaken Identity

Book 3 of The Mayfair Literary League

By Lana Williams

JOIN THE LADIES OF The Mayfair Literary League as they pursue a new mission: For Better or Worse.

One bold move could change their futures...

The bachelors of London won't know what hit them when these bookish ladies set their sights on the men in their lives who don't see them for who they truly are—yet.

How far would you go in the name of friendship?

A terrible secret...

Lady Harriet Persimmons stopped dreaming of love long ago. Her stepfather's cruelty left her with scars that are only part of what makes her unlovable. Yet one man has caught her admiration even if he's out of reach.

To Harriet's dismay, her shy friend Frances carries a torch for the same gentleman. Even worse, Frances asks for Harriet's help to gain his notice at a house party.

Joseph Harris, Viscount Garland, attends the party with one goal—to convince his wealthy host to invest in his new venture. The sweet yet seductive messages he receives from the man's daughter catch him off guard even as they intrigue him. But the notes don't seem to match the lady herself, and her lovely friend is the one who captures his interest.

A mistaken identity...

Each moment Harriet spends with Joseph trying to convince him why Frances is perfect for him has her heart more and more entangled. The kiss they share is a terrible mistake, but one she can't forget.

Will a mistaken identity end with the chance for a happily ever after?

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Other Books in The Mayfair Literary League Series:



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A Mistaken Identity, Book 3
A Simple Favor, Book 4, Coming Summer 2023



Prologue



London, England 1870

“Now for the final item on our agenda,” Lady Harriet Persimmons began as she sent a nervous glance at Lady Tabitha Malton, a dear friend and fellow member of The Mayfair Literary League. “Who will be the next to move forward with *For Better or Worse*?”

Tabitha, or Tibby, as she was known to her friends, knew of Harriet’s plan to volunteer to be the next member to step forward for the league’s mission of making a bold move to catch the notice of the man for whom they held a secret *tendre*.

The sick feeling in the pit of Harriet’s stomach suggested she was either about to make a terrible mistake or had finally found the courage to reach for more in her life.

If only she knew which it was.

The *For Better or Worse* initiative had been introduced by Lady Phoebe Fitzroy, who was now the Countess of Bolton since she’d recently married her secret *tendre*. As founder of the league, she knew each of the five other members well and discovered they had something in common in addition to their love of reading—they were invisible to the gentlemen for whom they carried a secret admiration.

Phoebe had challenged each member of the book group, who’d all experienced five or more Seasons, to do something to make those men see them in a new light with the hope of catching their attention. Though Phoebe had experienced a bumpy road on her path to a happily ever after, no one could deny her success.

Still, Harriet had doubts. Given her situation, what was the point of gaining a man’s notice? Once he came to know her, he would turn and walk the other way without a backward glance.

But what if he didn’t?

That was the voice in her head she couldn't silence. The question called to her in the quiet moments of her days. Unfortunately, she had far too many of those. It was just her and her mother, and they'd gone through so much in the past decade.

Those dark memories were unwelcome, but especially today when she was doing her best to think of her own future for once.

From what Tibby had reported moments ago to the league members regarding her attempt at a bold move, the second one to do so, it was difficult to say whether she would see true success. The situation for Tibby and Captain Shaw was still quite uncertain.

However, the courage both Phoebe and Tibby had shown was inspiring and made Harriet wonder if she might follow their examples.

The league meetings were something Harriet looked forward to each month, and since she was hosting this one as Phoebe was on her wedding trip, she needed to keep her thoughts from drifting.

Even more so since she intended to do the unthinkable—volunteer to be the next to make a bold step toward her future.

This was her chance—the impetus she needed—to attract the notice of Joseph Harris, Viscount Garland. She couldn't say precisely why she had these unsettling feelings for him. After all, it wasn't as if she knew him well. Yet she couldn't deny the flutters she experienced when she caught sight of him across the ballroom. Heaven help her if he happened to speak to her, not that such a thing often occurred.

The handsome viscount had a kind smile and a way of watching her as if truly interested in what she had to say. Shadows marked his hazel eyes, suggesting he'd endured a depth of pain few others had and come out on the other side.

Though she couldn't imagine what might've happened to him. From the little she knew, his life seemed perfect, but she recognized those shadows because she was a survivor as well.

It was as if his wounded soul called to hers because few others could understand what they'd been through.

Harriet gave herself a mental shake at her ridiculous thoughts. In all honesty, she wasn't even sure if he knew her name, though they'd been introduced. She wasn't the kind of lady that people remembered. How many times had she been introduced to the same person twice because they'd forgotten her?

The longing to have Viscount Garland look at her and truly see her was overwhelming. She wanted it more than her next breath. The realization had her digging deep for courage and lifting her hand from her lap.

Before she raised it fully, Frances Melbourne jerked to her feet. "I would like to try."

Harriet's breath left her body in a whoosh as her hand fell to her lap, disappointment spearing through her. Frances was one of her very best friends, but Harriet had no idea that she carried a *tendre* for someone. Then again, Harriet hadn't told Frances about hers either.

Ignoring the sympathetic look Tibby sent her, Harriet quickly masked her distress. Hiding her emotions had become a necessary means of survival before her stepfather's death. Harriet had become a master at it.

Rather than indulging in self-pity, she rose to hug Frances. "How brave of you."

"Thank you. But we will see if I manage to follow through with it." Frances' brown eyes brimmed with a mix of nerves and excitement.

Tibby hugged Frances as well. "That is the purpose of having the league involved. We will offer support and encourage you to move forward."

"Yes, we will," Harriet agreed, careful to avoid looking at Tibby.

Winifred and Millicent joined them, along with their newest member, Lady Marion.

Once refreshments were served and the ladies were visiting, Tibby moved close to Harriet. “Just because Frances is proceeding doesn’t mean you have to wait,” she whispered.

“I know. But maybe this is a sign that I should think further on the matter.” Indecision filled Harriet, stealing her earlier courage.

“Don’t think too long,” Tibby advised. “Remember, we don’t want to live with regret.”

Harriet nodded even as she worried her lip. “True. But this is probably for the best. I don’t even have a plan yet.”

“You will soon. Be prepared to take a leap of faith when the opportunity presents itself.”

Harriet pondered her words as the conversation continued around her. No matter how she’d considered the possibilities, she couldn’t think of how such an opportunity would occur. She didn’t see Viscount Garland often, other than at an occasional ball.

Her gaze rested on Frances again, who seemed to have gained enthusiasm from her announcement. Her normally shy demeanor had changed to one more animated as she spoke to the other ladies.

Harriet smiled. If this endeavor brought Frances happiness, all the better. Harriet was pleased for her.

She hoped her own day would come. For now, she would support her friend as she moved forward and learn from Frances’ experience.

Never mind the deep pang of regret that felt like a splinter in her heart.



Chapter One



Six Weeks Later...

Joseph Harris, Viscount Garland, entered the small shop on Bond Street and paused to study his mother as she perused the glass case where a selection of ribbons, parasols, and embroideries was displayed.

He was well aware that he was the only man in the place, mainly because of the glances the other ladies shopping cast his way. They clearly wished he would leave. How ridiculous that he'd had to resort to paying his parents' footman to send word when his mother stepped out for an afternoon of shopping just so he'd have the chance to speak with her alone.

His father left him no choice. The Earl of Caldwell's religious fervor meant any conversation with him was fraught with strife. Joseph refused to speak with him unless necessary.

If possible, Joseph would've cut off all ties with him. For the most part, his younger siblings had already done so. His sister had married the first man who'd showed interest, now lived in the country, and was expecting her first child. One of his brothers had also married and the youngest was studying to become a solicitor. That was a particular sore spot with their father, who'd wanted Isaac to become a clergyman. All of them, including Joseph, had left home as soon as they were of age and had the means to do so.

But his mother remained.

Joseph knew there was little he could do to protect her, especially when she refused to leave her husband. That meant Joseph did what he could to see her. If his father went out, which was rare, Joseph stopped by. If his mother went shopping, Joseph tried to join her.

Thank goodness the footman was willing to alert him with a message when either of those occasions occurred.

“Good afternoon, Mother,” he said quietly as he joined her at the counter.

Her grey gown with bell-shaped sleeves, only a hint of a bustle, and an old-fashioned black bonnet were much simpler than the ruffled and trimmed gowns most women wore these days. One could easily mistake her attire for mourning. He wondered if the choice was deliberate on her part. Did she mourn for a different life than the one she had?

“Joseph.” She glanced at him, her hazel eyes so like his own wide with surprise. She looked behind him, her brow furrowing with worry. How he hated that look. “You’re alone?”

He wasn’t certain why she bothered to ask. It wasn’t as if he accompanied his father anywhere, let alone shopping. “Yes.”

The taut lines on her narrow face eased, and she drew a relieved breath. “We haven’t seen you for some time. I hope you are well.”

That was because his father had remained home, and she hadn’t left the house. But he didn’t bother mentioning those reasons as they would fall on deaf ears. “I am. Are you?”

She was thinner than he’d like, lending her a fragile air. Yet he knew she was stronger than she looked, much like a reed bending in a strong gale, only to recover once the storm was over.

“I am.” She glanced at the glass case. “I was just admiring the display.”

Joseph followed her gaze to the pieces of lace trim that had caught her interest. “Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“Oh, no. I don’t need anything.” She never did. Yet he didn’t miss the way her focus lingered on one particular trim with a shell-like design.

His father disapproved of such embellishments, along with bold colors, or anything else that drew attention to the female body. Was it any wonder his sister had married young to

escape the strict rules that had governed their home? She seemed happy, and he sincerely hoped she was.

“Please don’t tell your father I was here,” she whispered with a quick look around the shop. As if he would. “He doesn’t like me to shop in places like this.”

“Of course not.” He touched her arm to reassure her but as always, she stiffened in response, uncomfortable with displays of affection. Joseph blamed that on his father as well.

“What have you been doing of late?” he asked.

“The usual things, I suppose.” As if realizing he wanted to know more, she added, “I’m working on a new piece of embroidery.”

“Oh?” His heart ached that such an ordinary activity was the extent of her news. She had loved to paint when he was young and was quite skilled at watercolors. His father preferred she spend her time doing something more industrious. “What are you creating?”

She glanced at him from under her lashes, no doubt confused by his word choice. But he wanted her to know that even if she was stitching seat cushions, pillows, or something equally practical, she was still creating. “It’s a garden scene for a pillow. Quite colorful.”

He smiled, appreciating that she found small ways to rebel against his father’s preference for all things monochrome, not to mention his need for control. “I look forward to seeing it.”

“Your father has been busy.”

“Oh?” With something other than quoting Bible verses, he wondered.

“Reverend Henderson has been a regular visitor of late.”

The news didn’t please Joseph.

Reverend Charles Henderson was a devout Christian as well. It was no wonder his father admired the man. However, Henderson had a slick quality about him that Joseph didn’t care for. Already, his father had given him money on

numerous occasions. From what Joseph had discovered, it added up to a significant amount.

Yet his father insisted there wasn't enough money to drill a new well or purchase updated plows for their country estate, not to mention roof and fence repairs.

"I'd hoped the man would find someone else to bother." Joseph didn't think his mother cared for the man either, though she never said as much.

That she didn't disagree with his comment suggested she might think the same. Her silence only made him worry more.

Joseph had grown concerned over the past few years about his father's lack of interest in what was happening to the tenants and the declining income of the estate.

He'd researched new methods of farming to make the land more efficient as well as new strains of seeds to improve the harvest and had several ideas they could implement to increase income. But his father refused to invest in any of it. With little money of his own, Joseph was hard-pressed to make improvements without his father's agreement.

However, he'd been working on an investment opportunity that could provide funds for those improvements. First, he needed to find some investors.

"He closets himself in with your father for hours at a time."

The matter sounded concerning, especially since he didn't trust Henderson.

"Do you know of what they speak?" Frequent meetings could mean they were planning something. If so, Joseph wanted to know what it was.

His father might not care what happened to the people who depended on the Caldwell estate for their livelihood, but Joseph did. Anything he could do now to provide additional income would lessen the problems he'd face when he inherited.

“No.” Yet the wrinkle of her brow suggested she knew or suspected something.

He waited a moment, but she said nothing more. “If you happen to hear any details, please let me know.”

Her mouth tightened, and for a moment, he feared she’d refuse. “I’ll try.”

“Thank you.”

“I should be going,” she said.

“Are you sure there isn’t something you’d like to buy while you’re here?”

Again, she glanced at the lace trim with the fancy shells but immediately shook her head. “No. I don’t need anything.”

Perhaps. But sometimes, it was nice to have something simply because one wanted it. He didn’t press her when it would only make her uncomfortable.

“It was nice to see you, Joseph.” Her gaze held on him, raking over his face, making him wonder what she saw. To his surprise, she leaned close and hugged him, albeit awkwardly.

He kissed her cheek, his heart squeezing with regret. “Take care, Mother.”

She nodded and walked to the door. But the expression on her face when she’d spoken about Reverend Henderson remained in his mind. If she was troubled by the reverend’s conversations with his father, he was, too.

The situation made it even more important that he move forward with his investment plan as quickly as possible. But first, he wanted to purchase the lace trim for her that she’d so admired.



HARRIET PAUSED TO STUDY a silk gown in a dressmaker’s window on Bond Street. The fabric looked as if it had been woven by fairies the way it shimmered in the sunlight.

“Isn’t that pretty?” Her mother halted beside her then looked at Harriet. “Would you like to inquire inside about it?”

How she wished that was possible. But the low décolletage of the gown had Harriet pressing a hand to her chest, her gloved fingers brushing the high neck of the one she wore. Her scars would never allow her to wear a creation like that.

As if reading her mind, her mother gestured toward the gown. “We could add a lace insert, and it would still be very pretty.”

Harriet shook her head. While that was true, *she* would know the reason for the extra lace. She’d learned long ago to put aside her bitterness over the scars that covered her chest, but she had yet to stop longing when she saw others wearing daring gowns.

“I have more than enough gowns,” she said with a smile.

She and her mother lived on a limited income, but as far as Harriet was concerned, they lived in comfort.

Her mother was a widow twice over. While Harriet missed her father, who had died from illness when she was ten, she didn’t miss her stepfather, who’d died in an accident nearly two years ago.

Though she worried her mother was lonely, she hoped she didn’t marry again. Not when the last one had proven so disastrous. Her stepfather had fooled them both until after the vows had been said.

By then, it had been too late.

She and her mother often enjoyed window shopping on Bond Street as it was a pleasant way to spend an idle afternoon even if neither of them needed anything.

“Are you certain you don’t want something new for Frances’ house party?” her mother asked, gesturing toward the shop next door that sold buttons, lace, and ribbon. “It will be here before you know it.”

“I don’t think so.” Harriet enjoyed nice things, much like other young ladies her age, but didn’t care to draw too much

attention to herself by wearing the latest fashion or bright embellishments.

“I shall miss you while you’re gone,” her mother said with a smile. “Ten days is a long time to be away.”

“I will miss you as well. Are you certain you don’t want to come with us? I’m sure Frances would be happy to have you. We could share a room and the cooler air of the country would do us both good.”

Frances’ parents were holding a house party at their country estate west of London. The gathering would consist of a combination of Mr. and Mrs. Melbourne’s family, friends, and associates from London along with some of the local gentry.

“I think I prefer to remain home,” her mother said. “You will have an enjoyable time without me. Besides, your uncle will stop by, I’m sure.”

Harriet’s uncle, Matthew Hancock, had moved to London after his wife died nine years ago, and had recently been courting Tibby’s mother, much to Tibby’s delight.

Harriet released a quiet breath of relief at her mother’s refusal. It would be easier if her mother remained here as she wouldn’t approve of what Frances had asked of Harriet.

Frances had approached Harriet a few weeks ago and asked for her help. Apparently, the gentleman Frances was interested in had been invited to the party, too. Frances struggled with shyness and asked Harriet to help her catch his notice.

Harriet had mixed feelings about doing so. She adored Frances but wanted her friend to find the courage and determination to move forward on her own.

When she’d tried to explain that, Frances had shaken her head. “I can’t. The moment he speaks to me, I won’t be able to say a word in return. Please say you’ll help me.”

Of course, Harriet had agreed. But she would do her best to encourage Frances to gain the gentleman’s notice on her own. She was only going to help bolster Frances’ confidence.

The plan would be easier if Frances told her who the man was, but she refused to disclose it until the party, saying she feared doing so would bring bad luck and keep him from coming.

In two days, Harriet would travel with Frances and her parents by train to Melbourne House. She looked forward to the trip. Rumors suggested that the country estate was impressive. Frances' grandfather had made a fortune in textiles before selling the business and buying the place, leaving it to his only son upon his death.

"I suppose I should become accustomed to you being gone," her mother continued as they walked to the lace shop window. "When you marry, I won't see you nearly as often."

It was all Harriet could do not to dispute her comment. She couldn't imagine marrying. Not when doing so meant revealing her secret. She pressed her hand to her chest again, the scars there a reminder of that secret.

Harriet had tried to explain her feelings several times, but despite her poor experience with her last marriage, her mother continued to insist that when Harriet found the right man, he would overlook her scars.

But Harriet knew the truth—the worst of the scars were on the inside and couldn't be overcome.

It was truly for the best that Frances had volunteered for the *For Better or Worse* mission instead of her. Harriet had grown accustomed to the idea of being a spinster. Mostly. Or at least she had until Viscount Garland had strolled into her world.

"I'm so pleased your uncle is nearby," her mother said, bringing Harriet's thoughts back to the conversation. He lived a short walk from their house in Mayfair and visited frequently.

"We don't see him as often now that he has been courting Tibby's mother." Harriet and Tibby had arranged for them to meet a couple of months ago. Much to their surprise, he and Lady Dunford seemed quite taken with one another.

“True,” her mother agreed. “But he still makes time for us and for that I’m grateful. I wonder if I should consider getting a dog like the one he gave Lady Dunford.”

Harriet looked at her mother in surprise. “I didn’t think you liked dogs.”

“I didn’t think I did either. But Pekoe is adorable and so well behaved. It would be nice to have that sort of companionship.”

Harriet smiled. “Perhaps we should have Uncle Hancock look for one for you. He seems to be an excellent judge of dogs since he found one for Captain Shaw’s mother as well.”

A lady dressed in a dull grey gown with her hair tightly bound under a black bonnet emerged from the lace shop, bumping into Harriet. “Terribly sorry,” she murmured with barely a glance at Harriet.

The unhappiness—or was it despair?—etched on her narrow face made Harriet wonder at its cause. She knew from experience that everyone had a story, including herself. How sad to think the lady was so distraught.

The woman’s attire suggested she was in half-mourning. Perhaps that was the reason for her apparent sadness.

As Harriet watched, she walked toward the street, seemingly unaware that she crossed people’s paths, causing them to halt to avoid her, as she went. Without slowing her pace, the lady stepped off the curb into the street.

Harriet glanced up and down the busy street where carriages, riders, and coaches rumbled past, some at an alarming pace. Surely the woman would take care to navigate the heavy traffic. Yet her gaze remained focused on the ground rather than the approaching conveyances.

One oncoming carriage was driving far too fast and approached the woman at a fast clip.

“Oh, dear,” Harriet’s mother said as she watched the scene as well. “That carriage is going to—”

Before her mother completed the thought, Harriet ran toward the woman, hoping to catch her.

The driver of the approaching carriage seemed unaware of the danger as he flicked the reins for the horses to go even faster.

Harriet's heart hammered as she rushed forward, fearful she wouldn't reach the woman in time. With a lunge, she grabbed the woman's arm, jerking her back just as the carriage flew past.

"Out of the way!" the driver shouted.

Harriet wanted to shake her fist at the man, but he'd already passed by. Instead, she turned to the woman whose arm she still held. "Are you all right?"

The lady's hazel eyes were wide with shock as she stared at Harriet. Her mouth opened but no sound emerged.

"What happened?"

Harriet turned at the male voice, surprise stiffening her entire body at the sight of Viscount Garland staring at her.



Chapter Two



Joseph looked between his mother and the lady who had saved her in disbelief. “Are either of you hurt?”

He’d walked out of the shop in time to see his mother step into the path of an oncoming carriage that showed no sign of slowing.

The sight of the galloping horse and the tall carriage wheels drawing ever closer wasn’t one he’d soon forget.

His mother glanced down as if to check to make certain all was well before looking back at him. “I—I believe I’m well. Thanks to this kind lady,” she said as she gestured toward the woman.

“The driver was going far too fast.” The lady, who looked vaguely familiar, scowled as she stared down the street to where the carriage had disappeared from sight.

“Oh, my goodness.” Another lady joined them and wrapped an arm around the younger one. “That was a near miss. Thank goodness neither of you was hurt.”

Based on the faint resemblance between them and the age difference, they appeared to be mother and daughter. But his concern was for his own parent, especially when she was visibly shaken by the incident.

“Mother,” Joseph began as he reached for her trembling hand, his heart still pounding with fear, “you must take better care.”

“I suppose my thoughts were on our conversation rather than the traffic.”

Guilt struck him at her words. He hated to think his comments about Reverend Henderson’s visits had bothered her when she already had enough on her mind. He needed to keep his worry to himself.

“Please don’t mention this to your father.” Her face went paler with the request.

Joseph held tighter to her hand, ignoring the curious looks of the two strangers. “No, I won’t.” On that, they agreed. He wouldn’t be pleased with either of them or the fact that they’d been together.

He tucked her hand under his arm, determined to see her to her carriage. He studied her a moment longer, wondering what exactly had caused her to be so distracted that she’d nearly been run over.

With a quiet breath of relief, he attempted a smile at her rescuer. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“I’m pleased I was able to help.” Wide blue eyes the color of a bright summer sky held on him as a hint of blush tinged her cheeks. She was actually quite pretty and definitely looked familiar.

“Have we met?” he asked, still trying to remember if he should know her.

“Yes. Twice.” Her lashes fluttered downward, covering those amazing eyes.

He frowned, having difficulty believing he wouldn’t remember. While he tended to avoid speaking to ladies and their mothers as he had no plans to marry in the near future, he couldn’t imagine that he would’ve forgotten this lovely lady.

She gave a brief shake of her head as if to suggest it didn’t matter. “The Earl and Countess of Bolton are dear friends, and I believe you know Captain Shaw, as well.”

“Of course.” He nodded, his memory slowly returning. They’d been introduced at a ball, though he couldn’t say which one. Why hadn’t he noted her beauty then?

Perhaps it was the sunlight that made her look especially attractive. Her skin was smooth and glowed with good health, and her heart-shaped face had high cheekbones and a slim, pert nose. The hair beneath her narrow bonnet was a blend of light and dark with the paler strands winning the day.

“Mother, you might remember Viscount Garland,” she said.

“Of course. How nice to see you again.”

“A pleasure.” He bowed, aware of his mother’s hand still trembling under his arm. “May I present my mother, Anna Harris, the Countess of Caldwell.”

To his dismay, the young lady dipped into a curtsy but didn’t share her or her mother’s name. Of course, she didn’t when they’d already been introduced. How unfortunate that he couldn’t remember, nor could he think of a polite way to ask.

“Thank you again,” his mother told the younger lady, clearly ready to depart since she was still upset.

“You’re quite welcome.” The lady’s gaze held on his mother, and he wondered if she saw the same sadness he did.

He released a quiet sigh of frustration. He had done what he could to help, but she needed to stand up for herself as well.

However, he understood why she so often chose not to. His father’s wrath was unpleasant, to say the least. Defying him in any way was rarely worth the argument that followed.

“Are you certain you’re all right?” the lady’s mother asked. “We could find a place to sit and rest for a time.” She glanced around as if searching for one.

“No need,” his mother said quickly. “My carriage isn’t far.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Joseph offered.

“Very well.” She smiled politely. “It was a pleasure to meet you both.”

“And you as well,” the older lady said.

“I wish you a good day,” Joseph added. Then with a nod, he turned away. “Which way is your carriage?”

His mother tipped her head across the street.

As they moved away, he couldn’t resist looking back at the pretty rescuer and found her watching him. How he wished he

could remember her name.



THREE DAYS LATER, HARRIET paused after the footman assisted her to alight from the coach at Melbourne House in Wiltshire. The sight of the imposing mansion was enough to give one pause. Though she knew Frances' parents were wealthy, one look at the estate suggested that was an understatement.

Frances' grandfather had bought large tracts of land with his fortune, including the mansion. Arthur Melbourne, Frances' father, continued the family's success with savvy investments over the years, growing their wealth even more. Frances' mother's family came from money as well.

However, those who met Frances and her parents in London wouldn't guess the extent of the family's fortune. The townhouse in the city was nice but not ostentatious. The Melbournes didn't host lavish parties. Frances dressed well though not always in the latest fashion, and she didn't go shopping any more often than most young ladies her age.

However, the trip to Melbourne House hinted at their wealth. She and Frances had traveled in their richly appointed private train car, along with her parents. A fine coach with a team of four had picked them up at the train station.

But viewing the country estate made it clear just how wealthy the family was. A circular driveway led to the three-story red-brick structure where a statue of a water deity stood guard. The house boasted over fifty rooms and was an H-plan Elizabethan design, according to Mrs. Melbourne. Formal gardens were visible on the north side. Rolling green fields surrounded the estate with a forest bordering the southern edge, and practically begged one to enjoy long walks around the property.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" Frances asked as she paused beside Harriet to study the place. "A duke and duchess lived here two hundred years ago." She gave a rueful look at Harriet. "I don't

suppose they would be pleased to know that we live here now, but such is the way of things.”

“I hope they’d be happy someone was enjoying their home,” Harriet said as she continued staring at it. “Tell me there’s a library inside.”

Frances grinned. “We have two. You can read as many books as you’d like.” She started forward only to turn back. “But you still have to participate in all the activities Mother has planned.”

“Of course.” Harriet hoped there wouldn’t be too many as there was nothing she’d rather do than explore the libraries. “I wish the other league members could’ve come.”

“As do I,” Frances agreed. “Winifred is coming for a few days. But Phoebe is at Bolton House in the country, and of course, Tibby is on her wedding trip. The others weren’t able to make the journey.” She turned to Harriet. “Thank you again for coming and for agreeing to help me. It means so much to me.”

“The pleasure is mine.” Harriet touched her arm. “I’m certain you won’t need my assistance.”

Frances shook her head. “The moment I see him, my shyness takes over, and I can’t manage to say a coherent word.”

“Are you ready to divulge the name of the man who has you so tongue-tied?” Harriet had pressed her during the train ride when they’d had a few minutes alone but with no success. How could she help if she didn’t know who it was?

Color rose in her friend’s cheeks. “I don’t want to jinx it. Not until he arrives. I fear some problem will arise to keep him away if I tell you.”

“Come along, girls,” Mrs. Melbourne said as she and her husband passed by to lead the way to the front entrance. “Let us see you settled before tea. I’m certain you’re both famished from the journey.”

Harriet trailed behind them, unable to stop gawking at the house, wondering how many servants it took to maintain it.

Based on the number who spilled out of the arched, carved front doors to greet them, it was dozens.

Soon she followed Mr. and Mrs. Melbourne and Frances inside. The grand entrance hall had a timeless elegance with tiled floors in a black and white pattern, dark wood paneling, and a wide staircase that divided into two on the second floor to curl upward in opposite directions.

Harriet was pleased to find her bedroom was just down the hall from Frances on the third floor rather than on the opposite side of the house.

“See what you think,” Frances said, waiting while one of the maids opened the door.

Harriet stepped inside, delighted by the tasteful blue décor. “It’s beautiful.”

A four-poster bed dominated the room with matching night tables on either side. Pale blue wallpaper covered the upper half of the walls above more of the dark wood paneling predominant throughout the house.

A pink floral wingback chair sat near the window, a perfect place to read during the day, and another stood before the fireplace. A small writing desk was in a corner, also an inviting place to sit.

Harriet turned to Frances with a smile. “Thank you so much. It’s a lovely room.”

“I’m so pleased you like it. Let Sally know if you need anything. We’ll be sharing her services during your stay.” She tipped her head toward the maid, who smiled warmly. “I’ll leave you to settle in then return to collect you to join Mother for tea in the drawing room in a half hour. Afterward, I’ll show you around.”

“Perfect.” She looked forward to seeing the rest of the house.

Frances departed as a footman brought in her bags. Sally, the maid, quickly unpacked and answered a few questions for Harriet before leaving her to rest.

Harriet took advantage of the few minutes of quiet to retrieve one of the books she'd brought with her and try the chair by the window. However, the view proved too much to resist. She looked forward to walking across the fields and made a mental note to ask Frances if that was permissible.

Tea a short time later was a delight. Harriet didn't know Mr. and Mrs. Melbourne well, but they were kind and generous, much like Frances. Frances' older brother, Martin, and his wife, Catherine, joined them. The conversation was lively. Everyone seemed excited about the house party.

Mrs. Melbourne didn't linger long since she wanted to speak with the staff to make certain everything was in readiness for the guests who would begin arriving the next day.

Frances led Harriet on a tour of the house, which boasted over thirty bedrooms, a gallery, a dining room, a ballroom, and numerous sitting rooms, as well as the libraries.

"Father has books in his study, of course," Frances said, "but they're on farming techniques and the history of the area. Let me know if you want to look in there, and I'll make certain he's not using it." She paused before a door on the second floor and smiled. "This is my favorite place in the house."

She opened the door wide for Harriet who gasped in response.

Floor-to-ceiling shelves lined one wall with a bank of tall windows on another that allowed sunlight to pour in. A narrow spiral staircase led to an upper balcony where more bookshelves were visible. A ladder offered a tempting way to take a closer look at some of the higher shelves.

A cozy sitting area invited one to linger even though portraits of imposing looking gentlemen frowned down at them.

"Who are they?" Harriet asked.

Frances leaned close as if to share a secret. "To be honest, we don't know. The paintings were here when we moved in. Mother thought they looked too important to take them down."

She held a finger to her lips. “But you’re sworn to secrecy on that subject.”

Harriet smiled. It seemed she would be keeping a few secrets while she was here.

Frances moved to the shelves near the window. “This is my favorite section, so I recommend browsing these first.”

Harriet joined her, pleased to see several familiar titles. “Isn’t it wonderful that Captain Shaw is writing a mystery?”

Tibby’s new husband had started writing a book at Tibby’s urging. The league members were excited at the thought of knowing an author.

“I cannot wait to read it,” Frances said. “I think mysteries are my second favorite kind of book.”

“With romantic tales being your first?”

“Exactly.” She sighed, pressing a hand over her heart. “I love happy endings.”

“On that, we agree.” Whether she would ever have her own happy ending remained to be seen.

“Watching Phoebe and Tibby has convinced me that I shouldn’t simply wait to see if a man notices me.” Frances ran a finger along the spines of the books, though it was obvious her thoughts were not on reading. “But I hope not to encounter the problems they did. That is why I want to do things differently.”

“How so?”

“We can no longer assume that our mission of *For Better or Worse* is secret. Not with Lady Lucinda and Lady Jane knowing. Who knows who they’ll tell next?”

“True.” The sisters were terrible gossips and had overheard Phoebe and Frances discussing the initiative at a ball.

They’d nearly ruined things for Phoebe with the Earl of Bolton. Then they tried a similar tactic with Tibby and her Captain Shaw.

Harriet sighed. "I fear that by not allowing them to join the Mayfair Literary League, we might have created enemies of them."

Frances frowned. "What choice did we have when they admitted they don't like to read? That is the main purpose of a book club—to read and discuss books."

"I agree, but that doesn't lessen my concern. They seem intent on spreading the news of our agenda."

"Well, we won't have to worry about them during the house party. They were not included on the guest list."

"Thank goodness," Harriet said. "How clever of you to manage to have your gentleman invited here. That should make it easier to catch his attention."

When it was her turn, how would she find a time or place to speak with Viscount Garland? Attempting to make a bold move at a ball—if he happened to attend one as he didn't often—seemed impossible.

Then again, encountering him on Bond Street had been unexpected. Several times over the past few days, her heart had raced at the memory of his mother stepping into the street in front of the carriage. What if she hadn't seen her? What if she hadn't reached her in time?

Harriet suppressed a shudder at the thought. Lady Caldwell had seemed sad, and Harriet couldn't help but wonder why. Viscount Garland's concern had been touching and made Harriet admire him all the more.

Yet he clearly hadn't remembered her. She'd considered mentioning her name again, but the moment had been so awkward that she couldn't bring herself to do so. Was she so unmemorable and uninteresting? The thought was discouraging.

"Martin is acquainted with him," Frances continued, bringing her thoughts back to the conversation, "and Father approved him coming." Frances' brown eyes sparkled with excitement. "I'm not sure if this will work, but I'm determined to try."

Harriet smiled. “The house party seems the perfect place for it.” Her friend’s enthusiasm made Harriet wish for a moment that she was the one who was moving forward. How silly to long for a future that was out of reach. He might have caught her notice, but she certainly hadn’t caught his.



Chapter Three



Joseph arrived at Melbourne House the same time as several other guests. He was pleased to have been invited and couldn't quite believe his luck. The timing of the house party was perfect. He'd managed to put together the details of his investment plan and hoped to speak with Mr. Melbourne about it.

The need to make money to reinvest in the estate in the near future had increased after his conversation with his mother. He feared his father's lack of interest in providing for their tenants would only continue to worsen.

Servants hurried forward to help unload passengers and baggage. The arriving guests all appeared to be in high spirits, based on the chatter and laughter. Apparently, they were also grateful to leave London for the fresh air and relaxation of the country.

"What an impressive place," Charles, his valet, murmured as he paused beside Joseph with a bag in hand.

The servant had been with him for over five years now and Joseph relied on him for many things, including friendship. Charles tended to offer an opinion whether it was wanted or not, but Joseph didn't mind. It was refreshing to hear another person's honest thoughts.

"It is. This should be an interesting week."

Charles smiled. "Here's to a successful stay." He was privy to Joseph's plan, and Joseph knew he would do all he could to support it, from sharing information he learned from other servants to anything he overheard from guests.

In short order, they were shown to Joseph's room where Charles began unpacking. Joseph was too restless to relax so returned downstairs in search of the other guests. If he had the

chance to speak with Mr. Melbourne, all the better, starting with thanking him for the invitation.

He didn't know the man well, which was one of the reasons he'd been surprised to be included on the guest list. He did know his son, Martin, though he'd been two years ahead of Joseph at university.

The casual acquaintance seemed an unlikely reason that he'd been invited. The Melbournes had a daughter as well, but he didn't think they'd been introduced. He wouldn't know her if she were standing before him.

"Is there something you needed, my lord?" the efficient butler asked when Joseph returned to the entrance hall.

"Just stretching my legs after the journey," Joseph said.

"Of course. You'll find some of the other gentlemen in the billiard room at the end of the hall if you'd care to join them."

"Excellent." Hopefully, Melbourne would be there as well, along with Martin.

The sound of feminine laughter from the upper floor caught Joseph's notice, and he looked up to see two ladies walking along the railing. To his surprise, one was the pretty lady who had helped his mother last week.

His heart beat faster at the sight of her. In truth, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her since then.

If only he knew her name.

He looked at the butler. "Could you tell me the name of the lady?" he asked, tipping his head in her direction but taking care not to stare.

The servant looked up. "Miss Frances Melbourne, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Melbourne."

How interesting. Perhaps she was the one he needed to thank for the invitation. He looked up again, but she'd disappeared, leaving only the other lady in view.

Joseph was pleased he'd come. He'd been selective about what events he'd attended over the past year. Since he wasn't

yet looking for a wife, he hadn't bothered with most. Now that he had a purpose in mind with the investment opportunity, it was important to make the right connections.

In truth, he was reluctant to consider taking a wife when he held little belief in love. Not when it had been used like a club by his father while Joseph was growing up. Then again, his father continued to try to use it to his advantage, claiming Joseph should do this or that if he truly loved his parents. Or if he loved God.

It had taken years on his own for Joseph to realize the extent of his father's attempts at manipulation. Damn if there weren't still times when guilt swept through him along with doubt about whether he was right or wrong in the way he lived his own life.

At the butler's direction, he walked down a long corridor with several closed doors, admiring the architecture and design as he went. The house was both elegant and grand. Much of the décor was a reflection of it having been built in the 1600s. A few modern touches had been added, and it all blended nicely together.

The house made the country estate, where he had grown up and would eventually inherit, look modest in comparison.

However, Joseph didn't envy the cost it would take to maintain an estate like this. That proved just how much money the Melbournes had.

He found a set of open double doors that led into the billiard room. The large room boasted two billiard tables, several card tables, and an impressive bar complete with crystal decanters, and a servant offering drinks. One wall held a half-dozen antlers from hunting expeditions, along with paintings of fox and hound hunts.

Several gentlemen stood around the room visiting, and one who was familiar walked forward with a smile when Joseph entered.

"Good afternoon, Viscount Garland," Martin Melbourne said with an outstretched hand.

“Melbourne.” Joseph shook his hand, pleased to see him. “It’s been some time.”

He looked much as Joseph remembered with brown hair that hinted at a receding hairline, a thick mustache, and a stocky build. His confident demeanor suggested he knew his place in the world and was comfortable with it. However, he didn’t have the arrogance that many wealthy men his age had.

“It has. I appreciate the invitation to join you,” Joseph said, hoping Martin would confirm whether he was the one behind it.

“We’re pleased you could come. It should be an enjoyable time. I know my mother has far too many activities planned, but I hope you will enjoy at least some of them.” His easy smile had Joseph smiling in return.

“I look forward to it.” Those were to be expected with a house party.

“You probably know many of the others here.” Martin gestured toward the nearest group of men and led Joseph to them.

Introductions were quickly made, though only a few were necessary as Joseph was familiar with most of the men. The guests were a mix of nobility and landed gentry. Some had made their wealth, and others had inherited it. The combination would make for interesting conversations over the course of the week.

If any were like Joseph, they’d realized that managing their inheritance and estates might not be enough. Agriculture was becoming a more difficult way to generate income with cheaper imports, including wheat and other grains, now being shipped to England.

Joseph knew he wasn’t the only one who would be faced with a challenging set of problems when he inherited. However, he didn’t think any of their fathers were giving away their wealth like Joseph’s was.

Peter Connolly was the son of a man who had made a fortune in shipbuilding. The Earl of Herrington had recently

inherited, and rumor suggested that he was on the hunt for a wealthy bride. Thomas Sinclair was a second son and had recently left the Navy. Lord Weston was the oldest member of the group and very set in his ways. The fact that he was friends with the Melbournes came as a surprise.

Soon everyone had a drink in hand. Several played billiards while conversing. More guests trickled in. The air was festive, and everyone was already starting to relax and enjoy themselves.

A short time later, Arthur Melbourne entered the room, and Martin formally introduced Joseph. He was of medium height with the same stocky build and receding hairline as his son, but there was a piercing quality to his brown eyes as if he looked straight into a person and saw them for who they truly were.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Garland,” Melbourne said as he firmly shook Joseph’s hand. “We’re pleased you could come.”

“Thank you for inviting me. It is a pleasure to leave the soot-filled air of London for a time.”

“We enjoy spending two or three months here each year as our schedule permits,” Melbourne said with a smile. “Inviting friends to join us makes it even more special.”

Joseph was impressed by the warm welcome. And he was also impressed by the relationship Arthur Melbourne had with his son. What would it have been like to grow up with a father who looked at one with respect and admiration rather than judgement?

A set of French doors stood open to the outdoors, and some of the group spilled out onto the flag-stoned terrace which overlooked the rolling hills of the back of the estate.

Joseph found himself telling an amusing story from his childhood which gained several laughs. It was easy to pluck out the few humorous tales as they were few in number. Better to dwell on the better times than the difficult ones.

As the afternoon waned, a certain peacefulness came over Joseph. For the first time in longer than he cared to admit, he had the comforting feeling that the future just might settle itself. That there was hope for his plan, especially amidst this room full of intelligent individuals, who for the most part, seemed to welcome new opportunities.

The time had come to move forward with his life and create his own future. His worry over what his father was doing as well as concern for his mother wouldn't end, but his focus needed to shift if he wanted to support the people who would depend on him when he inherited.

His goal of finding investors such as Melbourne was all the more important. It was too soon to approach the man with his idea, but he felt he was already in his good graces since he'd been invited to this gathering.

With a smile, he finished the last of his drink and turned at the sound of more guests arriving.

The good feeling fell away in an instant at the sight of Reverend Henderson shaking hands with Melbourne.



HARRIET BREATHED A sigh of relief when Mrs. Melbourne entered the drawing room where the ladies had all gathered to greet one another. Frances was there of course, but her shyness made it difficult to properly greet the guests and make them feel welcome.

She'd done her best to help and stayed by Frances' side as they greeted each new arrival. More often than not, Frances sent Harriet a helpless look after exchanging the most basic of greetings. It seemed up to Harriet to inquire as to how their journey had been, and whether they had visited the area before.

What seemed like common courtesy was a struggle for Frances. It was a different side of her friend that Harriet hadn't seen to this extent before. While Frances had been shy at the first few meetings of the literary league that she attended, now she freely shared her opinion during book discussions. Her

timidness was evident at balls and other events but she seemed even more so now.

Harriet was happy to help, but this wasn't her home, and these people weren't her guests, which made the situation awkward as she was forced to explain that she was a friend.

"Welcome. Good afternoon," Mrs. Melbourne greeted everyone from the doorway before she moved to the nearest guest. She proceeded to visit with each person, making her way around the room to do so. The social graces that came naturally to her mother did not carry to Frances.

"Let us go," Frances whispered to Harriet.

"Go where?"

"Anywhere but here."

"Won't your mother be displeased if we leave?"

Frances glanced at her mother. "Yes. But I need a moment to collect myself."

Harriet didn't understand why Frances felt such distress. Everyone they'd spoken to had been cordial.

Harriet glanced at Mrs. Melbourne, torn as to what to do. She was a guest here and didn't intend to forget that. While she was sympathetic to Frances' feelings, she didn't want to upset Mrs. Melbourne.

"Why don't you step out?" Harriet suggested. "I will provide an excuse to your mother if she asks."

The look of gratitude Frances cast her made her feel as if she'd done the right thing.

"Are you sure?" Frances asked.

"Of course. But don't be gone too long."

Frances nodded and walked toward the door, casting one more look at her mother and Harriet before she departed.

Harriet turned toward the nearest guest and struck up a conversation, wanting to do her part to help.

But when a quarter of an hour had passed, and then another, she grew concerned.

Mrs. Melbourne approached her. "Do you know where Frances is?"

"She needed the retiring room, but I'm not sure what's keeping her."

Mrs. Melbourne glanced around the room then back at Harriet. "May I ask you to check on her? I know the guests make her nervous, but I need her."

"Of course. I'm happy to help in any way I can," Harriet reassured her. "I will return with her directly." She smiled and departed to begin her search.

First, she went up the stairs to Frances' bedroom and knocked on the door but received no answer. After a moment's hesitation, she went down to the library, grateful to have already explored the house enough to know her way around.

However, one look inside showed the library empty. Perhaps she was in the other one. Aware of the time passing, she went downstairs and asked the butler if he'd seen her.

"I believe Miss Melbourne is in the large library, my lady."

"Thank you." She walked down the corridor, slowing her pace as she passed the open doors of the billiard room.

The murmur of voices and her curiosity had her glancing inside. Her heart caught at the sight of Viscount Garland speaking with Frances' brother, Martin. Her entire body warmed at the sight of him. Her heart hammered and her mouth went dry. To know that he had been invited to the party was more than she could've hoped for.

Oh, my goodness.

His presence changed everything. She couldn't think of what to do. One thing was certain, she didn't care to be caught staring at him. She forced her gaze away and continued forward until she reached the library.

After drawing a deep breath to calm the emotions bubbling inside her, she opened the door and found Frances staring out

the window at the far end of the room.

“Frances? Your mother is asking for you.”

Her friend heaved a sigh and turned to Harriet. “Very well. I’m ready to endure it again.”

“Perhaps you’re looking at the guests in the wrong way.”

“How do you mean?”

“They are more nervous about meeting you and your family than you could possibly be about them.”

Frances shook her head. “I don’t see how that could be possible. I suppose I feel as if other people are judging me and find me lacking.”

Harriet’s heart squeezed at her friend’s confession. “You are a wonderful person. Lovely inside and out. I’m very fortunate to call you my friend. If anyone thinks otherwise, then it is their loss. Now then, let us return to the drawing room.” She glanced at the clock on the nearby table. “Before we know it, the dinner hour will be here, and you’ll be able to tell me who has captured your interest and inspired your bold move.”

Frances pressed a hand to her chest as if to calm her heart. “If he came. I confess that I’m torn, half hoping he didn’t and yet hoping he did.”

“I hope he is here,” Harriet said with a smile despite her worry about how difficult it would be to help her overcome her shyness. “I look forward to learning his identity.” She might share who she admired as well.

“Harriet, I can’t begin to tell you how grateful I am that you’re here and that you’ve agreed to help me. I would be hiding in my room the entire time otherwise and both Mother and Father would be unhappy with me.”

Harriet looped her arm through her friend’s. “It is going to be an enjoyable week.” She pulled Frances gently forward, surprised—and disappointed—when she turned in the opposite direction that Harriet had taken.

“Let us go up the back stairs so we don’t run into anyone.”

“Very well.” Yet Harriet couldn’t help but look longingly down the corridor, where she’d hoped for another glance at Viscount Garland. The evening couldn’t come fast enough.



Chapter Four



Joseph returned to his room to dress for dinner, his mood foul. Of all the people who might've been at the house party, that the very man he was quickly coming to view as an enemy had arrived seemed unbelievable.

He'd realized that anyone claiming to be overly religious struck a nerve with him. How could they not given his father's actions during his childhood? The lectures insisting he was bound for hell for the smallest infraction. The days in his room with nothing to eat unless his mother managed to sneak him food.

But knowing that didn't change his dislike of Reverend Henderson.

It had taken all of his reserve not to walk out of the billiard room the moment he'd seen him. Instead, he'd managed to make certain to be on the opposite side of the room no matter where the man was.

If Mr. Melbourne liked the reverend enough to invite him to his home, it would reflect poorly on Joseph to show his dislike of him. The man acted more like a lord than a man of the cloth. Perhaps there was a family connection. While he supposed Henderson might be considered charismatic by some, Joseph knew better from Henderson's dealings with his father.

But he was a guest here just like the reverend. The last thing Joseph needed was a reason for Melbourne not to invest in his plan before he'd had the chance to propose it.

"What happened?" Charles asked after taking one look at his face.

"Reverend Henderson is here."

The valet's surprise made Joseph feel marginally better. "Why?"

“I don’t know, but I intend to find out. The way Melbourne greeted him, I’m inclined to believe they’re friends of a sort.”

Charles scoffed as he helped Joseph change. “In other words, the reverend is pretending to be nice in order to ask Mr. Melbourne for a donation to his church.”

Joseph shook his head. “I wonder if he shares the fact that he doesn’t use those funds to aid the less fortunate.”

“Surely people would ask before handing him money.”

“If a reverend asks for donations, one would assume it is going to a good cause. But from what I’ve learned from Henderson himself and my parents, I have my doubts. I want to know what he intends to do with the money that people like my father give him if it’s not to aid the poor.”

Henderson had told Joseph when they’d crossed paths outside Joseph’s parents’ house that he didn’t believe in helping the less fortunate. He insisted that Great Britain’s duty was to civilize other countries, and that meant the country’s population needed to be strong. Handing money to the weak didn’t aid that mission.

He shared a pointed look with Charles. “Clearly, the time has come to discover what we can about the man. See if you can learn anything from his servants.”

“Of course. My pleasure.” Charles assisted him into his evening coat.

“I will ask Melbourne’s son, Martin, about the reverend.” The memory of Miss Melbourne came to mind. “If he isn’t helpful, perhaps his daughter might be willing to share the details. She is the one who helped save my mother last week on Bond Street.”

“Ah.” Charles smiled. “The plot thickens.”

“Indeed.” Somehow, the thought of her eased his upset, a balm on his troubled mind. He still didn’t understand why he hadn’t remembered her when they’d been introduced. How long ago had that been? He must’ve been distracted then. Plus, he’d gone out of his way to avoid speaking overlong with eligible ladies since marriage wasn’t in his near future.

It was only in the past month that his idea for the investment opportunity had come to mind. Before that, men like Melbourne hadn't been of special interest to him either.

"Surely, some of the other guests will see through Reverend Henderson's *façade* and realize the truth," Charles said as he adjusted Joseph's tie.

"Considering that I'm still waiting for my father to recognize the truth, I remain doubtful."

Charles shook his head. "The man must exude more charm than we've witnessed thus far."

"Apparently so. I will do my best to hide my dislike and distrust of him from our hosts and the other guests. However, I fear I've already shown my cards to him. No doubt he'll keep a watchful eye on me."

"Amused disdain can be quite effective."

Joseph chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind. I rather hope he chooses to say something about his relationship with my father. I would welcome the chance to ask a few questions."

"Especially in front of the other guests, eh?" Charles offered a satisfied smile. "I can only hope I am witness to that exchange."

"I wouldn't want to offend our hosts, but neither can I remain silent if the chance to share what I know arises. Perhaps Reverend Henderson will keep his unusual ideas to himself with me here."

"There's some satisfaction in knowing he must be as unhappy to see you as you are to see him."

"True. Perhaps my presence will foil any hope he had for asking for donations."

Charles stood back and studied Joseph's black evening attire with a nod of approval. "I look forward to hearing how dinner goes. Meanwhile, I'll see what I can discover below stairs."

"Perfect." Joseph nodded. He already felt better knowing they had a plan in place.

Charles leaned close as if to speak in confidence. “If I were you, I’d focus on Miss Melbourne rather than her brother. It sounds more enjoyable.”

Joseph smiled, appreciating the reminder. “I’ll see what I can do.” Hopefully, he’d have a chance to tell Mr. Melbourne how brave his daughter had been to save Joseph’s mother. There hadn’t been time earlier in the billiard room. Then again, he didn’t want to say too much about his mother and what might’ve caused her to step into traffic.

He made his way downstairs to the drawing room where the guests had been invited to gather before dinner and paused in the doorway, searching for a glimpse of pale hair.

To his delight, he saw her speaking with another young lady near her age with dark hair. Luckily, there was no sign of Reverend Henderson as of yet.

He moved slowly in their direction, not wanting to be too obvious.

“Garland,” Thomas Sinclair greeted him. “I didn’t have a chance to speak with you earlier. It’s been some time since we last spoke.”

Joseph shook his hand. “Indeed. I understand you’ve parted ways with the Royal Navy. It must be good to return home.”

“It is.” Sinclair smiled. “I confess that I still feel the ground moving beneath my feet after so many years on a ship.”

“I can only imagine.” They conversed for several minutes, but Joseph kept an eye on Miss Melbourne, hoping for a chance to speak with her. He managed to catch her eye and nod a greeting, which she returned with a smile that made her blue eyes look all the brighter.

Anticipation swirled through him after that moment of connection that had nothing to do with her last name. She was attractive and kind, something he knew beyond a doubt by the way she’d placed herself in danger to aid his mother.

When Sinclair stepped away to greet someone else, Joseph walked directly to her. “Good evening.”

“Viscount Garland.” She dipped her head in acknowledgement. “How nice to see you again.”

He glanced at the lady by her side whose face had turned red with what appeared to be embarrassment, though he didn’t know why.

Before he could inquire as to whether anything was amiss, she murmured, “Excuse me,” and took her leave.

“I hope I didn’t offend the lady,” Joseph began as he looked back at Miss Melbourne.

“I’m sure she’s fine.” Yet her worried look as she watched her former companion made him wonder.

“I wanted to thank you again for helping my mother last week.”

“I’m pleased I happened to see her. I hope she didn’t suffer any ill effects from the incident.”

“She’s well, thanks to you.” He shook his head. “I confess that I don’t understand why she wasn’t paying more attention.”

“Distractions seem to be part of the world now. But that carriage shouldn’t have been going so fast.” She glanced around the room. “Do you know the Melbournes well?”

He frowned at the oddly worded question. “Not well, though I look forward to becoming better acquainted.”

Before he could say anything more, they were called to dinner. He was paired with Miss Julia Frampton, whom he’d just met.

He was pleased to see Miss Melbourne’s friend had rejoined the party and was seated several places away. She seemed determined to avoid his gaze, but perhaps he was imagining that. She sat next to Mrs. Edwards, who was Mrs. Melbourne’s sister, according to his dinner companion.

The long dining room table held the thirty guests with ease. The meal of leek soup, roasted lamb, potatoes, and peas

was delicious, and Miss Frampton was pleasant company even if she wasn't as appealing as Miss Melbourne.

Unfortunately, he was too far away from Mr. Melbourne to hear much of his conversation. But he was pleased Reverend Henderson had also been placed well away from their host. Hopefully, that meant their association wasn't a close one.

Miss Melbourne was seated on the opposite side of the table several guests away between Sinclair and Connolly. Far too frequently, Joseph caught himself watching her, enjoying her graceful gestures and kind smile. She seemed to be doing her best to converse with those around her, putting them at ease.

Once dinner was over, the ladies withdrew to the drawing room, leaving the men to their port.

Joseph was content to listen. While he kept his gaze away from Reverend Henderson, he tried to hear what the man said. From what he heard the topics seemed to be mundane. Not once did he hear him mention his church or hint at the need for donations.

That only showed the man knew how to play his cards. Dinner wasn't the proper time for financial discussions of any sort.

Then again Joseph would readily admit that he was doing the same thing, biding his time until the right moment came his way. However, he was offering an investment opportunity with the intent of creating wealth, whereas the reverend was only interested in taking what others were willing to give.

The situation would be different if he felt Henderson was truly making a difference in people's lives. Based on what Joseph had learned about the man, he wasn't. The poor and troubled weren't part of his mission. Why his congregation, including Joseph's father, agreed was concerning.

Joseph pushed away the thought as it only made him angry. A house party was not the time to dwell on his irritation with the reverend. But if given the chance, he would mention his concern to any who would listen in the coming days.

Soon, Mr. Melbourne rose and suggested they join the ladies.

Once again, Joseph entered the drawing room and found himself searching for Miss Melbourne. He saw her friend, who had seemed so shy and uncomfortable earlier. The lady stood beside Mrs. Melbourne. Odd, but the two of them looked as if they could be related.

An uncomfortable thought seeped into him as the memory of the pretty lady's mother on Bond Street came to mind.

"Garland." Martin Melbourne clapped his shoulder before Joseph could consider it further. "It appears as if charades are on the agenda for tomorrow afternoon. My mother has asked that I secure your agreement to join in the fun."

"Charades?" Joseph didn't especially care for those sorts of games, but what house party wasn't complete without entertainment of some kind to keep the guests engaged? "I suppose, but only if you are as well."

Martin laughed. "My wife and I will be there lest my mother disown us." He glanced behind Joseph. "Have you met Lady Harriet?"

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," Joseph said only to turn to see his mother's rescuer, whom he thought to be Miss Melbourne, standing there.

When he'd asked the butler her identity, there had been two ladies in view, but Joseph's focus had been solely on Lady Harriet. Clearly, the butler had only noticed Miss Melbourne.

He nearly groaned at the realization that he'd mistaken her name even as he bowed.



HARRIET'S FACE HEATED as she caught Viscount Garland's words. She hardly knew what to say, especially when hurt speared through her. Did he still truly not know who she was?

While she wasn't as painfully shy as Frances, neither was she that sociable compared to some of her friends. Especially

not after all that had happened in the past few years. Those experiences had taught her to be cautious.

She couldn't stop from running a finger over the lace insert of her gown that hid the scars on her chest. They tended to itch when she was embarrassed or distressed.

Yet what could she do but smile and act as if it was of no consequence that the gentleman for whom she held a secret *tendre* didn't know her name even after she'd saved his mother from injury? That he didn't remember being introduced to her. Twice. That he obviously didn't feel any of what she felt for him.

While he'd acted pleased to see her, obviously that had only been because he was being polite.

The realization was lowering and squeezed her heart. Thank goodness she hadn't managed to volunteer to be the next league member to make a bold move. At this point, getting him to know her name was as much as she could accomplish.

The viscount closed his eyes briefly and then looked at her with an apologetic expression. "I'm so sorry. I had you confused with another." He glanced over his shoulder to where Frances stood next to her mother.

Frances noted his look and her cheeks turned pink once again.

A sinking feeling caught Harriet as she saw her friend's expression. Surely, she had to be wrong.

"You must meet my sister as well." Martin waved toward Frances. It took a nudge from her mother to make Frances join them, her gaze fixed on the ground.

"Viscount Garland," Martin said as he began introductions, "may I introduce my sister, Frances."

"It's a pleasure, miss," Garland said as he bowed. "I fear I had the two of you confused. I'm so sorry."

Frances dipped into a curtsy and sent a pointed look at Harriet that pleaded for help.

Please let me be wrong. Still, Harriet smiled as she moved closer to Frances. “We are often together as we are the dearest of friends,” she told the viscount. “It’s no wonder if you confused us for one another.”

“My apologies to you both.” Garland truly looked upset, which eased some of Harriet’s hurt.

His remorse was rather sweet. But the way Frances watched him so attentively from beneath her lashes left no doubt that she liked him. He had to be the one with whom she wanted Harriet’s help.

If only Frances would’ve shared who she admired beforehand, perhaps Harriet could’ve explained why she couldn’t be of assistance. Yet what could she have said? I’m sorry, but I like him, too?

What a terrible tangle this was.

How should she proceed? Did she tell Frances of her feelings? It seemed silly to say anything now that she realized how little of an impression she’d made on Viscount Garland from their first introduction to now.

Martin stepped into the conversation void, explaining that he knew Garland from university although they’d been a few years apart. They also belonged to the same club and crossed paths there occasionally.

Harriet glanced at Frances, willing her to join the discussion. This was her chance to get to know Garland and to allow him to come to know her.

Yet Frances looked like a doe caught in a field by an angry farmer, all wide eyes and stiff body. While she no longer stared at the ground, she was now blinking an alarming amount.

Martin frowned at his sister as if wondering what was wrong.

Before her brother could potentially embarrass her, Harriet smiled. “How nice that the two of you are acquainted with one another.” She managed to nudge Frances, hoping her friend took the hint.

“Harriet and I belong to the same club as well, but it’s a book club.” Frances’ words came out in a rush. “The Mayfair Literary League.”

Garland frowned. “That sounds familiar.”

Harriet nearly groaned. Of all things for Frances to say, that wasn’t a good choice. The two gossipy sisters, Lady Lucinda and Lady Jane, had done their best to spread the news of the league’s *For Better or Worse* agenda.

If Garland had heard of it, he wouldn’t want anything to do with either of them for fear they intended to trap him into marriage. The sisters had cast it in a poor light.

“Since you’re acquainted with Captain Shaw and the Earl of Bolton, they may have mentioned it as their brides are members as well,” Harriet said, hoping that might be the reason he remembered it.

Garland nodded. “That must be why it’s familiar.” He smiled at them both. “What kind of books do you enjoy reading?”

Harriet held back, hoping Frances would answer but was ready to help her if necessary.

“*Pride and Prejudice* is one of our favorites,” Frances said only to frown as if wishing she could take back her answer. “But we read a variety.” She glanced at Harriet with a hint of panic in her brown eyes.

“A wide variety,” Harriet agreed. “*The Seven Curses of London*, for example. Have you by chance read it? The author shares what he considers to be the seven worst problems that plague London.”

“Someone else mentioned it to me, but I haven’t yet taken the time to read it,” Garland said.

“But you do like to read?” Harriet asked, unable to help herself. She almost wished he’d say no. That would give her a reason not to admire him as much as she did.

Then again, as she stared into his hazel eyes with their long, dark lashes, she wondered if that were true. What was it

about him that caused this breathless feeling, or the way her heart sped when he was near?

She'd met several other gentlemen this evening. Mr. Sinclair and Mr. Connolly had both been very kind at dinner, and she'd enjoyed their conversation. But she hadn't experienced any of the physical symptoms she did with Viscount Garland.

"Very much," the viscount said. "Charles Dickens is one of my favorite authors."

Harriet's heart melted a little bit more. "He's one of mine, too," she murmured only to wish she hadn't said anything when Frances frowned at her.

"I like him as well," Frances said. "*Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* are wonderful stories."

"They are indeed." Viscount Garland nodded in approval.

"I wish I read more," Martin added, looking rather bored by this turn in the conversation. "The news sheet doesn't count, I suppose. Anything else tends to put me to sleep."

"I've heard that means you simply haven't found the right book to interest you," Garland said. "I'm certain these two ladies would be able to recommend a few for you to try."

"Perhaps." Martin shook his head, seeming unconvinced. "But not until after the house party. There will be little time for reading during the days ahead."

Harriet had to bite her lip to refrain from disagreeing. She found time to read every day, even if it was only for a few minutes. But she knew from experience that her liking to do so wasn't anything to share with others. Bookish ladies were unappealing to many.

Martin looked at Frances. "I mentioned to Garland that Mother wants to play charades tomorrow afternoon."

"I do hope you'll join us," Frances said with a warm smile.

Harriet couldn't have been prouder even as her heart ached. All Frances needed to do was relax and be herself. Any gentleman worth his salt would enjoy being with her.

“Martin has agreed to be there, so I will as well.” Garland grinned at Martin as if to make certain he didn’t forget.

“We’re hosting a ball later in the week,” Frances advised, a hint of color coming to her cheeks as she glanced again at the viscount.

Harriet released a quiet sigh as longing filled her. Would she have the chance to dance with Garland? Or should she keep her distance out of loyalty to Frances?

Suddenly, the week stretched out ahead of her, seeming endless. What little hope she’d held when she’d first caught sight of him in the billiard room drained away, leaving her empty. Yet she need only look at Frances’ smile to be reminded how important her friendship was.

How unfortunate that honoring their relationship meant holding back on her own dream. Still, she smiled in encouragement at Frances even as she tried not to look at Viscount Garland, telling her heart to hush.



Chapter Five



Joseph slept fitfully, his dreams filled with visions of him calling all the guests by the wrong name, including Mr. Melbourne. Though the worry was ridiculous, he woke feeling less than ready to join the others.

He could only surmise that he was even more distraught by his mistake about Lady Harriet's identity than he'd realized. It mattered because she mattered. He couldn't imagine getting off on the wrong foot any worse, especially with a lady to whom he was attracted.

Charles drew back the curtains, a signal it was time to rise. Joseph sat up, wondering how best to proceed with the day. The week would be over before he knew it, and he worried he wouldn't accomplish anything.

He had to admit that spending time with Lady Harriet had become a priority as well. She intrigued him as no other lady had. He gave himself a mental shake. Ladies were not part of his plan, but he didn't think he could resist the lure of her.

"Good morning, my lord," Charles said as he walked to the wardrobe to select the proper attire for the day. "I've brought warm water if you'd care to wash."

"Thank you."

"I managed to speak with Reverend Henderson's servant in the kitchen this morning," Charles continued.

"Oh?" That perked Joseph's mood. "Anything of interest?"

"Not yet. The man is an odd sort with a German accent. Seems to prefer to keep to himself but have no fear. I will wear him down until he talks."

"I have complete faith in your abilities," Joseph said with a smile.

“I think he’s merely self-conscious about his accent. I told him it was intriguing. We’ll see if that warms him up.”

“Excellent.” He’d already shared his dismal failure to remember Lady Harriet’s name and his mistake of thinking she was Miss Melbourne.

Charles had chuckled. “Perhaps the error will endear you to both ladies. You’ll have your own private jest between you to refer to.”

Trust his valet to shed a positive light on the *faux pas*. Then again, it might just work.

After preparing for the day, Joseph made his way to the dining room and the welcome scent of coffee and breakfast. Several other guests were at the table, including Sinclair. The sideboard held all manner of offerings, and Joseph made his selections before joining Sinclair.

The weather was fine once again with the morning sun shining through the tall windows.

“Care for a ride this morning?” Sinclair asked. “Martin was here earlier and mentioned several others are venturing out after breakfast. Apparently, his father is an early riser and will be riding as well.”

“I’d like that.” Joseph made a mental note to rise earlier tomorrow morning to see if he could catch Mr. Melbourne when fewer guests were about.

The coffee and breakfast served to wake him fully, and he walked with Sinclair to the stables where several horses had been saddled and were ready for guests.

It didn’t appear as if any of the ladies were joining them. Luckily, there was no sign of Henderson either.

Soon the group of men, including Martin and his father, were riding across the fields for a tour of the estate. The fresh air was invigorating and the view even more so.

Joseph enjoyed looking at other properties with an eye for improving his family’s holdings. However, his hands were tied

from implementing any improvements until he inherited since his father had little interest in changing things.

“What crops are grown at your estate?” Mr. Melbourne asked when Joseph happened to ride alongside him.

“Wheat for the most part, though with prices down, that has been less profitable.” The worry weighed on Joseph as it didn’t show any signs of improving.

“Frustrating, isn’t it?” Melbourne frowned, staring at the horizon. “While I think it’s fortunate that food is becoming more affordable for the masses, it makes it less economical to continue to cultivate crops that can be shipped to England more cheaply than we can grow them here.”

The comment gave Joseph hope that Melbourne might be interested in his proposal. From what he could see, landowners needed to make adjustments or risk losing money for the foreseeable future.

If he could learn more about Melbourne’s interests, he could adjust his proposal to better appeal to him. A few more days in his company should provide ample time for that.

After the ride, they arrived back at the house and many of the men gathered in the billiard room once again. When Joseph and Sinclair walked in, Reverend Henderson was speaking to several others in a tone that sounded suspiciously like a sermon.

“God helps those who help themselves,” Henderson said with a nod. “It is clear that providing handouts to the less fortunate only encourages them not to work.”

Joseph gritted his teeth, having heard portions of the same ridiculous ideas from his father. It grated on him when lending a helping hand to those in need had previously been something they agreed on.

“Hmm.” Sinclair stopped a short distance from where Henderson stood speaking. “I’m not sure I can agree with the reverend,” he whispered.

“Nor can I.” Joseph shook his head. “I’ve met Henderson on several occasions and can only say that I tend to disagree

with much of what he says.”

“Oh?”

“He agrees with Herbert Spencer’s ideas about survival of the fittest and thinks England will benefit from allowing those who can’t manage to make a living to be left to their own devices.”

Sinclair stared at Joseph in dismay. “As in starve?”

“If that is what happens.”

“What sort of Christian attitude is that?” Sinclair asked.

“Not one I have interest in adhering to.”

“Surely, Melbourne doesn’t agree,” Sinclair said. “He is well known for his philanthropy.”

“I hope he doesn’t. But I’m certain the reverend intends to try to change his mind over the course of the week. No doubt he’d like to receive a donation to his church.”

“For what purpose if he doesn’t believe in aiding others?” Sinclair’s outrage eased Joseph’s mind.

After the frustrating conversations with his father, he had started to worry that he was the only one who didn’t see any logic in Henderson’s message.

“Excellent question,” Joseph said. “One to which I have yet to hear a straight answer.”

“As a guest, I wouldn’t want to offend anyone. But I refuse to hold my opinions to myself if asked.”

Joseph smiled, pleased to think Sinclair felt the same as he did. “As do I.”

Two of the men who’d been listening to Henderson wandered away from the discussion, but one remained—Lord Weston, one of the older guests.

Joseph intended to have a word with the lord if he had the chance to see if he truly agreed with Henderson’s beliefs. The fewer people who agreed with Henderson, the better as far as Joseph was concerned.



“WHAT IF HE DOESN’T come?” Frances asked in a whisper.

“He’ll come. He said he would.” Harriet glanced once again at the doorway, torn as to whether she truly wanted Viscount Garland to join them for charades.

Frances had told her that she’d never been formally introduced to Garland until the previous evening. He’d caught her notice at a ball when he’d handed her a glass of lemonade at the refreshment table several months ago. She confessed that since that small act of kindness, she hadn’t been able to think of anyone else.

Harriet had held back from telling Frances that she, too, cared for the handsome viscount. Her friend would surely be distraught by the news. What good would come from that? None from what Harriet could see.

She adored Frances, and though she didn’t completely understand her shyness, she held sympathy for her.

“If he does, what if he’s not on my team?” Frances worried her bottom lip as she pondered the concern.

“What if he is?” Harriet countered.

Frances’ eyes went wide as if she realized that was a bigger worry than the previous one.

“It doesn’t matter,” Harriet reassured her. “That detail is out of our hands.”

“Mother insists on reviewing everyone’s ideas for the charades to make certain they’re appropriate.” Her scowl suggested she wished her mother wouldn’t.

“That is a relief, isn’t it?” Harriet didn’t care for the idea of being asked to act out a word or phrase that would prove embarrassing.

“I suppose, though Winifred said it would take the fun out of the game.”

Harriet looked at their friend and fellow league member who’d arrived earlier in the day and sat across the room.

“Don’t let her fool you. She wouldn’t want to be embarrassed either.”

“True.” Frances glanced at the empty doorway again. “Where are the gentlemen?”

“I’m sure they’ll be along shortly.” In truth, she rather wished the ladies were playing by themselves first. Games like this were awkward amongst strangers. While it was a way to come to know each other better, it could also be uncomfortable to act out of character.

Mrs. Melbourne arrived with a basket and slips of paper. A glance around the room had her frowning, suggesting she wasn’t pleased that the men had been delayed. “I hope you have all been thinking of a word or phrase to contribute.”

She set the items on the table and gestured for the ladies to come forward. “Now then, everyone write down your idea and add it to the basket.”

A few giggles erupted as the ladies discussed the possibilities, but Mrs. Melbourne reminded them to keep their ideas secret to make the game fair.

“Hurry,” she said. “The gentlemen will be joining us shortly.”

Harriet pondered her phrase as she waited in line to write it down.

“Tell me what you’re going to add,” Frances whispered.

“That would be cheating.”

Frances squeezed her eyes shut for a long moment. “I just know I’m going to get a terrible phrase.” Her cheeks colored as if she were already mortified by the possibility.

“They’re all going to be embarrassing if you ask me,” Harriet said, causing Frances to laugh just as she’d hoped.

Harriet was writing down hers when a tingle ran along her skin. She knew without looking that Viscount Garland had arrived. Drawing a deep breath, she finished writing and stepped away from the table to look, unsurprised to see him standing nearby along with the other men.

In truth, she was thoroughly puzzled by her physical reaction to him. Why him? How could she be attuned to him in this way when she didn't know him that well?

Then again, marriages were arranged between couples who knew each other less. The thought was a frightening one. Thank goodness her mother wouldn't insist upon Harriet marrying anyone she didn't want to.

She shivered at the memory of her mother and stepfather. Her mother had thought him a wonderful person. He'd made them both believe that until it was too late. The memory served as a reminder to be cautious. How did one truly know whether someone was to be trusted?

Then again, who would trust her if they knew the truth of her past?

"A penny for your thoughts." The deep timbre of Viscount Garland's voice brought another shiver.

She forced a smile. "An unpleasant memory." With a stern reminder to better guard her thoughts as her stepfather had taken up too many of them already, she tried to relax. "How has your day been thus far?"

"Enjoyable." He glanced at her then leaned closer. "Though I confess I'm not excited at the idea of playing charades."

Harriet laughed even as his scent caught her notice—a mixture of bergamot and the forest. It made her knees weak, much to her dismay. "Nor am I," she whispered in return. "I only hope I don't have to go first."

"Agreed. Do not worry. I will suggest that Martin does."

She opened her mouth to reply only to see Frances out of the corner of her eye, watching them closely. "As long as he doesn't insist that his sister follow him. She's a little shy as you may have noticed."

"Ah. Then we shall take care that she doesn't have a turn until later."

Harriet's heart melted a little more. What a kind man he was.

"Everyone put their phrase in the basket," Mrs. Melbourne called out. "Then we'll stand in a circle to make teams."

Within a few minutes, they'd divided into teams of four people each and sat in groups. Neither Frances nor Harriet was on the same team as the viscount or each other.

"Martin should go first," Viscount Garland called out and laughter erupted when Frances' brother protested.

"Martin, come and select your charade." His mother's tone brooked no argument.

With a beleaguered sigh, Martin did as she requested. His demeanor made it easy to picture him as a young boy being forced to do something he didn't want to do.

He acted out someone playing cricket, which was quickly guessed. A female guest volunteered to go next, but no one was able to guess her actions of tending a garden.

Harriet worried something similar would happen to her. Despite her concern, the afternoon sped by quickly amidst much laughter. Everyone was nervous at first and while some had reason to be embarrassed given their ability—or lack thereof—to act out their charade, all seemed to enjoy the game. Viscount Garland helped to keep the guests in good humor, making amusing remarks in a droll tone.

Frances managed to do a wonderful job with her phrase of walking a dog. Harriet noted the admiration in Garland's face but ignored the pang of envy she felt.

Soon the game ended, and everyone stood, most mentioning they intended to rest before dinner.

"That wasn't as terrible as I thought," Viscount Garland said to Harriet as they followed some of the others out of the room.

"Rather entertaining, wasn't it?" Harriet smiled. "Be sure not to say that too loud, or we'll be playing it again tomorrow afternoon."

Garland laughed, bringing a flush of pleasure to Harriet. “Good point. You were very creative with your phrase. I knew it immediately.”

Her stomach felt as if it flipped over at his compliment. “Thank you.” Pretending to play croquet had been easy enough, but she was still flattered. “May I say the same for yours?”

“Climbing a tree was a bit of a challenge.” He laughed. “Some of the guesses made it clear I wasn’t portraying it well.”

The guests parted ways. Harriet wasn’t ready to hear what Frances had to say or to have to reassure her again and decided to go to her bedroom in hopes of avoiding a conversation.

Yet she realized as soon as she entered her room that she was too restless to lie down. A visit to the library was in order. Deciding she’d prefer to avoid any guests that were of the same mind, she made her way to the smaller library on the second floor which was more likely to be empty.

Relief filled her when she opened the door and found it so. She took her time selecting a book then settled into a chair by the window. She hadn’t been reading long when the door opened.

A mix of delight and trepidation rushed through her when Viscount Garland came into view. She felt guilty when she spoke with him, knowing Frances admired him.

“Lady Harriet,” he said with a smile. “I see you have discovered the secret library as well.”

“Indeed.” She glanced about. “It’s a lovely room and they have an excellent selection of books.”

“I’ll find a book and leave you to the peace and quiet.”

“No need.” Heat warmed her cheeks. Was she being too forward? Yet it seemed ridiculous to keep the whole room to herself. “You’re welcome to remain if you’d like.”

“Thank you.” He turned to the shelves of books and perused the offerings, the silence peaceful rather than

awkward.

Harriet returned her attention to the page only to realize she had no idea what it said. With a quiet sigh, she allowed herself to admire the viscount's broad shoulders as he walked slowly along the shelves.

Yet she couldn't halt a rush of guilt as Frances came to mind. This could be the perfect opportunity to mention her friend to him.

Suddenly he turned to face her, his gaze meeting hers.

She stilled, remorse flooding her at being caught staring at him. How embarrassing.

"May I ask what you're reading?" he asked, seemingly unaware of her fascination with him, much to her relief.

"Oh." She glanced at the book, her mind blank for a moment. "Charles Dickens, actually."

"You truly do enjoy his work?"

"I do. He wrote from the heart about what he observed around him. I've reread his stories numerous times. I suppose it's like seeing old friends again."

Garland nodded. "The familiar provides a certain comfort, especially when one is troubled." He pulled out a volume before looking back at her. "I'm joining you with another one from Dickens."

Her heart warmed as he walked toward her and sat in the nearby chair. His words lingered in the air between them, and she couldn't let them go.

"Are you?" she asked quietly. "Troubled, that is," she added when he glanced up, one brow lifted in question.

He blinked as if only now realizing what he'd said. "I suppose I am. Life is often more complicated than I'd like."

She nodded, telling herself not to say anything more on the topic. Why would he confide in her when they hardly knew one another?

"Are you familiar with Reverend Henderson?" he asked.

Harriet told herself not to be disappointed by the change in subject. It was to be expected since they were mere acquaintances. How silly to think he might unburden himself to her.

“Only from his time here.” She hesitated to say more though she had already decided she didn’t like the man. He had a sly quality she didn’t trust. In fact, something about him reminded her of her stepfather.

“And?” Garland studied her. “Would you care to share your opinion?”

“I don’t really know him well enough to say.” What if Garland admired him?

“Do you have a first impression?”

Harriet drew a deep breath as she considered how to word it without causing offense. “He seems to have strong opinions on several topics with which I would be hard-pressed to agree.”

The viscount smiled. “I knew I liked you.”

Her stomach flipped again at his easy smile not to mention his words.

“Do you happen to know why he’s here?” he asked.

“No, although the question crossed my mind as well. I thought about asking Frances.”

“This might sound like an odd request, but if you learn anything, would you share it with me?”

Her heartbeat sped at the idea of having a reason to speak with him in private again, not to mention the connection it offered. “Of course. May I ask why?”

“Henderson has befriended my father, much to my dismay. I don’t agree with many of his views, nor do I trust him.” He glanced at the book he held. “Of course, I wouldn’t want to cause any problems for another guest, including him. I’d prefer to have this remain between us.”

“Of course.” But she intended to ask Frances at the first opportunity. It might be ridiculous of her to latch on to a reason to speak with Garland again, but she couldn’t help it. Not when she found him so appealing.



Chapter Six



A few hours later, Frances paced the length of Harriet's bedroom, her brow puckered with concentration. "If only I could think of something clever to say to him."

They had dressed for the evening and were ready to go to the drawing room to gather with the guests before dinner.

"As I mentioned before, you need only relax and be yourself," Harriet said, nearly dizzy from watching her friend. "You are charming just as you are."

Frances halted, the bustle of her pale green gown swinging at the abrupt movement. "My mind goes blank when he's near."

"Oh?" Harriet's curiosity was caught as she had suffered a similar problem. "Do you experience other physical symptoms as well?"

"Other than embarrassment?" She shook her head, her frustration obvious. "I seem incapable of putting two words together in his presence."

That didn't exactly answer the question but maybe she was better off not knowing. Yet she couldn't help herself. "What is it about him that appeals to you?"

For Harriet, there were numerous qualities, from his handsome appearance to the warmth and humor in his hazel eyes to his willingness to take her into his confidence earlier today. Then there was her reaction to him even when she wasn't looking at him. She knew him to be kind and respectful, and she enjoyed speaking with him as well.

The worrisome issue was that she could go on.

And on.

"He's quite handsome." Frances sighed.

"True. What else?"

“He played charades in good humor.” She turned to look at Harriet, worrying her lower lip. “It’s difficult to explain.”

Harriet nodded. On that, they could agree.

It was apparent Frances didn’t know Garland well, but Harriet couldn’t claim to either.

Harriet had taken his request for more information on Reverend Henderson’s presence to heart and asked Frances earlier if she knew why the man had been invited. But she seemed as puzzled by his presence as Garland was. Then again, Harriet didn’t think her friend knew half of the guests. Her sole focus seemed to be on the viscount.

“Perhaps I could pen him a message,” Frances suggested as she returned to her pacing only to spin to face Harriet. “Or rather, you should.”

“Me?” Harriet couldn’t imagine doing anything of the sort.

Frances gestured toward the desk where Harriet sat. She’d spent the last hour writing letters to her mother and Phoebe. “You’re far cleverer with words than I could ever hope to be.”

“Frances—”

“Please, Harriet. This is important. I truly need your help.”

“I think speaking to him would be a better choice.”

“It’s not as if I won’t help,” Frances said, ignoring Harriet’s suggestion.

“How would this work? Do you intend to ask a footman to hand him a message?” Harriet hoped that once she thought this through, she’d realize it wasn’t a good idea. “Or do you intend to find a secret location to leave messages for him?” She was pretty sure they’d read that in a book for one of the league meetings.

“A secret location would be perfect.” Frances’ brown eyes lit with excitement. “How romantic.”

“I was jesting.”

“I’m not. It’s perfect. This is exactly why I need your help. You always have the best ideas.”

“How are you going to ask him to look in the secret place, wherever it is?”

“It will be in the small library. We already know he visits it since you encountered him there earlier.”

“What if someone else finds your message?”

“*Our* message,” Frances corrected her. “We won’t sign them, so no one will know who’s behind them.”

“Neither will he.” Harriet couldn’t believe Frances was so convinced this would work.

“That will be part of the fun. He’ll be intrigued by the thought of a secret admirer.” She sighed. “It’s perfect for my bold move.”

It didn’t seem very bold when Frances wasn’t the only one behind it. Still, all the league members had agreed to support one another in their endeavors. Harriet supposed that included directly assisting with it.

But she still didn’t like it. “He might think it’s someone other than you. Then what?”

Frances tapped a finger on her lip as she considered the question. “We’ll have to provide enough clues that he comes to the right conclusion.”

“Frances, this isn’t going to work. I have a bad feeling about it.” A sinking sensation that refused to be ignored. And she didn’t like the way Frances kept saying “we.”

“You worry too much, Harriet.” Frances rubbed her hands together in excitement. “Let us pen the first message. Then we’ll find a way to tell him to look in the library for it.”

Harriet rose from the chair and gestured to the desk. “You should write it.” The less she was involved, the better.

“Very well. Tell me what to say.” Frances settled at the desk and pulled a piece of paper closer.

“What do you want him to know?” Harriet asked reluctantly.

Her friend's brow furrowed. After a long moment, she said, "That I admire him and would like to come to know him better."

"Good." Harriet nodded to encourage her.

"How can I say it better?"

Harriet glanced at the clock. "We don't have much time."

"Perfect, because otherwise, I might convince myself not to go through with this."

Would that be such a bad thing? "It might help if you're specific about why you admire him."

"Such as?" The hope in Frances' eyes was more than Harriet could withstand.

"Joseph," Harriet began.

"His given name is Joseph?" Frances asked with some amazement.

Harriet could only stare in disbelief. How did she not know that if she thought enough of him to make him the focus of her bold move?

Frances waved a hand in the air as if to suggest Harriet forget she said that. "Dear Joseph. Then what? Perhaps something about the strength of his jaw?"

He did have an attractive jawline, but his other qualities mattered more. "In the brief time we've been acquainted, I've noticed what a kind and honorable man you are."

"Oh, that's good," Frances said as she wrote. "It would've been wrong to dwell on his appearance."

"I should very much like to come to know you better." That was what Harriet would like to tell him given the chance.

"Excellent. Then what?"

"My shyness prohibits me from—"

Frances shook her head. "We can't say that. He might guess it's me."

"Don't you want him to?"

“Not yet.” She shifted in the chair as if uncomfortable.
“It’s too soon.”

“All right.” Harriet considered it further. “May we come to know one another better through a few messages?”

Frances apparently liked that suggestion as she started writing immediately. Her smile helped to lessen the heaviness in Harriet’s heart. Once again, she reminded herself of the importance of friendship even if it didn’t keep her from longing to be the one who was trying to draw the viscount’s interest.

“I still think you should simply try to speak with him this evening.” Harriet felt compelled to make another attempt to convince Frances to be more direct. “Surely, your mother would be willing to make certain you’re seated beside him.”

Frances gaped at her as if she’d lost her mind. “He’d quickly think me a fool since I have such a terrible time talking to him. Nor do I want my mother to know about any of this.”

“The choice is yours.” But Harriet intended to keep suggesting she speak with him. “A simple smile can go a long way to catch his notice.”

Frances folded the message and then tucked it in her sleeve. “This will give me the chance to know him better, too. You go ahead to the drawing room. I’m going to ask Sally, the maid, to tell his valet to ask that he look in the decorative box beside the lamp by the window in the library but that she should keep who said so a secret. Then I’ll put this in the box before dinner.”

Harriet shook her head. With so many parts to Frances’ plan, it seemed like it would be easy for something to go wrong. “Don’t be too long.”

“I won’t.” With a grin, Frances departed, leaving Harriet to walk down to the drawing room, still wondering how the plan could possibly work even as she wished she were the one executing it.



JOSEPH SMILED AT LADY Harriet as she entered the drawing room before dinner. He'd enjoyed their conversation in the library earlier. Not only was she attractive, but she was easy to talk to.

That couldn't be said of most ladies, including the other female guests. Some, like Miss Melbourne, were so shy as to make talking to them impossible. Others seemed bent on flirting. A few had a limited range of subjects about which they were willing to visit.

Joseph continued his conversation with Sinclair but watched as Lady Harriet glanced around the room as if uncertain who to approach.

"Do you mind if I ask Lady Harriet to join us?" Sinclair asked before Joseph could.

"Excellent idea." However, he didn't care for the idea that Sinclair had noticed her dilemma. Did that mean he was interested in her?

"Good evening," Lady Harriet said with a smile after Sinclair spoke with her. "Mr. Sinclair insists that I won't be interrupting if I join you."

"Not at all," Joseph reassured her then turned to Sinclair "Lady Harriet and I have discovered we are both fond of Charles Dickens. Do you enjoy his books as well?"

"I have only read a couple but yes, I do."

"What other hobbies do you enjoy?" Lady Harriet asked, looking at them both.

Joseph waited for Sinclair to respond, which gave him the chance to watch her. She truly was pretty with those wide blue eyes that held on whomever she was speaking with as if she were actually interested in what they were saying rather than merely making polite conversation.

Her pale hair was drawn into a loose chignon with several strands left to curl around her face. A hint of color in her

cheeks made her eyes look all the brighter. Her high-necked gown was a slate blue that brought to mind a rainy evening.

Did she choose gowns with higher necklines because she was especially modest? He wouldn't have noticed except several of the other ladies' evening gowns had daring décolletages in comparison.

“And you, Viscount Garland?” she asked.

“Please, call me Joseph.” He wasn't certain what possessed him to suggest it, but it felt right. “We are all familiar given the confines of the house party, aren't we?”

The pink in Lady Harriet's cheeks deepened, making her even more attractive. Her shy smile tightened his chest. “Very well.”

“And I'm Thomas,” Sinclair quickly added.

She nodded. “You may call me Harriet.” She then looked expectantly at Joseph.

It took him a moment to remember the question when she looked at him that way.

He longed to tell her the truth, that he'd been forming a plan to open a regional bank to offer assistance to new businesses in the area and help support the faltering agricultural economy. But he wasn't ready to mention any of that in front of Sinclair. Not yet.

First, he wanted a chance to speak with Mr. Melbourne about his idea. Without investors, the bank wouldn't be possible.

Instead, he spoke of a few other hobbies, including riding and boxing.

Before he could ask her in return, Miss Melbourne arrived. It seemed as if Lady Harriet had been watching for her as she gestured for her to join them.

He had to believe Miss Melbourne wasn't especially pleased by the invitation based on the look she sent her friend.

Still, she approached with a smile. “Good evening. I’m sorry, but I must have a word with my mother before dinner.” Then with a nod, she departed.

Frustration flashed across Lady Harriet’s expression, which only made Joseph more curious about the unspoken exchange between the ladies.

“Mrs. Melbourne mentioned playing another game after dinner this evening,” Sinclair said.

“Charades again?” Harriet asked with a resigned look.

Sinclair leaned closer. “Worse,” he said with a grin. “Blindman’s wand.”

Joseph smothered a groan. The game consisted of two players who were blindfolded. Each held the end of a long stick and they had to guess the other’s identity.

“Oh dear.” Harriet frowned but still managed to look pretty. “I don’t particularly like being blindfolded.”

“Nor do I,” Joseph agreed. “Perhaps we should come up with an alternative everyone might enjoy more.”

“Music is on the agenda for tomorrow evening,” Harriet said. She glanced in Miss Melbourne’s direction who stood near her mother but seemed to be gesturing that Harriet do something. She gave a small shake of her head.

“Is all well?” Joseph asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

He was rather disappointed that she didn’t say anything further. Had she asked Miss Melbourne about Reverend Henderson’s presence? He dearly wanted to know but would wait to ask until they wouldn’t be overheard. Or was that merely an excuse to speak with her in private?

The bell rang for dinner and Joseph found himself beside Lady Caroline Harris, another of the female guests.

Everyone seemed more comfortable with one another this evening. The meal was once again excellent and the conversation interesting.

Mr. Melbourne stood after the meal was over. “Rather than having the ladies depart, we thought we would all enjoy a game or two before we’re left to our own devices for the remainder of the evening.”

Joseph hid a smile as the older man didn’t look especially pleased by the idea of playing a game. He couldn’t imagine Mr. Melbourne wanting to be blindfolded either.

Their host nodded toward his wife at the far end of the long table. “Mrs. Melbourne will explain the rules.”

She stood with a smile. “Let us play Twenty Questions with Mr. Melbourne starting us off.”

Everyone at the table seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

To Joseph’s surprise, Mr. Melbourne played the game with good humor, until finally someone guessed his word. The person to his right was the next player, and they went quickly around the table.

Most of the words were relatively easy as if the guests were in agreement not to try to stump everyone. It was good fun, and Joseph couldn’t remember laughing so hard in a long time.

Harriet’s word was marigold, which he managed to guess, though it took nearly all of the questions. Miss Melbourne didn’t seem to enjoy the game, no doubt because of her shyness, but still, she played.

Joseph selected plow as his word since agriculture had been on his mind of late. Harriet managed to guess it after listening to his answer to the other guests’ questions. The smile they shared across the table set his heart hammering.

Though it seemed silly, it was as if time stood still for a few seconds while they held each other’s gaze, something fundamental briefly connecting them.

Then her smile dimmed, and she glanced at Miss Melbourne. Her friend was speaking with someone else and hadn’t noticed their shared look.

For the remainder of the evening, the men gathered in the billiard room, either playing cards or billiards while enjoying a few drinks.

Joseph welcomed the opportunity to speak with Mr. Melbourne again but noted Reverend Henderson seemed to be trying to do the same thing. Joseph did his best to keep his distance from the man, having no desire to listen to his rhetoric. Each day that he didn't have to engage with him was a good one as far as Joseph was concerned.

The evening was enjoyable, but he missed spending it with the ladies. After a few hands of cards with Sinclair as his partner, he retired relatively early.

Charles was waiting for him in his room. "We have a bit of a mystery, my lord."

"Oh?"

"It has been requested that you look in a decorative box near the window in the small library." The valet smiled, seeming amused.

Joseph frowned, thinking it was an odd request. "Why?"

"That is the mystery."

"Who asked that I do this?"

"One of the other servants who said she was sworn to secrecy."

Joseph considered waiting until morning but had the feeling he would only lay awake wondering what—and who—was involved. "Very well. I shall return directly."

He vaguely remembered seeing the box earlier when he'd visited with Harriet. His chest tightened. Could she have left something for him?

Charles handed him a candleholder to take with him as it seemed unlikely any would be lit in the library at this hour.

Within a few minutes, Joseph opened the library door and peered into the room, almost disappointed to see it empty. He'd half-hoped Harriet might be waiting for him.

He strode to the box and lifted the lid to find a piece of paper inside. The feminine handwriting was visible in the candlelight, but the short message left more questions than answers.

Why would Harriet have left it when they'd had the chance to speak several times throughout the evening? Or had she felt the same connection he had earlier and hoped to explore it? Yet the note might not be from her at all but from one of the other ladies.

The thought had him grimacing. When he replied, he would have to take care how he worded his message. How could he make it encouraging but reserved?

He returned to his room and showed Charles the message, who read it with delight.

“A secret admirer. How interesting.” He raised a brow. “Any idea who?”

“No.” Though he knew who he hoped it was.

“Are you going to reply?”

“I suppose so. But I'll sleep on what to say.”

“Good idea. It will be difficult when you don't know who wrote it.”

That was precisely what worried Joseph.



Chapter Seven



“Would anyone like to go for a walk this morning?” Frances asked soon after they’d finished breakfast in the dining room where many of the ladies lingered over tea.

Several agreed, including Harriet. She looked forward to clearing her head with some fresh air and exercise.

Five of the ladies gathered their shawls and bonnets and soon started across the field.

Frances was in fine form and answered questions from some of the guests about the surrounding countryside and what the nearby village was like. She seemed more comfortable in smaller groups with just the ladies.

“It has an excellent lending library in addition to many shops. Perhaps we can venture there tomorrow afternoon if Mother doesn’t have other activities planned.”

They kept a relatively fast pace as they walked to the apple orchard. The fruit was nearly ripe, and Harriet couldn’t resist picking a couple of green apples to enjoy.

“Aren’t they sour?” Winifred asked, making a face as she watched Harriet take a bite after rubbing it to a shine on her cloak.

“Yes, but in a good way.” Harriet grinned as her friend shuddered.

They walked along the creek for a time then crossed a narrow wooden walking bridge that led to the forest where they followed a trail through the heart of the woods.

Harriet paused a moment, allowing the others to walk ahead while she took a moment to breathe in the scent of the forest. It brought many pleasant memories from her youth when her father had been alive, and all had been right with the world.

The thought of him brought a pang of longing. She still missed him so much. How different her life would be if he had lived. Her mother wouldn't have married again, and that would've changed not only her life but her future.

She followed the rest of the group, hearing their voices just ahead but didn't make an effort to catch up. It was nice to take a moment to herself. While she didn't suffer from the shyness that so often overtook Frances, being around people for long periods, especially those she didn't know particularly well, was tiring.

Harriet emerged from the woods to see the ladies had stopped to rest. She joined them, admiring Melbourne House which was visible across the field.

"I was beginning to worry that I needed to come in search of you," Frances said as she reached her side.

"The forest is wonderful," Harriet said. "I took a moment to enjoy it."

"Perhaps you and I can manage another walk tomorrow morning before breakfast," Frances suggested quietly while the others talked among themselves.

"I'd like that." Harriet studied her friend, noting her smile. "What has you in such good spirits this morning?"

Frances' smile grew broader. "I received a reply."

"Did you?" Harriet's heart lurched. She'd forgotten about the message for a few moments and was uncertain whether she wanted to know what Joseph had replied. But she could tell Frances was anxious to share it with her. "What did he say?"

"That he looked forward to doing the same and would I provide a hint as to my identity."

"How interesting. Have you written back?"

"Of course not. I need your help with that."

Harriet sighed, her mood dimming. She wished she could refuse without harming their friendship. If only she hadn't agreed to help until Frances shared the identity of the man who held her affection.

“Is everyone ready to return to the house?” Frances asked.

Harriet glanced at the woods and almost wished she could remain there for a little longer. But Frances looped her arm through hers and started forward. No doubt she was eager to write to Joseph again.

Within a half hour, they were back at the house and Frances had joined her in her bedroom once more. She handed Harriet a folded piece of paper, and Harriet reluctantly opened it.

Seeing the masculine scrawl and knowing who it came from caused her chest to tighten. His brief message was polite but encouraging.

She only wished it had been addressed to her.

“Very nice,” Harriet said as she handed it back to Frances. “How do you want to reply?”

“I have no idea. What do you think?”

Harriet didn’t bother saying that she should go speak with him since Frances wouldn’t consider doing that.

“Perhaps you could make this message a little more personal. Tell him something about yourself that wouldn’t give your identity away.”

“That’s perfect.” Frances’ brown eyes sparkled with excitement. “Such as what?”

Harriet tried to set aside her frustration and be of help. “Well, you could mention something about your appearance, or maybe some of your interests, like reading.”

It took another quarter of an hour before Frances had settled on what to write. By then, Harriet’s patience had worn thin.

“Will you take it to the library for me?” Frances asked.

“I’d rather not. What if someone sees me?”

“You were in there yesterday.”

“Weren’t you as well?”

Frances heaved a sigh. “I will find Sally and have her do it.”

“Good.”

“Or we could both go there.” Frances looked at her imploringly. “Would you *please* go with me?”

Harriet gave in. “Of course.”

They went together and found the room empty. Harriet stood guard outside the door while Frances put the message in the box.

To Harriet’s relief, no one walked by. She couldn’t imagine what she’d say if Joseph had wanted in the library. With luck, Frances would ask one of the servants to help her next time and leave Harriet out of it.



JOSEPH WAS ON HIS WAY back to the house from the stables after enjoying another ride when he heard his name. He turned, pleased to see Melbourne striding toward him.

“How was your ride, Garland?” he asked with a smile. Despite his stout frame which was much like his son’s, he walked with purpose.

Joseph envied his confidence as if he knew his place in the world and was comfortable with it.

“Excellent. Your estate is a pleasure to view.”

“I’m pleased to hear it. Your country estate isn’t far, is it?”

Joseph realized this might be the opening he needed. “To the north in Gloucestershire. I plan to be there next month for a week or two.” At least, he intended to visit, assuming his father remained in London.

“I hope we can continue our conversation about raising crops before the week’s end.”

“I would like that.” Joseph was pleased by his host’s words. This was the opportunity he’d been hoping for. “I’d

also like to speak with you about an investment idea I've been developing."

Melbourne clapped him on the shoulder. "I look forward to it. Perhaps tomorrow's schedule will provide time to talk. For now, I must assist Mrs. Melbourne with a few things."

Joseph's spirits fell. Tomorrow seemed a long way off. Postponing it meant risking that it wouldn't happen at all. But he was grateful for the possibility all the same. "Of course."

Melbourne left him in the foyer when they entered the house.

Joseph went up to his room to freshen up, certain he smelled like horses. It was nearly time for luncheon, but he couldn't resist stopping by the library to see if another message awaited him.

Sure enough, a folded piece of paper was nestled in the box. He enjoyed the sense of anticipation that filled him as he opened it. But the reason for the feeling was that he believed Harriet was behind the messages. Perhaps this was her way of being flirtatious.

He read the missive, trying to read between the lines and look for clues. It seemed unfair that the author knew his identity, but he didn't know hers.

Still, he would enjoy the interaction with the hope it led to a deepening relationship with Harriet. Surely it had to be her who had written the messages. He couldn't imagine any of the other ladies doing so.

The location of where the messages were hidden also seemed to confirm Harriet had written them since they had spent a pleasurable hour visiting in this very room. Though he would rather speak with her again instead of exchanging brief messages, perhaps these would help her open up to him more than when they talked.

He entered the dining room where many of the other guests were already eating. Luncheon was a casual meal with a selection of bread, cold meats, and cheeses, along with fruits and nuts. The light repast was perfect and more than enough to

hold him over until dinner. Ale was offered as well, and he helped himself to a glass.

Joseph sat beside Peter Connolly, the shipbuilding heir, and asked a few questions, wondering if he might be interested in investing. But Connolly seemed more interested in enjoying himself than talking about business.

“Did you hear that our presence has been requested in the drawing room after luncheon?” Connolly asked.

“Oh, yes. We’re to play another game, aren’t we?” To his surprise, Joseph was looking forward to it. Or rather, to the chance to see Harriet again.

A few of the ladies were also dining but not Harriet. After finishing the meal, he went up to the drawing room though he was early.

He hoped to see Harriet, but the room stood empty. He turned to leave only to nearly run into Reverend Henderson.

“Excuse me.” Joseph started to move around his stocky frame, having no wish to talk to him.

“I was hoping for a word with you, Garland.” The reverend didn’t budge.

“Oh? Regarding what?” Joseph didn’t bother pretending to be friendly. He had no respect for the man.

“Don’t think I haven’t seen you whispering to the other guests behind my back.” The man’s dark eyes narrowed with his accusation. “If you have something to say, tell me directly.”

“I’ve already done so, but apparently you weren’t listening. If I haven’t made it clear, let me try again. I don’t agree with your views on withholding help for the less fortunate. Don’t bother asking for a donation as I won’t be handing you any money. And I will continue to advise my father against it as well.”

“You would do well to listen to your father,” the reverend suggested.

“You mean you wish I wouldn’t protest every time he gives you money.”

“It shows how narrow your mind is if you can’t appreciate the higher purpose of my church and its followers.”

“Perhaps you could provide a detailed list of how the funds are used. From what I can see, they appear to only go in your pocket.”

“You overstep yourself, Garland. You don’t know of what you speak.”

“It’s odd how much you protest but still don’t answer my concerns. If you’re not assisting the poor, then who are you aiding?”

Joseph saw movement out of the corner of his eye and looked over to see a startled Harriet with wide eyes. Of all the people who might have overheard him, he wished it hadn’t been her.

“Pardon me,” she said then turned to go.

“Don’t bother,” Henderson said and then looked back at Joseph. “We will speak of this again later.”

“No, we won’t.” Joseph had no desire to argue with the man. Clearly, doing so solved nothing. He watched as Henderson stalked to the stairs, then hurried toward Harriet who had turned to walk down the corridor.

“I’m sorry you heard that,” he said when he caught up with her.

She looked at him as if to gauge his mood, a hint of worry in the depth of her eyes. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

“You weren’t. The reverend seemed determined to air our differences.” He shook his head and attempted to put aside his frustration.

“May I ask why you have such strong feelings toward him?”

Joseph drew a deep breath, wondering how much, if anything, to tell her. Yet he didn’t want her to think poorly of

him. He glanced around, not wanting to share any of what he had to say where it could be overheard.

“Would you join me in the library for a moment?” He’d almost said *our* library. He needed to take care since he didn’t know if she was the author of the notes.

“Of course.” She followed him into the empty room.

He couldn’t help but note how her gaze lingered on the box as he closed the door behind them. Surely, that suggested she was the one writing the messages.

“My father has always been a strong Christian.” The topic was difficult to share, yet the empathy in Harriet’s expression compelled him to explain. “He was very strict and tended to use Bible verses to justify his actions or as a way to force my siblings and me to behave.”

He glanced again at her, hoping she didn’t think poorly of him. “Our childhood was a challenge as my father found fault with nearly everything we did.”

He shook his head, realizing he hadn’t answered her question. “Suffice it to say that after the way he used love and religion in that manner, when I come upon anyone with strong religious tendencies, I view them with suspicion.”

“That’s understandable,” Harriet said.

“Reverend Henderson has persuaded my father that donations to his church should be numerous and significant. He’s also convinced him that charitable donations to the poor hinder the forces of evolutionary advancement.”

Harriet’s puzzled look had him shrugging.

“He believes that Great Britain’s duty is to civilize other countries, and that meant our country’s population must be strong. Providing aid to the poor weakens all of us.” He shook his head. “It makes no sense to me either. Rather than assist those in need as he used to, Father donates to Henderson and his church.”

“How does Henderson use the donations?”

“That’s the question I keep asking, much to Reverend Henderson’s dismay. Why does a church need money if they don’t help the less fortunate?”

“How odd. I did ask Frances why he was on the guest list, but she isn’t sure. She said she’d ask her mother. I’ll remind her to do so.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” Joseph stared out the window. “I’m hoping to speak with Mr. Melbourne about an idea for an investment opportunity. But Henderson’s presence makes that difficult. I feel as if I’m no better than he, asking for money.”

“An investment opportunity is much different than a questionable donation.”

“Only if the investment succeeds,” Joseph said with a smile. “I truly appreciate your help in finding out why the reverend is here. I thought to ask Martin but haven’t seen him today.”

“He had to leave to see to a business matter and isn’t expected back until tomorrow.”

“See, you are a wealth of information.” He smiled again, his troubled thoughts easing as he watched her. “And you are a balm to my frustration. I thank you for both.”

“I wish I could be of more help.” Her lips tightened with displeasure. “If I have the chance to ask the reverend a few questions, I will certainly do so.”

“Take care if you do. Just because he has ‘reverend’ in front of his name doesn’t make him an especially nice or considerate person.”

Harriet stared at him before nodding, her fingers pressing to her chest. He’d obviously shocked her, but he wanted her to take his warning seriously. Henderson was not to be trusted as far as he was concerned.

She gestured toward the door. “I was going to the drawing room to make certain none of the guests who were interested in playing the games this afternoon were there. The activities are being held in the sitting room on the main floor.”

“I’m grateful you did, or I would’ve missed out on the chance to spend more time with you.”

Her mouth opened even as her eyes widened in surprise. Then a delightful blush colored her cheeks. She clearly didn’t know what to say.

He didn’t know what made him speak so plainly, but the week would be over before he knew it. Time was of the essence, and he wanted her to know that he found her intriguing. His reaction to her was unlike anything he’d experienced before, and he knew beyond a doubt he wanted to explore it.

Unfortunately, based on Harriet’s reaction, he wasn’t sure whether she felt the same way. Perhaps she wasn’t the one leaving him notes.

“I suppose we should join everyone, or they’ll be wondering what’s become of us,” he said.

“Yes, I suppose.” She turned to lead the way out of the room only to turn back, her gaze holding on him even as a deeper color rose to her cheeks. “I welcome the chance to spend time with you as well, Joseph.”

Before he could respond, she opened the door and stepped out. “Are you coming?” she asked with a glance over her shoulder and a smile.

Now he was the one taken by surprise. Lady Harriet Persimmons was a delight, and he was so pleased they had the rest of the week to come to know one another better.



Chapter Eight



The moment Harriet entered the sitting room with Joseph, she caught the puzzled look Frances sent her. Her friend probably wondered why they were walking in late together—and why Harriet’s face was red. An explanation would have to wait, though she didn’t know what she might say.

Her thoughts were still reeling from what Joseph had said. To think he wanted to spend time with her was thrilling yet concerning since she was supposed to be helping Frances.

Then there was his exchange with Reverend Henderson and what Joseph had confided in her about his father. It sounded as if the earl tended to be overly zealous in his faith. How difficult that must’ve been for Joseph and his siblings while growing up. What little he told her reminded her of her stepfather and made her wonder if they’d had a few similar experiences.

“There you are,” Mrs. Melbourne said with a smile. “Now then let us start the game.” She held up a wooden pole, nearly as tall as she was. “How fun will it be to play blind man’s wand.”

Some of the young ladies clapped in delight, but none of the men appeared to be excited from what Harriet could see.

As Mrs. Melbourne explained the rules, Harriet’s thoughts returned to the brief interlude with Joseph. She was being a terrible friend by telling him that she wanted to spend time with him, too. Yet how could she have disagreed when she longed for it with everything she had?

Mrs. Melbourne held up a scarf, catching Harriet’s notice once again. “Who would like to volunteer to go first?”

Joseph glanced at her and if she didn’t know better, she thought he might have winked. That couldn’t be right. Her heart hammered with the thought as he raised his hand.

“I’d be happy to go first.”

The other guests clapped and encouraged him as he moved to where Mrs. Melbourne stood. She handed him the stick and then tied the blindfold over his eyes. “Do your best to guess who holds the other end of the pole.”

Giggles erupted immediately, and even the men laughed.

Harriet couldn’t help but smile at what a good sport Joseph was.

Mrs. Melbourne gestured around the room to silently ask who would like to hold the other end of the pole for him to guess.

Peter Connelly stood and held a finger to his lips. He reached for the end of the pole from the ground and then straightened. He tugged the pole, catching Joseph off guard. Everyone laughed even harder, including Peter.

“Connelly?” Joseph guessed.

“How did you know?” Connelly asked.

“I recognized your laugh.” With the blindfold still on, he told the room, “Let that serve as a warning. No laughing.”

Everyone roared. Harriet’s cheeks already hurt from laughing and the game had only begun.

Peter took the blindfold from Joseph and turned for Mrs. Melbourne to secure it on him. Winifred boldly picked up the pole, but it took a few hints from the crowd for him to be able to guess her identity.

Winifred took his place and immediately guessed her male opponent, Thomas Sinclair, making it his turn.

“Are you certain you can’t see?” accused someone when she guessed so easily.

Once again, everyone laughed.

Winifred smiled. “I refuse to share my secrets.”

Much to Harriet’s surprise, Frances stood, her cheeks bright red as she reached for the stick. She managed to hold

her silence, pulling on the pole a few times with a grin.

“Hmm,” Thomas said. “I have to wonder if it’s a lady based on the gentleness of the tug.” He twisted the pole, causing Frances to giggle in surprise.

“Miss Melbourne,” he declared. He removed the blindfold and grinned at Frances.

One look at her friend’s face made Harriet wonder if Thomas had caught her interest. She could imagine how hard Frances’ heart was pounding. Harriet had experienced the same feeling in the library with Joseph. Yet somehow, watching the moment between the two made her feel even guiltier for admitting her interest to Joseph.

Thomas handed the blindfold to Frances, who took it reluctantly. “I do believe you’re next.”

She turned to allow her mother to bind it then Mrs. Melbourne made certain she couldn’t see.

To Harriet’s surprise, Joseph moved to stand at her side. “Are you going to give it a try?” he asked with a smile.

“Not with Frances. She will know that it’s me.” They knew each other too well.

“Excellent point.”

They watched together, calling out encouragement to the other players and sharing looks of amusement. Each time her gaze met Joseph’s, an intense awareness poured through her.

How could she ignore the feeling when it happened so rarely in life? She’d been to numerous events and balls and parties over the past five years. While she’d experienced nerves, embarrassment, and moments of happiness, never had she felt what she did when she looked into Joseph’s eyes.

She jerked her attention away from him yet again, glancing at Frances with the hope her friend hadn’t witnessed the moment.

But based on the coolness in her expression as she looked at Harriet, it seemed she had.



HARRIET PACED HER BEDROOM soon after the game had finished. She'd wanted to speak with Frances right away, but Mrs. Melbourne had requested Frances' help, delaying her in the sitting room.

If only she knew what to say. Would Frances ever forgive her for coming to care for Joseph, too?

She turned to walk to the window again only to hear a knock at the door. Her stomach twisted alarmingly, and she pressed a hand to it, hoping to settle her nerves. She hurried to the door and opened it to find Frances there, just as she'd expected.

"Frances," she greeted her as she opened the door wider. "Come in."

One look at her face confirmed her friend was upset. That only made Harriet feel worse.

"I simply cannot believe it." Frances strode past her then placed a hand on her hip as she turned to face Harriet.

The air left Harriet's lungs at her obvious distress. "I'm sorry. I can explain."

Before she could finish the thought Frances waved a hand in the air. "I don't think you can."

A terrible ache filled Harriet at her words.

"Lady Caroline was flirting outrageously with Viscount Garland," Frances continued.

Harriet stared at Frances in disbelief as she tried to understand what she had just said. "Lady Caroline?"

"She was acting far too forward. Did you see the way she placed her hand on his arm?"

Harriet had noticed but hadn't been concerned by it. They'd been in the middle of the game with everyone enjoying themselves. A certain friendliness at a house party was to be expected, wasn't it?

Never mind that she was certain what she felt was more than friendliness.

She couldn't deny her relief that Frances wasn't upset with her. This was the perfect opportunity to tell her how she felt about Joseph. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Besides, it wasn't as if they had done anything untoward.

The excuse sounded weak even to herself.

"It's clear that I need to take a bolder step to attract his attention," Frances continued. "I have been far too reserved up to this point."

"What do you intend to do?" She couldn't imagine her shy friend doing anything drastic to gain his notice.

Frances marched to the desk and pulled out a sheet of paper. "I will be more direct in this message."

"Or you could speak with him this evening and make it clear how you feel." How terrible that Harriet almost hoped she would refuse.

"No." Frances shook her head. "I can't do it. I thought to try this afternoon. But the moment he looked at me, my throat closed, and I couldn't say a word." She pressed a hand to her forehead. "I have no idea what is wrong with me, but I just can't. That is why I appreciate your help so much."

Harriet sighed. While relieved Frances wasn't upset with her, she wished Frances would simply speak with him. A smile and a few words would make it clear how she felt and allow Joseph the chance to return her regard if he were so inclined.

"I will tell him how handsome I find him." Frances stared at the blank paper, her hand holding the pen. Yet she didn't write anything.

"You could say exactly that," Harriet said softly.

"That's not good enough."

"What if you were more specific? Maybe mention the color of his eyes."

“Yes,” Frances agreed with an enthusiastic nod.
“Something about the blue of his eyes matching the sky.”

Harriet frowned. “His eyes are hazel. But I believe Mr. Sinclair’s eyes are blue.” Did Frances admire him as well? For a moment during the game, Harriet thought she might.

“Oh. Yes, of course.” She tapped the pen with a finger. “To what can I compare hazel?”

His eyes weren’t exactly hazel. They were a mix of green and brown with gold flecks. They reminded Harriet of moss in the forest. Then there were his long lashes. Who knew that a man’s lashes would be something to admire?

“Tea, perhaps?” Frances asked as she turned to look at Harriet.

“I’d love some,” Harriet agreed, realizing she’d lost track of the conversation.

Frances frowned. “I meant the color of Viscount Garland’s eyes.”

“Oh. Of course.” She felt the heat in her cheeks and hoped Frances didn’t notice. “That might be too brown, don’t you think?”

“You’re right. Do you have a suggestion?”

It was selfish of her not to offer the moss idea, but she couldn’t. That was hers. “What about an autumn leaf just changing its color?”

“Brilliant.” Frances wrote that down. “What else?”

“Perhaps something about his personality as well? You mentioned his kindness.”

“And his humor,” Frances added as if determined to prove she truly did know him.

“Good idea.” Harriet waited, wanting her friend to think of at least a few of her own words.

Frances jotted more down then once again looked at Harriet. “I would like to mention his shoulders.”

“What about them?” How broad they were? How she longed to run her hands over them and touch them rather than only admire them from a distance?

“They’re very admirable.”

“Can you be more specific?” Frustration welled inside her once again, and it was all she could do to not march over to the desk and take the pen and paper to write a message herself.

Yet several minutes passed with Frances saying nothing. “Broad, perhaps?” Harriet suggested at last, wanting the task to be done.

“Yes. That’s it.”

Frances finished the message and handed it to Harriet to read. The words didn’t flow well together. Her hesitation must’ve shown on her face for Frances asked, “What is it?”

“Well, it’s fine, really. It just doesn’t read smoothly.”

Frances jerked to her feet to read over Harriet’s shoulder. “Oh, you’re right. It sounds terrible.”

“Not at all.” One look at Frances’ hopeful expression had Harriet reading it again. “Perhaps if we just changed a few words...”

“Any suggestions you have would be welcome.” Frances sat at the desk again and pulled out a fresh piece of paper. “How shall I say it?”

It took more time than Harriet would’ve liked, but at last, Frances had written a message that would hopefully touch Joseph’s emotions. How terrible that the idea put a lump in Harriet’s throat.

Frances folded the paper carefully only to pause. “I should scent it with some of my perfume.”

Harriet nodded, her stomach sinking. That would more than likely give Joseph a clue as to her identity. Frances always wore the same flowery scent. Harriet hadn’t brought any perfume with her.

What if he realized who it was? Then what? Given that he had an investment idea to propose to Mr. Melbourne, he might be very excited to learn that the man's daughter was attracted to him.

Harriet released a quiet sigh. Why did it feel as if she'd lost him when she'd never had him?



JOSEPH STARED AT THE message, his chest expanding as he read the words.

He'd nearly forgotten about looking for another note until Charles had reminded him.

This one was more personal than the previous ones and quite touching.

Harriet had said she wanted to spend more time with him. Surely this had to be from her. Yet given that she'd *told* him that, why would she continue to write messages?

A faint scent caught his attention. He brought the paper closer and drew in the sweet fragrance only to frown. It didn't match what he remembered Harriet smelling like.

But that didn't mean she wasn't behind them.

The quiet of the library was at odds with his swirling thoughts. He couldn't say why he wanted it to be her so much, but he did.

After all, he wasn't ready to court a lady. Marriage was much further down the path of his future. It was unlikely that he'd inherit for years. Why marry now when he had other concerns, including the financial worry of his inheritance? When he did marry, it would be for practical purposes. Not love.

Then there was the fact that he didn't trust the emotion. How could he when it had been used as a club throughout his life to try to bend him to his father's will?

Not that love was involved. He and Harriet were still coming to know one another. But he wouldn't deny that he'd

never felt like this about anyone else.

He stared at the feminine script. Perhaps he could find a way to have her write something, even if it was a charade phrase. Then he might know whether his secret admirer was the one he hoped. Until then, he should assume nothing.

Still, he hoped it was Harriet. He wanted to explore what he felt for her. These unfamiliar emotions might be the result of close proximity. The house party narrowed the world and brought his focus to those around him.

His gaze caught on the grandfather clock standing in the corner. Realizing it was growing late, he hurried out of the library to join everyone in the drawing room before dinner.

He entered the room without anyone remarking on his tardy arrival. His focus shifted from one single lady to the next, considering the possibilities, only to conclude he had no idea who it might be.

His best chance of discovering the lady's identity was to respond to the message and hope the next one contained additional clues. Meanwhile, he'd try to speak with each of the unattached ladies this evening and note their scent.

The image of him sniffing each lady had him smothering a grimace—heaven forbid if he were caught. His gaze lingered on Harriet. As if sensing his regard, she looked at him and smiled, causing his mouth to go dry. Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to attempt to see if her perfume matched the message, fearful it wouldn't.

Instead, he moved in the opposite direction.

Dinner would soon be served, which didn't leave him much time. He approached Martin, who had returned earlier, and stood with his wife, Miss Melbourne, and Lady Caroline.

“What a fine day it's been,” Joseph said.

Martin nodded. “Though the way the clouds were building on the horizon when I rode in, one wonders if tomorrow's weather will be as nice.”

Joseph hadn't been speaking of the weather but didn't bother to correct him. He glanced at Miss Melbourne, whose gaze held on the floor as usual. Was it shyness that caused her reaction or did she simply not care for him?

"I do hope it doesn't rain tomorrow," Lady Caroline said with a bright smile.

She didn't seem to have any problem conversing with him. Didn't that make it unlikely that she'd have written the messages?

He subtly shifted his weight toward first one lady then the other, trying to see if one wore the same scent as the message. Damn, but it was nearly impossible to tell. Especially when they stood beside one another.

He moved on to Lady Winifred who spoke with Peter Connelly but didn't notice any fragrance near her.

Unfortunately, several other ladies stood together, making it impossible to know who wore what perfume. Then they were called to dinner, and he had to abandon his mission.

This evening, he was seated next to Lady Winifred.

"Haven't the meals been wonderful thus far?" she asked as he assisted her into her chair. "I look forward to seeing what will be served this evening."

"As do I," he agreed, trying to sniff her with little success.

She seemed to act rather flirtatiously toward him as he took his seat. She leaned close as if adjusting her position, and he thought he smelled a sweet perfume, but it was difficult to tell, especially once the first course was served and the appetizing scent of food complicated the matter.

Still, the way she smiled and spoke with him, touching his arm several times, made him wonder.

Then there was Lady Caroline, who sat across the table from him and also seemed to send him interested looks.

He sat back in his chair and smothered a groan as the soup bowls were removed. Clearly, he was making himself mad

with this endeavor. It would be better to allow the matter to play out naturally and see where it led.

The meal soon concluded, and once again, the ladies departed to leave the gentlemen to their port. Reverend Henderson's voice rose from near the end of the table, drawing Joseph's attention. He was speaking with Lord Weston, one of the older members of the party. The lord's fierce expression suggested they were arguing about something, making Joseph wish he knew what they discussed.

A glance at the other end of the table showed Mr. Melbourne frowning as he looked at the two. Their host cleared his throat to gain the attention of everyone, including the two men.

It took a moment before the two noticed the silence that had descended and looked at Mr. Melbourne.

"The week will come to an end before we know it. Is there anything in particular you'd like to do tomorrow?" he asked.

Joseph wanted to mention that he'd appreciate a few minutes of Mr. Melbourne's time per their previous conversation but held his silence. He had to hope Melbourne remembered.

Several of the gentlemen mentioned riding again in the morning, and Joseph agreed. That might give him the chance to speak with Melbourne.

Within half an hour, they joined the ladies in the music room, where they were deciding who would perform this evening.

Joseph's gaze sought Harriet's, his chest tightening when she immediately looked at him again. The confirmation of a connection of some sort between them pleased him more than he could say. He smiled, hoping she was among those performing. He welcomed the opportunity to have a reason to watch her.

Miss Melbourne appeared a little anxious with her hands clasped tightly before her and a hint of color in her cheeks. She often seemed overwrought or uncomfortable. Her obvious

shyness caught his sympathy. It wasn't an easy quality to overcome.

As if she, too, felt the weight of his regard, Miss Melbourne looked at him, her cheeks growing even brighter.

He smiled, hoping to ease her angst and offer encouragement. The overly bright smile she offered in return was perplexing, even concerning. Surely, he hadn't given her the wrong impression.

Though she seemed nice, she didn't spark the same reaction in him that Harriet did. That was one more reason to be careful in his query to discover who was writing the messages.

"This should be interesting," Joseph said as Connolly stood beside him.

Connolly cast him a doubtful look. "I'm always fearful of these kinds of evenings. Can't say that I care for music much. Why is it always the less-than-talented who are eager to perform?"

Joseph chuckled as he'd witnessed that as well. "We'll hope that isn't the case tonight."

Everyone took their seats and the conversation subsided when Lady Winifred took the seat at the pianoforte with Miss Melbourne standing nearby to turn the music pages. Lady Winifred proved to be quite talented, and the piece was enjoyable.

Next, Miss Melbourne took a seat, careful to avoid looking at the guests and keeping her focus on the music. He was surprised that she played so well considering her shyness. Yet it was as if the music took her away, and she was able to set her nerves aside and simply play. Sinclair appeared to be equally entranced by her piece.

For the next piece, Martin joined his sister, and they sang while their mother played. The song was a touching one, and they invited everyone to join in the last chorus.

To his delight, Harriet played next, and he watched with his heart pounding all the harder. It was clear she was a little

nervous, perhaps not used to performing before so many.

She sang as she played, her voice growing more confident as the song continued. While Martin and his sister had done well, Harriet put even more heart into her performance.

He almost felt as if she were singing to him and was touched by the piece. It was all he could do to hold back from standing to clap when she finished.

“That was spectacular,” Connolly said with awe in his tone.

Joseph couldn't agree more. What a surprise Harriet continued to be. What else might she keep hidden?



Chapter Nine



Harriet woke early the next morning, feeling as if she'd dreamed of Joseph all night. If only he hadn't caught her eye when she'd finished performing last evening. The delight on his face, as if he were proud of her, had caught her breath.

Not merely proud—but something else, something more. Whatever it was, it thrilled her, leaving a warm glow in its wake.

Even now, remembering that look was enough to make her heart race. Unable to hold back her smile, she stretched, deciding it was going to be a good day.

Sally, the maid, came to help her dress and advised her that Frances had risen as well and was looking forward to their walk.

"Please tell her I'll be down directly," Harriet said, her mood lifting even further.

The hour was early enough that only a few other guests were in the dining room.

Frances stood the moment Harriet entered. "Can you make do with a slice of bread? We could take it with us."

"Perfect," Harriet agreed and walked to the sideboard to select a piece.

Soon, they were striding across the field, eating their freshly baked bread, and agreed nothing had tasted better.

The air was cool, the sky overcast with the smell of the rain that had fallen during the night lending a freshness to it.

"Wasn't last evening wonderful?" Frances asked as she brushed the crumbs from her fingers and donned her gloves.

"It was." Harriet finished hers as well and did the same, tightening her cloak around her. The brisk air was

invigorating.

Frances touched her arm, eyes wide with enthusiasm. “Did you notice? Viscount Garland applauded at the end of both of my performances so enthusiastically. I could hardly believe it.”

“Oh?” Harriet’s fine mood diminished. Why had she thought his reaction to her playing was special?

“His gaze met mine, and I felt as if my heart might beat from my chest.”

Yes, that described the feeling precisely, which only made her feel worse.

How silly to think he’d thought her playing special, that he’d realized she’d been thinking of him as she performed.

Frances continued talking while Harriet’s thoughts drifted, trying to recapture what she thought she’d experienced last evening, only to be certain she must’ve imagined it.

They’d nearly reached the forested area when Frances halted with a gasp. “Oh, dear. I was supposed to check with Mother before we departed.”

Harriet stopped as well, not ready to return inside, hoping Frances wouldn’t ask her to.

“I had better go back.” She glanced at the woods and then back at the house. “I don’t expect it to take long. Do you want to continue, and I’ll join you where the path leads out of the trees to the north?” She pointed in that direction.

“Yes, perfect.” Harriet hoped she hadn’t latched onto the suggestion too quickly.

“I’m sorry,” Frances said. “I will hurry. I’ll tell Mother you’re waiting for me. She’ll surely allow me to do whatever task she has in mind once we return.”

“I’ll wait for you there.” Harriet paused until Frances started back before she turned toward the woods with relief.

A few minutes alone was just what she needed to regain her equilibrium.

Of course, Joseph had admired all those who'd performed. That was confirmation of how kind he was and one of the reasons she admired him so. It was just that she'd thought something special was budding between them, much like a bloom opening to the sun.

She need only remember his words in the library, when he'd said he wanted to know her better, to think that might be true. Surely that meant something. She couldn't imagine him telling other ladies the same.

Yet he'd acted rather oddly when he'd come to the drawing room before dinner. She'd been hurt that he'd turned in the opposite direction of where she'd stood. He had immediately greeted Frances, and for a brief moment, she wondered if he'd guessed who was writing the messages.

When Frances had spoken to her in the music room without mentioning it, Harriet was relieved. How ridiculous when the time would soon come that he would either guess or Frances would find the courage to tell him. It was a matter of hours rather than days in her estimation.

But she wanted the chance to hold this bloom in her heart a little longer. To believe that her admiration and dare she say, affection, for the handsome viscount was returned. To pretend that a future with him was possible despite her past and the scars that marked her, always a reminder of what she'd done and who she was.

The forest beckoned and she entered the woods, welcoming the quiet peace that fell over her. She slowed her pace, not wanting to rush now that she was deep in the trees.

She walked quietly, wondering if she might see a deer or a squirrel along the way. Far better if she focused on her surroundings rather than the spiral of emotion that felt overwhelming.

With a watchful eye, she admired the foliage of the trees and bushes as well as the moss that grew along the ground. Yes, it resembled the color of Joseph's eyes. Especially the edges of the moss that were gold and green with hints of

brown. She crouched down to take a closer look, reaching out a finger to touch the velvety softness.

“Harriet.”

She jerked upright at the unexpected sound of her name to find the very man whose eye color held her so enraptured. “Joseph.” She pressed a hand to her pounding heart. “I didn’t hear you.”

“I’m sorry if I startled you.” He offered the apology with a smile. “I thought you would hear me, but you were so focused on the ground.”

His gaze shifted to the moss she’d been studying, and her cheeks heated with embarrassment.

“Are you an admirer of moss?”

“I am.” Since meeting him anyway. “The colors are so varied.” She hoped the explanation was sufficient, and he wouldn’t press her for more as she didn’t know anything about moss.

“You’re up and about early this morning,” he said.

“Frances and I were walking together, but she had to return to assist her mother.” She should feel guilty that she was the one enjoying a moment with Joseph rather than her friend. But she didn’t. She hated to think what that said about her. “She’s meeting me a little later at the end of the woods.”

He nodded. “May I accompany you?”

Her heart leapt. “I would like that.”

He turned to walk alongside her, the path wide enough for them to walk side-by-side most of the time. “We’re going for a ride soon, but I wanted the chance to walk first,” he said.

“It’s the perfect morning for it.” She glanced up at him, admiring the strong line of his freshly shaven jaw. Her father had always said a strong jaw was a sign of strength in character. The question of what it would be like to touch it sent flutters dancing in her stomach.

“I agree. Sunshine is lovely, but there’s something about a damp, cool morning that quiets the mind and soothes the soul.”

Harriet’s heart melted. “I couldn’t agree more.” She couldn’t keep the hint of wonder out of her voice and noted how he looked at her in question.

“Forgive me,” she said with a shake of her head. “I just didn’t expect you to feel the same way.”

He halted to face her, prompting her to do the same. “Nor did I. Think you might agree, that is.” He smiled again. “My thoughts don’t translate to words very well when you’re near.”

Harriet drew a deep breath certain her heart was nothing more than a puddle by now. “Joseph.” She didn’t know quite what to say.

“When you played last night,” he began, his quiet voice sending shivers along her skin, “I confess that I was nearly overcome. You have a wonderful voice and are very talented.”

A mix of hope and relief tightened her throat. She hadn’t imagined the look he’d given her. “Thank you. That’s kind of you to say.”

“No.” He shook his head, his brow furrowing. “It’s the truth.” He reached for her hand slowly as if to give her time to pull away. “It’s as if you reached out and touched my heart.” As he spoke, he pressed her gloved hand to his chest. His firm, manly chest.

A deep ache of longing swept through her until she could hardly think. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

With his gaze holding hers, he placed his hand over hers, holding it gently in place. “There’s so much more than ‘nice’ to what I feel for you, Harriet.”

She swallowed, unable to believe this was happening. “I must admit that I’m experiencing much the same.”

He drew closer until their bodies brushed against one another. Despite the numerous layers of clothing between

them, Harriet felt every inch of where they touched, her body humming with awareness.

“I should very much like to kiss you, Harriet.”

The deep timbre of his quiet voice, not to mention his words, had her placing her other hand on his chest. Anything to anchor her reeling emotions. “I...would like that, too.”

In all her wildest dreams, never had she thought to make a bold move like this. She didn't know where her courage had come from, but she was grateful for it.

At her response, his eyes darkened, the green becoming more visible, even more like the moss at their feet. He bent his head, his breath fanning over her lips until anticipation nearly overwhelmed her.

Then he kissed her. Wonder seeped into her much like the warmth of a hot cup of tea on a chilly day. How could it be that his mouth on hers could make her feel so much?

He was gentle as he cradled her cheek with his hand. Then he drew back to look into her eyes. She could only think the moment hadn't been long enough. She needed more to truly—

Before she finished the thought, he took her mouth with his again, masterfully this time, as if he couldn't get enough.

Her knees weakened with the onslaught, and she reached up to wrap her arm around his neck and held on tight.

His tongue pressed against the seam of her lips, and she parted them, not certain what he intended.

Oh, she thought as his tongue gained entrance. The invasion added an entirely new layer of sensation to the kiss.

How had she never realized how much a kiss could make one feel? Descriptions in books hadn't given it justice.

Joseph eased back, the pad of his thumb shifting back and forth along her cheek. “Harriet, you are so special. Beautiful and sweet.”

She focused on trying to catch her breath, uncertain how to respond. How could she tell him what she felt when she had

yet to understand herself? “I’m pleased you decided to walk along this path this morning,” she said, her voice sounding rather rough and unlike her.

That had to be because this moment had changed her forever.

He chuckled. “As am I.” He glanced around. “I suppose we should return to the house before we are missed.”

The image of Frances came to her mind, threatening to pop the bubble of happiness inside her. “Yes, I suppose.”

Yet rather than start walking, he remained where he was, his focus solely on her. “Dare I hope we have the chance to share another kiss soon?”

She should say no. There were Frances’ feelings to consider, first of all. Then there was her past to think about. She removed her hand from his shoulder and ran a gloved finger along her scarred chest, a physical reminder of why marriage was so unlikely as to be impossible.

He would turn away in disgust if he ever saw her scars, let alone if she shared what had happened.

She should definitely say no.

“Yes.” She waited a moment half-fearful lightning would strike her.

But it didn’t.

Instead, she was rewarded by Joseph’s grin, his firm lips curving upward, his chiseled jaw begging for her touch. That would have to wait until next time.

“I look forward to it.” He released her and stepped back to gesture toward the path. “Shall we see if Miss Melbourne is waiting for you?”

With a nod, she walked alongside him, her heart full. This couldn’t lead anywhere, she reminded herself, but was it so wrong for her to enjoy happiness during their brief time together?



A HALF-HOUR LATER, Joseph was riding with several other gentlemen, including Melbourne. This morning, they ventured in a different direction than where they'd previously explored.

However, his thoughts were consumed by the kiss with Harriet. While he'd expected it to be pleasurable given how he felt about her, he hadn't expected the passion that had surged through him the moment their lips touched.

Pursuing a lady hadn't been part of his plan, but neither could he turn away. She intrigued him on every level. It was as if they were kindred souls, attuned to one another both physically and emotionally.

He told himself he was exaggerating. They'd had less than a week to come to know one another, but it felt true all the same. He'd known from the moment Harriet had saved his mother that she was special and everything he'd learned since confirmed it.

"The village is just ahead," Melbourne called out, bringing Joseph's thoughts back to the ride.

The small village was charming and appeared to be thriving. Though modest in size, it boasted much of what the people who lived and worked in the surrounding area needed.

He couldn't help but smile at the lending library on High Street that ran through the center of the village. Melbourne had probably seen to that considering how much his daughter enjoyed reading.

He and Harriet had come across Frances as they'd exited the forest earlier. He hadn't missed the questioning look she'd given them both but had done his best to act as if they'd just come upon one another moments ago.

Luckily, Harriet seemed to understand his intent and played along. He didn't want to cause any harm to Harriet's reputation even with her friend.

Within the hour, the group of riders, smaller today, returned to Melbourne House. Joseph watched Melbourne, hoping to have a chance to speak with him. His luck seemed

unbelievable thus far in the day, and he had to think he'd have the chance to talk to the man soon.

Just as he'd hoped, Joseph was able to time his walk from the stables to the house with Melbourne's.

"The village seems to be flourishing," Joseph said as he caught up to him.

"Indeed, it is. Much improved from when we first moved here. I feel it's imperative to do what we can to help the community."

"I couldn't agree more. In fact, that concerns the proposal I wanted to discuss with you."

"Oh, yes. I forgot. Why don't you join me in my study, and you can share what you have in mind?"

Joseph did his best to mask his excitement. "I'd appreciate that. I think you'll find it of interest." He kept his tone casual, determined not to act as if it mattered overly much.

But it did.

While there were other wealthy gentlemen in England, none seemed as perfect a fit for Joseph's plan as Melbourne. His concern for those who lived on his land, as well as the surrounding area, was obvious in the care he showed his tenants and those living nearby.

He followed Melbourne into his study, relieved when no one delayed them.

Melbourne held open the door then closed it behind Joseph before striding toward the large desk at the far end of the room. A globe on a stand stood to the side of it and shelves of books lined one wall. The space was masculine but not ostentatious. It would be a comfortable space to work with its dark wood and the bank of windows that offered so much light.

Rather than sitting behind the desk, Melbourne joined Joseph in the chairs before it, which allowed them a view of the fields that led to the forest. He couldn't help but think of

Harriet as he looked at the trees. Surely that was a positive sign as well.

“I’m pleased to hear you have an interest in providing for those on your estate,” Melbourne said. “Some gentlemen seem content to allow their agricultural endeavors to fall to the wayside and instead leave the grounds for hunting.”

“That is an easy path since it’s becoming less and less cost-effective to grow crops, isn’t it?” But that wasn’t what Joseph wanted on his family’s property. Not when it didn’t provide any income for them or their tenants.

“As we discussed previously, I’m relieved that food is becoming more affordable for England.” Melbourne leaned back and folded his hands over his stomach. “That hasn’t always been the case.”

“True. I would like to introduce other methods of income to local economies in addition to crops. However, it takes funds to do so and the banks in London seem less than interested in providing loans to areas well outside the city.”

“Banks are only willing to loan money to those who don’t need it, eh?” Melbourne laughed at his jest.

“Also true. Establishing a regional bank in the area that would take such endeavors seriously could improve the economy. They would be familiar with the people as well as the land and have a deeper understanding to see the potential of requests for loans.”

Melbourne nodded as if in agreement, so Joseph continued.

“I’m certain you’re familiar with the shoes being made in Northampton. Raw materials, including oak bark, water, and leather are nearby. The central location of the manufacturing allows for easy trading. It all fits well together.”

“Are you hoping to start making shoes here?”

“Not necessarily as we have different raw materials in the area. But making use of what’s available locally with the intent of scaling it to sell across England and perhaps even abroad

would make sense. One need only look at the ceramics produced in Staffordshire to see what's possible.”

Clay was readily available there, along with coal, which had given rise to pottery factories. They were well known for their stoneware.

They continued the discussion with Melbourne asking several questions.

“I foresee a board of directors who are all from the area overseeing the bank,” Joseph explained.

“It might be helpful to have an outsider familiar with banking operations to be involved as well.”

“Excellent idea.” Joseph paused and held the man's gaze. “Would investing in such an endeavor be of interest to you?”

“Absolutely. I would want additional details, of course. Who else do you have in mind to potentially invest?”

“I'm open to suggestions.”

Within a quarter of an hour, Joseph had the names of three other gentlemen from the area that Melbourne thought would be interested in investing as well.

He couldn't have been happier. The day was truly a lucky one and made him pleased he'd come to the house party. His future was looking brighter, especially because of the growing hope that Harriet would be in it.



Chapter Ten



“That is the perfect color,” Frances said as she watched Harriet select a peach-colored rose to add to her arrangement of white lilies.

The ladies had gathered in the small conservatory at the back of the house to arrange flowers to decorate for the ball being held the following evening.

Tall crystal vases that contained forty to fifty stems each would be placed around the ballroom and the entrance hall.

“The flower selection is delightful.” Harriet eyed the cut blooms piled on the table awaiting vases. The gardeners had been busy that morning. “I’ve never had so many flowers from which to choose.” Her mother’s modest garden didn’t provide anything like this.

In truth, the task before them was daunting given the number of flowers and vases.

The door stood open to the garden yet still the heavy fragrance in the conservatory was nearly overwhelming.

Harriet glanced at Frances out of the corner of her eye, pleased her friend hadn’t taken offense at finding Harriet walking with Joseph that morning.

Frances hadn’t questioned Joseph’s comment that they’d just come upon one another. Thank goodness he’d thought to offer the explanation so calmly. Guilt had heated Harriet’s cheeks and caused words to fail her.

She’d feared that if Frances looked at her closely, she’d know what had happened between her and Joseph. Even now, the urge to set down the flowers and press her hands against her hot cheeks to cool them was tempting.

Never would she have guessed this morning when she woke that she’d share a kiss with Joseph. Nor that she’d feel

so much when she did. To have him mention repeating the experience made it clear he'd enjoyed it as much as she had.

She couldn't tell Frances any of that.

What an impossible situation. Thank goodness Frances hadn't mentioned the messages again.

Her friend finished the arrangement she was working on then joined Harriet.

"There hasn't been a message today as of yet," she whispered.

Harriet smothered a groan. Clearly, she'd been relieved too soon.

"What do you think that means?" Frances asked.

"Perhaps he's been busy." She clenched her jaw at the words, thinking of why he'd been busy for at least part of the morning.

"Hmm. I hope I wasn't too forward."

Harriet didn't know how to answer that, especially when most of what Frances had written had been Harriet's words.

Unease crept through her. What if Joseph asked her if she was the author of the messages?

Should she say no and leave it at that? But she didn't want to lie, and omission was a form of lying. The thought was disheartening. In truth, she was lying to Frances by not telling her how she felt about Joseph and the moments they'd shared.

There was no easy resolution to the dilemma. She didn't want to be untruthful to Frances or Joseph, especially since she cared for them both.

But if she said something to Frances now, that might ruin the house party for her friend. That seemed unwise as well.

It was clear she needed to tell her friend the truth before the party ended. Perhaps after the ball. Surely, that was soon enough. One more day would make no difference.

Unless, of course, the truth was somehow revealed before then. The concern was enough to cause her to shiver.

“I think I should write another,” Frances murmured.

Harriet smothered a sigh. “What would you say?”

Frances glanced at where her mother was putting the final touches on an arrangement. “Perhaps something more suggestive.”

Harriet blinked, hesitating to guess what that might be. “I thought you worried the last one was too forward.”

She shook her head. “I changed my mind. I want him to be eager to know my identity.” A smile came over her face. “I think I know.”

“Frances?” her mother called before she could say more.

“Coming, Mother.” With the smile still in place, she stepped away, leaving Harriet to worry all the more.



JOSEPH BERATED HIMSELF for not asking Harriet if she were behind the messages. He'd had the perfect opportunity, but the missives were the last thing on his mind when he had come upon her in the woods.

Kissing had taken precedence.

The memory was enough to have him smiling as he entered the library before dinner.

He'd left a message after luncheon and decided to check before dinner to see if she'd replied, whoever “she” was.

Sure enough, a folded piece of paper was in the box. He sighed as he opened it, realizing he had mixed feelings about the messages.

Yet as he read the words, it was as if Harriet were whispering in his ear. The very idea was enough to make his blood sing.

I find myself thinking of you at the oddest times, even when it's terribly inconvenient. When we're surrounded by others.

It's all I can do to keep my gaze from holding on you. From approaching to tell you how I feel.

Though he could easily imagine Harriet saying this, it didn't quite make sense given what had happened between them that morning.

If only he knew.

Stuffing the paper in his pocket, he walked to the drawing room, pleased he wasn't the last to arrive. It took only a moment to note that Harriet was not yet there. He hoped nothing was amiss. It wasn't like her to be late.

He remained by the doorway with the hope of having a chance to speak with her, however briefly.

"Good evening."

He turned at the feminine tone to find Miss Melbourne at his side. How surprising. "It is indeed. Did you have an enjoyable day?"

She seemed rather breathless based on the way her chest heaved. The low décolletage of her gown made it impossible not to notice. She licked her lips and appeared uncertain of how to respond to his question.

Odd, since it wasn't a particularly difficult one to answer. While her shyness earned his sympathy, it was wearing thin on his patience. Why had she engaged in conversation with him if she was uncomfortable doing so?

"Yes," she managed at last. "And you?"

"Very nice." He hesitated to ask any additional questions when the last one had seemed to cause her such distress.

"I understand you spoke with my father." Her cheeks turned pink as she spoke, her gaze dropping to the floor.

Joseph stilled, wishing she would look at him so that he could gauge the meaning behind her remark. "Yes, I did." He nearly held his breath with the hope she'd say something more.

While Melbourne had acted interested in his plan, there was always the chance he had merely been being polite to a guest.

“Did he mention it?” Joseph asked when she said nothing further. Speaking with Miss Melbourne was maddening.

“Yes. He said he was quite impressed by your idea.”

Satisfaction welled inside him. “That’s good to hear.”

“May I ask what it was regarding?” The words came out in a rush so that it took him a moment to understand them.

He couldn’t deny his surprise that she wanted to know. Surely it would’ve been easier to ask her father than him.

“It was regarding the formation of a regional bank with the hope of promoting industry in the area.”

“A bank?” Reverend Henderson appeared out of thin air. Perhaps that was because Joseph had been so intent on ignoring his presence. “What on earth for? There are already numerous successful ones in London.”

Joseph clenched his jaw to keep from telling the man to mind his own business. He felt the weight of several people’s stares from nearby and reminded himself to be civil. “Regional ones are often more willing to promote local industries.”

“There are no industries around here, Garland.” The reverend chuckled. “You should have your facts straight before you suggest such outlandish ventures.”

The reverend’s comment seemed to make Miss Melbourne even more uncomfortable if that were possible.

“That lack is exactly why one should be established in the area,” Joseph protested.

“Not when you don’t have any banking experience.” Henderson shook his head. “Nothing but foolishness and a waste of money.”

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion.” Joseph didn’t care if the man heard the edge to his tone. In fact, he hoped he did. Nor did Joseph care who else heard him.

“Good evening.”

The sound of Harriet’s voice had Joseph drawing a prolonged breath, willing his temper to cool. As always, she was a balm to troubling thoughts, something he truly appreciated.

“I hope I’m not interrupting.” She glanced between Joseph and the reverend, and Joseph knew without a doubt she must’ve heard much of what had been said based on her sympathetic expression.

“Not at all,” Joseph said with a dip of his head, hoping she knew how much he appreciated her timing. “May I say you look especially lovely this evening?”

Her pale blue gown made her eyes look all the bluer. As always, it had a high neck, though this one almost looked as if the thick lace that covered her chest had been added above the previous neckline. Her hair was pulled back into a sleek coiffure that flattered her face.

“Thank you.” She smiled in response only to quickly sober as she glanced at Miss Melbourne, making him wonder at the reason. “Did Frances tell you that we spent a delightful afternoon arranging flowers?”

Joseph nearly laughed at the way she turned toward him and Miss Melbourne, effectively cutting Henderson out of the conversation by angling her body away from the reverend.

“That sounds delightful.” Joseph glanced between the two ladies, unsurprised that Miss Melbourne’s gaze remained fixed on the floor. “Are you both now experts at the task?”

“We are now, aren’t we, Frances?” Harriet asked with a smile. “I didn’t think we’d ever find a place for all those flowers.”

Frances didn’t return her smile, only looking at Harriet with what looked to be coolness in her expression.

Joseph had the feeling he was missing an unspoken conversation between them. Before he could say anything further, they were called to dinner.

Much to his delight, he and Harriet were seated beside one another.

“Is all well with Miss Melbourne?” he asked quietly soon after they had taken their places.

Harriet released a sigh. “I do believe she’s displeased with me.”

“Why?” He couldn’t imagine anyone being unhappy with Harriet, not even Henderson.

She hesitated. “It’s a rather long story.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” He risked another glance at Miss Melbourne who sat near her mother toward the end of the table.

“Not especially.” Her tone sounded troubled. “Not yet.”

That only made him more curious, but he respected her wish and changed the subject. “Your afternoon of arranging flowers sounds like a pleasant way to spend time.”

“It was.” She glanced at him from beneath her lashes. “Although not as enjoyable as the morning.”

Her unexpected words sent heat rushing through him. He was coming to truly adore the woman at his side. It was as if he felt complete when she was near. And he liked the fact that they had a secret between them. Something that bound them together.

That brought to mind the messages. Dare he ask if she was the author?

For some reason, he held back, deciding he didn’t want to know yet. For now, he wanted to enjoy this meal with her so near.

Pretending to adjust his chair, he managed to graze his knuckles against her leg.

Her body immediately stiffened, and she gave a quiet gasp. He risked a glance at her, hoping he hadn’t offended her with his blatant flirting.

Her cheeks held a delicate pink, and a small smile slowly curved her lips. But to his disappointment, she didn't look at him as the footman poured her a glass of wine.

Several minutes passed while they conversed with the people on either side of them. He reached for his wine, only to nearly spill the glass when something brushed against his thigh. He looked toward her, watching as she adjusted the napkin on her lap as if nothing were amiss. His body stirred from that light touch, desire simmering just below the surface.

Uncertain whether it had been an accident or deliberate, he studied her to find that small smile had returned though she didn't look at him.

He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her in response.

Luckily, the first course of celery soup arrived before the temptation took hold.

Joseph waited as long as he could stand it. All of five minutes later, he managed to gently bump her side with his elbow, making certain to linger long enough so she'd know he'd touched her on purpose.

She bit back a laugh, then quickly covered her mouth with her napkin to hide her grin.

He was discussing horses with Connolly, who sat across the table, when he felt a foot on top of his. Unfortunately, he lost his train of thought mid-sentence at the touch.

Connolly looked at him with a raised brow, clearly wondering what was wrong.

Damn if that foot didn't bump against his again. He shifted in his chair, hoping his body didn't betray him. Though this dalliance was causing him problems, he couldn't resist reaching out to touch her leg again, this time giving it a gentle squeeze beneath the cover of the tablecloth.

She returned the favor, managing to do so when he least expected it.

By the time dessert was served, he could hardly stand it. He needed a moment alone with Harriet more than he needed his next breath. His thoughts raced for a possible excuse that would allow it.

As always, the ladies withdrew to the drawing room, and he was forced to bide his time.

Reverend Henderson stood and moved to sit next to Melbourne and Melbourne's brother-in-law at the end of the table and began speaking quietly. Joseph was well aware of the pointed looks the reverend sent in his direction, making it clear what—or rather, who—he was speaking about.

Though anger simmered inside him, Joseph shoved it aside. If Melbourne believed whatever Henderson was saying, so be it. Melbourne was an intelligent man capable of making his own decisions. Surely, he would question what the reverend was saying.

At least, that was Joseph's hope. It wasn't as if he could join them to try to defend himself. The reverend could be quite convincing. Joseph need only think of his father to know that.

Instead of wasting time worrying about things out of his control, he spoke with Sinclair and Connelly until Melbourne rose and announced it was time to join the ladies.

It was all Joseph could do to keep from rushing toward the drawing room. Yet the air left his lungs when he realized Harriet wasn't there. He hesitated a moment before stepping back out of the room, prepared to offer an excuse if anyone noticed his exit. To his relief, no one paid him any attention.

Dare he hope Harriet felt the same as he did?

With quick steps, he went to the small library and opened the door, disappointed to find it dark. He'd thought perhaps she'd be there. That they truly did have a connection between them.

“Joseph?”

He turned to see her walking out of the darkness of the room toward him, her form just visible in the fading light

coming through the windows. “Harriet.” Her presence was like an answer to a prayer.

“I was hoping you might think to come here.”

He didn’t bother to answer but reached for her and drew her into his arms. This might be a mistake when they could be caught, but he couldn’t resist.

His lips found hers and he crushed her to him, putting the frustration their flirting from dinner had caused into the kiss. She seemed equally as intent on meeting him halfway.

Then he kissed her jaw and just below her ear, his hands molding the curves of her body. She fit against him perfectly, the top of her head brushing his chin.

As if his exploration gave her permission, she slid her hands over his shoulders then down his chest and back up again, stirring his body even further.

“We need to return to the drawing room,” she murmured as she kissed his cheek and along his jaw.

“Yes. Definitely.” Yet instead of doing so, he kissed her deeply once more. A voice at the back of his head reminded him of how special this was—more than physical. More than emotional. It was as if they were linked in every possible way. The realization had his heart thudding painfully.

When she pulled back, he reluctantly let her go, wanting only to take her hand and lead her to somewhere they wouldn’t risk being discovered.

With a deep breath, he held back. This was too much too soon. He didn’t understand what this was that burned between them, especially since he didn’t believe in love. But they needed to slow the rush of feelings before it overwhelmed them.

“You go first,” he whispered in the dark. “I’ll follow shortly.”

She sighed as she ran both hands over her gown as if to smooth it. “Joseph, I—”

She broke off the words with a shake of her head. Then she opened the door and was gone.

He stood there for a long moment, trying to cool his ardor. The bulge in his trousers would give him away unless he managed to think of something other than the feel of Harriet in his arms. He counted backward from a hundred until he felt certain his desire wouldn't be noticeable.

Then he, too, returned to the drawing room. The evening was going to be a long one, but any time spent in the same room with her was welcome.



Chapter Eleven



The next day flew by as if on wings. Harriet and Frances were asked to do all manner of things in preparation for the ball. They directed the staff where to set the large vases of flowers they'd arranged along with other decorations around the ballroom. There were last-minute decisions to make about the light supper and desserts that would be served as well as where to place the tables that would hold the refreshments.

Despite being busy, Harriet's thoughts were frequently filled with Joseph. She couldn't believe how bold she had been. Their flirtatious touching during dinner had been like a forbidden delight. Once they started, she couldn't seem to stop.

To think that Joseph had read her mind and joined her in the library was even more of a thrill. In her mind, that proved how taken they were with one another.

Those moments in his arms and the way he had kissed her were something she would never forget.

But she still couldn't see how this would end well. And there was no doubt it would come to an end.

The thought was discouraging, but she did her best to push it aside. The time for endings would come too quickly. But today was for celebration.

Soon, the time came for them to dress for the ball.

Frances was giddy with excitement, seeming to have set aside her displeasure with Harriet. Her enthusiasm only made Harriet more determined to do everything in her power not to ruin the evening for her.

Sally helped Frances prepare first before coming to Harriet's room.

“Miss Melbourne is so excited,” Sally reported. “She looks especially lovely this evening if I do say so myself.”

Harriet laughed. “I’m certain you had a hand in it. I look forward to seeing her gown.”

“Yours is beautiful as well,” she said as she fingered the lace insert that would cover Harriet’s scars.

Sally had commented on them the first time she’d helped Harriet undress.

“How terrible, my lady. What happened?” the maid had asked as she stared in dismay at Harriet’s chest.

Harriet had run a finger along them as memories filled her of that terrible night. “A result of hot tea.”

She was tempted to explain just how the tea had landed on her chest but had learned not to. Mentioning her stepfather’s involvement only seemed to give him more power over her life. That was something she refused to do.

He was gone and would never hurt her or her mother again. That was all that mattered.

Still, she shivered as memories flooded her. Would the events that had followed ever fade from her mind?

Sally’s lips firmed as she looked between Harriet’s scarred chest and the ballgown. “Let us get you dressed,” was all she said.

A short time later, after Sally had secured the dress, and Harriet sat before the dressing table while the maid arranged her hair, Harriet studied the neckline of her gown, wishing it were different. Wishing she were different.

She closed her eyes and gave herself a mental shake. Nothing could be done to change what had happened.

Unfortunately, little could be done to change her future either. Joseph would be disgusted if he ever saw her scars. But if he learned what she had done afterward, he would truly be repulsed.

Though her mother continually insisted that no one needed to know, and they could keep pretending nothing had occurred, Harriet couldn't imagine marrying and keeping her secret. What sort of marriage would she have if it wasn't founded on trust?

"You look beautiful, my lady."

"Thank you." The gown was one she'd worn before but liked. It was an emerald green with a pleated ruffle of the same color around the hem. Gold cord was sewn into swirls along the bodice. The bustle fell in layers in a flattering cascade down the back. She was careful not to dwell on the high neck in the mirror, reminding herself that she'd much rather cover the scars than show them to the world and be viewed with pity and disgust.

Sally twisted strands of her hair before drawing it back into a chignon high on her head then winding a green ribbon through it that matched her gown. Next, she tucked tiny white flowers in the chignon.

A knock sounded at her door, and the maid secured her hair then stepped away to open it.

"Are you ready, Harriet?" Frances asked as she swept into the room. "Oh, you look lovely."

"So do you." Harriet rose from the bench to face her friend. "What a beautiful gown."

Frances smoothed her white-gloved hands along the front of the rose gown with cream lace trim. Rows and rows of ruffles made her look like a princess, as did the necklace she wore.

"That's gorgeous," Harriet said as she drew closer to admire the oval ruby surrounded by small diamonds.

"Thank you." She glanced down at it with a smile. "A gift from my parents."

"How special."

Frances studied Harriet's gown, her brow puckering. "Are you certain you don't want to try a gown with a lower

neckline? I'm sure I have one you can borrow.”

Harriet's heart ached at the question. She knew her friends noticed that she always wore modest gowns, but she couldn't bring herself to explain why. Even mentioning the scars brought forth memories that threatened to swamp her with fear.

“Not this evening.” She managed a smile.

One look at Frances' expression suggested she'd been less than convincing.

Unwilling to talk about it, especially now, Harriet looped her arm through Frances' and turned toward the door. “Do you think the guests have started to arrive?”

The neighboring gentry and other affluent people from nearby towns had been invited to the ball. The moment they stepped out of the room, the sounds of the small orchestra warming up could be heard, echoing through the house.

“They should begin arriving soon. Father asked us to join him and Mother in the reception room beforehand.”

Relieved she'd turned away Frances' attention from her gown, Harriet smiled. “Who do you hope to dance with first?” she whispered as they walked down the stairs.

“As long as I'm asked to dance, it doesn't matter,” she replied with a giggle. “The gentlemen here have all been very kind, don't you think?”

“Yes, they have.” But there was only one man with whom Harriet wanted to dance—Joseph. Doing so with anyone else would fade in comparison.

At times like this, Harriet had to wonder if Frances truly liked Joseph or if she simply liked the idea of having a secret *tendre* for someone. She hadn't made much of an effort to get to know him. While her shyness was obviously difficult to manage, wouldn't her desire to become better acquainted overcome it?

Harriet pushed away her doubt. That wasn't for her to decide. Who was Harriet to know how Frances felt when she

would be loath to explain her own feelings?

“There you are.” Mr. Melbourne greeted them with a broad smile as they entered the small reception room a short distance from the ballroom. “Don’t you both look lovely?”

Mr. Melbourne’s affection toward Frances made Harriet miss her own father. She hoped Frances knew how lucky she was. Both her parents were kind.

“Very lovely,” Mrs. Melbourne said with a nod of approval.

“Thank you.” Frances touched her necklace. “And thank you again for the beautiful necklace.”

Mr. Melbourne chuckled, sharing a tender look with his wife. “Our pleasure.”

“Your gown is so elegant,” Harriet said to Mrs. Melbourne. The violet silk fit her figure perfectly, and the ecru fringe moved with every step she took. A daring neckline showed her diamond pendant to full advantage. “You look beautiful.”

“You’re too kind, Lady Harriet,” Mrs. Melbourne said.

“Thank you again for inviting me.” Harriet looked between them. “It has been a wonderful week.”

“We’re pleased you could come and keep Frances company.” Mrs. Melbourne touched Harriet’s arm. “I hope you’ve enjoyed yourself.”

Mr. Melbourne walked to the sideboard where crystal decanters gleamed in the candlelight. He poured three glasses of sherry and brought them over, handing the first to his wife before giving one to Frances and Harriet. “Are you young ladies ready to dance away the night?”

“Most definitely,” Frances said as she took her glass then looked at Harriet.

“I look forward to it.” Harriet didn’t mention that having more than a few dances would be a unique experience. She tended to spend more time visiting with her friends at balls rather than dancing, much like Frances.

Martin and his wife, Catherine, entered the room. Her gown was a golden beige satin which looked striking against his black evening attire.

“Apologies for our delay.” Martin tugged on his tie as if it were too tight. “I can never get these things straight.”

“It looks perfect, dear,” Mrs. Melbourne said as she studied his appearance. “You both look wonderful.”

Mr. Melbourne returned to the sideboard to pour one more glass of sherry and a finger of whiskey into two glasses and handed them to Martin and Catherine before lifting his glass. “The guests will arrive soon, but I thought we should take a moment to toast the success of the week. I have no doubt our guests had a wonderful time, thanks to all of you.”

“Here, here.” They lifted their glasses and drank.

“It has been enjoyable,” Martin agreed. “Everyone seems to have gotten along well.”

Reverend Henderson came immediately to Harriet’s mind. He was the only one who had made her uncomfortable. She wished she knew why he’d been invited. Did she dare ask?

“Will Reverend Henderson be attending the ball this evening?” she asked instead.

“I believe so.” Mrs. Melbourne raised a brow. “Why do you ask?”

“I was hoping he wouldn’t,” Frances said before Harriet could respond. “Did you see the way he glowered if anyone appeared to be enjoying themselves too much?”

Harriet hadn’t noticed that but was pleased Frances had.

“Now, dear,” Mrs. Melbourne began, “he’s a good friend of your aunt and uncle’s.”

That explained his presence. Now that Mrs. Melbourne had mentioned it, Harriet remembered seeing him speaking with the couple several times.

“Apparently, he doesn’t particularly care for Viscount Garland,” Frances continued.

Mr. Melbourne frowned. “He shared his concerns about Garland with me, though I must say I don’t agree.”

“You found the viscount to be likeable, didn’t you, Papa?” Frances asked, a hint of a blush rising in her cheeks.

The question squeezed Harriet’s heart—a blatant reminder that whether Harriet chose to believe it or not, her friend thought she cared for Joseph, too.

“I do. I found his business proposal of great interest and look forward to learning more about his plans. Of course, Henderson wasn’t happy to hear that.”

“That’s because if you invest in Garland’s plan, you might not donate to Henderson’s church,” Martin said dryly before taking another sip of his drink.

“I’m surprised the reverend requests donations since he doesn’t believe in assisting the poor.” Harriet knew none of this was her business, but she couldn’t resist throwing more kindling on the fire if it meant discrediting the man.

She hadn’t cared for him before Joseph told her those details about him. The information Joseph had shared made her like him even less.

Then there was the disrespectful way he’d spoken to Joseph the previous evening. He’d been horrible. How could someone who considered themselves a true Christian act that way?

“He doesn’t?” Mrs. Melbourne frowned at Harriet then looked at her husband. “Is that true?”

“He believes giving money to those less fortunate interferes with allowing the fittest to succeed,” Martin said when his father hesitated. “I heard far too much about it when I happened to ride alongside him the other morning. Since then, I’ve done my best to avoid him.”

“I hope you haven’t given him any money, dear,” Mrs. Melbourne said with a pointed look at her husband.

“I haven’t as of yet. Odd, but he didn’t mention that belief to me.” He looked disgusted. “He probably realizes it wouldn’t

please me. Philanthropy is a responsibility of those blessed with wealth in my opinion.”

Harriet managed to keep from smiling. Anything she could do to help Joseph, even indirectly, was welcome.

“Enough of this talk,” Mrs. Melbourne declared and lifted her glass. “Let us finish our drinks and prepare to receive our guests.”

After they did as she bid, the family formed a receiving line just outside the ballroom.

Mrs. Melbourne touched Harriet’s arm. “Harriet, dear, will you check the ballroom one more time to make certain all is in order? If anything needs adjusting, feel free to take care of it or alert one of the staff.”

“Of course.” Harriet continued into the ballroom, pleased that Mrs. Melbourne trusted her enough to ask.

Several of the other house party guests were already visiting inside, but she didn’t see Joseph. Wanting to take Mrs. Melbourne’s request seriously, Harriet walked slowly around the perimeter of the room. Other than adjusting a flower vase or two, everything looked perfect.

The musicians had completed their warmup and awaited the time to begin playing in earnest. The refreshment room looked inviting with bottles of both champagne and pitchers of lemonade ready to be served. Platters of pale pink iced cakes were displayed, though the cold meats and cheeses would be brought in later.

She walked to the ballroom entrance and waited to catch Mrs. Melbourne’s attention then nodded to advise her all was well.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Melbourne mouthed.

The sound of voices coming from the entrance hall suggested guests were arriving.

Nerves danced in Harriet’s stomach as she returned to the ballroom, undecided whether to join some of the other guests to visit or take a few minutes to herself while she could.

“Good evening, Harriet.”

She turned to see Joseph walking toward her, looking especially handsome in his black evening attire. “Joseph. Don’t you look wonderful this evening?”

He grinned. “I couldn’t possibly look as wonderful as you. That color is lovely on you.”

“Thank you.” She waited for his gaze to take in her neckline, so different than what all the other ladies would be wearing this evening. How unfortunate that the current fashion was a low décolletage. It only made her feel more out of place.

To her pleasure, his attention held on her face rather than her gown. “I do hope you’ll save a dance.” He leaned close. “Or two for me.”

“I should like that very much.” Yet the thought of Frances came to mind. “Is there a chance you might ask Frances for a dance as well? I know she’d appreciate it.”

The tender look in Joseph’s eyes made her heart turn over in her chest. “If it pleases you, I’ll dance with Reverend Henderson.”

Harriet laughed, nearly snorting with amusement. “It wouldn’t, so you may take that off your mind.”

“Thank goodness.” He chuckled. “But yes, I would be pleased to dance with her. I suppose I should attempt to dance with all of the unattached ladies from the house party.”

“You are a good man, Joseph.” Such a good man. That only made her appreciate him more. If only—

But no. She refused to think of such things this evening. Instead, she would focus on enjoying herself. This might be the last time she’d have the chance to spend time with him, even if it was with nearly a hundred guests.

Soon the ballroom filled with all manner of people, from the young to the old to those wearing the height of fashion and those wearing outdated clothes. But everyone seemed excited and ready to enjoy themselves.

She and Joseph became separated as they greeted the new arrivals and helped to make them feel welcome. The orchestra started to play, and the guests began to dance.

Harriet breathed a sigh of relief as the Melbournes at last entered the ballroom. A few minutes later, Frances joined her, waving a gloved hand before her face.

“I’m already warm and the ball has only just begun.” Still, her smile was bright as she glanced around the room. “Mother is so grateful you are here to help.”

“I’m happy to,” Harriet said. It felt good to be useful, especially since she had failed to help Frances with Joseph.

Before they could speak further, Sinclair approached with a smile, looking quite debonair in his evening attire.

“The two of you look lovely this evening,” he said as he glanced between them.

“Thank you,” Harriet said, realizing she might be answering for them both. Frances’ cheeks had pinkened and her gaze shifted between Sinclair and the floor, suggesting her shyness had taken hold once again.

But to Harriet’s surprise, Frances managed to meet his gaze and smile. “Thank you, Thomas.”

Harriet hid her surprise that they were on a first-name basis. Frances’ reply was barely audible, but she’d done it. Harriet couldn’t have been prouder.

Sinclair dipped his head in acknowledgement. “May I have the honor of a dance, Miss Melbourne?”

Frances stilled, her lips parted as if she were uncertain how to respond. “Of course.”

“Excellent.” Sinclair offered his arm, and Frances took it only to glance back at Harriet over her shoulder with a grin.

Harriet watched them conversing as they walked toward the dance floor with hope rising inside her. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if Frances decided her affection was caught by Thomas rather than Joseph?

“What has you smiling?”

She looked to find Joseph standing beside her once again. “Frances actually spoke to Mr. Sinclair. I have hope she’s overcoming some of her shyness.”

“How nice.” He turned to face her. “I’m certain that’s in part thanks to you. May I have the honor of a dance?”

“Absolutely.” As she took his arm, she reminded herself to be careful. It wouldn’t do to allow anyone to see how much she liked Joseph. Not until she’d told Frances how she felt. She should’ve been honest from the start.

Come the morning, she would tell her friend that she cared for Joseph. The plan helped to ease her guilt.

The dance started and all else fell away as they moved in time to the music. It was easy to pretend for a few minutes that they were alone, and that a future was possible.

She caught sight of Frances and Thomas as they turned and was pleased that they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Frances’ smile was proof of that.

Her attention returned to Joseph, her chest tightening at the way his gaze held on her. Was there a way to make what was building between them work? If she explained what had happened two years ago, would he understand?

The realization that she was considering telling him shook her. It was something she’d promised herself to never speak of.

“What is it?” Joseph asked when the dance steps drew them closer together.

“Nothing,” she denied, wishing the temptation hadn’t come to mind. She smiled, determined to enjoy this moment. This was her first dance with Joseph, and she wanted to focus on how wonderful it was.

All too soon, the music ended. After they bowed and curtsied, Joseph took her arm and guided her toward the open French doors that led to the balcony. “I think a breath of fresh air might be in order.”

“Yes, that would be perfect.” The ballroom was warm, but it was the thought of being alone with Joseph even for a few brief minutes that mattered.

They stepped out onto the large balcony which overlooked the grounds and garden below. Lamps illuminated the terrace and garden and cast enough light to see a short distance.

The cool evening air helped ease Harriet’s angst, and she turned to face him.

“I cannot believe this is our last evening here.” He lifted a finger to touch her cheek.

She tipped her head toward his caress. “Nor can I.”

“Harriet, I have to ask.” He pulled a folded paper from his inner pocket, and her heart sank. “Did you write these?”

She hesitated, wishing she could answer honestly. But how could she when she hadn’t told Frances the truth? But neither could she lie to Joseph. “No.”

He frowned, making her wonder if he sensed her unease. It took a moment for her to realize she’d just admitted she knew what he held since she hadn’t asked what it was. Nor had she shown any surprise.

“But you know who did,” he suggested.

“Yes.” She closed her eyes briefly, wishing they weren’t having this conversation now.

“Was it Miss Melbourne?”

Harriet opened her eyes to look at him in surprise. Did she confirm it or keep Frances’ secret? She didn’t want to hurt her friend, but neither did she want to ruin the possibility of a future with Joseph.

It was an impossible choice.

She reached for his empty hand and took it in hers, hoping the right answer would come to her. “Joseph, I—”

“Harriet?”

Harriet looked over to see Frances emerging from the ballroom with Mr. Sinclair directly behind her, her gaze fixed on their connected hands. Harriet quickly released Joseph but knew it was too late. Her friend had already seen their touch.

Frances stared between them, eyes wide with a mix of hurt and surprise. "I don't understand..."

"Frances, I didn't mean for this to happen," Harriet began, her heart aching. That much was true. She only hoped her friend didn't ask what it was that had happened because she couldn't explain.

Tears filled Frances' eyes as she backed away. Then with a sob, she spun and ran inside.



Chapter Twelve



Joseph watched Miss Melbourne rush away with Sinclair following, calling her name.

A glance at Harriet's stricken expression had him taking a step closer to her. While he didn't precisely understand what had just occurred or why the lady was upset, he had an idea and couldn't help but think he was to blame.

"Joseph, I'm sorry," Harriet began before he could say anything.

"I feel as if I'm the one who should apologize." He waited a moment, hoping she'd explain.

She shook her head, her distress obvious. She glanced toward the ballroom as if torn whether to follow her friend. "Frances didn't realize that I—that we—" She broke off, clearly at a loss as to how to explain.

"That we have come to care for one another?" He hoped that was true.

"As you might have guessed, she cares for you as well."

Joseph frowned, well aware she hadn't answered. Confirmation of his suspicion still came as a surprise considering how Miss Melbourne acted around him. Her shyness might explain some of it but not all in his opinion. "Are you certain?"

"Quite." Harriet heaved a sigh. "She asked for my help to catch your notice." She gestured toward the paper he still held. "That was why she started writing you messages."

"They sound so different from what little I know of her."

"I helped with them."

"Ah." He nodded and flashed a small smile. "That explains it."

“Again, I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “I need to see if she’s all right.”

“Of course.” As she turned away, Joseph said, “Harriet? You are a good friend.”

To his surprise, she looked as if she might cry at his words. “No, I’m clearly not.”

Before he could say anything more, she hurried inside.

Joseph slipped the message back into his pocket and gripped the wrought-iron railing as he looked up at the night sky. Life could be complicated. This was certainly one of those times.

Had he done something to make Miss Melbourne think he cared? He scoffed, thinking of the messages he’d written. While he’d been careful with his replies, he’d also thought they might have been from Harriet.

How unfortunate that Miss Melbourne witnessed them holding hands. He hoped that hadn’t ruined their friendship. And he dearly hoped it wouldn’t change Harriet’s feelings toward him.



HARRIET GLANCED AROUND the ballroom but didn’t see Frances anywhere. Thomas stood at the opposite side looking about with a furrowed brow as if also searching for Frances.

Next, she peeked into the reception room where they’d gathered before the ball only to find it empty. That left only one other place she might be. Harriet hurried up the stairs and paused before Frances’ bedroom door, remorse filling her at the sound of weeping.

She knocked. “Frances, may I come in?”

The weeping stopped, but her friend didn’t reply.

“Please, Frances. I would like to explain.” Though she feared what she had to say wouldn’t help.

After a long moment, the door opened, revealing Frances with tear-filled eyes and a handkerchief pressed to her nose.

The fact that she looked hurt rather than angry only made Harriet feel worse.

“I’m so sorry.”

Frances sniffed and turned away. Harriet took that as permission to come in and closed the door behind her.

“I should’ve told you from the beginning,” Harriet said.

“I wish you would’ve,” Frances murmured as she wiped her nose.

“Remember the league meeting when you volunteered to be the next to go forward with *For Better or Worse*?”

“Yes.”

“I intended to volunteer that day as well.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

Harriet pressed her lips together. “I took it as a sign that I wasn’t ready. In truth, I wasn’t.” She couldn’t help but trail a finger over her chest, reminding herself why she believed that.

“You see, Joseph caught my notice at a ball,” Harriet began, her heart aching at the thought that she’d hurt Frances. “Though we were introduced, we didn’t dance. But he was still so kind. So handsome. It was as if a spark inside me had been lit. Each time I saw him afterward, it grew a little brighter.”

Frances nodded. “I know just what you mean.”

“Then I encountered him the week before the party on Bond Street. His mother nearly stepped in front of a passing carriage, and I managed to catch her in time. I thought he and I had a moment of connection only to realize he didn’t remember me. Then when the house party began, he mistook me for you, which made it clear that I was quite unmemorable. At least, to him.” Harriet sighed. “I had no idea you cared for him until you told me.”

“He seems to like you.” Frances sniffed again. “Much more than he likes me.”

“I don’t suppose he’s had much of a chance to know you as of yet.”

Frances closed her eyes. “I wish I could act normal when I’m near gentlemen, but I can’t seem to. My throat closes and I can hardly force out any words if I happen to think of them.”

“You’ve done well the last few days.”

Frances sent her a doubtful look.

“It’s true. Each evening, you’ve visited more and more with the guests, gentlemen included.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“Perhaps it feels like only small steps of progress, but it’s still progress,” Harriet pointed out.

“So often it is an uphill battle.”

“Mr. Sinclair seems to think well of you. He’s downstairs, quite worried.” At least, Harriet assumed so from his expression.

“Truly?” Frances blinked. “I shouldn’t have left him the way I did.”

“May I ask how long you’ve cared for Joseph?”

Frances stared across the room. “Several months. Since before Phoebe suggested the bold move.”

Not so different than Harriet.

“Do you think he’s the one?” Harriet asked, uncertain if her friend would answer.

“I did at first. When he brought me that glass of lemonade, his kindness captured my heart. Now I’m not so certain.” She glanced at Harriet from beneath her lashes. “I find Thomas quite attractive as well.”

“He is rather handsome.”

“Yes.” A small smile played about her lips. “He’s gone out of his way to make me more comfortable. The day we were playing charades, he told me he thought I had the loveliest eyes. Can you believe that?”

“You do have lovely eyes.”

“But I also like Viscount Garland.” Her brow puckered, much like Harriet’s heart.

It seemed clear there was only one thing she could do though the thought of it hurt more deeply than her scars had.

“I realize the party is almost over, but I will keep my distance and allow you more time to decide how you feel for each of them.” The idea made her entire body ache, but it seemed the least she could do. Besides, how could anything come from what she felt for Joseph? It had been ridiculous of her to think it was possible.

“Are you certain?” Frances asked.

“It’s the least I could do. I’m sorry I didn’t do so sooner.”

“How could you have without being rude? It’s impossible to avoid any of the guests.”

“True.” Really, this was for the best. Besides, Frances might be able to help sway her father into assisting Joseph with his bank. “Again, I’m so sorry, Frances. I hope you can forgive me.”

“I can’t be angry with you when I didn’t explain from the start who I admired. I practically forced you to help with the messages. I am sorry as well.”

Yes, she thought as she returned Frances’ hug. Staying away from Joseph was for the best. Yet the thought didn’t make her feel any better.

“I suppose we should return to the ball before Mother wonders what happened to us.”

“Right.” But Harriet intended to slip away at the first opportunity. If she couldn’t be with Joseph, she didn’t want to remain at the ball. Her heart felt as if it were breaking.

“Allow me to wash my face, and we’ll go down together.”

“Perfect.”

Frances hugged Harriet again. “You are the best friend I could ask for.”

“As are you,” Harriet replied, grateful Frances wasn’t angry with her. “Thank you for understanding.”

“We made our bold moves together, didn’t we?” Frances suggested. “After all, you helped write the messages.”

“I suppose you could say that.” Harriet returned her smile. But unless she was prepared to share her secrets, she wouldn’t be able to make a bold move.

In truth, she couldn’t imagine telling anyone about what had happened. Not even the ladies of The Mayfair Literary League. It would be best if she resigned herself to spinsterhood. That was the only option. The time with Joseph had been a pleasant encounter. Nothing more. She hoped in the coming days she could convince herself of that.



Chapter Thirteen



Late the following morning, Joseph prepared to leave Melbourne House along with most of the other guests. But first, he wanted to speak with Harriet.

Though they'd shared a glance or two across the ballroom after she and Miss Melbourne returned, he had the impression she was avoiding him. Each time he moved in her direction, she managed to suddenly appear on the opposite side of the ballroom.

He'd approached Miss Melbourne and offered an apology, saying he hoped he hadn't said or done anything to offend her. She insisted he hadn't and accepted his invitation to dance. However, based on how stiffly she moved, she seemed quite uncomfortable. She'd opened her mouth several times as if about to say something but remained silent except for responding to his attempts at conversation with brief answers.

The rest of the evening crawled by, especially once he'd realized Harriet had left the ball.

Harriet hadn't been at breakfast either, nor had Miss Melbourne.

"Did you look to see if there was another message?" Charles had asked when Joseph shared some of what had occurred.

"I suppose I should." Yet if the messages had been from Miss Melbourne, why would she write any additional ones?

The unfilled box in the library left him with mixed emotions. It was as if the emptiness of the box symbolized the loss of what had been building between him and Harriet. He hoped that wasn't true.

He dearly wanted to see how she was faring, especially given her upset the previous evening. Then again, he just wanted to see her.

One of the maids was passing by in the hallway when he emerged from the library.

“Pardon me, but have you seen Lady Harriet?”

“She’s left, my lord.”

His heart sank at the maid’s answer. How disappointing that Harriet hadn’t spoken with him beforehand. Surely, it was a bad omen that she’d departed without saying goodbye.

One thing was clear—there was nothing to keep him at Melbourne House any longer.

After a word with the butler, he entered the billiard room in search of Melbourne. Two other guests were bidding him goodbye, so Joseph waited his turn.

“Garland, we’ve enjoyed having you,” Melbourne said as he shook his hand, his smile warm.

“It’s truly been a pleasure, sir. You have a beautiful home and a wonderful family. Thank you for the hospitality.”

“You’re welcome. When would you like to meet to further discuss your proposal?”

Relief and a healthy dose of satisfaction filled him at the question. “Whenever you’re available. Will you return to London soon?”

“In a week or two. I’ll send a message to the other potential investors I mentioned to set a date when we can all meet.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Safe travels.”

Martin entered the room as Joseph was walking out and also shook his hand. “Thank you for coming.” Martin paused then leaned closer. “I understand you and my sister have become friendly.”

Joseph stilled, uncertain what to say. He’d thought the matter was resolved but perhaps that wasn’t the case. “She is a very nice lady.” What else could he say? He wasn’t about to pretend affection for her in order to convince Melbourne to

invest, but neither did he want to proclaim that Miss Melbourne was sharing falsehoods.

Martin grinned. “That would certainly aid your efforts to interest my father in the bank. Perhaps we can arrange another gathering when we return to the city.”

“That would be enjoyable.” With a nod, he continued on his way, his thoughts churning, only to nearly run into Henderson. “Excuse me.” He didn’t bother to say goodbye.

“Garland. I’m sure you’ll be happy to know that I have a meeting with your father next week,” the reverend said with a smile that looked more like a smirk.

“To ask for yet another *donation*?” Joseph kept his voice low but couldn’t halt the question.

“Who am I to deny the contributions he wishes to make to my church?”

“Why don’t you share what you do with the money you receive? Perhaps then I could be convinced to change my opinion.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation. But have no worry; the donations will be put to good use.” Henderson gave a single nod and strode toward Melbourne.

Joseph reminded himself that he was a guest here until he stepped out the door. Once he returned to London, he would deal with Henderson.

“Pay him no mind,” Martin whispered as he joined Joseph again at the entrance of the billiard room.

“If only I could.” Joseph shook his head. “I would like my father to see him for who he truly is.” As he watched, Henderson shook hands with Melbourne though Joseph couldn’t hear their conversation.

“Perhaps that will come to pass,” Martin suggested.

Joseph wished that were true but knew from experience that was rarely the case.

Soon, Joseph and Charles were on the train to London. He half-hoped to see Harriet and couldn't hold back his disappointment when he didn't.

Would he have the chance to see her in London? Few events were held in the autumn, but one never knew.

Though tempted to call on her, he hesitated. Perhaps some distance would be wise. He shouldn't allow his attraction to her to change his plans. Besides, he still didn't believe in love, though he'd be the first to admit his attraction to her.

However, the time had not yet come to consider marriage, and Harriet deserved nothing less.

Never mind that he hadn't been able to remember any of that when she was near. The coming days would help him focus on what was important. He had much work to do if he wanted to convince Melbourne and other investors to open a regional bank. His time would be better spent doing that than worrying about Harriet.

Yet as he stared out the window at the passing scenery, her face was all he saw.



“HOW HAVE YOU BEEN?” Phoebe asked as she sat in Harriet's drawing room several days later.

“Well, and you?” Harriet waved a hand. “Never mind. I can see with one glance how happy you are.”

Phoebe laughed. “It's true. I am.” She shook her head. “I never dreamed I'd feel this way. I still have to pinch myself to know for certain my life is real.”

Harriet grinned despite the longing that left her aching. “I'm so pleased for you.”

“Thank you. At times, it seemed as if Anthony and I would never be together. Now I can't imagine life without him.”

“How marvelous.” It made Harriet want to weep for what she'd never have.

“The joy we’ve found only makes me more determined for all of the league members to make their bold moves. I know Frances is working on hers, but I hope you’ve given some thought to doing the same.”

“In truth, I’m having second thoughts.”

“That’s perfectly normal. I did as well.” Phoebe shifted to the edge of the chair, her gaze holding Harriet’s with intensity. “But the feeling passes, and you’ll find the courage you need again.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.” Harriet had given it much thought since her return home. It wasn’t just that Frances also liked Joseph—it was that Harriet’s secrets were impossible to overcome.

“Harriet, take heart. I have no doubt you will discover a way and enjoy the same happiness Tibby and I have found.”

She forced a smile, something she’d been doing often of late. “You are both a wonderful example of what’s possible.”

“We are.” Phoebe’s grin was almost contagious. But not quite.

“You knew your earl for some time, just as Tibby knew Captain Shaw since childhood. I’ve only known the man who caught my interest for a short time.” The excuse sounded hollow even to her own ears, but she hoped Phoebe would accept it.

“What difference does that make?”

Harriet sighed, realizing she had to talk to someone about it. “Well, for one, Frances cares for the same man that I do.”

The shock on her friend’s face followed quickly by dismay had Harriet nodding her head.

“Exactly,” Harriet said. “So you can see why any action on my part is impossible.”

“I must assume he was at the house party.” Harriet nodded. “Did you know she admired him before then?”

“No.” She rubbed a finger on her temple, feeling a headache brewing. In truth, she was tired of thinking about the situation when there wasn’t a solution.

Unfortunately, she had yet to find a way to remove Joseph from her thoughts. The truth was that she was thoroughly taken with him.

“To further complicate matters, Frances asked for my help to attract his notice.”

“Oh, Harriet. How terrible for you.”

“Terrible for us both. Of course, it all came out. I’m grateful Frances has forgiven me for not being honest with her.”

“Such a complicated situation. What happens now?” Phoebe asked.

“I’m keeping my distance so Frances can pursue her interest in him if she so chooses.” She bit her lip at the lie. She was stepping away from Joseph for good. If she happened to see him, she would treat him as an acquaintance. That was all she would allow herself. But she didn’t share that. It was one more secret to keep.

She was very good at keeping secrets.

“What a tangled state of affairs. But I have faith it will work itself out, and you should, too.” Phoebe watched her, the confidence in her expression causing Harriet to smile. She nearly believed her.

Yet what would Phoebe think if she told her about her past?

“I am blessed to call you a friend, Phoebe. You and all the ladies in the league are a treasure.”

“I couldn’t agree more. While I understand your wish to allow Frances time to sort through everything, don’t give up hope for yourself.”

“We shall see.” She didn’t want to lie to Phoebe by agreeing when she had no intention of seeing Joseph again, let alone giving in to her feelings for him.

Phoebe scowled. “I want what’s best for you both. These things often have a way of resolving themselves when we least expect it.”

“I shall keep that in mind.” But as far as Harriet could see, it was over and done. From this point forward, it was only a matter of convincing her heart of that.

“Now then, I want to discuss a few items regarding the league,” Phoebe said.

“Of course.”

“We have had several ladies request membership. Five more. A few I know but others I don’t.”

“So many?” The thought was alarming when it had only been the six of them for nearly two years. Doubling their size would present a few challenges.

“I fear news of our group continues to spread.” Regret flashed across Phoebe’s face. “I suppose it is to be expected since Lady Lucinda and Lady Jane seem determined to tell others about us. But still, it makes deciding who genuinely wants to join us more difficult.”

“You mean since we don’t know if they want to become members for the books or the *For Better or Worse* agenda,” Harriet suggested.

“Exactly.” Phoebe shook her head. “I find it interesting that anyone could believe we have a secret way of finding husbands. As if we do something they couldn’t do on their own.”

Harriet raised a brow. “I have to say I wouldn’t have even considered taking action if not for you suggesting the agenda, along with the support of the other league members.”

“I never meant for it to become our primary purpose.”

“Of course not.” Harriet agreed completely. “What do you propose we do?”

“I think we should meet with them individually to discover what their true intentions are before we invite them to a

meeting. Those who seem to be a good fit can attend the next league meeting and decide if they'd like to join."

"Excellent idea. I'm happy to assist with that."

"Thank you. I appreciate it. Perhaps we'll divide up the list of potential candidates and ask the other league members to aid us as well."

"I'm certain everyone would be happy to help. Have you decided on next month's book?"

They discussed the three that Phoebe was considering, all of which sounded wonderful to Harriet. One she had already read, but she'd realized in the first few months of belonging to the league that reading a book with others and discussing it brought details to light she'd never considered.

Hearing other views made her think in new ways. She didn't always agree with them, but the discussions forced her to reconsider her own opinion. The meetings were always interesting. That was all the more reason they needed to be careful about who they invited to the league.

After Phoebe took her leave, Harriet remained in the drawing room, staring out the window, her thoughts on Joseph once again. She'd already told herself to stop thinking of him more times than she could count.

Unfortunately, without success.

Time would ease the pain. The thought of the coming weeks without him was daunting when she'd grown accustomed to seeing him every day.

But what choice did she have?

She didn't want to lose Frances' friendship, nor could she erase her past. Reaching for the stars would be easier than reaching for Joseph. It simply wasn't meant to be. She pressed a hand to her aching heart and closed her eyes.

If only...



Chapter Fourteen



“Joseph. This is a surprise.” His father studied him from where he sat behind his desk. The earl didn’t bother to rise to shake his hand, but Joseph had learned long ago never to expect it.

Displays of affection were a sign of weakness as far as his father was concerned. For a time, Joseph had worried whether he was capable of showing affection but eventually realized the problem was his father’s, not his.

After meeting Harriet, he knew that for certain. When he was with her, the question was whether he could keep his hands to himself.

Thoughts of her eased the anger and resentment that always flooded him when he spoke with his father.

“Father.” Joseph dipped his head. “I hope you are well.” He glanced at the chair in front of the desk but decided he wasn’t going to remain long enough to sit. The sooner he said his piece and left, the better.

“I am. What brings you by today?”

I’m well, Father, thank you. Saying the words to himself didn’t ease the stab of hurt that his father couldn’t be bothered to exchange the simplest of pleasantries. As always when Joseph spoke to him, his emotions threatened to gain the upper hand. Though he told himself their poor relationship wasn’t his fault, the subtle rejections his father tossed out so effortlessly hurt and made him question what he’d done wrong.

He’d spent too many nights in his youth wondering just that to no avail. His father was a difficult man to please under the best of circumstances. In any other case, it was impossible.

“I am in the beginning stages of planning to open a regional bank in Gloucestershire and wanted to speak to you

about it.”

“A bank?” His father frowned. “Whatever for?”

Joseph knew how the conversation would go but still felt compelled to speak to his father about the opportunity. He blamed it on watching Martin and his father together. The voice inside Joseph that never seemed to give up when it came to the earl insisted he try to find a way to connect with him.

A part of him still sought approval from his father. Or at least a topic that would allow them to speak civilly to one another.

“As I’m certain you know, income from agricultural efforts is reducing every year with the cheaper imports coming from America.”

His father scoffed. “That is a temporary problem. We will wait it out until the price of wheat recovers.”

Joseph reminded himself not to argue. That would be a waste of time and energy, and it wasn’t his purpose today.

“None of us can predict the future. But it seems wise to create alternative sources of income for ourselves and those who depend on us.”

His father’s narrow lips pressed together, his disapproval obvious and all too familiar. His taut expression made Joseph realize how much he’d aged in the past year.

His temples held more grey than dark hair, and what had been fine lines around his eyes and mouth had deepened. Not for the first time, Joseph realized that his father’s beliefs didn’t bring him happiness. While that wasn’t the purpose of religion, shouldn’t it offer comfort?

“What do you intend to do with this bank?” the earl asked.

“Encourage local industries, both large and small.”

“Such as?” He raised a brow, his skepticism obvious.

“Several people have shared ideas that take the area’s resources into account. They only need the funding to proceed.”

“Banks are risky, Joseph. You should leave such things to those with experience.”

Another rejection, just as he'd expected. He wished it didn't hurt and that his father's opinion didn't matter.

“I am forming a group of investors with experience and wealth. I thought perhaps you might want to join us.”

That was as much of an invitation as he could manage.

His father chuckled, though it was an unpleasant sound. He leaned back in the chair, his fingers laced over his modest stomach. “I think not. I'd advise you to stay out of it as well.”

“You'd prefer to give money to Henderson instead?” Joseph regretted the words as soon as they were out. He'd already questioned his father on the subject without success.

“Henderson is a visionary. There are only a chosen few who have realized it thus far.”

“On that, we will have to disagree. The man is sly and greedy, no better than someone standing on the street corner with his hand out.”

The time with him at the house party had only deepened that belief.

“You're wrong.” His father straightened, his nostrils flaring even as his face reddened.

“What does he do with the money, Father?” Joseph couldn't let it go.

“You wouldn't understand his plans.” He waved a hand in dismissal. “I wish you luck with your bank. You're going to need it.”

The slight tremor of his father's hand gave Joseph pause. He hoped he hadn't pushed him too far. But his father held his gaze steadily, making Joseph certain he'd imagined the moment of weakness.

“Thank you,” Joseph said, pretending the remark had been sincere. “Goodbye.”

He strode out of the study, closing the door behind him before he drew a slow breath.

The riot of emotions was unwelcome, reminding him too much of the young boy he'd been, so desperate for his father's love. How ridiculous that he still felt that need when he knew it would never be given.

If only he could stop trying. He closed his eyes briefly to regain control then went upstairs to his mother's sitting room.

He'd advised the butler upon his arrival to let her know he was there, but she still seemed surprised when he walked in. No doubt she'd thought he would leave in anger after speaking with the earl.

"Joseph." She studied his expression warily. "You spoke with your father."

"Yes." But he wasn't going to talk about that. It would only upset them both. "I hope the day finds you well, Mother."

"It does. How nice of you to call on us." Still, she watched him as if worried about what he might say.

"I thought you might like to have this." He handed her the lace he'd purchased the day they'd met on Bond Street as he sank into the nearby chair.

"Thank you. You're always so thoughtful." She smiled as she examined the delicately woven threads.

A piece of embroidery sat at her elbow, catching his eye, the ecru and cream colors bland. "I thought you were working on something else."

She followed his gaze and pursed her lips. "I grew weary of it."

Had she? Or had his father made a comment that made her feel guilty for choosing bright colors? He smothered a sigh. That wasn't his fight.

"Mother, if you ever need anything, anything at all, even a home, I can help you." He repeated this each time he visited, wanting her to know he would help her if the day ever came when she was ready to leave his father.

“What could I possibly need, Joseph?” She shook her head as if he’d said something ridiculous.

Perhaps he had.

“I have just returned from a house party.” He would think of an amusing story to share with her. One that would make her smile.

“Oh?” Her eyes lit with interest, which tugged at his heart. How small her world had become. “Was it enjoyable?”

The thought of Harriet had him nodding. “Very much so. The kind lady who assisted us the other day on Bond Street was there.”

“Truly?”

“Her name is Lady Harriet.” Surely, the only reason he was talking about her was because he wanted something to share with his mother. It wasn’t because he couldn’t get the lady out of his mind.

“She is pretty, isn’t she?” his mother asked.

“Yes. She is.” Joseph couldn’t agree more. Much to his surprise, he found himself telling her all about Harriet, thinking how much she’d like her. One of his stories made his mother laugh out loud, and that helped to make up for the visit with his father.



HARRIET ENTERED THE lending library the following afternoon with a maid in tow and found Phoebe, Winifred, and Millicent at their customary table.

Phoebe had sent a message suggesting they meet to discuss the questions they wanted to ask prospective members.

“Good afternoon,” she greeted her friends with a smile. In truth, she was grateful for a reason to leave the house. She needed to find more to occupy her time in order to keep from dwelling on Joseph.

“Harriet,” Millicent greeted her with a warm smile. “Winifred was just telling us what a lovely time you both had

at the Melbourne's house party."

Harriet looked at Winifred as she sat, wondering what, if anything, Frances had told her. Based on her usual pleasant expression, she was unaware of the events that transpired. "We did, indeed."

"Of course, we missed you both," Winifred added, looking between Millicent and Phoebe.

"I was sad to miss it," Millicent said. "But my aunt was feeling poorly, and I didn't want to leave her."

"I hope she's recovered." Harriet was more than happy to turn the conversation away from the party.

She met Phoebe's sympathetic gaze and smiled, grateful as always for her support. Yet her friend's expression made her worry that she wasn't hiding her sorrow as well as she hoped.

The conversation continued as she glanced around.

The library had tables for those who wished to read as well as for groups like theirs who needed a place to meet. The majority of the patrons were women, but a few men also sat at the tables perusing books.

Clerks stood behind a counter in the center of the room, prepared to retrieve any book requested. The library was a wonderful place to borrow books as they were quite expensive, but it made Harriet think of Frances' library, which only brought to mind Joseph.

Then again, everything reminded her of him.

After catching up with one another, Phoebe withdrew a sheet of paper from her reticule. "It won't surprise any of you that I have prepared a list of potential questions for prospective members."

Harriet couldn't help but smile. Phoebe was well known for making lists. In fact, she'd presented a list to her husband when she'd proposed a marriage of convenience to him, something they still teased her about.

"I'd appreciate your opinion on these," Phoebe continued. "I thought we should ask everyone similar questions to make

sure they like to read.”

Millicent giggled. “I can’t believe anyone would want to join because they think we can help them find a husband.”

“Some ladies are more desperate than others,” Winifred said. “One need only think of Lady Lucinda and her sister, Lady Jane, to know that. The two seem intent on spreading falsehoods about the league and our agenda.”

Phoebe tapped a finger on the paper. “That’s exactly my concern. Now here’s what I have so far.”

Twenty minutes later, they had settled on several questions that would confirm the level of the ladies’ interest in books and reading.

“We should attempt to become acquainted with them in addition to asking the book questions.” Millicent looked at Phoebe to see if she agreed.

“Absolutely,” Phoebe said.

They added two more questions and declared the list done.

Harriet was disappointed the task had been completed so quickly.

“I’m going to select a book or two while I’m here,” she said when it looked as if everyone was ready to leave.

Millicent leaned forward before anyone rose and looked between Harriet and Winifred. “Do you have any news on how Frances’ *For Better or Worse* plan is progressing?”

Harriet glanced at Winifred, uncertain how to respond. Frances had told her that her family intended to remain in the country for another week or two.

Winifred shook her head. “I have no idea.” She frowned. “I don’t even know the identity of the gentleman in whom she’s interested. I didn’t notice anything during the house party. Perhaps he wasn’t there.”

When Millicent looked at Harriet, she shrugged, unwilling to share anything on Frances’ behalf. “We’ll have to wait for Frances to provide an update at the next league meeting.”

She truly didn't know how the situation was going. She'd left the house party as early as possible.

"It's terribly exciting," Millicent said with a grin. "Especially when I think of your success, Phoebe, as well as Tibby's. In fact, I'm thinking about being the next to move forward."

Harriet's breath caught even as Phoebe sent her a concerned look. Millicent's comment shouldn't bother her. Hadn't she told herself that she couldn't pursue Joseph because of her past?

Then why did she not only ache for Joseph, but it also felt as if life was passing her by?

"That's so brave of you." Winifred touched Millicent's arm. "Do you have a plan?"

"Not yet." She pressed a hand to her stomach. "The idea makes me so nervous I can hardly bear it. Perhaps I won't be able to go through with it."

"Of course, you will," Harriet said, pushing away her own concerns. "I'm sure it's frightening, but that's the whole reason we are doing this together."

"Exactly," Phoebe said. "If it weren't for thinking that I'd be letting down everyone, I might've not gone forward with my plan."

Millicent nodded then smiled at each of them. "I am so grateful for you ladies. This is an excellent reminder of why we need to take care to invite ladies who will be a good fit to join us. I wouldn't want our friendship to change."

"Nor would I." Harriet still worried that Frances would resent her after all that had happened.

They talked for a few more minutes before Millicent and Winifred departed. Harriet took her time rising, not yet ready to be alone with her thoughts again.

Phoebe stepped closer. "Harriet, I can see you're still upset."

“It will pass.” Though she was beginning to worry it wouldn’t.

“Have you considered that the gentleman has a say in all this as well? While it’s generous of you to allow Frances to proceed, how you and he feel also matters.”

Phoebe’s quiet words sank in, making Harriet wonder if she’d done the right thing by leaving without speaking to Joseph.

“If you still feel so strongly about him, maybe that proves there’s more to your attraction than you realized.”

Harriet blew out a breath. Did that change anything?

“At least think on it,” Phoebe continued. “Love is rare. Don’t toss it aside without fighting for it.”

Love? The word caused her to hold her breath as she considered how she felt. Surely, she wasn’t in love with Joseph. Yet the way her heart ached since they’d last been together suggested what she felt was more than a *tendre*. Much more.



Chapter Fifteen



“I’m so pleased you could join us.”

“Thank you for the invitation.” Joseph shook the Earl of Bolton’s hand then bowed to his new wife, Lady Phoebe Bolton, in the entrance hall of their London home.

“May I also offer congratulations on your marriage?”

“Thank you.” Lady Bolton shared a look with her husband, love shining in her eyes.

Joseph expected to feel uncomfortable at that look since he didn’t believe in love. Not when his father had used the term to try to manipulate his family and bend them to his will, including Joseph.

Instead, a pang of envy struck him square in the chest.

That Bolton appeared to be as besotted with his wife as she was with him was surprising. Joseph had seen hints of it before they’d married, and now they appeared to be even more in love.

Bolton had always been a practical sort with an eye firmly on the future. He’d watched over his younger siblings like a hawk and been intent on seeing them make happy matches unlike that of his parents who’d had a marriage of convenience.

The news of Bolton saying his vows had been surprising. To think a man of his intelligence had been struck by love made Joseph reconsider his own view of the emotion, as well as what he wanted for his future. In truth, his feelings for Harriet were what made him crave a life he’d never expected.

The couple’s happiness was impossible to deny. It would be a lie to say that he didn’t want what they had for himself.

Joseph had come upon the earl at the club two days earlier and mentioned his investment idea. While he wasn’t certain if

Bolton would be interested since his country estate wasn't near Joseph's or Melbourne's which made the regional bank less impactful to him, it still seemed worth the chance. To his pleasure, Bolton had been intrigued.

Bolton had mentioned at the club that they were having a few friends over and asked if Joseph would like to join them. Joseph had immediately agreed, telling himself that the more connections he made the better.

But it was the memory of Harriet telling him that Bolton was one of the reasons she knew him—and that he should've known her. He held hope that she might be in attendance this evening. If not, the time had come to call on her. Keeping his distance wasn't helping anything.

"Thank you, Garland," Bolton added as he placed an arm around his wife's waist.

Their affection for one another sent longing straight through Joseph—all for Harriet. How he missed her.

He followed them up the stairs to the drawing room to see several other guests already present.

Unfortunately, not Harriet. His spirits sank at the realization even as he greeted Bolton's brother, Robert Stanhope, followed by Captain Michael Shaw and his new wife, Lady Tabitha Shaw.

"Congratulations." Joseph shook Shaw's hand. "It's not often that I can say that twice in one evening. Makes one wonder if there's something in the air of late."

The two ladies smiled at one another as if they shared a secret as Shaw thanked him.

Philip Carstairs, the Duke of Trentworth, arrived before he could say anything more. Joseph hadn't seen him since he inherited the previous year.

"It's been some time, Garland," the duke said.

"It has, Your Grace. I hope you've been well."

He and the duke had been at university together, though Trentworth was two years his senior. As the spare heir, he

hadn't expected to inherit. A tragic accident had taken the life of his elder brother, and his father had died soon after.

The last Joseph had heard, Trentworth was spending the majority of his time at his country estate, implementing changes his father had started before his death.

If only Joseph's father took an interest in their estate.

"I have," Trentworth replied. "And you?"

Before Joseph could answer, a sudden awareness swept over him. He stilled before slowly turning to see Harriet enter the room. All else fell away as he watched her greet Lady Bolton.

"Garland?" The duke's voice sounded as if it came from next door rather than his side.

Joseph pulled his attention away from Harriet to look at the duke, reminding himself that he was there to make connections. "My apologies for my distraction, Your Grace."

However, another glance at Harriet had him saying, "Please excuse me for a moment."

He was drawn to Harriet's side like a compass needle to true north. It didn't matter that she was speaking to Lord and Lady Bolton. It wouldn't have mattered if she'd been speaking to the Queen herself. He simply had to be closer.

"Harriet."

"Joseph." Her eyes lit with what he hoped was pleasure despite a hint of caution in their blue depths. "How nice to see you again."

He knew Lord and Lady Bolton watched them with avid interest but couldn't bring himself to care.

"Harriet, I didn't realize you were so well acquainted with Viscount Garland," Lady Bolton said, her eyes wide with interest.

"We both had the pleasure of attending the Melbourne's house party last week," Harriet said as color rose in her cheeks.

He'd missed her so much. It was all he could do not to take her hand. Thank goodness she'd provided an explanation to their hosts as he wasn't certain he could've.

She looked lovely in a blue gown with embroidered flowers along the bodice. The vivid color complemented her complexion and blonde hair.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. Only now did he realize how empty his world had been without her.

There was so much he wanted to say but couldn't. Somehow, he had to find a moment alone with her before the evening ended.

"We're sorry we weren't able to attend," Lady Bolton was saying. "I've heard wonderful things about Melbourne House."

"It has not one but two libraries." The amazement in Harriet's tone was sweet, a reminder of how much she enjoyed reading.

But when she looked at him, he knew immediately she was thinking of the kiss they'd shared in the library.

So was he.

"Two?" Lady Bolton was clearly impressed and touched her husband's arm. "Perhaps we should consider adding one."

Harriet smiled as she held Joseph's gaze. "Joseph can attest to how wonderful they were."

"They were indeed." He would've agreed with her no matter what she said. "Especially the smaller one. That was my favorite."

Harriet's eyes widened at his comment, and color stained her cheeks even deeper. "It boasted a spiral staircase and a library ladder. It was perfect." Her focus remained on Joseph, warming his entire body.

Lady Bolton's mouth dropped open. "How wonderful."

"I can see we'll soon be adding a library and a ladder." Bolton heaved a resigned sigh even as he smiled at Lady

Bolton.

“I hope you do,” Harriet said. “But be warned that the league members will be frequent visitors.”

“We wouldn’t have it any other way.” Bolton grinned. “Especially since Phoebe and I owe our union to the league.” He paused and studied his wife. “Though I like to think I would’ve eventually realized the gem beneath my nose.”

Lady Bolton laughed. “I had grown weary of waiting for you to notice me. The time had come to take matters into my own hands.”

“Thank goodness.” The earl took her hand in his.

Once again, Joseph was struck by their obvious affection for one another. His gaze shifted to Harriet, wondering what she thought when she watched the couple.

The naked longing on her face was so poignant that it made him ache. But the look was gone as quickly as it had come, masked by a polite smile, leaving him wondering if he’d imagined it.

She pressed a finger on her chest, rubbing back and forth along the fabric, a frequent habit of hers.

Then she noticed him watching her and quickly dropped her hand, her expression almost guilty. How puzzling. He couldn’t imagine why she would feel that way.

They moved to where the other guests stood, though Joseph wanted to draw Harriet to a quiet corner and ask how she truly was and why she’d left without saying goodbye.

But that conversation had to wait.

With a deep breath, he collected his thoughts and tried to focus on the discussions around him. He needed to keep his goal of finding potential investors for the bank in mind.

But Harriet’s presence at his side made that much less important. The realization shocked him, and he wasn’t certain what to do about it.

He did his best to tuck away the thought and turned toward the duke.

“My apologies again, Your Grace,” he murmured.

The duke raised a brow. “Far be it from me to take your attention from a lady, especially one as lovely as Lady Harriet.”

Luckily, Harriet was involved in a conversation with Lady Tabitha and Lady Bolton and hadn’t heard the compliment. Joseph had no desire to compete with a duke for Harriet’s attention.

“She is that,” he agreed quietly. “I understand you have been busy at your country estate.” He had to shift the conversation to something else before he reached for Harriet’s arm.

“I have. But my aunt continually reminds me that I also have obligations in the city.” Trentworth leaned closer. “And that I should begin the search for a wife.”

“A necessity when one is a duke.” Joseph was relieved not to have the pressure of selecting a lady with all of Society watching.

With his handsomeness and charm, Trentworth had always drawn attention everywhere he went and with everything he did. Now that he’d inherited the title, it was even more so. Surely, he grew weary of the watching eyes. If he did, he hid it well.

“Don’t tell me I’m in this alone,” the duke said with a wry smile. “Isn’t it time for you to do the same?”

“Eventually.” Yet he couldn’t help but look at Harriet. Perhaps it would be sooner than he expected.



HARRIET HAD HALF-HOPED Joseph might be at Phoebe’s dinner party. But finding him there was bittersweet. She’d thought more time apart would provide objectivity and allow her to remember the reasons a future with him was impossible. She’d meant to treat him as an acquaintance and nothing more.

Yet Phoebe's words at the lending library made her reconsider her decision.

Then their eyes had met across the drawing room, and she'd realized how much she wanted Joseph in her life. As she watched him speak with the Duke of Trentworth, her heart continued to hammer.

When he'd mentioned the smaller library with such an intent look in his hazel eyes, her knees had weakened. Those moments were forever emblazoned on her mind, a passionate and tender interlude she would always cherish.

"Is all well?" Tibby asked from her elbow.

Harriet closed her eyes briefly. "I'm not certain." Though she hadn't intended to tell anyone other than the little she'd shared with Phoebe, she found the words spilling out. "Frances and I share a *tendre* for Viscount Garland."

Tibby's eyes widened in alarm. "Oh, dear."

"Yes." Harriet glanced at Joseph, her heart squeezing. "She didn't tell me who it was until we were at the house party, and I didn't intend to see him again afterward. At least, not so soon. I wish Phoebe had invited Frances rather than me."

"I believe she invited you both, but Frances and her parents have not yet returned to London."

"How unfortunate."

"Is it?" Tibby asked with a raised brow. "I mean, where is it written that you should step aside for anyone? Nor should Frances step aside for you. Why not allow Viscount Garland to decide for whom he cares? You both deserve an equal chance, do you not?"

"Frances volunteered—"

"That doesn't matter. I have no doubt that Phoebe would agree." She looked toward their friend who was conversing with her guests. "I would be happy to ask if that would help."

Doubt filled Harriet. "It seems disloyal." In truth, Frances had been her excuse for not pursuing Joseph. It was easier for her to think of her friend than consider her past.

“For all you know, he might not be attracted to either of you.”

Harriet nearly shook her head. She couldn't deny how he'd acted during their time alone together, let alone those kisses.

“What?” Tibby stepped even closer. “Something happened. You had a moment with him, didn't you?” Excitement lit her brown eyes. “A kiss, perhaps?”

A smile curved Harriet's lips before she could halt it. “Perhaps.”

“Oh, Harriet.” Tibby glanced around the room, her gaze lingering on Joseph. “I am here to tell you that you should follow any attraction you feel to see where it leads. Don't turn it away. You must give whatever is between you a chance to grow.”

“You sound like Phoebe.” Harriet pressed a hand on her chest, wishing things were different. If only her past didn't cast such a long, dark shadow. She hated to think her stepfather was still affecting her life to the extent he was after what she and her mother had already endured.

Curse him.

Yet she didn't regret that he was gone, or that they had their freedom and the chance for happiness, something that wasn't possible when he'd lived.

“I don't know,” Harriet began, her eyes meeting Tibby's. “In all honesty, I'm not certain marriage is possible for me.”

“Why?” Then a look of understanding came over Tibby's face. “Is it because you don't feel you can leave your mother alone if you marry?”

Sympathy swept through Harriet for she knew how difficult Tibby's life had been with her own mother. Lady Dunford had seemed bent on being unhappy with life after the death of her husband.

Unfortunately, Tibby had borne the brunt of it. Out of desperation, she'd suggested a pretend betrothal to Captain

Shaw, who had been a childhood friend, in an effort to loosen her mother's grip.

But she'd also proposed the ruse to help Captain Shaw see her differently as part of the *For Better or Worse* agenda.

"No, though that is a concern." Harriet shook her head. This wasn't the time or place to share the reason she hesitated. She wasn't sure she ever wanted to tell anyone.

Tibby touched her arm. "You have been so helpful to me over the past few months, a true friend. Know that I would be pleased to return the favor. You are deserving of happiness, too."

"Thank you." Harriet was touched by her words and support. What was the right way to proceed? "Frances does, as well," Harriet felt compelled to add. The conversation made her realize she'd been using Frances' feelings for Joseph as a shield so she didn't have to risk exposing her past.

"Of course, she does. But the decision isn't hers alone to make."

Lord Bolton interrupted their conversation to offer glasses of sherry, and the others joined them, ending the discussion for now.

Harriet's thoughts whirled as the guests mingled, and she found herself alone for a moment.

"I'm so pleased to see you, Harriet." The deep timbre of Joseph's voice nearly made her shiver with the longing it brought.

She turned to face him, pleased to have the glass of sherry to occupy her hands as it kept her from touching him. "I'm happy to see you, too. You've been well?"

"Yes and no."

She frowned at the odd answer. "How do you mean?"

"I've been well enough, but my thoughts are not." He leaned close, a warm, teasing glint in his eyes. "They are too taken with you."

Her breath caught. How was she supposed to react when he said such sweet things? “Joseph—”

He shook his head. “I don’t know what you intend to say, but I ask you not to because I can see from your expression that I won’t like it. Allow me to hold on to my dream a while longer.”

Dream? What could he possibly mean by that? “It’s just that Frances cares for you, too, and I don’t want to interfere.”

“Too?” His gaze held steadily on her until her entire body heated. “Be still my heart.”

She was mortified by the slip. “I meant—”

“You cannot take it back.” His smile sent her heart pounding.

“Garland, you aren’t keeping Lady Harriet to yourself, are you? I never took you for a selfish fellow.” The Duke of Trentworth approached them, his smile engaging.

Harriet felt her face flush once more. To have both men even pretending to flirt with her was inconceivable. The duke was handsome, but her body didn’t react to him the same way it did to Joseph.

That was proof of what Tibby had said.

She watched as Joseph spoke with the duke, comfortable with His Grace despite his intimidating title. He also included Harriet in the conversation.

Joseph was such a good man. But did that mean he’d understand her past? Or would he turn away if he saw her scars and heard her story?

Was it worth the risk?

Dinner was wonderful because she was seated beside Joseph. Both Tibby and Phoebe sent her encouraging looks and soon, she allowed herself to relax and simply enjoy the evening. The future would take care of itself.

Given the small number of guests, everyone joined in the same conversations, leaving her and Joseph no chance to

speaking privately. Being at his side was enough. She listened to what he said with interest and could feel him doing the same when she shared something.

After dessert was served, the ladies withdrew to the drawing room.

“Where are your mother-in-law and sisters-in-law?” Tibby asked Phoebe.

“They attended a musical this evening. Lady Bolton said she wanted us to have the chance to entertain without the entire family watching.”

“How lovely that you already had such a good relationship with everyone in the family before you married,” Harriet said. “Liking them all must make living here much easier.”

“It does. Lady Bolton has been so kind,” Phoebe said. “And you know I adore Violet.”

“I’m so pleased.” Tibby reached out to squeeze Phoebe’s hand. “We wouldn’t have believed it if someone had told us a year ago that we would be happily married now.”

“It’s true.” Phoebe grinned.

Harriet sighed with envy at her friends’ happiness. Watching the two of them made it seem possible for herself. Dare she hope it might be?

The gentlemen joined them a short time later. Bolton’s brother shared several amusing stories about their childhood which had them all laughing.

Joseph continued to be in fine spirits and drew her eye time and time again. Harriet feared the other guests would guess how she felt about him as many times as they shared glances.

Eventually, the guests started leaving, including Tibby and Captain Shaw. Harriet said her goodbyes and was pleased when Joseph offered to see her to her carriage.

They walked down to the entrance hall, and the butler went to the kitchen to alert her maid that she was ready to depart.

Joseph glanced around the hall and took Harriet's hand, drawing her into the nearby empty reception room.

"Thank goodness," he whispered in the dim light that spilled in from the hall.

"For what?" Harriet asked, breathless at being alone with him.

"To have a moment with you for this." He drew her into his arms and kissed her.

Harriet's heart surged, and she placed her gloved hands on his chest both to steady herself and to touch him. His broad shoulders and strong physique never failed to stir her. But when his tongue swirled against hers, she needed to brace herself to keep from swaying.

She had underestimated the passion she felt in his arms. Apparently, her mind had blurred the memory in an attempt to convince her she wasn't falling for the handsome viscount. The desire that pulsed through her insisted that what was between them was even bigger than she'd believed.

"Please permit me to call on you," he whispered then pressed a kiss to her cheek, his hands squeezing her waist.

Harriet hesitated, torn as to how to answer. Phoebe and Tibby's encouragement made her long to say yes. But Frances and her past insisted she say no.

Voices drifted from the upper landing, suggesting they'd be interrupted at any moment.

"Please, Harriet. I want to see you again. Soon." The pad of his thumb moved along her cheek, the gentle touch tipping the scales of the battle waging within her.

"I would like that as well."

His smile lit her heart, making her certain she'd given the right answer. "Excellent. I will see you soon."

With that, he released her and gestured toward the hall. They both moved forward as Bolton and Phoebe came down the stairs.

Harriet's excitement bloomed as she said goodbye and departed with her maid. One last look at Joseph before she was handed into her carriage only heightened the flutters in her middle.

For the first time, she found herself wondering if a future with him was possible.



Chapter Sixteen



Harriet should've asked Joseph when he intended to call. Then she wouldn't be listening for a knock at the front door or declining to accompany her mother when she asked her to go along on an errand, something she'd already done once. Would he come by today or next week?

"Whatever are you looking at?" her mother asked when she entered the drawing room to find Harriet staring out the window to the street below.

"Nothing." Harriet knew her blush belied her words. Though tempted to mention that she'd spent time with Joseph at the house party and how much she was coming to care for him, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

What if he changed his mind and decided not to call on her?

What if he realized the advantage pursuing Frances would bring to his investment plan?

Those questions were much different than the hopeful feeling she'd had on the way home from the dinner party last evening.

"The day looks to be an especially fine one," she said when her mother continued to stare at her with a questioning look.

"Too fine to remain inside. Why don't you come with me to the apothecary? Afterward, we can drive by Regent's Park."

Alarm kept Harriet in place. She hated not to be home if Joseph called.

Seeming to take her silence for agreement, her mother said, "I'll have the carriage brought around and fetch my shawl." Then she turned and left the room.

With a sigh, Harriet glanced out the window to the empty street below again and then went to her bedroom to get her shawl as well. Staring out the window watching for Joseph wouldn't bring him by any faster.

Her mother had mentioned how much she'd missed her while she'd been gone. Harriet couldn't bring herself to refuse to go with her again.

Soon they were driving toward Purdy's Apothecary, her mother chatting all the way about the dog she was considering getting, thanks to Harriet's uncle. They alighted outside the shop and the tinkle of the bell above the door announced their arrival.

Harriet always had mixed feelings when she looked around the establishment, though her mother had been a customer for as long as she could remember. A certain uneasiness always crept over her when she looked at some of the items available for purchase.

Luckily, her mother only required headache powder and a potion for unsettled stomachs rather than alligator tongues or leeches kept in jars of rainwater. Her mother frequented the shop less often as she rarely suffered from ills since the death of her second husband.

The brown curtain that hid the back room parted, revealing Mr. Purdy. The small man was several inches shorter than Harriet and wore thick glasses that made him look as if he were peering through one of his glass jars. Only the thin muttonchops along his jaw made it apparent he wasn't as young as he first appeared.

"Good afternoon, Lady Chapman." He bowed, his black suit covered by a white apron with two large pockets where he kept long tweezers, measuring spoons, and wooden stir sticks.

"Mr. Purdy, I am in need of more headache powder, please."

"Of course, my lady." He dipped his head and moved to where he kept the powder and retrieved a small bottle. "I'm happy you found it helpful."

“Yes, it is amazingly effective. I advised one of our neighbors who suffers from frequent headaches that she should try some.”

He and her mother conversed as Harriet walked around the shop, studying the items available for purchase. Wafers, tonics, and pills were kept in jars and tins, some with labels and others unmarked. A tall jar stood in the corner with pickled eels. She couldn't imagine an ailment that would convince her to take it.

She'd asked what they were used for once, and Mr. Purdy had smiled and whispered, “Sometimes, it's believing that a remedy will aid one that provides the true benefit.”

Harriet was behind the front door when the bell tinkled once again and someone else entered the shop. To her dismay, the newcomer was Reverend Henderson. He walked slowly forward, his attention on Mr. Purdy.

Though she longed to depart before he caught sight of her, she couldn't leave her mother. Instead, she turned to face the display case of remedies along the front wall with the hope he wouldn't notice her.

“Lady Chapman,” the reverend said, causing Harriet to stiffen in surprise. “It's been some time since I last saw you.”

Harriet hadn't realized her mother knew the man.

“Reverend Henderson.” The coolness of her mother's greeting was undeniable and almost made Harriet smile. Apparently, her mother didn't like him either.

“I was sorry to hear of Lord Chapman's passing.”

“Thank you.”

Harriet slowly turned, unease crawling up her spine. Any mention of her stepfather was concerning, but that was especially true coming from a man for whom she didn't care.

Reverend Henderson's gaze shifted to her. “Lady Harriet, what a pleasant surprise.” He glanced between her and her mother. “I didn't realize the connection until now.”

Harriet walked to stand beside her mother. “The reverend was also a guest at the Melbourne’s house party.”

“I see. How nice.” Her mother nodded politely then turned to look at Mr. Purdy. “That is all I need today. We must be on our way.”

“Lord Chapman’s demise was most unfortunate. And so puzzling.” Reverend Henderson stepped closer and placed a hand on the counter, the move somehow threatening when he was so near her mother.

Her mother shifted, lifting her chin. “Sadly, accidents happen daily.”

Harriet’s stomach clenched. It was all she could do not to grab her mother’s arm and rush them both out the door before he said anything more.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to pay my respects at his funeral. I was abroad for several months.” He shook his head. “I can’t understand it. A fall seems so out of character. He was in excellent health when we visited not long before that.”

Her mother’s face grew pale. “I’m certain you’ve taken a misstep yourself at one time or another. Such things can occur quickly.”

“Hmm. Never a misstep at the top of the stairs where a handrail is surely within reach.”

Bile rose in the back of Harriet’s throat as memories of that terrible moment flew at her like bats swooping out of a cave.

“I suppose we will never know exactly how it happened.” Her mother pursed her lips, clearly upset by the conversation.

Reverend Henderson’s focus shifted between Harriet and her mother. “No one witnessed the...*accident?*”

Harriet’s chest tightened at the emphasis he placed on the word. She couldn’t have responded if her life depended on it. Nor could she move. Not when ice filled her veins, chilling her to the bone.

“No one,” her mother said, her voice tight. “Such a tragedy. Now then, we must be going.” She glanced at Mr.

Purdy who had stopped to listen rather than working on her order. “Please have my order delivered when it’s ready.”

The apothecary seemed to realize his lapse and glanced at the empty bottle before him. “Of course, my lady. You’ll receive it this afternoon.”

“Thank you.” Her mother glanced at Henderson. “Reverend.” Then she reached for Harriet’s arm and walked toward the door.

Thank goodness she took hold of Harriet, or she would’ve still been standing there, staring at the reverend.

Only once they were settled in the carriage did her mother show any emotion. She pressed a gloved hand to her mouth as she held Harriet’s gaze. “How unfortunate to come upon the reverend.”

“He acted as if he suspected something.” Harriet blinked back tears as fear clutched at her throat. “How did he know my stepfather?” Though he’d frequently told Harriet that she could call him Father, she’d refused. He could never have taken the place of her father.

Her mother leaned back against the tufted seat as if her strength had fled as the carriage rolled forward. “I don’t know exactly, but Henry admired the reverend. I believe Henry donated to his church at one point.”

Harriet stared out the window but didn’t see any of the passing scenery. Her heart raced at the idea of being questioned by the reverend or anyone else about what had happened that terrible night. “Mother—”

“You will not say a word, Harriet.”

“But I—”

“No.” Her mother shook her head as tears filled her eyes. “We’ve already discussed this. Nothing happened. What Reverend Henderson thinks doesn’t change anything.”

Despite her mother’s insistence, Harriet feared it did.



JOSEPH LOOKED BETWEEN Harriet and her mother, certain he hadn't called at a good time. When his carriage had pulled up before Harriet's home as she and her mother were exiting theirs, he'd thought his luck excellent.

But before he'd even greeted the ladies, it was clear something was amiss.

Harriet looked distraught, her body stiff, and if he didn't know better, he thought she might have been crying. Her mother didn't look any better, her face pale and a glaze of worry in her eyes.

Lady Chapman had looked at her daughter then at him, clearly confused by Joseph's presence. Still, the lady had invited him for tea.

Now they sat in the drawing room, waiting for the tea to arrive, conversing in a stilted fashion. He wanted to distract Harriet and her mother from whatever was bothering them but couldn't seem to keep from watching Harriet long enough to think of what to say.

Harriet sat on the edge of her seat, hands clasped tightly together in her lap, her gaze focused on something just over his shoulder. Her demeanor was so different than it had been last evening that it was clear something distressful had occurred.

He didn't think it was anything he'd done. Yet the worry remained all the same. If only her mother would step out of the room, so he could inquire as to what was amiss.

Unfortunately, Lady Chapman showed no sign of leaving. Her gaze darted about the room, her thoughts clearly elsewhere even while she attempted a few remarks about the weather.

Joseph cleared his throat, the knot of worry in his chest tightening the longer he was there. "It was a pleasure coming to know Lady Harriet while we were at the house party."

Lady Chapman managed a smile. "How interesting life can be at times." She sent her daughter a pointed look, making him think her words held a hidden message.

“Isn’t it though?” Joseph agreed. “Much like the day Lady Harriet stopped my mother from stepping into the path of the carriage on Bond Street. I will always be grateful for that.”

“Indeed.” Lady Chapman nodded with a polite smile.

Harriet met his gaze. Her chest rose and slowly fell as if she were drawing a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. He gave a slight nod, hoping to silently lend his support. His protective instincts rose and demanded he take action though he didn’t know what.

“As Lady Harriet may have mentioned, I count both the Earl of Bolton and Captain Shaw as good friends.”

Lady Chapman nodded. “She did mention that. Their wives are close friends of Harriet’s. Aren’t they, dear?”

“Yes.” Harriet offered a small smile, giving him hope that she was recovering from her upset. “They certainly are.” She paused for a long moment. “Mother and I just returned from the apothecary’s. We were surprised to come upon Reverend Henderson there.”

“Henderson?” Joseph didn’t bother to hide his dislike of the man. “What a small city London can be at times.”

“Quite,” Harriet agreed.

Did Henderson have something to do with their upset?

Before he could ask, the butler arrived with the tea tray and set it before Lady Chapman.

The ritual of serving tea seemed to calm both ladies, easing some of the tension in the room.

Still, Joseph couldn’t let it go. “Forgive me for being overly familiar, but did he press you for a donation?”

“No.” Harriet shook her head then shared a look with her mother as if debating how much to say.

He hoped she knew she could trust him and that he would do anything in his power to aid her.

“It turns out he knew my late stepfather.”

“Oh?” Joseph took a sip of the tea Lady Chapman handed him, not wanting to appear overly anxious to learn more. He hadn’t known Lord Chapman. From what he’d learned at the house party, his death had been nearly two years ago.

When Harriet said nothing further, Joseph said, “I can’t say that I care for Henderson.”

“How is it that you know him?” Lady Chapman asked.

“He and my father are acquainted.” Perhaps if he shared more, Lady Chapman would do the same. “His ideas on requesting donations but not aiding the poor are concerning.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize he felt that way.”

Joseph explained what little he knew. But when the lady didn’t share anything more, he changed the subject. Speaking of the reverend only ruined his fine mood.

He told them about a display of Viking artifacts he’d seen at a museum and a recent lecture on predicting the weather that he’d attended.

Much to his relief, Harriet joined in the conversation and shared a few details about a book she was reading.

He didn’t remain long and soon took his leave, disappointed that he didn’t have a moment alone with Harriet to learn what had happened.

He had his driver take him to his club, wondering who he might ask to learn more about Lord Chapman. With no likely candidates of that age visible, he found a table to wait for a time to see if someone entered who might be helpful.

As he sipped a whiskey, his thoughts returned to Harriet. She had almost appeared frightened. But of what or whom? Surely not Henderson. She hadn’t shown any such emotions toward the man during the house party.

That Henderson knew her stepfather had to be of note, else why would she have mentioned it? He mulled over the possibilities as he greeted several acquaintances.

While he’d wanted to discover more about Henderson because of his involvement with his father, plans for the bank

had taken precedence.

Not anymore. Aiding Harriet was now his priority. That meant looking further into Henderson.

He studied each man who came into the club, searching for a possible connection to Henderson or Chapman. He would guess that the two men had been nearly the same age, so finding someone of a similar age to ask could prove helpful.

He'd asked two without success when Lord Weston, who'd also been at Melbourne's party, entered. Joseph stood to catch his attention.

"Garland." The lord nodded. "Recovered from the house party?"

"Wishing we were still in the country, as a matter of fact." Because that would mean he'd be with Harriet. "What of you?" He gestured to the empty chair at the table, pleased when Weston pulled it out to join him.

"Always enjoyable to spend time away from the city."

They spoke for several more minutes before Joseph asked, "Do you know much about Reverend Henderson?"

"Other than speaking with him briefly at the party, not really. The reverend seems determined to insert himself into every possible opportunity of late."

That didn't clarify how Weston felt about Henderson. Given that Joseph had seen them speaking several times during the house party, they might be on good terms.

"I have a few concerns about his attitude toward being of service." Joseph waited, hoping he'd feel free to agree or disagree. Either way, Joseph would know where Weston stood.

"I don't think I'll be donating to his church any time soon. I'm curious to know if Melbourne did."

"As would I." Joseph waited with as much patience as he could muster while the waiter served Weston a drink. "Did you know Lord Chapman?"

“Yes, though he died a year or two ago.” His brow furrowed as if he were thinking it over. “It’s probably been closer to two.”

“What happened?”

“An accident if I remember correctly. Fell down the stairs. Makes you think twice to hear things like that. Healthy one minute and dead the next.”

The information left Joseph with more questions than answers, but it was a step in the right direction. “Do you know who was well acquainted with Chapman?”

Weston gave him two names, though Joseph didn’t know them well.

As Weston departed to go to the card room, Joseph sighed with frustration. Did he pursue his line of questioning, or did he try to speak with Harriet privately? Did she trust him enough to allow him to help?



Chapter Seventeen



Late that evening, Harriet stared at the dressing table mirror, having already dismissed the maid who'd helped her prepare for bed.

With stiff fingers, she untied the ribbon that secured her white linen nightgown and eased it open to reveal her chest. She slowly traced the web of scars. The angry red, lumpy blotches spread from her collarbone down to the swell of one breast to the opposite side of her chest.

Sometimes, she forgot how ugly they were. She often went for days without truly looking at them. The doctor had said they'd fade with time, but they hadn't. Not really.

She knew they could be worse. Some with burn scars were left with skin that never healed. While hers were still uncomfortable at times, they were no longer raw.

The events of that fateful afternoon were forever etched on her mind.

Harriet had hated seeing Lord Chapman belittle her mother, something he did time and again. During the two years they'd been married, her mother's brightness had faded, smothered by his cruel remarks. The situation had worsened as time passed and soon, it seemed as if he had nothing good to say. Not to Harriet, but especially not to her mother.

Harriet couldn't stand it. She'd hated him with everything she was. Her mother kept trying to find ways to placate him to no avail.

He'd expressed dissatisfaction with the tea cakes, and her mother had stepped out of the drawing room to request the butler bring something else. Lord Chapman had made yet another demeaning remark about his wife not hiring the proper staff and how she couldn't do even the simplest tasks correctly.

Something inside Harriet had snapped at his words. She hadn't been able to hold back and told him that her mother deserved happiness with a gentleman who respected and admired her.

For a brief moment, Harriet had been proud of herself for finding the courage to stand up to him. To take control.

Lord Chapman had thrown the entire pot of steaming tea at her in response.

The fabric of her gown had held the boiling liquid against her, worsening the injury. She'd jumped to her feet, crying out, the pain unbearable. It had felt as if her skin were on fire, yet she couldn't do anything to stop it since her gown fastened at the back.

Her stepfather had remained seated, shaking his head as though disgusted by her behavior. Luckily, a maid had come to see what was wrong, and her mother soon followed. Between the two of them, they managed to unfasten the gown to peel it from her burnt flesh.

The days that followed were agony. The fabric had embedded into her skin in places. Removing the threads was torture, no amount of laudanum had eased.

Lord Chapman had shown no remorse when her mother confronted him. "If Harriet was more respectful, I wouldn't have been forced to react in such a manner."

He'd told them numerous times in the days that followed that Harriet should be grateful the hot liquid hadn't struck her face as those scars would've been impossible to hide.

Grateful? Never.

Her mother had been beside herself with worry and anger. Though her stepfather often spoke harshly to them, he'd never done something so terrible until that afternoon.

From what her mother told her later, Lord Chapman resented the time she spent tending Harriet. His angry voice had echoed through the house on more than one occasion, disturbing Harriet's restless sleep. But Harriet hadn't been able to do anything to protect her mother while still recovering.

Nearly three weeks passed before Harriet had been able to rise from bed for any length of time. She'd reduced the doses of laudanum she'd been taking to ease the pain, determined to regain her strength.

The doctor had encouraged her to try to walk when the pain was bearable, so she walked along the corridor a few times each day.

Unfortunately, Lord Chapman had caught her at the top of the stairs one evening before she returned to her room. He'd accused her of pretending the injuries were worse than they were.

Harriet hadn't bothered to answer, her mind still muddled from the laudanum and the sleepless nights she'd endured.

Lord Chapman had grabbed her as she'd tried to brush past him and tore at the bandages over her chest. His actions had reopened the healing wounds, reigniting the pain. She'd been so frightened that he'd hurt her again.

She shoved him, intent on escaping.

Her mother came upon them as her stepfather tumbled backward down the stairs, striking his head.

The sight of his lifeless body at the foot of the stairs was one she'd never forget. Guilt swept over her and threatened to take her under along with the pain.

Her mother rushed her back to her room and sent a servant to fetch the doctor, though the butler checked Lord Chapman and said he was beyond help.

Whether any servants had witnessed the scene was unclear. Her mother said there was no need to ask them since it had been an accident. She'd had Harriet repeat that several times while they waited for the doctor.

Harriet re-tied the ribbon, willing the memories to fade despite knowing the past would remain with her forever just like the web of scars across her chest.

While she'd never meant for Lord Chapman to die, she refused to deny her relief that he was gone. An odd sense of

peace had descended over the entire household in the days that had followed.

Reverend Henderson's visit had upended that peace for Harriet and her mother. Yet Harriet had to think it had happened for a reason, a reminder from fate that she should know her place, just as her stepfather had always told her.

She'd allowed hope to lead her forward with Joseph. She wasn't like her friends in the league. A bold move couldn't change her future. How could she permit anything more to build between her and Joseph considering the black mark on her soul?



BY THE FOLLOWING DAY, her worry had eased slightly, the knot of panic that felt as if it were choking her lessening.

But it was far from gone.

She need only look at her mother to know she felt the same way even if she wouldn't talk about it. Though Harriet longed to pour out her worries, she understood why her mother refused to discuss any of it.

She insisted it wasn't Harriet's fault, but Harriet wasn't convinced. She had known they were at the top of the stairs, and she *had* pushed him. She'd only wanted to escape him, not cause him harm.

Hadn't she?

In all honesty, she wasn't sure. That terrible night, her mother tucked her back into bed with strict instructions not to rise, that she would take care of everything.

After the doctor departed, her mother assured her that Lord Chapman's death had been an accident, and the doctor agreed. She'd made Harriet promise to never speak of how he died.

But it was impossible not to worry. If any of the servants had seen what happened, Harriet could easily be blamed for his death. While none had come forward, perhaps that was only because no one had asked them for details.

The threat of being accused of murder was ever present, and Harriet couldn't forget it for a moment. She had to take care. Reaching for a future other than the one she'd resigned herself to held too much risk. It would be wiser—and safer—to keep her past hidden and accept spinsterhood so she wouldn't ever need to reveal the details of that night.

Thank goodness she had the literary league meeting that afternoon to look forward to. She welcomed the diversion of spending time with her friends rather than thinking of the past. Hopefully, no one would notice her worry.

Two potential members were joining them for the meeting at Phoebe's house. One Harriet had already met when she and Phoebe had called on her to determine if she would be compatible with the current league members. Harriet immediately liked Lady Eliza Chadwick because of her passion for reading, along with her kindness and good humor.

Two of the others interested in becoming members weren't able to attend the meeting and a third had changed her mind when she realized they truly did focus on reading books.

“Good afternoon, Harriet.” Phoebe looped her arm through Harriet's and gestured toward the stairs after the butler had shown her in. “A few members have already arrived. Did you enjoy the dinner party the other evening?”

“It was very enjoyable. You are a wonderful hostess.”

Phoebe laughed. “Anthony and I were saying how it was a milestone for us as a newly married couple.”

“With more to follow, I'm sure.” Harriet adored how much they cared for one another even though she envied it.

“Do you have anything to tell me?” Phoebe asked with one brow lifted as they started up the stairs.

Harriet's stomach tightened as worry about Reverend Henderson crossed her mind. “What do you mean?”

Phoebe frowned. “Only that I thought I sensed something between you and Viscount Garland during dinner. Was I wrong?”

“Oh. No. I mean yes.” She shook her head. “It’s too soon to talk about. Please don’t say anything, especially to Frances.”

“I won’t. Besides, she and her family have yet to return to London.”

Harriet wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed. She wanted to know how Frances fared and how she felt about Joseph. Then again, it didn’t truly matter if Frances was still interested in him. He wasn’t for Harriet.

It had been easier for her to pretend as if Frances’ feelings had been holding her back rather than her own past.

“Is everything all right?” Phoebe asked, pausing midway up the stairs. “You seem out of sorts today.”

Harriet’s breath hitched. She was taken aback by the sudden urge to sob. Clearly, her emotions had yet to settle. She pushed back the feeling, remembering her vow to her mother not to tell anyone.

“It’s nothing.” She met Phoebe’s gaze, hoping she wouldn’t press her because she wasn’t sure if she could hold in the secret any longer.

Phoebe squeezed her arm, concern in her expression. “I hope you know I will do anything I can to help.”

That was the problem. No one could help. Talking about it wouldn’t solve anything.

“Thank you, Phoebe.” Harriet forced a smile she didn’t feel. “You are a dear.”

They joined Winifred and Millicent in the drawing room and within minutes, the rest of the members arrived, including Tibby and Lady Marion, as well as two potential members.

Harriet hugged Tibby, pleased to see how happy her friend was after returning from her wedding trip.

“Welcome, everyone,” Phoebe said. “And an especially warm welcome to our guests.”

Introductions were made for Lady Eliza and Mrs. Rebecca Hatch, the latter a widow despite being close to their age.

“Please share something about yourselves,” Phoebe requested.

“Thank you for inviting me.” Lady Eliza was attractive with light brown hair curled in ringlets, green eyes, and a friendly smile. One glance suggested she was anything but a wallflower, unlike the original members of the league. Her pink-beige gown was in the latest style with folds of fabric in the back and an ecru lace-trimmed underskirt.

“I look forward to becoming acquainted with all of you,” she continued. “I am relatively new to London, having attended finishing school in Switzerland followed by several years abroad, traveling with my aunt.”

“How interesting that must’ve been,” Winifred said.

“It was, though rather lonely at times. My brother is several years older than me, and we had little in common during my childhood, so I spent much of my time immersed in books. The same proved true while I was at finishing school and abroad.”

Lady Eliza’s warm manner and easy smile made her immediately likeable. She seemed kind from what Harriet had witnessed thus far. She had a way of looking at people intently as if eager to listen to everything being said, and she didn’t want to miss a word. The trait was endearing.

Mrs. Hatch was more reserved in her manner and still wore the grey of mourning, her gown modest in design. She had a cautious demeanor and seemed to closely observe everything around her. “I am a widow and recently moved to London,” she said as she smoothed a hand across the grey fabric. “I don’t have family in the area other than a cousin with whom I live.”

She had to be lonely as well, Harriet thought. But was that due in part to her reserve?

They each shared one or two of their favorite books and what they liked about them before the meeting started in

earnest.

Phoebe called the meeting to order. “The first item on our agenda is a discussion on the last book we read, *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens.” She looked around expectantly.

“I confess that I found it rather complex and difficult to follow at times,” Winifred said. “I didn’t understand why the main character was pretending to be someone else and went so far as to allow everyone to presume he was dead.” Winifred looked at the other members. “Did anyone else feel that way?”

Harriet couldn’t help but notice how uncomfortable Mrs. Hatch looked at Winifred’s comment and wondered at the cause, especially when the lady said she hadn’t read the book. Yet the widow’s face went pale, and a hint of panic shone in her eyes. Harriet made a mental note to ask Phoebe if she’d observed it as well.

As always, the discussion was a lively one. Though Lady Eliza hadn’t read the book either, she’d heard of it and joined in the conversation.

“Our book for the coming month will be *The Eustace Diamonds* by Anthony Trollope,” Phoebe said. “This is the third in the Palliser series. It was originally published as a serial in the *Fortnightly Review*. Has anyone read it?”

“I enjoyed the first two in the series but have yet to read this one,” Millicent said. “The family drama has been entertaining thus far.”

Harriet briefly closed her eyes, wondering what her friends would think of her own family drama. She wasn’t certain she wanted to read about anyone else’s at the moment.

“I look forward to it,” Mrs. Hatch said, and Lady Eliza agreed.

“Excellent. Next on our agenda is our charitable work. Some of the books we’ve read have shed light on the poor in London, so we’re volunteering for several charitable activities.”

“How wonderful.” Lady Eliza’s broad smile left no doubt as to her approval.

“I would like to be involved,” Mrs. Hatch added. “Being new to London, it’s difficult to know where and how to spend one’s time on such activities.”

“Perfect. Next Wednesday afternoon, we’ll be visiting the Whitechapel Workhouse to discuss their needs and how we might help.”

Phoebe shared a smile with Tibby. “The final item on our agenda is an update on the *For Better or Worse* agenda.” She addressed the two new members. “You may have already heard of it. This agenda might not be of interest to you.”

“What is it?” Mrs. Hatch appeared rather uncomfortable again, shifting in her chair.

At a glance, it seemed that neither of the newcomers had heard the gossip. During their initial conversation with the ladies, they’d only wanted to make certain they liked to read. They hadn’t discussed the other activities of the league.

“We have challenged one another to make a bold move to draw the eye of the gentlemen for whom we carry a secret *tendre*. Nothing untoward, of course.” Phoebe’s cheeks flushed as she spoke. “Just something to help them see us in a different light and as a possible match.”

“Truly?” Lady Eliza studied each of them with that look of avid interest she often displayed. “And? Has it been met with success?”

Phoebe offered a grin. “I proposed a marriage of convenience to the man who is now my husband. He refused but a short time later, we married, though not for convenience. Definitely a success.” She looked at Tibby with a raised brow.

“I suggested a pretend betrothal to a childhood friend, and we are now married.” Tibby’s beaming smile spoke of her happiness and had everyone smiling in return.

Lady Eliza sat back in her chair as if overcome by the conversation. “I never thought of doing anything like that.”

“Does that mean there’s someone who has your affection?” Phoebe asked.

For a moment, Harriet thought she wouldn't answer. Then she slowly nodded. "Yes, there is." She tapped a gloved finger on her lip, seeming deep in thought for a long moment. "How interesting."

"Mrs. Hatch, I know you're a widow, but is there someone ___"

"No." The lady adamantly shook her head. "No one." She glanced about as if realizing her vehement denial was out of place. With a forced smile, she shook her head again. "I'm sorry but I must decline to participate in that."

"That's fine," Phoebe quickly reassured her. "We started this several months ago. One of our other members who isn't here today is working on hers. Otherwise, we'd have an update from her, as well."

"You take turns?" Mrs. Hatch asked, her brow furrowed.

"We have thus far, although it's not a requirement." Phoebe cast a meaningful look at Harriet as she spoke.

Harriet smiled, but at that moment, she knew she wouldn't be making a bold move, and it had nothing to do with Frances. The encounter with Reverend Henderson was a warning she had to heed.

If Joseph learned the truth, he'd walk away. Better that she be the one to end their association before it progressed any further and left her with nothing but heartbreak.



JOSEPH KNOCKED ON THE door of Bolton House that afternoon, excited to meet with the earl at his behest to further discuss the plans for the regional bank. Afterward, he intended to go to his club again in search of someone who might know more about Lord Chapman or Reverend Henderson.

Harriet's distress was never far from his thoughts. What could have upset her so? He still felt certain it involved one of the two men or possibly both. There had to be a connection beyond their being acquaintances that he hadn't yet discovered.

In truth, the mystery was beginning to consume him. Seeing her again had made him realize how much he cared for her. He didn't like knowing how upset she was. It was more than his protective instincts coming to the surface. How much more, he couldn't say.

The butler greeted him and requested he wait in the reception room then departed to announce him.

Joseph was too restless to sit and paced the small room, his thoughts swirling. Only a few minutes had passed when he heard voices in the hall.

Feminine voices.

Actually, a familiar feminine voice.

He returned to the foyer to see Harriet descending the stairs. "Harriet." His heart pounded like a drum.

"Joseph." Surprise and delight brightened her expression only to be quickly shuttered.

He strode forward to take her gloved hands in his when she reached the bottom of the stairs. "What a pleasant surprise." He nearly grimaced as his words didn't express anything of what he felt.

"Indeed." Her gaze searched his face, a reserve in her blue eyes he didn't like.

Yet still, reserve was a far cry from the fear he'd noted the previous day when he'd called.

"Are you well?" He wanted her to tell him everything but would settle for anything. How he wished she trusted him enough to share what was concerning her.

"Yes." But the lack of conviction in her voice was undeniable.

"Did Reverend Henderson say something to offend you?" He knew their time was limited and had to force himself to keep from taking her into his arms to demand she tell him what was amiss so he could fix it.

“Joseph.” She pulled her hands from his, regret and fear pinching her face.

His chest tightened, and he shook his head. “It has something to do with Henderson, doesn’t it?”

“The reverend only reminded me of what I already knew.” Pain flashed in her eyes, and it tore at him.

“Allow me to help.” Yet the distance in her demeanor made him worry he couldn’t.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.” She looked away, and the house was quiet enough that he heard her breath catch.

“I don’t understand.” He reached for her hand again and held it between his. “Especially since everything feels possible when I’m with you.”

“Oh, Joseph.” She pressed her lips together and her eyes glittered with tears. “I wish the situation were different. But I can’t see you again.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, his heart sinking like a stone as she pulled away once more. “Is this because of Miss Melbourne?”

The sound of footsteps echoing in the hall interrupted them.

Bolton came into view, his gaze shifting between them as if realizing he was interrupting something important. “Lady Harriet. Garland.”

Joseph cleared his throat to try to gain his bearings. “Good afternoon, Bolton. Lady Harriet and I were just catching up.”

“Of course.” Bolton nodded, his gaze holding on Harriet with concern. “I hope all is well.”

“Yes.” Harriet gave a single nod as if that was all she could manage. “The literary league meeting has just ended.”

“What is the next book?” Bolton asked, obviously trying to clear the heaviness in the air.

Joseph wasn’t the only one who felt it, though that brought little comfort.

“The Eustace Diamonds.”

“I look forward to hearing more.” Bolton shifted his gaze to Joseph. “My apologies, Garland, but I have a narrow window of time before I have another engagement.”

“Please don’t let me keep you,” Harriet held out a hand, palm out, and it was all Joseph could do not to take it to keep her from leaving. “I must be going.” Her eyes met his and the finality in them sent alarm spiraling through him. “Goodbye.”

“Harriet—” Panic flooded him at the realization that she was saying goodbye for good.

“I’m sorry, Joseph.” She shook her head, her expression resigned. “I wish you happiness.”

Then she hurried out the door, leaving him staring after her, more confused than ever.



Chapter Eighteen



Harriet made it home and to her bedroom before her tears took over. The hurt and surprise on Joseph's face was something she'd never forget. He seemed to understand that she was saying goodbye to what had been building between them.

How silly to be so upset when they had only shared a few kisses.

But a voice inside her head suggested that was a lie. So did her heart. She had thought he might be the one. The man with whom she could discover her own happily ever after. The thought had her sinking onto her bed as she cried.

Coming upon him at Phoebe's had been so unexpected. While she hadn't planned on telling him that she couldn't see him again, the moment had seemed fortuitous. Or was it ill-fated?

No. She'd needed to make it clear he couldn't call on her again. She couldn't imagine him coming to the house and her finding the strength to refuse him.

This had been for the best. But she wished she'd had time to prepare. Perhaps that would have lessened the pain. Losing the little hope she'd held for the future she'd secretly dreamed of made her entire body ache. Especially her heart.

At last, the tears slowed, and a resigned numbness took hold. She rose to wash her face, hoping she'd worked through the worst of her upset before anyone saw it even if the despair gripping her suggested otherwise.

A knock on the door had her drawing a breath. She glanced in the dressing table mirror, hoping it wasn't too obvious she'd been crying.

"Enter."

Her mother opened her door, her face pale and her expression grim. “Thank goodness you’re home.”

“What is it?” Alarm swept through her.

“Reverend Henderson is calling.”

Her stomach clenched, and she pressed a hand on it. “Whatever for?”

“He asked to see us both.” Her mother clasped her hands tightly before her, a sign of how anxious she was. “I considered refusing, but perhaps it would be best if we saw him now rather than worrying if he might return later.”

“Mother, what if he suspects something?” Harriet asked, fear chilling her to the bone.

“Suspects what?” She shook her head. “He couldn’t possibly know anything.”

Visiting with Reverend Henderson was the last thing Harriet wanted to do. But neither did she want the threat of him calling again hanging over her head.

As if sensing her hesitation, her mother said, “If you don’t feel up to it, I will speak with him alone and tell him you’re not home.”

“No.” Harriet drew a long, slow breath. “I won’t allow you to deal with this alone.” She touched her chest, reminding herself of everything her stepfather had done. If anyone was at fault, it was him.

Yet that reassurance had never freed her from guilt.

“Very well.” Her mother lifted her chin, her relief evident. “We will see what he has to say. Remember, we didn’t do anything wrong.”

Harriet nodded, appreciating her words. The problem was that *we* hadn’t. *She* had. She’d been the one who’d pushed Lord Chapman.

“Admit nothing,” her mother whispered before taking her hand in hers. “No matter what he says. We will not tell him anything.”

Again, Harriet nodded, though fear sat like a lead ball in the pit of her stomach.

They walked together to the drawing room where Reverend Henderson stood looking out the window, hands clasped behind his back.

“Good afternoon, Reverend Henderson,” her mother said, having released Harriet’s hand. Her manner was cool and confident as they entered the room. She looked every inch a lady. “To what do we owe the honor of your visit?”

He turned at her greeting. “How nice to see you both again.” He gestured toward the chairs as if inviting them to sit.

Anger speared through Harriet. How dare he. A glance at her mother showed her eyes narrowing. Clearly, she didn’t appreciate his arrogance either.

Henderson lifted a brow when neither of them responded to his invitation.

“Harriet and I have other matters to attend to. I’m sure you understand.”

“I see.” He walked slowly forward, his gaze holding on each of them in turn.

Harriet held tight to her anger. She much preferred it to fear. Who was he to say anything to them?

“After seeing you yesterday, I keep thinking about Lord Chapman and the unfortunate...accident.”

“Oh?” Her mother waited, saying nothing more.

“Lady Harriet, your stepfather often spoke fondly of you.”

Harriet said nothing, doing her best to keep a polite if disinterested mask in place. She didn’t want to hear what he’d told the reverend.

“I wonder if you could tell me about the day of his death.”

Her mother shook her head, her frustration clear. “To what end?”

“Only to quiet the questions circling my mind.” The man’s smile was enough to give Harriet the chills. “Lord Chapman was a friend, though as I told you before, I was out of the country when he died and unable to pay my respects.”

“There is little to tell,” Harriet said, deciding the sooner they responded, the sooner he’d leave. She didn’t want her mother to bear the brunt of the conversation. “He was found unconscious at the foot of the stairs. The doctor came directly, but there was nothing to be done. He’d struck his head during the fall.”

“What time of day was it?”

“Evening.” Twelve minutes after nine o’clock to be precise. She’d noted the time when her mother had helped her back to bed. But she wouldn’t share anything she didn’t have to.

“Had he been drinking?”

“Reverend, while I appreciate your friendship with my late husband, I’m sure you can understand that we don’t care to revisit that day.” Her mother turned toward the doorway. “Now, unless there’s something else you need, I must ask you to go.”

“Very well.” But the man didn’t move. “It’s just that I find the whole matter concerning.”

“On that, we agree,” Harriet said. She found everything about her stepfather’s actions concerning. She need only look in the mirror to confirm it.

Her remark seemed to appease Henderson, and he strolled toward the door only to pause and look back, studying them. “There’s something odd about a healthy man falling down the stairs.” He shook his head. “I simply can’t let it go.”

Harriet said nothing despite the fear clenching her stomach.

Reverend Henderson’s lips twisted. “I believe a visit with some of his other friends to see if they have the same questions might aid me. Learning more details will surely help to put my mind at ease. Or...”

Harriet's breath halted at the unpleasant glitter in the man's eyes, knowing she wouldn't like what he was about to say.

"If you were to make a donation to my church in his name, it would not only ease my worry but also appease your conscience. A hundred pounds should suffice. Then I wouldn't have to continue with my inquiries about his... *accident*. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

With that, the reverend nodded and strode out the door, leaving Harriet trembling as she stared at her mother's stricken expression.

This was Harriet's worst nightmare come to life. She felt trapped, like a bird caught in a net with no possibility of escape. Panic caused her heart to race, and it was all she could do to remember to breathe.

"We don't have that kind of money," her mother murmured, her face crumpling. "Whatever will we do?"



"YOU MAY COUNT ON ME to join in," Bolton said as he stood to shake Joseph's hand. "It sounds like an excellent investment opportunity that will also serve the community."

"I'm pleased to hear it."

Joseph was surprised the earl agreed given how distracted Joseph had been after his conversation with Harriet. He'd barely managed to remember what he wanted to tell Bolton about the investment when his thoughts remained on Harriet and her painful goodbye.

After advising the earl he'd be back in touch once he secured the other investors for the bank, he took his carriage home, his thoughts churning.

Despite what Harriet had said, he still intended to proceed with his plan to uncover all he could about Reverend Henderson and Lord Chapman. Something—or someone—was frightening her, and he would get to the bottom of it.

But first, he needed a few minutes to collect himself and come to terms with her goodbye.

The terrible ache in his chest at the thought of not seeing her again made it difficult to think. He knew without a doubt that she was scared. If he could discover the cause and put an end to it, perhaps he could convince her to change her mind about allowing him to call on her.

It had to have something to do with Reverend Henderson and Lord Chapman. More information on both men would surely help.

His reeling emotions made the task feel daunting. He had to hope that fate would lend a hand and guide him with his goal.

“What happened?” Charles asked as Joseph entered his apartment.

“Lady Harriet has rejected my suit.” Even saying the words hurt. But he needed to focus on why she had told him goodbye rather than how much it upset him.

“I’m terribly sorry to hear that,” Charles said with genuine sympathy.

“I don’t think we are done trying to discover what Reverend Henderson is up to.” Joseph handed him his hat and gloves. “I have reason to believe that her refusing me is somehow connected to the man.”

“How concerning. Though it seems doubtful this has anything to do with the matter, this just arrived.” Charles handed him a message.

Joseph opened it, surprised to see his mother had written it. “My mother asks me to come by this afternoon while my father is out.”

Charles lifted a brow. “I hope all is well.”

“As do I. I’ll go see her now.”

Worry curled through him during the brief carriage ride. What could’ve happened that would make her reach out?

“Lady Caldwell is expecting you, my lord,” the butler said upon his arrival. “She’s in her sitting room.”

Joseph took the stairs two at a time and knocked on the open door before entering.

“Good afternoon, Mother.”

“Joseph. Thank you for coming so quickly.” A hint of a smile softened her expression. Hopefully that was a sign that she didn’t have bad news.

“Of course.” He bent to kiss her cheek, breathing in her familiar flowery scent. As he sat on the nearby chair, he studied her but didn’t see anything amiss. “I hope you are well.”

“I am. I sent for you because I heard your father and Mr. Henderson arguing this morning.”

“Oh?” Joseph caught the fact that she didn’t use reverend before his name, which only made him more curious.

“Do you remember Reverend Elliott from the church we used to attend?”

“Of course.” The man had taken the place of the long-time minister of their church who’d retired a few years earlier. His father had numerous disagreements with Elliott. Soon afterward, his father and Henderson had become acquainted, and his father had changed churches.

“He called to advise us that questions have arisen regarding Henderson’s activities.”

If Joseph didn’t know better, he would’ve thought amusement lit his mother’s eyes. “What sort of questions?”

“No one has been able to confirm where or if Henderson was ever formally ordained. Nor was he granted permission to hold services in the building on Down Street.”

Joseph sat back in his chair, hardly able to believe all she’d said. “How did Father take the news?”

“Not well. When Henderson came by afterward, he confronted him. Henderson insisted that he was ordained by a higher power than the church. That his calling is to find true believers like your father who are willing to do God’s work.”

“But not through an established church,” Joseph suggested, astounded the man had gotten away with it.

She shook her head. “So it seems. For a moment, I feared your father might have an apoplectic fit, his anger was so great.”

Joseph could easily imagine his father’s reaction.

“Your father demanded Henderson return the money he’d donated. Henderson refused, saying it had already been put toward the purchase of an abandoned monastery in northern England where he will lead true believers who turn away from earthly possessions.”

“And give them to Henderson?” Joseph guessed.

“I assume so. I don’t know what your father intends to do now, but I thought you’d want to know.”

“Thank you. This is very helpful.” He reached out to touch his mother’s arm, hope building inside him. “The timing of the news is excellent.”

“Oh?”

“Do you remember me telling you about Lady Harriet?”

“Of course. You seem rather taken with her.”

“I am. But I believe Henderson is doing something to frighten her. What you’ve told me might help me stop him.”

“Do take care. I don’t trust that man.”

“Nor do I.” He blew out a breath, relieved to have leverage of any sort in the situation. “I want to aid Harriet.” He looked at his mother, sad that he was never able to help her.

“You’re a good man, Joseph. She is blessed to have you in her life just as I am.”

“Thank you.” He smiled. “But I will be the lucky one if she allows me to court her.”

“Do you love her?” she asked.

“My feelings are certainly moving in that direction.” He knew it was too soon to say for sure, but what other

explanation was there for the way he felt?

Surely, the news about Henderson would aid her and allow Joseph to convince her to change her mind. He couldn't have misunderstood. She had to care for him the same way he did for her.

The way he felt was so different than what he'd thought love to be. He didn't want to manipulate her or force her to his will as his father had done to him.

Being open to love might leave him vulnerable to hurt. But it also could bring more joy than he'd ever known. What they shared was special, and still so fragile. They needed time together to make it stronger—if Harriet agreed.

“I'm happy for you, Joseph.” His mother touched his hand where it still rested on her arm. “I wish you luck.”

“I'm going to need it.” At the moment, the crevasse that separated them seemed vast. But not as impossible as it had a quarter of an hour ago.

“Your father should return soon.” Her brow puckered with worry.

“I'll go before he does. I will return in the coming days to speak with him.” He didn't think the situation between them had changed despite the information about Henderson.

But he had to continue attempting to mend the distance between them. To keep trying to convince him to undertake the improvements and repairs at the country estate. He wanted them to find some common ground.

“Thank you for sharing this with me, Mother.” He rose and kissed her cheek once again. “Take care.”

The shadows had already returned to her eyes, and they broke his heart. “You as well, Joseph.”

She was the reason he had to keep trying with his father. The worry and occasional fear in his mother's expression reminded him of Harriet's. While he might not be able to save his mother, he intended to do everything in his power to save Harriet from whatever threat Henderson posed.



Chapter Nineteen



“Mother, stop.” Harriet had hated watching her mother rush around the house for the last hour, trying to determine what they could sell to raise the money Henderson wanted.

Now they stood in her mother’s bedroom as she opened the drawers of her jewelry box to pull out anything of value.

“If we look harder, we might be able to find enough to sell and raise the money.” Her mother’s frantic movements made Harriet nauseous.

No. That wasn’t true. Henderson’s thinly veiled threat had done that. Her own panic had calmed, but her mother’s had increased.

“Mother, this isn’t the answer.” She walked toward her slowly, her mother’s fright tearing at her.

“I think we might have enough. There are the pearls your father gave me on our wedding day.” Her breath hitched with the words. “I’m certain those are worth a significant amount.”

Harriet reached to stop her mother before she picked up the pearls. “No. We’re not selling those or anything else. Not for Henderson.”

“But you heard him. He’ll keep asking questions until Arnold’s friends realize they have questions as well.”

“If we give him money now, he’ll only ask for more later.” Harriet was certain of it.

“He’s a reverend. Surely not.” Yet the concern seemed to take hold for worry deepened the lines around her eyes and mouth.

“He is attempting to blackmail us. I don’t think we can trust him not to want more.”

“Oh, dear.” Tears ran down her mother’s cheeks. “What are we going to do?”

“Shh.” Harriet held her tight. “The servants might hear.”

She worried about what the staff had thought while her mother frantically looked through several rooms.

“You’re right,” her mother agreed. “But what can we do?”

Harriet drew back to look into her eyes. “He doesn’t know anything. Nor can he prove anything. We aren’t paying him a shilling.”

They didn’t have money to spare. Not that amount. But that wasn’t the point. Henderson wouldn’t stop if they gave in to his threat. Harriet knew it, though she couldn’t say why.

“How could a reverend do something like this?”

Harriet had the same question. “I don’t know, but we will carry on as before. If he returns with more questions, we’ll refuse to see him.”

Though worry felt as if it were eating a hole in her stomach, she tried to keep it from showing on her face. She needed to do everything she could to calm her mother. Revealing how scared she was wouldn’t help.

“There has to be someone who can aid us. I’ll send a message to your uncle,” her mother said.

“Not unless we have to.” Harriet didn’t want to tell anyone.

She didn’t want to see the question in her uncle’s eyes every time he looked at her if she told him about her part in Lord Chapman’s death.

Her mother nodded and drew a shuddering breath. “You’re right. I’m allowing worry to gain the better of me.”

“We both are.” Harriet forced a small smile. “If Lord Chapman’s friends had questions about the accident, they would’ve asked long before now.”

“Yes. Of course.” Yet her face crumpled again. “If only I hadn’t married him.” She reached out to gently touch Harriet’s

chest. “Then he wouldn’t have hurt you.”

“He hurt you, too, Mother.” Only some scars weren’t visible.

“But he’s gone and can’t do it anymore.”

Harriet bit her lip to keep from disagreeing. His death had cast a permanent shadow over them, one from which they could never emerge.

As if sensing her thoughts, her mother studied her closely. “I am lucky to have found love. And I want the same for you. Don’t allow him to keep you from opening your heart to the right man. You need only think of your father to know what’s possible. Perhaps that man will be Viscount Garland. The way he looked at you when he called made it clear how much he thinks of you.”

Harriet swallowed against the lump in her throat. She appreciated her mother’s words, but it was too late. She’d turned Joseph away and said goodbye. It wasn’t her stepfather’s actions, but her own that kept them apart.

“Your father was the best husband I could’ve ever had. My mistake was in trying to replace him. I didn’t believe I could be happy without a man in my life.”

Her mother closed her eyes and shook her head. “I thank God every day that Arnold is gone.” She opened them to look at Harriet. “That sounds terrible, but I can’t help it.”

“He was the terrible one. Not us.” Harriet rubbed her mother’s arms. “Why don’t I have tea sent to the sitting room, and we’ll discuss something more pleasant?”

“Yes.” Her mother drew a deep breath. “We will continue as before.”

The words pierced Harriet’s heart. The idea of continuing to pretend that all was well, that she hadn’t caused her stepfather’s death, and that she had a chance for a happy future was enough to cause bile to rise in the back of her throat. But what choice did she have?

The image of Joseph filled her mind, sending a pang of longing so strong that she pressed a hand to her heart.

If only—

She halted the thought before it went any further. There was no room for *if only* in her life now. Not with Reverend Henderson's veiled threat hanging over their heads.



THOUGH JOSEPH WAS TEMPTED to go directly to Harriet's to share what his mother had told him, he feared it wouldn't be enough to change her mind. He needed to take action first.

Of course, if he knew the nature of Harriet's concern, moving forward would be easier, and the action he should take clearer.

Lord Chapman was dead, and Joseph couldn't change that. Harriet hadn't mentioned his death or seemed to mourn his passing. That meant the best chance of protecting her was to focus on Henderson.

The most effective way to strike him would be from a financial standpoint. Having those who'd donated to him demand their money be returned was a start. Spreading the truth about the man's actions was important as well.

He hoped Melbourne hadn't given him any money. The concern had him requesting his driver take him to Melbourne House. While he wasn't certain whether the family had returned from their country estate, he could at least leave word that he had an urgent matter to speak with him about.

He knocked on the door of Melbourne House and when the butler opened it, he caught sight of the bustling servants in the entrance hall.

"Mr. and Mrs. Melbourne arrived a short time ago, my lord," the servant advised. "Allow me to see if Mr. Melbourne is receiving."

Joseph waited several minutes before he was shown to Melbourne's study.

“Garland, good to see you again.” Melbourne strode forward to shake his hand.

“And you, sir. My apologies for descending upon you when you’ve only just returned, but I have an important matter to discuss.”

“Of course.” Melbourne gestured toward the chairs before his desk only to turn and smile broadly at Joseph. “Does it have something to do with Frances?”

Joseph blinked, uncertain as to what he referred. “I’m sorry?”

“I heard you might have an interest in my daughter. Is that what you’ve come to talk about?” Before he could answer, Melbourne clapped his shoulder. “I must say, it would make investing in your bank even easier.” He laughed only to slowly sober as he took in Joseph’s remorseful expression. “Do I have it wrong?”

“I’m terribly sorry.” Joseph didn’t know what to say. “That isn’t the case. Miss Melbourne is a lovely young lady. However, my interest lies elsewhere.”

“I see.” Melbourne’s frown didn’t bode well.

Yet Joseph wasn’t about to pretend to be interested in his daughter to gain his agreement to invest in the bank. “I understand if you decide not to participate, of course.”

“Then what is this pressing matter you wanted to talk about?”

“It’s regarding Mr. Henderson.”

“You mean Reverend Henderson?” Melbourne looked more confused by the minute.

“Actually, according to Reverend Elliott at the Anglican church in Bexley, who is a longtime acquaintance of my family, Henderson is a fraud. He was never ordained.”

“What?”

“Shocking, I know. The church where he holds sermons wasn’t assigned to him either. It seems he appointed himself to

a position that doesn't exist. He's gathering what he calls true believers who are willing to hand over their possessions and join him to live in a monastery in the north."

"Are you certain you have your facts correct?"

Melbourne's anger and disbelief were obvious.

"Yes. I'd be pleased to ask Reverend Elliott to tell you himself." Joseph had no doubt the man would be happy to. On more than one occasion, he'd expressed his displeasure with Henderson to Joseph after Joseph's father decided to change churches.

"I would like that. As you may know, my wife's sister and brother-in-law are very taken with the man."

"I wanted to tell you as quickly as possible with the hope you can help share the news. I believe anyone who gave him money should demand that he returns it."

Melbourne sighed and shook his head. "What is this world coming to when such men walk among us, not blinking an eye as they deceive?"

Joseph didn't have an answer, though he didn't think the problem was a modern one.

"I'll send word to my brother-in-law immediately."

Melbourne studied him for a long moment. "Are you certain you don't have an interest in my Frances?"

"I'm sorry, sir. She is lovely, and I'm certain the right man will come along, but it's not me."

Melbourne shook his head again. "Her shyness makes it difficult for others to come to know her. That was one of the reasons her mother thought the house party would be a good idea."

"I thought perhaps Mr. Sinclair had caught her interest."

"Hmm. I only heard your name and a long list of your attributes."

Joseph didn't know what to say, uncomfortable at the idea of Miss Melbourne speaking about him. She'd seen him and Harriet holding hands the night of the ball. Surely, she knew

they were attracted to one another. But perhaps all this had been behind the reason Harriet had left the house party without saying goodbye to him.

“I appreciate your visit nonetheless. Send word when Reverend Elliott is available.”

“Of course. I’ll be in touch.” Joseph walked toward the door.

“Garland?” Joseph turned back and Melbourne dipped his head. “Thank you for letting me know.”

“You’re most welcome.” Joseph departed, only to come upon Miss Melbourne descending the stairs to the foyer. He drew to a halt. “Good afternoon, Miss Melbourne. I just stopped by to speak with your father.”

“You did?” Her eyes went wide with surprise followed by what almost looked to be alarm.

Only too late did he realize how his words could be construed. “About a business matter,” he quickly added.

Her crestfallen expression made him certain he’d imagined the alarm. He felt terrible at the thought that he’d hurt her.

He continued toward her. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression.”

Her gaze dropped to the floor, and her cheeks flushed, a familiar pose for her.

While he felt awkward addressing the issue, it seemed best to do so given what her father had said. “I did enjoy your messages.”

She offered a shy smile as she met his gaze. “I confess that I had help.”

“Oh?” Though he already knew, he thought it best to hear her out.

“Lady Harriet assisted me.” She glanced at him from beneath her lashes, then more fully. “She is a dear friend and has a way with words.”

“Indeed, she does.” Then again, he was starting to think everything about Harriet was perfect.

Miss Melbourne sighed. “I told myself I imagined the two of you were holding hands the night of the ball, but that wasn’t the case, was it?”

“No. I...I find myself quite taken with her.”

She sighed again. “I thought that might be true. She is special and deserves happiness. I hope you’re the one to provide it for her.”

“I’m not certain if she’ll allow me the chance.” Not when she’d already told him goodbye.

Her eyes narrowed as if she were pondering something. “Perhaps you need to consider making a bold move.”

He frowned. “How do you mean?”

“You may have heard of our literary league’s *For Better or Worse* agenda. It seems to be all the latest gossip.” At his questioning look, she continued, “Do something to catch her notice and help her see you in a new light.”

Joseph smiled. Perhaps that would be the result of his plan to halt Henderson. That made it even more imperative that he do everything in his power to end any threat the man posed to Harriet.



HARRIET TOLD HERSELF to act normally, but it took another day before she convinced herself to leave the house.

Between her upset over losing Joseph and Reverend Henderson’s threat, she felt ill-prepared to speak to anyone. But she had to move forward.

Joseph had called the previous afternoon, much to her dismay. She’d advised the butler to tell him she wasn’t receiving. The longing she felt for even a glimpse of him suggested it would take more time before she could pretend to forget him.

He'd left a note saying he needed to speak to her about something important.

She'd thought long and hard on the matter and realized there was nothing he could say that would change her situation. The idea of him possibly telling her that he cared for her would break her heart. She wouldn't be strong enough to turn him away. Neither could she share what had happened, including her scars, inside and out.

However, it was impossible to avoid him forever. He deserved better than that. With a sigh, she acknowledged that she would have to talk to him soon. But first, she needed to determine what to say.

The carriage rolled to a stop outside Fortnum & Mason, a tea and sweet shop. This errand was a start at acting normally. Perhaps forcing herself to venture out would help her prepare to speak with Joseph.

She'd decided against going to the lending library for fear of seeing one of her friends. They'd note her upset and want to help, but that would require telling them about the past. That wasn't possible. She needed time to bury her emotions again before she saw them.

Visiting the store would allow her to buy a few gifts for her mother's upcoming birthday and be a step toward normalcy. That was as much as she could manage at the moment.

"This shouldn't take long, Cora," Harriet murmured to the maid who accompanied her inside.

"I'll wait by the door, my lady."

Harriet nodded and moved forward, pleased to have something to occupy her thoughts other than her worries. A display of tea caught her eye, and she paused to study the options, wondering which ones her mother would enjoy.

"Harriet."

Her heart pounded at the achingly familiar tone, and she looked up to see Joseph approaching. "Joseph. What are you doing here?"

“My apologies for intruding, but I was coming to call on you again when I saw your carriage leaving. I took the liberty of having my driver follow you.” The emotion in his eyes tugged at her. “I realize my behavior is untoward, but I truly do have something I need to tell you.”

“Here?” She glanced around, noting the clerk watching them closely. Perhaps what Joseph had to say wasn’t personal in nature after all.

He followed her gaze, then shifted his back to the clerk, effectively blocking Harriet from his view. “Yes. It can’t wait because it might be important to you.”

The oddly worded statement only made her more puzzled. “I see. No.” She shook her head. “Actually, I don’t.”

Joseph grimaced. “I’m sorry I’m not being clearer. Perhaps this won’t matter at all. But I discovered that Henderson isn’t who he claims to be.”

Harriet blinked at the unexpected news. How silly of her to think Joseph had been about to make some sort of declaration about his feelings toward her. The deep ache of disappointment caught her off guard. She tightened her hold on her reticule in an effort to keep her sorrow at bay. “He’s not?”

“No. He is a fraud. A charlatan. I don’t know if it matters, but I thought perhaps he was part of the reason for your unhappiness the other day.”

“He is,” she whispered. Though she didn’t know if this reduced his threat. He could still ask questions and make suggestions to her stepfather’s friends about his death. But maybe his posing as a reverend would cast him in a questionable light.

“I’m trying to share the news with as many people as possible. Several, including my father, have demanded that he return their donations.”

Harriet nodded, a faint hope stirring within her. It sounded as if Henderson would have his hands full with his own

problems. Perhaps that meant he would have little time to bother her and her mother.

“Harriet,” Joseph whispered, “I would still like to speak with you in private. If you’d allow me to call on you...”

She blew out a quiet breath. Perhaps he did care for her. At any rate, he deserved an explanation as to why she couldn’t see him. “Yes.” She glanced at the display of tea as she gathered her thoughts, wondering what to tell him. “This afternoon?”

The relief in his expression and his slow smile pinched her heart.

If only...

But no. She would have to find a way to make him understand that she wasn’t fit for anyone, especially a wonderful man like him. She should suggest he consider Frances even if she didn’t think he would, no matter how much she adored her friend.

“Excellent.” He nodded, his pleasure only making her wish she could tell him now, so he didn’t have false hope.

But with Cora watching, along with the shop clerk, this was not the place for what she had to say.

“Two o’clock?” she asked.

“I look forward to it.” With another smile and a bow, he took his leave.

Harriet watched him go, her heart aching for a future that could never be and the happiness she still craved.



Chapter Twenty



Over the past two days, Joseph had done his best to create as many problems for Henderson as possible for making false claims. Charles had assisted by speaking to fellow servants, helping to spread the news as quickly as possible.

Joseph had visited Henderson's church, but Henderson hadn't been there. No one had, making Joseph wonder if the man realized his house of cards was about to fall.

After that, Joseph went to his club and found two gentlemen who had known Lord Chapman.

One had been a long-time acquaintance of Chapman's and had nothing good to say about him. He said the lord had a cruel streak that was evident in the pranks he'd played on fellow students at boarding school. Those antics continued at university.

Apparently, Chapman pretended to be kind only to suddenly change his demeanor, taking pleasure in tormenting those younger and weaker.

The other gentleman hadn't known Chapman long but thought him a fine fellow and mentioned how terrible it was that an unfortunate accident had taken his life.

None of that was especially helpful in shedding light on what might be bothering Harriet. Joseph hoped she'd trust him enough to tell him so he could help her.

He'd taken a risk by following Harriet to the shop, but he was pleased he had. One look at her face confirmed she was still distraught.

While relieved she'd agreed to see him, he still worried about the outcome of the visit. Would they have a few minutes alone together so he could share what was in his heart?

Would that be enough to convince her to give him a chance?

Two o'clock couldn't come fast enough. He'd nearly driven Charles mad with his pacing until the time came to leave.

He arrived a few minutes early and much to his relief, the butler immediately showed him in. He'd been half-afraid Harriet would refuse to see him given her uncertainty when he'd spoken with her earlier.

The sight of her alone in the drawing room standing near the settee sent his heart racing once again. She looked beautiful as always, her blue gown partially hidden by a thick shawl. His chest felt as if it might burst from the emotion flooding through him.

"Good afternoon." He bowed, doing his best to hold all his feelings back, not wanting to alarm her with how much he cared. "Thank you for seeing me."

"Thank you for coming." Her posture was stiff, along with her manner. She gestured toward a chair, and he took a seat.

She sat as well, looking at him expectantly.

Where did he begin?

"If Henderson has been bothering you, I hope that will soon come to an end if it hasn't already. It appears he'll have his hands full with his own problems from this point forward."

"I'm pleased to hear that." Yet she looked anything but pleased.

Clearly, the news didn't solve whatever was bothering her. He'd been afraid that would be the case.

"Harriet, you must know how much I've come to care for you. We haven't known each other long, but that doesn't seem to matter."

Her expression held a mixture of longing and regret.

The regret made his heart sink.

"Joseph, there is something you don't know about me."

“Oh?” He couldn’t imagine what she might say that would change his opinion.

“You are a kind and honorable gentleman. It has been a pleasure coming to know you.”

But? He heard it in her voice, and it caused his hope to plummet further.

She tightened the shawl around her shoulders as she looked away. “I mentioned to you that my mother and I saw Reverend Henderson.” Her gaze shifted to meet his. “Or rather, *Mr.* Henderson.”

He nodded, pleased she included that detail.

“As I told you, he was a friend of my stepfather’s,” she continued.

“Yes.” How did this have anything to do with them?

“Lord Chapman was not a pleasant person. Far from it.”

Ah. So the person he’d spoken to who’d known Chapman longer had also known him well. The idea of the lord being cruel to Harriet, or her mother, made his blood boil. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He deceived us. My father died when I was young, and my mother was lonely in the years after his death. Chapman pursued her, and his actions reminded her of my father. She hoped he’d be a good husband and a father figure to me.”

Joseph’s chest tightened, able to guess where the story would lead. How unfortunate that they shared a similar background.

Memories of his own experiences washed through him, a roaring sound in his ears left in their wake. The days in his room with no food. The hours of lecturing him how he was bound for hell. The numerous Bible verses read to him that proved how terrible a person he was and why he had to be punished.

Was it any wonder that those who claimed to be overly religious made Joseph suspicious?

But this wasn't about him. Only Harriet.

“When they were first married, everything was fine,” she continued. “But with each month that passed during the two years they were married, his demeanor shifted. He became angry in the blink of an eye.” She paused, clearly distraught by the memories. “The first time he slapped me, I was stunned. When Mother confronted him about it, he refused to admit any wrongdoing.”

“What a terrible excuse of a gentleman.” He shook his head, trying to hold back his anger. “I would've throttled him if I had the chance. I'm sorry you had to go through that.”

She reached up to adjust her shawl, her fingers rubbing her chest, a habit he'd noticed during the house party. “He would apologize later, and I hoped things would change. He promised they would. He acted better for the next few months, though he still berated and belittled both of us. Then one afternoon, we were having tea, and he said something demeaning about my mother. I protested.”

Joseph clenched his fist, wishing he had the opportunity to confront Chapman. Harriet was the sweetest, kindest person he'd ever met. Nothing she could've said or done would merit physical violence.

She drew a deep breath then slowly loosened the shawl, her gaze watching him. The gown's modest neckline revealed a web of terrible scars that spread across one entire side and part of the other. He now understood why she favored high-neck gowns.

His heart ached at the thought of what she'd been through, but his rage was even greater. It was almost as if he could feel her pain on his own skin. The burn scars were ugly but because of what they represented—a violent act by someone who should've been her protector—not because of how they looked.

“The tea?” he asked, doing his best to keep his voice steady and mask his emotions.

She nodded as she wrapped the shawl around her once again. “Yes.”

“Harriet...” He hardly knew what to say.

One look at her face made it clear that she was waiting for him to turn away in horror. That was the last thing he intended to do.

“Seeing your scars only makes me care for you more. I understand being treated as though you don’t matter. As you know, my experience with my father was awful in many ways. And I know it’s the scars on the inside that hurt the most.”

She released a breath that almost sounded like a sob. The sound tore at him.

“I can’t imagine the pain you experienced,” he continued as he knelt beside her and took her hand. “But know that those scars don’t change how I feel about you.”

“Joseph, I...” She swallowed hard, seeming unable to say more at the moment.

“I didn’t believe in love,” he confessed. “Not when it was so often used against me. Not until I met you. But you’ve made me realize what love can be. That it can help one see the good in life. It can make one strive to be more. To be better. Coming to know you has done all that and more.”

Her eyes glittered with unshed tears, her breath uneven.

He felt compelled to say everything in his heart, fearful she’d stop him. “I know we haven’t known each other long, but I care deeply for you. I want the chance to show you how much. To earn your trust and affection. I want to do everything in my power to make you happy because that would make me happy as well.”

Harriet briefly closed her eyes. But her distress suggested his declaration hadn’t changed anything. Panic swirled through him as he tried to think of how to convince her of his sincerity.

“I wish the situation was different,” she whispered, her blue eyes opening to hold on him once more. “That I was

different. But there's more to my past than just these scars.”

She hesitated as if uncertain how to tell him.

“It doesn't matter,” he reassured her, still kneeling beside her. “Nothing you can say will change how I feel about you. If it takes the rest of our lives, I will gladly spend each day proving my regard for you. Please give me—give us—a chance.”

She pulled her hand from his, and a cold knot formed in the pit of his stomach. “It took weeks to recover, of course. I refused to speak to him after that. Even after he apologized.”

She shook her head. “I didn't believe him. Especially when he still blamed me for angering him. The worst thing was that his comments made me question myself. After all, no one saw it. Mother was out of the room when he did it.”

Joseph hated how much the memory pained her but waited as she clearly had more to say.

“Nearly three weeks later, after the burn had started to heal, I was returning to my bedroom from my mother's sitting room one evening. He was coming up the stairs after having been at his club. He'd been drinking. I could smell it.” She shuddered, and it was all Joseph could do not to take her into his arms and offer comfort.

But he held back, certain she wouldn't welcome his touch.

“He insisted I was pretending to be injured worse than I was. He tried to tear off the bandages to prove it.” She looked at him then, a mixture of anger and fear in her face. “It hurt terribly. I had to get away from him. So I shoved him.”

She pressed her fingers to her temple as if the memories hurt. “It happened so quickly. One moment he was pulling at the bandages, and the next he was falling backward down the stairs. He struck his head, and when he reached the landing, he didn't move. He never moved again.”

“Harriet.” To think she'd lived with that all this time. As if what she'd already endured wasn't painful enough.

“I know,” she said with a sob, pressing both hands over her face. “I’m a murderer.” The keening sound coming from her made it impossible for Joseph not to reach for her.

“No. You were defending yourself.” He wrapped her in his arms, feeling her stiffen at his touch. He held tight anyway. “Everyone has a right to defend themselves.”

“Reverend Hen—I mean, Mr. Henderson—suspects something. He told Mother and me that he intends to start asking questions about what happened to my stepfather unless we give him a sizable donation.”

“Henderson is in no position to accuse anyone of anything. He must’ve decided to put pressure on you since he’s lost so many donations of late.” Joseph worried he was to blame for Henderson’s threats to Harriet.

She sniffed and drew back to look at him, her tears undoing him. “He isn’t the problem. I am. Mother keeps insisting that it was an accident. That my stepfather took a misstep. That I didn’t kill him.”

“Harriet, you had every right to push him away. He’d already harmed you once. You had reason to believe he would do so again.”

Despair clutched her, visible in her hunched shoulders, as if she hadn’t heard him. “You must be disgusted by my actions. If I had the chance to relive those moments—”

“It wasn’t your fault.” He stared into her eyes, willing her to understand. “It was *not* your fault. You are not to blame. If I would’ve been in your place, I would’ve done the same thing. What other choice did you have?”

She blinked as if sorting through possible options.

“None. You took the only action you could. Of that, I have no doubt.”

“Nor do I, Harriet.”

Joseph looked up to see Lady Chapman walking slowly forward with a stricken look on her face.

“I’m sorry I didn’t reassure you more often. My suggestion that we pretend nothing happened didn’t help you. I didn’t realize that until now. I’m so sorry. You did the right thing. The only thing you could. I hope you can forgive me.” She sent a questioning look at Joseph, but he wasn’t about to release Harriet. Not yet.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Mother.” Harriet heaved a sigh. It seemed clear that she was still considering whether she believed what they’d said, and if she could accept his death wasn’t her fault. “I still feel to blame...”

“No,” Joseph said again. “No one has the right to harm you. No one.” He smiled as he touched her cheek. “From this day forward, I will remind you every day that you took the proper action if you will allow me.”

Her half-smile lit hope deep inside him.

Lady Chapman cleared her throat. “Harriet, the things you’ve told me about Viscount Garland remind me of your father.” She smiled at Joseph. “He was a kind and honorable man as well.”

Harriet drew back to look at Joseph. “He would’ve liked you, Joseph.”

“I think I would’ve liked him as well.” Though Lady Chapman continued to watch them, he had to tell her again how he felt. “Please tell me you’ll give me the chance to show you how much I care about you.”

“Are you certain? Even knowing what I did?”

He hated the doubt on Harriet’s face. “There is not a doubt in my mind. May I begin to court you now? This very moment?”

Her smile lit her eyes then took over her face. He’d never seen anything more beautiful. Especially since it gave him hope.

She glanced at her mother.

“Follow your heart, my dear,” Lady Chapman said. “That is where you will find happiness. Now then, I will leave the

two of you to talk but know that I wish you both all the joy in the world. I'll be in my sitting room if you need me." With a smile, she was gone.

Joseph looked back to Harriet, wondering what else he could say to convince her. "I will wait as long as you would like to make it official, but please say you agree."

"Joseph, the gift you have given me is more than I could have ever hoped for. Your belief in me is a dream come true." She straightened her shoulders for the first time since his arrival. "You may be right. What happened wasn't all my fault."

"None of it was your fault," Joseph countered.

She blew out of breath and looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. "I feel as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders." She looked back at him. "All because of you. I had nearly given up on my dream of a future. Yet here you are. To think you care for me in return is unbelievable."

He lifted her hand to kiss her knuckles. "Believe it, my dear. You have changed my thinking as well and helped me see that love is a gift. One to be cherished. We are the perfect pair, don't you think?"

She laughed and reached to wrap her arms around his shoulders. "I do believe you are right. I should very much like you to call on me."

"Perfect." He took her mouth with his, gently, pouring all he felt into the kiss, including his belief in her.

When he drew back, she said, "Joseph, I am the luckiest woman alive." Then an odd look came over her face making his worry return.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I need to tell Frances."

"Actually, I happened to see Frances when I visited her father to tell him about Henderson's deception."

"You did? What did she say?"

Harriet's concern for her friend only made him admire her more. "I believe I let her down gently. I hope she understands that what arose between us wasn't planned, nor did we mean to hurt her." He shook his head. "I thought Sinclair was the one who had caught her eye at the house party."

Harriet smiled. "I wondered the same thing."

Joseph trailed a finger along her cheek. "I already miss those messages."

"I never meant to deceive you when I helped Frances write them."

"I know. Perhaps you will write me a message or two in the coming weeks...or years," he suggested with a smile.

She laughed again. "As long as you don't mistake me for anyone else."

"Never. That would be impossible given how much I adore you. We might both be scarred, but we're perfect together. I believe we can heal our hearts with love." He leaned forward to seal his words with a kiss.



Epilogue



Six months later

Harriet prepared for her wedding night with breathless anticipation. Joseph had proposed only three months ago, but their marriage couldn't come quickly enough as far as they both were concerned. The more time they spent together, the more their love for one another deepened.

Joseph had found a lovely townhome for them that wasn't far from her mother's house in Mayfair. They'd enjoyed furnishing it together, and it already felt like home.

He took her to visit his parents several times. His father had a stern demeanor, making conversing with him a challenge. His mother was sweet if reserved, especially when her husband was nearby.

Watching Joseph and the hint of sadness that came over him when he was with his parents made her love him all the more.

Henderson had been found dead alongside the road north of London the week following his attempt to blackmail Harriet and her mother. Apparently, he'd been traveling to the monastery he had purchased with the donations he'd received. His saddlebags had been rifled through and nothing left in them.

Joseph's father had shaken his head at the news but refused to say why he'd been so taken with the man. The monastery had been sold to repay those who'd given him money, though it didn't sound as if it had been enough for some. Whether any of his 'true believers' remained was unclear. None had come forward at any rate. Rumor had it that no one had attended Henderson's funeral.

Harriet's mother adored Joseph, and her uncle approved as well, as did Ceylon, the sweet little dog her mother now called

her own.

The league members had met Joseph at one time or another and were so happy for Harriet. Though Frances had been reserved initially, she now insisted no one could be happier for them and took partial credit for their union.

Harriet still thought something might be brewing between Frances and Thomas Sinclair, but he had departed for a lengthy visit to America two months prior to visit relatives and had yet to return.

Their wedding that morning had been beautiful with family and friends joining in the celebration. All the members of the literary league had attended, two with their husbands, which made the morning even more special.

Once her maid left, Harriet took one last look in the dressing table mirror. Her hair was bound in a loose braid tied with a white ribbon and rested on her shoulder.

Her nightgown had a plunging neckline that made her feel bare, but the wrapper that went over it covered more of her. Her gaze held on her burn scars in the mirror. While Joseph had already seen them, she still felt self-conscious. Would that feeling ever pass?

She stood and glanced around the room, pleased to see everything was in order. A fire burned cheerfully in the hearth. Two vases of white roses were placed on either side of the room, lending a sweet fragrance to the air.

It was silly to be nervous. It wasn't as if they hadn't enjoyed a few interludes of passion in the weeks leading up to their wedding that had gone well beyond kissing. Yet she couldn't deny that the idea of making love with Joseph made her anxious.

Before she had time to worry further, a knock sounded at the door.

"Enter." She waited by the fire as Joseph walked into the room, wearing a burgundy robe.

His tender smile as he moved to stand before her then reached for her hands helped to allay her fears.

“I love you.” The simple words and the emotion shining in his eyes made her heart swell, though she would’ve sworn it couldn’t feel any fuller.

She would never grow weary of him telling her that.

“Excellent,” she said with a smile. “Because I love you as well.”

“It feels as if I’ve waited forever for you.” He released her hand to touch her cheek.

“You don’t have to wait any longer.” She stepped closer to lift onto her toes and kiss him.

The kiss was gentle yet passionate and quickly melted away most of her nerves. He seemed to hold back his desire as if not to overwhelm her, his movements slow and careful.

He wrapped her in his embrace, pulling her tightly against him. Already she could feel the hardness of his manhood through his robe. The physical evidence confirmed that he wanted her despite his cautiousness and aroused her even more.

He eased his hold and released a shuddering breath. “I can hardly believe you’re mine,” he whispered as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and then trailed a finger along her cheek.

“Nor can I.” She cupped her hand on his jaw, the slight roughness of his whiskers incredibly erotic. “Or that you’re mine.”

His grin had her grinning in return. “Waiting seemed to take forever yet went by in the blink of an eye.”

“I felt exactly the same.” She breathed in his scent as she rested her head against his shoulder, reveling in the way he made her feel, cherished and loved. “I never realized happiness like this was possible.” She lifted her head to look into his eyes. “You have helped me see that it is.”

“Harriet.” He kissed her again, the restraint she’d sensed in him earlier loosening its hold.

With this kiss, he seemed intent on devouring her. And it felt glorious. The feeling of being desired pushed away the doubt that lingered and hushed the voice that said love wasn't possible given her scars, both inside and out.

She returned his embrace, but as the kiss continued, she realized it wasn't enough. She wanted more of him, to explore what she'd only been able to admire until now.

As if the thought granted her permission, she ran her hands to roam over his broad shoulders and along his neck. She found her way beneath his robe to his warm, firm flesh.

His muffled moan suggested she was taking the right path, so she continued, discovering a boldness of which she hadn't realized she was capable.

But this was Joseph, her husband, and he loved her. The headiness of that knowledge shed another layer of the worry she'd lived with for over two years.

He broke the kiss only to press his lips along her jaw and down her neck. "Harriet," he whispered. "I love you with all that I am."

His words felt like a vow. Somehow, they freed her, lifting the last of the chains that had bound her. She released him to shed the wrapper and allow him to see more of her.

The wave of vulnerability that swept over her shocked her with its strength. Though he'd told her numerous times that her scars didn't matter, she waited for his reaction, hoping the sight of them didn't change his desire.

As if realizing what the gesture meant, he ran a gentle finger over the scars from her collarbone to the plunging neckline that revealed the swell of her breast. "You're beautiful." He met her gaze for a long moment. Then he bent and pressed a trail of kisses from her neck down to her breast.

She blinked back tears at his sweet gesture. For once, her scars didn't feel ugly but simply part of who she was.

Passion surged within her, and she held tight to his shoulders, her knees weakening at his touch.

“Perfect,” he murmured then moved aside the fabric covering her breast. He took her taut nipple into his mouth, his tongue swirling around it until need speared straight to her center.

Liquid heat filled her, and her self-consciousness fell away. She pushed back his robe to reveal his broad shoulders and muscled chest, the dark hair that covered it beckoning her to explore. She ran her fingers over his chest and discovered his male nipples as well, loving the way he shifted into her touch.

The feel of Joseph’s warm hand on her bare thigh should’ve shocked her, but it only felt right.

Eager to keep pace, she untied his robe, her trembling fingers fumbling with the knot until at last she managed it and eased the sides apart. She took in his muscular form, so very masculine. “Perfect,” she said, repeating what he’d said to her.

He chuckled. “Hardly but I’m pleased you think so.”

His quiet words made her smile as she trailed her fingers over his chest, the coarse dark hair that covered it beckoning. He sighed and shifted again, suggesting he enjoyed her touch. They had that in common for she enjoyed his as well.

Her exploration continued to the flat plane of his abdomen where the hair thinned into a narrow trail that led her fingers lower and lower still.

He gasped as she took hold of his length. The stiff rod of his manhood wasn’t what she’d expected. Then again, she would’ve been hard-pressed to say what she thought to see or feel. With one finger, she traced its length, the smoothness seeming at odds with the hardness. The combination fascinated her. She repeated the process, this time with two fingers, then again with her hand.

“Harriet.” With a muffled groan, he grabbed her wrist to halt her exploration. “Your touch will end this before it’s truly begun.”

Before she could question what that meant, he pulled her to him, the warmth of his body heating hers. She shifted

against him and reveled in their differences as his lips took hers once again.

His hand on her bare bottom pressed her even closer to him. When he trailed a finger along the slit of her buttocks, she was the one who moaned as her very center ached with need.

Those fingers gently squeezed her hip, then continued to the front of her to brush against the curls where her thighs met.

His touch had her drawing in a deep breath. She reached up to hold his shoulders, needing support when it felt like her knees might fail her. His fingers found the slick folds between her legs, and she was thankful to have something to hold on to.

“Oh, Joseph!” Her head tipped back as passion soared with his touch.

A few moments later, he bent to lift her into his arms and carried her to the bed where the covers were already folded back.

“I want you, Harriet. So much.” He quickly shed his robe, the dim light highlighting the contours of his strong body.

Harriet pulled her gown over her head, tossing it aside. She no longer needed it, not when Joseph looked at her like that. His obvious love for her was a gift for which she’d be forever grateful. The ability to be her true self without worrying about what he’d think was more freeing than she could’ve imagined.

She didn’t doubt his love. No matter what happened, their love was true.

The thought had her smiling.

“What?” he asked as he lay down beside her, answering her smile with one of his own.

“I never thought joy like this was possible.” She placed her hand on his cheek as he leaned over her, the heat of his body warming her.

“Nor did I.” He kissed her.

Then all thought fell away as they caressed one another, learning the places that pleased the other.

Need built until Harriet couldn't bear it. "Joseph?"

"Yes, my love." He shifted on top of her, nudging her legs apart with his.

His weight on her felt marvelous. She couldn't wait to be his. To be one in every sense of the word.

The tip of his shaft teased her entrance. She wriggled her hips, anxious for the next step. Though she knew what to expect, she couldn't deny her sudden nerves.

"Hold me," Joseph gritted out.

As she did what he said, he thrust into her, feeling far too large to properly fit. The sharp pain was expected but still shocking. She froze, willing her previous desire to return and for the hurt to ease.

Joseph held still and pressed kisses over her face then drew back to look into her eyes. "Better?"

"Yes." The tenderness in their depths sent a wave of love through her, and she pulled him down for a proper kiss.

As his tongue swept into her mouth, his hips moved slowly, and she realized the pain was gone. In its place came pleasure. He set a rhythm she eagerly met, her body seeming to know just what to do.

The need she'd felt earlier built until she thought she might burst with it.

"Let go, my love." Joseph's words, along with the pressure building inside her, sent her into the sky, mingling with the stars as everything within her shattered in the most delightful way.

Her release seemed to send him over the edge, and he thrust into her once more, his body convulsing against her.

They slowly returned to earth, the pleasure fading even as happiness remained. He kissed her once more. "My sweet, beautiful wife."

“My strong, handsome husband.” How marvelous it felt to call him that.

He shifted to her side and drew her into his arms, her head cradled on his shoulder. “I am so blessed to have found you.”

“We’re blessed to have found each other.”

“Thank goodness I have always and forever to show you how much I love you.” Then he kissed her once more.



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About the Author



Lana Williams is a USA Today Bestselling Author who writes historical romance filled with mystery, adventure, and sometimes a pinch of paranormal to stir things up. She spends her days in days in Victorian, Regency, and Medieval times, depending on her mood and current deadline.

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