



A Game of Scandal (The Agency For Scandal #3)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: An all-female detective agency righting wrongs at the end of the nineteenth century;

infiltrating a scandalous upper class world straight out of Bridgerton and using their wit and bravery to unmask a villain.

In this third book, a member of the Aviary must infiltrate the darkly glamorous London underworld, stepping bravely into the gambling dens of the capital that are home to some criminal masterminds.

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CHAPTER ONE

It seemed to me that weddings were highly overrated.

Don't misunderstand – the bride was beautiful, the groom was devastating, and the way they were looking at one another would melt the hardest heart. I wasn't against weddings. However, there was no denying that the ceremony itself was tedious. We'd been sitting in this church for hours, and, as the vicar droned on and on, it appeared there was to be no end in sight.

I looked down at my fingers, holding my gloves in my lap. I thought I'd managed to remove all the ink stains, but there was a long smudge of sapphire blue down the side of my right hand. As the vicar continued his endless pontificating on the subject of marriage, I tried to rub it away.

Surely all this was overdoing things? A brief "Do you? I do" would do the trick just as well. Did the whole congregation really need to hear about how fruitful the vicar hoped the marriage would be? Personally, I thought it bad manners that he was already haranguing the pair of them about procreation (in front of an audience, no less) when they had said their marriage vows only moments ago. After all, Iris Scott-Holland was only a year older than me. I shuddered at the thought.

"Stop. Fidgeting," my brother, Max, muttered out of the side of his mouth.

"I'm not fidgeting," I whispered back, poking him hard in the side. "I am shuddering ."

My brother stared straight ahead, utterly unmoved, his expression serene, but on my other side I felt his wife, Izzy, tremble.

“Felicity, please don’t make me laugh in church,” she said in a low voice.

“The vicar seems very interested in flesh , doesn’t he?” I mused, keeping my own voice to a quiet murmur. “You don’t hear people talking about flesh much in company. Strange that it’s acceptable in church.”

Izzy’s shoulders shook harder.

Further along the pew, in a voice that was a touch too loud, Izzy’s best friend Teresa St Clair asked, “What’s the joke?”

Max made a sound like an angry cat.

I huffed and decided to focus my attention away from this dull scene. I turned my mind instead to harmonic progression and its relation to the particularly knotty mathematical problem that Dr Volterra at the University of Rome and I had recently corresponded about. This worked a treat, and by the time Nicholas Wynter exclaimed “Finally!” (echoing the thoughts of the entire congregation) and kissed his bride with an enthusiasm that sent a ripple of scandalized laughter around the church, I had made a pleasing amount of progress. I would have to make some notes as soon as we got home.

A murmur of chatter broke out, and after the bride and groom swept back up the aisle, everyone began to filter out of the small wooden pews.

“Well,” Teresa said, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief as she got to her feet. “That was lovely, wasn’t it? I do enjoy a wedding. Such a nice excuse to have a good cry.”

“You don’t need an excuse, you watering pot,” Izzy teased. “You cried this morning as well, over that novel you were reading.”

“I have a lot of feelings,” Teresa said, sniffing. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Nothing at all,” her husband agreed, slipping his arm round her waist. He bent his head and whispered something in Teresa’s ear that had her blushing the same vibrant shade of pink as her gown.

“James! We’re in church !” she hissed, batting at his arm, but the grin on her face told its own story.

I rolled my eyes. The trouble with the St Clairs was that they were constantly mooning over one another. Max and Izzy were just as bad. I never thought I’d see my solid, sensible big brother reduced to the doe-eyed, soft-hearted fool that he was when it came to his wife. Over the last couple of years I had grown used to noisily announcing my arrival before I entered any room in the house, having caught the two of them in each other’s arms far too often. As his sister, I was vaguely horrified. Max was unrepentant. It was enough to put a person off romance altogether.

We made our way out into the thin February sunshine that trickled across the beautiful frosted landscape and joined the crowd of well-dressed guests making their way down the winding path from the church to the big house. The Wynters had decided to get married at Iris’s family estate in Kent, which – from what I had heard – had been the site of many glamorous parties over the years.

I wasn’t the only one to have been surprised by this choice. Nicholas Wynter was one of the most fashionable men in the country, and his dazzling new wife would certainly have been the toast of the coming season had Lord Wynter not stolen a march on every other eligible bachelor (much to their chagrin) and whisked her down the aisle. Typically, one would expect a lavish ceremony in town, plenty of pomp and

circumstance, with various dignitaries and the odd royal in attendance, but this was much smaller, more intimate.

Perhaps it was down to the bride's mysterious history. No one was really sure where Iris Scott-Holland had been for the last few years, though there were plenty of stories. The most commonly accepted rumour was that she'd been educated somewhere in Europe, but I knew better. How scandalized would many of these guests be, I wondered with a smile, to know that Iris Scott-Holland had run away as a child, had been living in London and working as a seamstress, only to return seven years later to reclaim the home that was rightfully hers, the home we were currently standing in?

Now that was a good story.

"Felicity!" a voice called, and I turned towards it, to see the person who had told me the whole tale in the first place: my friend, and Iris's stepsister, Cassandra Weston.

"Thank goodness you're here," Cassie said, looping her arm through mine and dragging me away from my group. I glanced towards Max and saw him mouth the word Behave . The smile I gave him in return was angelic, and his eyes narrowed. He knew me too well.

Max might be my brother, but the man had practically raised me. Our father died when I was four and Max was twelve, and though I loved my mother, she didn't want much to do with bringing up a child, particularly one who was considered – by society's standards, at least – peculiar . Max had become my official guardian when he turned eighteen, though in his typical, chivalrous way, he'd been carefully watching out for me for far longer. It wasn't exactly my fault that I tended to get into scrapes... I was a naturally curious child, constantly poking my nose in where I shouldn't, fascinated by how things worked, and that hadn't changed as I reached adulthood.

If you asked me, there was a straight line to be drawn between incidents like the time I got lost in the woods, tracking a family of badgers, or when I almost set the house on fire, taking apart a gas lamp, and my academic interest in solving a mathematical problem. What I enjoyed was the knowing – I wanted to know why things were the way they were. For every problem there was a logical solution. Unfortunately, one area in which I could discover very little in the way of logic was the myriad, confusing, contradictory rules of society.

I did try to behave the way my family wanted, but I never got it quite right. Trouble seemed to follow me around, and Max had always been on hand to fix things.

This had led to the regrettable situation I found myself in now: I was eighteen years old, and whenever my brother looked at me, he still saw a precocious girl in pigtails and knee socks.

“Wasn’t the service interminable ?” Cassie groaned now as we fell back, away from the watchful gaze of my brother.

“Endless,” I agreed.

Cassie darted a glance in the direction of Max’s back as he made his way towards the house, and we hovered, smiling politely at people as they passed. “Well?” Her eyebrows raised. “What did he say?”

Whatever expression passed over my face then must have been enough to communicate my frustration, because Cassie exhaled. “He said no? Again?”

“He doesn’t say no,” I grumbled. “He says ‘not yet’, which is much harder to argue against.” I sighed. “He says that once I’ve had a proper season being out , then we can revisit the idea of university. He says Mother is excited about coming to London, showing me off, attending the parties, that it would make her happy, that perhaps I’ll

enjoy myself. He makes it sound so reasonable , as though he's only giving me more options, but the man is utterly transparent. He thinks I'm going to walk into a ballroom and get moony-eyed over some insipid aristocrat, and then he'll be able to bundle me off safe and sound into marriage and I'll forget all about studying mathematics. He acts as though the whole thing is a ... a ... girlish fancy."

Cassie gave a rumble of annoyance that made me smile. It was a gift to have a friend who was so ferociously on my side. Like me, Cassie had no desire to find a husband. For her, it was a decision born from an absence of romantic interest. For me ... well, I already had one overbearing man in my life. I saw absolutely no reason to add another.

"I thought better of him," she said, disapproval in her tone. "I thought he'd become so much more progressive over the last couple of years. His speech in Parliament last week was extremely stirring."

"He has," I agreed quickly, feeling a need to defend Max, even against my own frustration. "He'll tell you he's all for women's education and he means it. It's about me . You know he's always been overprotective. Besides, Mother will hate the idea, and he's trying to keep the peace for as long as possible."

Cassie's head dipped in acknowledgment. "Still..." She trailed off.

"Still, it's not over yet." I met her gaze, baring my teeth in a smile. "He might think I'll give up quietly, but he's about to find out he's wrong."

"So what will you do?"

I shrugged. "I'll think of something. Perhaps I should talk to Izzy again. I know she's careful about interfering too much in my relationship with Max, but if anyone can get him to see sense it's her." I scuffed the ground with my toe, noticing, as I did, a

smudge appear on my silly pink-ribboned slippers. “This would be much simpler if I had access to my trust. What’s the point of having all this money if I have to ask Max’s permission to spend it? I can’t spend my own money, but I also can’t get a job, because ladies don’t work. And,” I added, heated now, “if Max had his way, I’d marry and then my husband would control the purse strings instead. It’s infuriating. I have as much right to my inheritance as he does. For goodness’ sake, I’d spend it better than most of the men of my acquaintance. An education, is it really such an outrageous thing to want?”

Cassie nodded eagerly. “Exactly,” she said. “If it wasn’t for Iris, then I’d still be stuck, waiting to do something with my life.” She reached over and squeezed my hand in hers. “No one has more drive than you,” she said. “Max doesn’t see that yet, but he will. It would be criminal to keep a mind like yours caged. He loves you; he’ll come around. We must remember that sometimes men can be painfully slow on the uptake.”

Hearing her words felt like drinking something warm on a cold day, a pleasant feeling spreading through my body. Cassie’s belief in me was unshakable, and had been since we had met four years ago at one of the few social occasions young, well-bred girls were allowed to attend: a bland tea party at someone’s London home. I’d discovered Cass sneaking outside with pilfered finger sandwiches to feed to the hostess’s fat pug, and we’d been firm friends from that moment on.

Cassie had a keen mind and a disdain for the conventional. Until recently, she – like me – had been denied the opportunity to put that mind to good work, but after her mother and sister had departed for Europe, leaving Cassie to stay with Iris, along with access to the trust left to her by her stepfather, she had wasted no time in enrolling at University College London to study medicine. My feelings were a swirling mixture of pride and envy, and I’d be lying if I said it hadn’t led to me stepping up my own campaign with Max. I had a brain – a brilliant one, as it happened – and I wanted to use it.

My affinity for numbers had outstripped my governess's when I was eight years old, and – I believe because it amused him – Max had hired a young male tutor from Oxford to help me with my mathematics. By ten, I was running circles round the man. In the intervening years, I'd taught myself, poring over books and journals, striking up correspondence with several eminent mathematicians (always under the name F. Vane, never quite trusting that the gentlemen in question would be so forthcoming had they known I was a woman).

But what I longed for, what I needed now, was instruction: proper instruction and direction. I had a lot of bits of knowledge and a natural gift, but I knew perfectly well that I was capable of much more. I wouldn't even need to leave the city for the longed-for glory of Cambridge. University College accepted female students; even the London Mathematical Society had elected a handful of female members – they were doing important work, publishing it, and I wanted to be a part of it all so badly that it made my teeth ache. It was the start of a whole new century, and it felt as though anything were possible.

"Let's not think about it now," I said, shaking my head as if to dislodge the frustrations that ran in a loop there. "It's only making me cross, and then Max will tell me off for scowling at everyone. Not appropriate for a wedding."

"I'm afraid we're going to have to socialize," my friend said glumly. "Small talk. The horror."

"Perhaps we could sneak off?" I suggested. "We could take the bicycles." I glanced up at the cloudless blue sky. It was cold but the sun shone; I could almost feel the ripple of the breeze that would brush its icy fingers across my face as we pedalled down one of the undulating hills that made up the parkland at Scott-Holland Hall. I spared half a moment's thought for the gorgeous blue silk gown that Nancy, my maid, had buttoned me into this morning, knowing that this was exactly the sort of trouble Max had been warning against, and smoothly shoved the concern aside. What

was the worst that could happen?

Cassie's expression lit up. "We could slip out of the—"

"Don't even think about it," a dry voice came from over my shoulder, and I turned to find the bride herself fixing Cassie with a gimlet stare. "I know exactly what you're plotting, Cassandra Weston, but you're the sister of the bride. Stop loitering out here in the cold. Come inside and greet people with me."

Cassie pouted briefly, but softened when Iris smiled at her.

"You look lovely, Lady Wynter," I said. And she did. She looked like the fairy on top of the Christmas tree – gleaming gold hair, deep blue eyes, a delicate face. She wore a wedding dress of fine Italian white lace that was so breathtakingly lovely she must have designed it herself. She was dainty, elegant, and my words brought a hint of soft pink to her cheeks. If you didn't know her, you'd think her a lamb, rather than what she really was – a fox in disguise. There was nothing soft about Iris Wynter: she had an iron will and was a force to be reckoned with. I found her fascinating.

"Lady Wynter," she said, shaking her head. "I suppose I shall get used to that. Anyway..." Iris's expression turned stern. "I can tell that the pair of you are cooking up mischief, but I already told Cassie she's to hold off scandalizing the guests at least until after we've eaten."

Cassie sighed and shared a doleful look with me. "She's a respectable married lady now."

"Oh, I hope I shall never be that," Iris replied coolly. "For one thing, my husband would be terribly disappointed."

"And so would I," Cassie said.

“And I,” I put in. “If we’re putting the matter to a vote.”

“The motion is carried, then.” Iris slipped a hand through Cassie’s arm and the through mine, guiding us firmly towards the front door. “We solemnly swear to never become respectable.”

CHAPTER TWO

Cassie may have been snared in the net of social responsibility, but I was still a free woman – at least for the time being. Careful to avoid Max and Izzy, I skirted the edge of the ballroom, where people were milling, drinks in hand, waiting to go through to the dining room for the wedding breakfast.

I had a brief window in which to plot my escape, otherwise it was going to be nothing but speeches, and fancy, fussy plates of food, and being inevitably seated beside an “eligible bachelor” who couldn’t even spell Pythagoras. In this crush I’d hardly be missed – except by my family, of course, but it would come as no surprise to them that I’d chosen to remove myself.

The ballroom was quite spectacular, like a wedding cake itself, all gilt and marble, with pale duck-egg blue walls, and, soaring above us, a ceiling covered in clouds and rosy cherubs. It was beautifully decorated, garlanded with boughs of holly and fat red roses that carried a heady perfume, and flickering candles that made the scene feel festive.

This was, I recognized, a prime opportunity for small talk, and as such was to be avoided like the plague. In the last year or so, something had shifted in the way people looked at me. It was as if a sign had gone up over my head that read: For sale: single heiress, sister of a duke . I was constantly being measured as marriage material, and, because what mattered most in the eyes of society were money and breeding, I found myself in the uncomfortable position of being considered a “good catch”.

Never mind the things that made me me . Never mind that I could recite pi to over eight hundred digits, or that I loved apple pudding and riding bicycles, that I hated prunes, or that my fingers were always freckled with ink. None of those things mattered. I was a pretty jewel in a cabinet, on display for gentlemen to appraise and then bid upon.

In social situations I had to behave impeccably, because that's what was expected of me. And because I loved my family, because I cared about what they thought of me and what other people thought of them, I really did try my best. But it was exhausting, and I constantly came up short. Like a puzzle piece that had made its way into the wrong box, I simply didn't fit.

For one thing, I didn't like crowds. This was something of a hindrance if one was supposed to be a dazzling social butterfly. It wasn't only the small talk, which I found hard work; it was the press of people. The sound of all the voices, the way they seemed to clamour for attention in my brain. The noise and the energy of it was overwhelming, which only added to my discomfort.

"Lady Felicity," a regal voice called, and I fought to keep the grimace from my face as Nicholas Wynter's grandmother – the Dowager Countess Wynter – stepped out in front of me, neatly blocking my getaway. I quite liked the old dragon, but nothing escaped the woman's beady eye. I felt at once that she knew every wicked, uncivil thought that had ever crossed my mind. She also definitely knew that I was trying to sneak out of this room unseen.

"Lady Wynter." I smiled politely. "How lovely to run into you."

The woman gave a small harrumph , which I took to mean that she was perfectly aware I was wishing myself far, far away.

"The ceremony was delightful," I tried, giving myself over to polite chit-chat, already

experiencing the numb, creeping feeling that went with it.

“The ceremony was overlong.” The dowager countess’s lip curled into a sneer. “But what can one expect from a parochial little church like that? The vicar was hardly a talented orator. When I think we could have held the wedding at St George’s, with all the pomp and circumstance, and Bertie in attendance ... well .” She finished on a huff, her ice-blue eyes snapping. “My new granddaughter-in-law certainly knows her own mind.” Despite her attempt at sounding displeased, I heard the grudging approval in her voice.

“I thought the two of them looked very happy,” I said gamely. “They’re a beautiful couple.”

“They are that,” the dowager countess agreed. Her gaze drifted speculatively over me – a thorough once-over. “And you, Felicity Vane, have got a look of your mother about you. You’ve blossomed into an attractive young lady, though I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that.”

“I don’t,” I said placidly, “but thank you anyway.” While I wasn’t a patch on Iris Wynter, I was aware that my appearance was more than acceptable by society’s deeply conventional standards. I’d inherited my mother’s willowy figure and her poker-straight silver-blond hair. My face was symmetrical, which I understood helped; my eyes were a dark blue that tipped towards violet in certain lights. (This I knew thanks to a rather flowery description from a friend of Max who had made a brief attempt at flirtation when I’d been dragged to a party two weeks ago. It hadn’t gone well.)

Lady Wynter gave a short bark of laughter. “Good girl. Can’t stand those niminy-piminy misses who act as though they’ve never seen themselves in a mirror before. And your dress is excellently made too. The colour sets off your complexion.”

“That’s all down to my sister-in-law,” I said.

The dowager countess’s eyes narrowed. “I suppose she and your brother have you shopping for a husband?”

I stilled. My smile became strained. “I would say ... we’re in negotiations over the matter.”

“Hmmm.” I couldn’t tell what the noise meant. “Well” – again I was treated to a penetrating glare – “I’m sure I shall follow your coming season with interest.”

I didn’t know if that was a threat or a promise, but I wasn’t about to hang around and find out.

“I look forward to it,” I said weakly. “Oh, I think I see an old friend – please excuse me.” And with that I turned and took to my heels as decorously as possible. The knowing chuckle that followed me made me think I hadn’t been as subtle as I hoped.

Keeping my eyes cast firmly down, I managed to make my way out of the room without being cornered by anyone else, and I headed along the twisting corridor, opening doors as I went until I found what I was looking for.

With a sigh of pleasure, I took in the library. It was enormous, stretching up two floors high, every shelf groaning under the weight of books. The room was fairly empty of furniture, though I spied a high-backed chair in front of the huge stone fireplace. Wasting no time, I dragged it over to one of the bow windows. There was just about enough space in there for me to sit and pull the curtains closed in front of me. It wasn’t foolproof, but it would be a hiding place of sorts – one that might provide respite if Max came looking for me.

Working quickly, I scanned the shelves until I found a book to read. The mathematics

section was sadly out of date, but I found a promising-looking, well-thumbed hardback called *A General History of the Pyrates*, which was about the adventures of Mary Read and Anne Bonny. I had a particular fondness for pirate stories, and it seemed to me that if anyone might have solid advice on how to handle an overbearing older brother, it would be two fearless female outlaws.

I curled up happily in my chair; the drawn curtains created a cocoon, while the cold light from the window spilled over my shoulder. I gave a sigh of satisfaction. Hidden away, alone, with a book: this was how you enjoyed a party.

I'd been there for several minutes, sinking luxuriously into the many tales of derring-do, when I was interrupted by the sound of the door being pushed open.

I froze, coming out of the chair, reminding myself that I couldn't be seen, and hoping that whoever it was would turn and go away. Instead, I heard a heated voice and a heavy tread.

"You mean to tell me you won't accept the responsibility?" The voice was full of angry bluster. "You are a hair's breadth from becoming the next in line for the title!"

A second voice came then, and something about it made my pulse leap.. It was soft, amused, with a touch of gravel. "I am well aware, thank you. We're both unhappy about the development, but unless you've fathered any other sons I don't know about, then we are where we are. I shall have to hope for Perry's swift recovery. As you know, I have no interest in your title."

"You shouldn't speak so disrespectfully! Your brother may die!"

The drawling shiver of a voice hardened. "I'm not going to pretend affection for the man. I'm no hypocrite. I don't want Perry to die. I hope he lives – as much for my sake as for his, but it doesn't change the fact that he's a cold-hearted, cruel scoundrel

and always has been.”

These words were met with a choking splutter, a sound of obvious rage.

“Don’t go having an apoplexy,” the bored voice only said. “The last thing we need is the both of you dropping dead. Think how inconvenient it would be.”

“You! You ... ungrateful cur! Your brother is worth a hundred of you.”

The amusement deepened. “No, he’s not. That’s the whole problem, isn’t it?”

“So pleased with yourself.” The angry voice held a sneer. “Running your shabby gaming hell. A disgrace to the family name! I’m ashamed of you.”

“Well, I’m ashamed of you, so it runs both ways, Father. And the Lucky Penny isn’t a hell. It’s a business. I would have thought that my situation was preferable to Perry’s – bankrupting the family with his debts, and getting himself shot thanks to his shady dealings.”

“Your brother was attacked by a madman in the street!” the older man roared. “And you would impugn his honour?”

“I thought the gossipmongers were doing a good enough job of that. Or are the rumours of his unsavoury connections exaggerated? Flashing his money about before it happened, wasn’t he? Very interesting. I wonder where all those funds have got to.”

There was another huff of outrage. “Stuff and nonsense! I’ve put a stop to all that foolish gossip. I won’t have a scandal attached to this family. Besides, it was all a misunderstanding. Your brother is a gentleman . Not that I’d expect you to understand that. I know all about that hole you run in Whitechapel. Whitechapel! A son of mine! Involved in a den of iniquity!”

“A den of iniquity.” The words sounded seductive. I imagined the curl of a smile. “I like that.”

“You would.” There was a gobbling sound like a turkey might make, and I was forced to press my lips together to avoid laughing. “I understand you even allow women to gamble there. Women! It’s unnatural.”

I perked up at these words. A gambling den that allowed women? I hadn’t heard anything about such a place ... but then again nightclubs in Whitechapel were firmly outside my social circle. Unfortunately.

“You didn’t seem so squeamish when you were tapping me for money,” the younger voice said mildly, snapping my attention back to the conversation.

“All I asked was that you settle some of your brother’s outstanding expenses. I see now that I was wasting my breath. You have no sense of family loyalty, no brotherly duty.”

“I’m glad we understand one another.”

“And it’s clear to me you haven’t got two pennies to rub together. You are nothing but a ... a ... careless wastrel. Spending all your time gambling and drinking and doing God knows what!”

“Mmm. That sounds like an extremely good use of a person’s time to me.”

“My only consolation is that hardly anyone knows of the connection between us,” the older man continued, as though his son had not spoken. “You had the good sense at least not to use the family name. But if your brother dies... If you inherit...” The older man’s voice dropped, and it seemed he was talking more to himself. “The title must be beyond reproach. Ensuring the succession is crucial. I’m thwarted at every

turn. It's beginning to feel as though there is a curse on this family, and left in your hands ... well, this behaviour cannot continue to be tolerated."

"And by this behaviour, you mean my life?" the silky voice asked mildly.

"That's enough of your cheek! This is an important event with important people. You will behave accordingly."

"Nothing less would have dragged you from Perry's side, I'm sure." The wry amusement was back, and it was clear to me that the more relaxed the son was, the more irate the father became. It was a tactic I could admire. "I think the time is long past where you dictate my behaviour, Father, but you have nothing to fear. I have no intention of behaving badly. I have more friends here than you do. Quite a lot of them frequent my ... den of iniquity. Including the groom. And the bride too. They consider it the height of fashion. You'll find that I am well liked by these important people, despite my lack of family connections."

On this note, the older man gave a loud groan of frustration and stomped across the floor. I heard the door being pulled open rather forcefully. "I have nothing more to say to you." The door slammed.

The air stilled, and a heavy silence fell. I stood, unmoving as a statue, barely daring to breathe. On the other side of the curtain, I knew that the younger man was now alone. I hoped that, with the family disagreement concluded, he would be on his way.

Instead, the curtain rippled in front of my face, as though someone had run their fingers over it, and it was as if I felt the touch running up and down my spine.

"If you're going to eavesdrop on private conversations," the voice that was doing strange things to my insides murmured, "next time you should take care to hide those pretty slippers."

My breath caught in my throat, and my gaze darted towards my feet. I hadn't noticed that the fabric did not quite reach the floor. I swallowed a curse.

"Thank you," I managed after a moment, relieved that my own voice sounded steady. "I'll certainly bear that in mind. Next time."

There was an amused hum of laughter. The fabric rippled once more, and for a moment I thought he was about to pull it back. I braced myself for confrontation. Then came the sound of an unhurried tread making for the door. When I heard the catch snick softly into place, I knew I was alone again.

With a sharp exhale, I slumped back into the chair. I turned over the events of the last few minutes in my mind. The argument, the fear of discovery. I could admit there was a gleeful thrill in eavesdropping, even if it transpired that one of the parties had been aware of my presence. It felt as though the stranger had drawn me into some curious intimacy by acknowledging my existence, by talking to me but not attempting to see my face, by not showing his. Just that voice, curling round me like smoke.

Giving myself a shake, as if to shrug off all the curious feelings it had stirred up, I turned my thoughts instead to a more significant and incredibly tantalizing proposition.

A gambling den where ladies were welcomed .

What was gambling, I mused, but mathematics? Chance, probability, risk and reward. Surely an enterprising mathematician could work the odds, could learn a few ways to turn their pin money into a much more substantial sum. After all, men were always winning fortunes over a hand of cards, and few of them could have my own expertise to bring to the table , as it were.

I leaned back in the chair, all but purring now, as a delicious new possibility

presented itself.

Money meant freedom. With my own money, I could pay my enrolment fees, present my university career to Max as a fait accompli. It would show him how serious I was; it would give me control over my own destiny. Could he stop me? I thought about it. I suppose he could, legally. But he wouldn't. I knew my brother; he would never let things get so far. I simply had to shake him out of his complacency, his wrong-headed notion of what I wanted and needed. I had to demonstrate that I was going to do this with or without his help, that for once I knew better.

With a grin, I swept the curtain aside and strode towards the bookcases. I needed to learn how to play cards. I needed to learn how to play cards perfectly .

And then I needed to pay a visit to the Lucky Penny.

CHAPTER THREE

I stood in the shadows, adjusting the bottom of the gold lace mask I wore round my eyes, and watched as groups of rowdy customers made their way inside the Lucky Penny. Every time the door opened, there was a blast of noise, a flash of red velvet and flickering light, the smell of perfume and cigar smoke. It was a tempting glimpse of another world, and I edged closer, drawn to it all.

This was the third time I'd stood outside the gaming hall. It had proved embarrassingly easy to slip out of the house and hail a cab to Whitechapel. For one thing, Max and Izzy often spent evenings sneaking out themselves to perform covert missions for the separate agencies they worked for – the ones they thought I knew nothing about.

Of course, I'd been aware of Max's government work for years. It hadn't been a difficult deduction to make – one had only to pay attention to his comings and goings and the way they lined up neatly with certain news items, to take note of the company he kept, to listen occasionally at a closed door.

Izzy's secrets were, I will admit, much better kept, but we did live together. I saw plenty to arouse my suspicions. At first I thought she worked for the same agency as my brother but I quickly discounted that theory. There was no way that Max was recruiting female agents from the aristocracy; that was decidedly not his style. Still, he seemed to know what she was doing, and occasionally they went out on their nighttime excursions together, stealing into the darkness practically hand in hand. After several months it became thrillingly apparent that the people Izzy worked with were all women, and it didn't matter if she slipped them in through the service

entrance or communicated with them in code: I was skilled at spotting patterns.

Sometimes I felt I should tell the pair of them that they didn't need to go to the trouble of sneaking around, that they could simply come and go as they pleased, but I took a certain amount of pleasure in allowing them to continue creeping in and out of their own home, because they had, once again, dramatically underestimated me.

The first two times I'd been to the Lucky Penny, it was to gather information. Having never been to a gambling den, I was interested in the etiquette. It had been a wise decision, because I'd learned that, while women did frequent the club, they were always masked. I also noticed that no women seemed to enter alone. This had given me a moment of disquiet, but I realized I would simply have to time my arrival to coincide with one of the large, rambunctious groups that often weaved their way through the wide mahogany doors.

Despite my best efforts, my casual enquiries into the place and its owner within my own social circles had turned up very little. Any young woman my own age knew nothing about it, sheltered as we were from such scandalous adventures. (Unfortunately.) And I could hardly risk alerting Izzy and Max to my plan by betraying my interest. All I'd learned was from my own late-night observations, and I would have to hope that would be enough.

While the club was on Goulston Street, in a rather dingy part of Whitechapel, the building looked better cared for than most. The sign hanging discreetly over the door had no words on it: only the image of a gold coin, glinting in the dim light of a single, flickering streetlamp. The clientele was surprisingly upmarket for such a location. It must be part of the thrill that drew members of the upper classes – a trip to this part of town. If it felt as though they were flirting with danger, they were reassured, I supposed, by the presence of two burly men who flanked the door, their meaty fists hanging listlessly at their sides until the first sign of trouble.

Keeping out of view of them had been the greatest challenge presented to me thus far, but that was about to change. I had no time to waste. It was a mere handful of weeks until the social season kicked off in earnest, and then Mother would be here, down from the estate in the country where she usually lived, and my life would be an unending cycle of teas and dinner parties and balls. In other words: a living, breathing nightmare.

I'd studied card play with a single-minded enthusiasm for just over three months, and the mathematics were fascinating. As far back as the 1650s, Pascal and Huygens had produced exciting theories on the structure of games of chance. It was an area ripe for investigation, and this side project of mine had proven to be a rich intellectual pursuit. Which was going to make tonight all the more satisfying. I was confident that I could turn the slim purse of coins in my reticule into, if not quite a fortune, then certainly a sizeable sum.

As a large party caterwauled its way down the street, I took a deep breath and slipped through the dingy light, to follow behind them. It was now or never.

Three women accompanied six or seven gentlemen, and they were clearly slumming it in Whitechapel, and giddy on the adventure of it.

"I do hope Joe has ordered in more of that brandy," one of the gentlemen chortled from over my left shoulder, his words slightly slurred. "He's got a fine nose for drink."

"Ash has got a fine skill for smuggling, you mean," one of the women giggled, and several of the men guffawed at that. I tried to join in, though to my ears my laughter sounded wooden. Now that the moment was here I found I was much more aware of all the different ways things could go wrong.

No one had seemed to notice me joining the party, and I sent up a silent prayer that it

would stay that way. We reached the two giants at the door, and I dared to peep up at one of them. He was a huge, hulking man with a head that looked like it had been carved – barely – from a lump of rock. A rock with the general impression of a face.

I sent him a thin smile, and he surprised me by returning it, a flash of yellowing teeth that made him look quite sweet. It was a bolstering moment, and I sailed through the door and inside the Lucky Penny for the first time on a wave of confidence.

I hit an intense wall of sound so abruptly that it felt as if something had detonated before me.

The place was heaving with people, as excited groups gathered round the different games taking place. A long table with a roulette wheel had drawn a particularly large crowd. I took a moment to get my bearings. The room was big, and people slipped out from behind the heavy forest-green curtains that surrounded us – implying that there were smaller rooms off to the sides as well. This concurred with my own observations from pacing the perimeter of the building and counting the windows. There were no windows here, only this decadent cocoon of deep-green velvet, and so there must be other chambers beyond. The tables were polished mahogany, the seats upholstered in a deep plum-jam red, the occasional leafy palm stood next to heavy gold (though to my eye, not real gold) candelabras.

There was a great air of excitement, and the scene was lit by a blaze of candlelight. A number of deep-red light shades cast a rosy glow that made the room feel even warmer than it already was. Waiting staff in grey uniforms whirled deftly between the oblivious crowds, delivering drinks and small plates of food, silent as shadows.

I waited to feel my usual discomfort, but at the moment the scene was too captivating, the thrill rushing through me too deep for me to be anxious. Also, standing masked in this crowd, where not a single soul expected to find Lady Felicity Vane, made me feel deliciously anonymous. No eyes crawled over me; there were no

naked looks of interest or calculation. As far as I knew, not one person in this room was worried about how I behaved or who I may or may not marry. No one was measuring me against some impossible standard. No one was paying attention to me at all. The thrill deepened.

I passed my cloak to the attendant and shook out my skirts, then I took a few minutes to wander around the room, watching the various games currently unfolding with interest. I accepted a glass of brandy from one of the uniformed servants, slipping a coin on to their tray. I sipped, feeling the golden burn of it run down my throat. It was surprisingly good – presumably part of the smuggled bounty mentioned by the group – though not a patch on the stuff I occasionally pilfered from Max’s study.

Eventually, I settled at one of the tables, where a man in a dark uniform was dealing vingt-et-un. This was what I had been preparing for; it was time to put my theories into practice. I watched for a while, knowing that the further into the deck the dealer got without shuffling, the greater my chance of success.

It was simply a matter of calculating the ratios and likelihood of high or low cards being drawn. I had only to keep the numbers clear in my head for as long as possible – and thanks to the way my mind worked, and the amount I’d been practising, I could keep them clear for a good, long time.

At last, I slid a single coin across the table, placing my first bet. It felt momentous. My heart thumped, and my hands had gone clammy, but after several cards were turned my prediction held.

“Vingt-et-un,” the dealer said with a smooth smile. “The lady wins.”

The feeling that ran through me then was more intoxicating than the velvet-gloved punch of brandy. My single coin grew to five, and I felt a smile curving at my own lips.

An hour later, the smile that the dealer gave me in return had grown wooden. “The lady wins again,” he said as the audience that had begun to cluster around me erupted into cheers.

I had been winning steadily for some time now. It seemed that my various hypotheses had been correct, and that was the greatest thrill of all. After that first win, the excitement in the act of gambling itself had faded almost straight away – what had remained instead was a giddy enjoyment in predicting the patterns of the cards. The numbers rang, crystal-clear bells in my mind, drowning out the crowd. All that existed was the problem in front of me as I calculated the probability that the card about to be drawn would be a six or lower.

“You play well,” a voice came from beside me, taking me by surprise.

I turned to find a man smiling at me. It was a broad smile that showed off straight white teeth. He was probably about Max’s age, with sandy hair and an open, friendly countenance.

“Thank you,” I said, my eyes turning back to the cards.

“It’s a thrill to watch a beautiful young woman experiencing a streak of good luck,” the man continued.

“It’s not luck,” I said absently.

“No?” The man’s voice lilted up in interest. “Witchcraft, then?”

This surprised a laugh out of me, and I turned to find him grinning. The mischievous expression on his face was winning, and he waggled his eyebrows, drawing another laugh from me.

“Perhaps it is witchcraft,” I said lightly, placing my bet.

When the four of clubs was revealed, I couldn’t contain a crow of triumph.

Suddenly, in place of the dealer’s elegant fingers, a coarse hand, the size of a dinner plate, came down on the table in front of me, jarring my concentration. I froze, held the numbers still in my mind as they threatened to leap about.

“Excuse me,” I huffed, irritated, eyes pinned to the cards. “You’re interrupting.”

“Boss wants to see you,” a growly voice boomed from somewhere above me, and when I reluctantly turned to look up over my shoulder, I found the burly doorman standing at my side. Only there was no longer a hint of sweetness in his face. Now the look in his eyes made my blood chill.

For a moment, my mind flashed to the voice in the library. There was a decided possibility that this boss might be the man at the wedding, and if that was the case, and he moved in such circles, I did not want to risk being recognized as Lady Felicity Vane even behind the protection of my mask.

“I have no desire to see your boss ,” I said with all the calm I could manage. “Please thank him for the invitation, but tell him I decline to accept.”

“It weren’t an invitation,” the man grunted, and he tugged the back of my chair so that I came away from the table with a muffled sound of surprise. The crowd around us, including the smiling gentleman, melted away, plenty of wide-eyed, interested stares and gossipy clucking sounds in their wake.

I eyed the giant with dislike. He eyed me back. I made some swift calculations and it seemed the best plan at the moment was to defuse the situation, meet this manager of his and then be on my way. I would have to hope that my mask did its job and

preserved my anonymity. The whole matter was made more frustrating, because – having made the effort to infiltrate the place – my winnings remained a long way from my goal for the evening.

I straightened my shoulders, treated the brute to another freezing look, then got to my feet.

“My money,” I said, turning to the dealer with my hand held out.

The dealer opened his mouth, but the giant spoke first. “Oh, don’t you worry, Spence here will take care of that, won’t you, Spence?”

“Of course,” the dealer said, his eyes darting from the giant to me.

“See that it’s waiting for me when I get back,” I said icily, and he nodded. “Fine.” I turned to the enormous man beside me. “Lead the way.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Never had I been more grateful to be born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I knew I wore my privilege easily, and I channelled the Dowager Countess Wynter at her most chilly as I glided, back rigidly straight, through the gaming hall. Even this hulking fellow was no match for the arrogant self-assurance of an aristocrat used to getting their own way, and his countenance grew less ferocious and more uncomfortable with every step.

I might have felt a twinge of sympathy had I not been busy simmering with frustration. I didn't care for being ordered around. Particularly when a plan I'd been working on for months was paying off.

We dipped behind one of the green curtains and climbed a set of steep stairs. Upon reaching a door at the top, the behemoth beside me knocked lightly.

"Come in," a voice called, and even with that single phrase, through the door, I knew it was him . The man from the library. It must have been the way goosebumps erupted across my skin.

My giant turned the door handle and swung it open, and – for the pleasure of it – I treated him to a long, hard stare, extra flinty. I thought I saw a flush of colour stain his cheeks.

"After you, miss," he grunted, and then looked surprised by his own good manners.

"Thank you," I replied, sweeping past him, the whisper of my apricot-coloured silk

skirts against the floorboards loud in the silence. This room felt far away from the hustle and bustle below.

The light in here was dimmer, and the office was dominated by an enormous desk. There was scant other furniture, only a seat in front of the desk, and one behind it. Sprawled in the chair facing me was a man.

My breath caught.

As a child I'd often demanded Max play a game with me, where I was Anne Bonny – pirate queen – and he my helpless captive forced to walk the plank. He'd rarely obliged – playing games was below his dignity. As far as I could remember, Max was born an old man. Still, I'd dreamed of that life of swashbuckling adventure, had long been fascinated by tales of pirates and their wicked, reckless deeds.

This was precisely the word that flashed through my mind at the sight of this man.

Pirate .

He was older than me, though I reckoned not by much, despite the way he held himself, with the confidence of an experienced man. Tall and lean with hair that fell in dark waves to brush the edge of his collar, he had a sharp face, with a strong jaw, and while he didn't have a beard, nor was he clean-shaven. He was dressed carelessly – his jacket nowhere in sight, his shirtsleeves rolled up, a dark waistcoat, loose and unbuttoned, thrown on top. There was a glint of gold as he turned his head, and a matching gleam in his dark eyes as he swept his attention over me.

I was pleased that I didn't falter as I made my way further into the room, sinking with all the grace I possessed (a good deal thanks to my mother's insistence on endless lessons in deportment – this was the first time I'd felt gratitude for them) into the single vacant chair.

There was a moment of silence. I cleared my throat.

“I understand from this” – I wrinkled my nose, casting a glance at the giant who still stood by the door – “gentleman, that you wished to see me.”

The gleam in the pirate’s eyes seemed to deepen with appreciation.

“I certainly did,” he said, and if I had any doubts at all, they were banished then. I’d know that smoky voice anywhere. This pirate was the man I’d overheard at Iris and Nick’s wedding. Interesting.

“It seems you’ve been having some luck at our tables,” he continued easily, his fingers drumming on the edge of the desk.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I do not believe in luck.”

The drumming stopped. “No?” He raised a brow. “Then what do you call it when you win six hands in a row at vingt-et-un?”

“I call it skill,” I replied, nettled by his indolent tone.

“And I call it cheating.”

At his words, I flew out of my seat.

“How dare —” I began.

That was when I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder, and knew myself to have been pushed beyond the point of endurance. Call me a cheat? And then have his goon manhandle me? I did not think so.

And I'd spent the last two years living with Izzy.

I raised my own fingers to the giant's hand, prising it away and twisting his wrist with a swift, sharp movement that had him crying out in surprise. Holding his wrist at an unnatural angle, which I knew would be painful but could be much worse if I chose to twist further, I stepped lightly to the side, keeping pressure on my grip.

"Do not put your hands on me." I kept my voice level, though my pulse thundered in my ears.

The giant stared at me, his expression stunned. His mouth dropped open slightly. "I was only—" he began.

I twisted a touch harder. Enough to have him bending his knees, a low moan in his throat.

"A simple apology will suffice," I said.

The man's eyes darted in the direction of his employer, but I remained focused on him. I knew that to risk being distracted was a bad idea. Izzy had made me practise this motion hundreds of times, though I hadn't believed I'd ever use it. She'd been the one to tell me: "A young woman should always be prepared to defend herself." And her lessons were much more interesting than the ones Mother and Max foisted on me.

"I-I'm sorry," the enormous man said now. I looked closely at his face. He didn't seem heated or angry, only anxious and a touch embarrassed. I released my hold on him, straightening my skirts as he rubbed his wrist.

"I weren't going to hurt you," he said, and he looked shamefaced. "I was only goin' to make you sit back down again."

“What is your name?” I asked, my tone brisk.

“Davey,” the giant said, his expression sheepish.

“Well, Davey. You never touch a woman without her express invitation to do so.”

“Yes, miss, I mean – ah – my lady,” Davey said, flustered. He glanced at the man behind the desk. “Took me by surprise, Ash,” he muttered.

I patted his enormous arm – like a Christmas ham, I marvelled. “It’s not your fault,” I said. “I’ve had exceptional training.”

“So it would seem.” The amused voice drew my attention back to the pirate behind the desk – Ash, as Davey had called him.

He was grinning a wide, crooked grin, and looking at his face felt a bit like staring directly into the sun.

“I think you’d better leave the lady to me, Davey,” he said, steepling his fingers as he leaned back in his chair.

“I dunno, boss,” Davey said uneasily, and I smothered a surprised chuckle of delight. It was nice to be considered dangerous.

When I looked back at Ash, I was certain he knew exactly what I was thinking. “I’m sure we can have a civil conversation in private,” he murmured. “If you’ll promise Davey that you can keep your hands off me...”

The words hung suggestively in the air and, to my annoyance, I felt my cheeks colour.

“That won’t be a problem,” I said stiffly. “As long as you behave like a gentleman.”

Ash laughed, and when he threw his head back, I saw that the glint of gold I had noticed at his ears were a pair of small gold hoops. The man was wearing earrings! Something rolled over, slow and heavy, in my stomach.

“I’m no gentleman, love,” Ash said, waving Davey away with his hand. Although he had no clue, I knew his words for a lie. I’d overheard him, after all, at the wedding. The man was in line for a title somehow. He might not look the part, but in name at least he was a gentleman. I narrowed my eyes as I recalled his father’s words, hardly anyone knows of the connection between us. Secrets were valuable currency, perhaps this information would prove useful.

My giant cast another worried look in my direction, before lumbering away. When the door closed behind him, there was a moment of heated silence.

“Please.” Ash gestured to the chair in front of me. “Won’t you have a seat?”

“That depends,” I said, gripping the back of the chair. “Do you intend to accuse me of cheating again?”

He eyed me thoughtfully. “Not immediately,” he said after a moment. “Perhaps we could get to know one another.”

I sniffed, but sat down. “I have no desire to get to know you.” I fussed with the elbow-length sleeve of my gown, straightening the froth of lace there. “I’d simply like to collect my winnings and leave.”

When I glanced up, Ash’s eyes were on my fingers, lingering on the delicate lace of my cuffs. “Who are you?” he asked bluntly.

I raised my brows, though they were still covered by the gold silk mask. “I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“On the contrary.” Ash stood, and he was taller than I’d anticipated. He rounded the desk and came to lean against the front of it, so that his long legs stretched out beside me. He wore dark trousers and leather boots. He braced himself with his hands, fingers curled round the lip of the desk, and disappearing under the edge of his rolled-up sleeve I saw a sinuous line of dark ink. My stomach did that strange somersault again. He had a tattoo.

“This is my business,” he continued, and my gaze snapped from his tanned forearm to his face.

I remained stubbornly silent, and he narrowed his eyes. “If you didn’t cheat...” he began, and then raised his hand to cut off my protest. “If you didn’t cheat, how did you win so many hands in a row?”

I considered him for a moment. There was really no reason not to tell him the truth. I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“I calculated the probabilities,” I said finally.

Whatever Ash had been expecting, this obviously wasn’t it. “Could you explain that to me?” he said slowly.

I nodded, pleasantly surprised. It was rare that a man was happy to admit he didn’t understand something instantly, rarer still that I got the opportunity to explain.

“It’s quite simple, really,” I said, leaning forward. “I assign each card that is dealt a value. If the card is between a two and a six, I add one. If the card drawn is between seven and nine, the added value is zero, if it’s above a nine, then I subtract one.”

Ash's brow crinkled. "How does this help you to calculate the probability?"

"In basic terms, if the running total is positive, the cards are more likely to fall in my favour, if the count is negative, it's more likely the dealer will triumph, and so one can bet accordingly. Of course, that's a very simplified explanation; there's a lot more nuance than that – it would be easier if I could draw some tables..." I trailed off, aware that I was getting carried away, and internally bracing myself for the condescending sneer or look of disgust that typically followed any enthusiastic demonstration of my mathematical interest.

Ash only furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "And you're able to hold a running count in your mind over all the different hands that are dealt?"

I inclined my head. "The odds in my favour increase the further into the deck we get. If more decks are introduced, of course, it becomes more complicated. Then one must determine the true count by dividing the running count by the number of decks in play." I narrowed my eyes. "Theoretically, you could continue to reckon the figures with a significant number of decks in the mix, but the calculations would grow increasingly complex. I have some more thinking to do in this area."

There was a beat of silence.

"Who are you?" Ash asked again, and this time the question was low, as he leaned close enough that I could feel the warmth coming from his body.

I swallowed. "I've already told you." My hands were twitching to do something wild like stroke the sandpaper texture of his jaw, so instead I folded them tightly in my lap. "That's none of your business. I didn't come here to be interrogated."

"Why did you come here, then?" Ash asked. "I know quality when I see it. That dress alone must have cost a small fortune. You didn't come for money. And you don't

seem like you're here for the thrill."

At the moment my whole body did seem to be experiencing quite the thrill, but I pushed that aside. "I'm hardly likely to confide my motivations to a stranger. My reasons are my own. Now" – I got abruptly to my feet, invading his space and forcing him to lean back – "as I've explained that I wasn't cheating, I assume our business here is concluded. I'd like to collect my winnings and be on my way."

"You know," Ash said ponderously, "this icy attitude of yours really gets my heart racing." He reached forward and lightly touched my hand, sliding his fingers up towards my wrist. It was a delicate touch, light and unthreatening, but I felt as though sparks were about to start flying across my skin. He pulled me gently towards him, resting my palm on his chest so that I could feel his heart beating – hard and fast – beneath it.

"I-I—" I stammered, thrown. I was no stranger to flirtation, but it was clear that Ash was a master of the art. I could appreciate that, could enjoy the way my own heart beat in time with his. "You made me promise to keep my hands off you," I reminded him, the words a trifle breathless.

He released my wrist with a smile. "So I did. Though, as I recall, we said nothing about my hands on you, did we, my lady?"

"I believe such an eventuality was covered under the demand that you behave like a gentleman," I managed, and decided there was no harm in keeping my hand pressed against the firm planes of his chest. He was standing so close. He smelled delicious, spicy and masculine.

"But as I already told you," he murmured, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, "I am no gentleman."

With a sigh, I tipped my head back, my eyes fluttering closed of their own accord. Lady Felicity Vane should definitely not allow a strange pirate to kiss her in the back office of a gambling den, but I didn't feel like Lady Felicity Vane just at that moment. I felt free, and reckless with it. I had a feeling that kissing Ash would be an education, and I was nothing if not thorough in my studies.

His lips were a breath away from mine, his hands reaching up to cradle my head, fingers gentle as they tangled in my hair. I felt a sudden tug and, with a whisper of silk against silk, the ribbon holding my mask in place came loose.

I made a sound of surprise as the mask fell into his hands. I froze, blinking up at him, as his gaze moved hungrily across my face.

"There you are," he said, his thumb and forefinger loosely gripping my chin.

Suddenly the door flew open. A slight boy came barrelling inside, Davey on his heels.

"Ash, you scoundrel! Stop that at once!" the boy cried, outraged. "Unhand her!"

I stared. Sighed. Took a step away from Ash.

"Izzy," I said. "What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER FIVE

“What am I doing here?” exclaimed Izzy, dressed as a young boy in worn, faded clothing, and she folded her arms across her chest. “What are you doing here?” She swung to face Ash, her expression furious. “And why are you ” – she jabbed a finger towards him – “manhandling her?”

“Would we call it manhandling?” Ash quirked a brow.

“Yes, we would, you absolute menace,” Izzy said fiercely, stomping towards us. “I swear, Ash, you are the biggest flirt in all of England.”

“Please, Isobel.” Ash grinned. “Let’s not limit this to England, it’s insulting; I was a sailor, you know.” He winked at me, and Izzy growled. I feared she was spending too much time with my brother.

Clearly seeing there was no immediate threat (from me, at least; Izzy looked like she was about to start spitting fire), Davey slipped back out to the hallway, and another figure sauntered through the doorway in his place. He was a slightly older man and the picture of elegance, his dark hair was swept back from a long, handsome face. He took in the sight of me and Ash – my hair dishevelled, my cheeks flushed, the gold mask lying at my feet – and let out a put-upon sigh.

I was getting the distinct impression that I was not the first girl to be caught in Ash’s office in a state of ... dishevelment. I found this information intriguing. I was not a prude, and it always seemed to me a much better idea to kiss someone who had had plenty of practice. I felt a shiver again at the thought of kissing Ash, it was a

possibility that warranted further consideration. I pressed my lips together, and his eyes dropped to my mouth, then lifted, heat in his gaze.

“Just ... stop that!” Izzy reached out for Ash’s arm, yanking him back and away from me.

“Stop what?” Ash asked innocently.

“You’re ... you’re smouldering at her,” Izzy said.

“She smouldered at me first,” Ash protested.

“Did I?” I asked. I turned to Izzy apologetically. “I was considering whether or not it would be worth kissing him, and it must have just happened.”

Ash gave a delighted shout of laughter, while Izzy raised her hands to her short brown wig and made a sound of frustration. “You shouldn’t be thinking about kissing anyone , Felicity. Especially not that man.”

“Felicity, is it?” Ash’s eyes swept over me. “From the Latin for ‘good fortune’. Looks like you really are set to be my good-luck charm.”

The elegant man’s reaction was different. He stepped forward, his mouth tightening.

“Not Felicity Vane?” he asked, his voice soft and somehow all the more dangerous for it. At Izzy’s answering nod, he let out a groan. “Oh, wonderful, Ash – that’s absolutely perfect.”

“Now, Joe...” Ash began soothingly, but he was cut short by Joe’s glare.

“Don’t you now, Joe me, you blockhead,” Joe snapped. “You know how things have

been lately. We've quite enough to deal with without—"

"What are you dealing with?" Izzy asked keenly.

"A few minor supply issues," Ash interrupted, waving a dismissive hand. "And a handful of card sharps descending on the place. Nothing to worry about. The Penny is doing well so they were always bound to turn up. I took care of it."

"But we don't need further complications," Joe continued. "I'm going to let you be the one to explain to the Duke of Roxton why you were alone in your office with his sister in the middle of the night."

"Yes." Izzy looked smug. "I think Max is going to have one or two things to say to you."

"That's quite enough," I snapped, annoyed now.

All three of them turned to me.

"No one is telling Max anything. What happened here is none of his business." I glared, first at Izzy and then at Joe. "Nor is it any of yours. I am an eighteen-year-old woman, and – according to several of the world's leading mathematicians – one of the most promising minds of my generation, not that anyone in my life acts like it. I am not a child to be coddled, and I'm certainly not a possession to be guarded by my big brother. It is insulting."

Here I treated Izzy to a hard stare and she had the decency to look ashamed.

"I will think about kissing whomever I like. In fact," I continued, "I have made it a practice to kiss whomever I choose, whenever I choose, and I have never once felt the need to take my brother's opinion on the matter into consideration, nor my sister-in-

law's, nor that of any other stranger wholly unconnected with me."

I had, in fact, engaged in my own research on the subject with enthusiasm. I thought about the soft, lush kisses I'd shared with Lady Julia Farnworth – as well as the surprisingly passionate embraces with Mr Jones, the quiet lawyer's clerk who had visited Max a time or two – and smiled.

Ash grabbed my hand, lifting it to his lips. "Marry me."

"No, thank you," I replied coolly despite the prickling, tingling feeling that was running all over my skin. "I would simply like, as I've already stated, to collect my winnings and go home."

"The lady has been gaming?" Joe asked neutrally.

I straightened my spine. "The lady has been winning."

"Yes." Izzy sighed. "And the lady has been flirting with Edward Laing."

Ash's lazy gaze sharpened. "Has she indeed?"

I glanced between them. "I certainly have not. I don't even know an Edward Laing."

"I had a report that the two of you were laughing over the vingt-et-un table," Izzy said.

"A report?" I said sweetly. "Why would you be receiving reports, Izzy?"

Some colour crept into Izzy's cheeks. "I mean, a friend saw you ... and told me."

"Mmm," I murmured. "I can't help but notice that's also an interesting outfit you're

wearing,” I said, and she glanced down at her trousers with a worried frown. It seemed she had realized I might have questions too. “I think there was a man who spoke to me at the table,” I added. “But I didn’t catch his name. I was busy concentrating on the cards.”

“Apparently, Mr Laing was especially struck by you,” Izzy continued doggedly.

“I should imagine so,” I replied, looking down at the gently dipping neckline of my dress. “My gown is becoming, and I do think the masks are dashing. Also, I was winning an awful lot of money.”

“An irresistible combination,” Ash agreed helpfully.

Izzy frowned. “Well, I’m glad to hear you don’t know the man.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Oh,” Izzy floundered. “I only meant it wouldn’t be appropriate for you to be talking to a man so intimately,” she said, regaining some of her poise.

“Really, Izzy, I had no idea before tonight that you were so obsessed with propriety,” I said, letting my gaze move again slowly and deliberately over her costume. “Perhaps now would be a good time to explain what, exactly, you are doing here.”

“Yes,” Izzy said, coughing into her hand. “I suppose it does seem strange, but there is a very – er – simple explanation. Teresa and I made a small wager that I could pass for a boy, you see.”

“Mmm.” I tilted my head. “And that wager brought you to a gambling den in the middle of the night?”

“Well, you know how convincing Teresa can be,” Izzy murmured vaguely.

I met my sister-in-law’s eyes. “As much fun as this is, let’s cut through to the meat of the matter, shall we? I assume that the agency that you work for has an interest in this Edward Laing character and that’s why you’re here tonight?”

I had the distinct pleasure of rendering Izzy utterly speechless.

“I—I—”

I waited patiently for her to find her words.

“I suppose I should stop being surprised by you, Felicity Vane,” she said finally, on an exhale.

I let a pointed silence do the talking here, deciding it was unnecessary for me to agree aloud.

“In answer to your question, yes,” she continued reluctantly. “My ... organization is looking into Edward Laing. We believe him to be a dangerous man.”

“And we believe him to be a cheat,” Ash said, moving back to sit behind his desk and shuffling through a sheaf of papers. “A clever one.”

“You called me a cheat not half an hour ago,” I pointed out. “Perhaps this Laing fellow is simply using the same mathematical principles that I was?”

“You accused Felicity of cheating?” Izzy’s outrage at this outstripped any she’d shown over finding Ash and myself in a compromising situation. It warmed my heart, and made it at least thirty per cent easier to forgive her for the overbearing routine that she’d clearly learned from my brother.

“I’ve been shown the error of my ways.” Ash held up his hands in surrender. “Your sister-in-law has a singular mind.”

“Yes, she does,” Izzy snapped, and I was reminded of a mother hen, feathers ruffled.

“If Laing isn’t cheating, then he’s an incredibly skilled player. But to answer your question, Felicity” – Ash’s eyes flashed to mine and he said my name as if it tasted delicious – “I don’t believe that Laing has your brains ... although he is cunning.”

“I can be cunning,” I said, stung. “You try having any kind of life when your older brother is a government spy with an overprotective streak that runs several miles wide.”

Izzy choked on thin air.

“So you know about...” Izzy trailed off.

“The two of you sneaking around like a couple of cat burglars?” I arched a brow. “It has come to my attention. Even if neither of you felt the need to share the information with me yourselves.”

“You know your brother loves you,” she croaked when she had regained a hold on herself. “And you know that he’s only cautious because of your history—”

“Yes, yes.” I cut her off. “I know. I don’t have to like it, though.”

“No,” Izzy said with some sympathy, and I saw a spark of understanding in her eyes. “No, you don’t. I can see that we’ve both made a lot of mistakes.”

“While this tender family moment is extremely moving,” Joe drawled, “perhaps we can focus on the matter at hand.”

“Yes, we’ve got something for you, Izzy. One of our girls heard that Laing is organizing a private high-stakes game of draw poker next week,” Ash put in.

Izzy was instantly alert. “Interesting. Does she know who else is invited?”

Ash shook his head, his fingers drumming against the top of his desk. “No, though I suspect there will be several sizeable marks for him to target.”

“You believe he’ll cheat people out of their money?” I asked.

“Yes,” Izzy said distantly. “He’s been working hard the past few months to garner a significant sum. The question is why. I won’t go into the details, but suffice to say, we’re learning that with Edward Laing, there’s every chance his intentions are dangerous.” Despite how deliberately vague Izzy was being, I felt a trickle of unease at that. “Our surveillance suggests an increase in activity and that whatever game he’s playing may be at a turning point. I’d give a lot to be at that private game he’s holding – he might let something slip.”

“It would be easy enough to get him to hold the game here,” Ash said.

Izzy nodded thoughtfully. “You think he’d want that?”

Ash shrugged. “I don’t see why not – we have private rooms where we often host high-stakes games. It lends a certain clout to the proceedings – I imagine Laing would snap our fingers off.”

Joe nodded. “I doubt Laing would suspect anything. We have eyes everywhere. We could get someone into the game, maybe. Turn it to our advantage. Stop Laing amassing this fortune he’s putting together.”

Izzy said, “And hopefully stop his scheme too ... or at least slow him down. It’s a

good idea. I'll have to discuss this with..." Her eyes slid to me. "My associates."

"It's worth mentioning to them that we have a secret weapon," Ash said.

Izzy raised her brows in question and his smile only grew as his gaze moved to lock with mine.

"Me?" I asked.

"Absolutely not!" Izzy exploded.

"What do you mean?" I asked curiously.

"Could you do what you did downstairs but with a different card game?" Ash asked. He produced a small gold coin from his pocket and began to roll it in an absent movement along the top of his knuckles. It was a strangely hypnotic gesture, and I watched those long, clever fingers rise and fall.

"Certainly the principles apply," I said, gathering my thoughts. "For a game like draw poker the odds would alter based on several different factors – counting the cards and calculating the probability of each potential hand as the deck was dealt would be complicated. An interesting problem to tackle, actually... Games of chance will always be mathematical problems at heart. It would never be faultless, but I suppose that with work, one could dramatically improve one's chances."

"It's not possible," Joe said firmly.

Ash's smile had a feral edge as he flipped the coin up into the air and caught it. "Felicity could do it."

The certainty in his words had me thinking about kissing him all over again.

“Yes,” I murmured. “I believe I could.”

Izzy’s eyes moved from Ash to me, and she groaned.

“Oh, your brother is going to kill me.”

CHAPTER SIX

Despite the fact the sun was creeping its way up, Izzy and I reached the house before Max did, which, I thought as I stripped off my gloves, was probably for the best. She and I had plenty to discuss.

“Before you start,” Izzy said as we stood in the hall, “let me go first.”

I nodded.

“I am a worm,” she pronounced.

This rather took the wind out of my sails. “What?”

“An absolute worm ,” Izzy continued, tugging the wig from her head and ruffling her hair. “It’s no excuse, of course, but when I met you, you had just turned sixteen and you seemed so young and so sheltered, and then Max treated you as though you were defenceless and I suppose I did too, though I should have known better.” She flopped down into a comfortable seat in the drawing room. “I’m disgusted with myself. Really. To underestimate another woman, when I’ve seen what I’ve seen, it’s unforgivable .”

The tongue-lashing Izzy was giving herself was making it difficult for me to argue with her, which was frustrating. I’d tried not to hold it against her, the way she repeatedly underestimated me, matching Max’s attitude, but as she said – I’d always hoped for better from her.

I sat down, noticed that the fire was crackling cheerfully in the grate, and wasn't surprised to discover that Wheeler, the butler, knew even more about what went on in this house than I did.

"I don't think I'd call you a worm," I said reluctantly.

"Well, you should." Izzy sat up straighter and gripped my hand. "You don't know all the details of my own family history, but I was young when I took on responsibility for keeping my household running, and I did so in unconventional ways, and in secret. Looking after people, protecting them was my ... purpose, I suppose. It was a sort of singular focus that kept me going when things were difficult. When I married Max, it changed so much, but I suppose the instinct is still there – to manage people, to keep them safe and cocooned from an imperfect truth." She looked thoughtfully into the fire. "Perhaps too safe. You said Max is overprotective. I see that I followed his lead there and didn't give you the respect you deserve. I'm truly sorry, Felicity."

"All right. But it's annoying. I was really braced for a good argument, and I had so many good points to make."

Now Izzy laughed, her posture loosening. "You could still make them," she suggested. "Perhaps it would make us both feel better."

"No." I also looked into the fire. "I don't think it would."

There was a moment of quiet.

"Do you want to tell me," Izzy hesitated, as though choosing her words carefully, "why you decided to visit the Lucky Penny tonight?"

"I wanted to make some money. And I did. I made a lot of it. Only, thanks to this Ash character, I don't currently have it, and I had to stop long before I planned."

“You wanted money? I was sure you were going to say it was for the thrill of it.”

“It was thrilling, I suppose.” I remembered the excitement of the cards turning, of winning hand after hand, and then my mind moved instead to the moment in Ash’s office, when my mask had slipped from my face, and his lips had skated so close to mine. I shook my head, as if to dispel the feeling. “But that was a secondary motivation.” I said firmly. “It was the money I was after.”

“Because Max has control of your trust?” Izzy surmised.

I nodded. “Until I marry or turn twenty-five. After some consideration I decided that neither of those options are acceptable to me.”

Izzy nodded too, and I felt relief that she wasn’t going to argue the point.

“This is about university?” she said instead. Her tone was neutral; I wasn’t sure what she thought about the matter.

“I’m going to study mathematics. Max knows that already.”

“He does. He and your mother want you to have a season first.”

I got to my feet impatiently. “Because they both think party dresses and the promise of marriage and babies will magically change things for me, but it won’t. It won’t! ” I was an inch away from stamping my foot, so I took a deep breath to steady myself instead. Having a tantrum like a child wouldn’t help my case.

“When Mother is here,” I said, regaining my poise, “she and Max will be a united front. I know she’ll be against the idea of university. She already thinks I spend too much time with my books. Max will hate the idea of being at loggerheads with her. And I ... I don’t want to be a disappointment. I want to please them. But, in doing so,

I slip away from myself.” I swallowed. “I don’t know how to express it clearly. I hate the whole wretched idea of a social season. It isn’t only that I don’t want to get married. I find the notion of a sort of market where I am to be put up for sale ... disgusting . It seems outrageous to me that we’re expected to accept such a situation as being ordinary. And there are so many people, so many rules, so much attention – it’s crushing. Whenever I’ve tried to explain this to Max, I know how it sounds: ungrateful or contrary. But the truth is that I can’t breathe when I think about it. And I thought that if I won the money, if I could pay the fees myself, then Max would have no way of stopping me...”

As I trailed off, my voice got smaller, and I hated myself for it, the way I felt so desperate and uncertain, so out of control of my own life.

Izzy had been frowning throughout this lengthy speech, and now she looked distressed. “You know...” She sounded cautious again. “You know he only wants what is best for you.”

“Of course I do,” I huffed. “But he thinks only he knows what’s best for me.”

Izzy chuckled ruefully. “Yes, that’s Max all over. That unfortunate chivalrous streak of his.”

“He thinks of me as a child, weak.”

“No, Felicity,” Izzy jumped in. “Not weak.”

“Fragile, then. Delicate. Like a piece of the best china. Something to be brought out and shown off on special occasions, then packed carefully away. And I know why.” I cut her off before she could speak again. “I know that he has his reasons, but I’m not fragile, Izzy. I’m not, and I want to make him understand that.”

There was a beat of silence, when only the angry snap of the fire broke the quiet between us.

“Very well,” Izzy said, seeming to come to a decision. “We’ll talk to him together.”

“Really?” I perked up.

“Yes. Of course.” She reached out and pressed one of my hands between her own. “Everything you’ve said is perfectly right and true. I should have inserted myself in the matter before but I didn’t want to come between the two of you.” She exhaled. “But I’ll warn you now, it’s not going to be easy. Your brother is stubborn as a mule when it comes to protecting the people he loves. He and I have had more than one disagreement about my work.”

“Have you?” I asked, fascinated. “And how do you get round him?”

“Well,” Izzy replied, “first I remind him of several promises he made to me when he proposed. Then I tell him to stop behaving like a complete ass. That usually works.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

Her smile was feline. “I kiss him until he forgets what he was talking about in the first place. It never fails.”

I shuddered.

“You did ask.”

“I’m extremely sorry I did,” I said. “I might have known it would be something like that, the way the two of you act like lovestruck fools half the time.”

Izzy shrugged. “I love my husband very much – even when he’s being difficult.”

“Do you think he’ll change his mind about this? About me, I mean?”

Izzy didn’t have time to respond to that question, because there was a short knock at the door and then Wheeler entered. Despite the early hour, the man was immaculately turned out, posture stiff and imposing. While he didn’t seem surprised to find Izzy in boy’s clothes, his mouth twitched ever so slightly in an expression of disapproval. I was familiar with this mouth twitch, having seen it almost every day of my life. I didn’t mind it and never had, because I knew Wheeler’s darkest secret: deep, deep, deep down, the man had a heart as soft as whipped cream.

“A message from His Grace, Your Grace,” he said, holding out a silver tray with a folded note on top of it.

“Thank you, Wheeler,” Izzy said with equal formality, taking the letter from him. My sister-in-law had yet to discover Wheeler’s secret for herself, and so she was still slightly awed by him.

I grinned and shot him a wink behind her back, which he pretended to ignore.

“Well, it looks as though we won’t be finding out what your brother thinks in the immediate future,” Izzy sighed. “He’s been called away on urgent business. He doesn’t know for how long, but at least a week.” She scanned the rest of the letter and whatever she saw there had colour flushing her cheeks and a soft smile on her lips. She folded the note and carefully slipped it into her pocket. Presumably to moon over later. “Thank you, Wheeler.”

The butler gave a stiff bow and left the room.

“Well,” I said brightly, “at least that simplifies some things.”

“Does it?” Izzy said, still clearly distracted by Max’s sweet nothings.

“Yes. We’ll have no trouble spending the next few days scheming to take down this Laing fellow.”

Izzy’s gaze sharpened. “Yes. That is true.” She sounded thoughtful. “After all, work gives a woman independence and that’s what you’re looking for, isn’t it?”

“Work?” Something opened up inside me at the word, something that felt even better than the idea of winning Max over. As Izzy said, it felt like freedom. “You mean, work with your agency?”

“As a consultant, I should imagine – nothing out in the field, of course. You’ve had no training.”

“Of course,” I agreed.

“And I will have to talk to Mrs Finch.”

“Mrs Finch?”

A smile curled at Izzy’s lips. “There are some things you don’t know, Felicity. Not yet, anyway.”

“But I will?” I asked, eager to find out more, desperate as always to follow a trail of questions to their answer.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “I have to make arrangements this afternoon, but we’ll go then.”

“Go where?”

“Tomorrow, Felicity, I will take you to the Aviary.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Izzy refused to be drawn further, but I was so tired that when I dragged myself upstairs and fell into bed, I dropped into a deep sleep that lasted several hours. These midnight excursions were certainly not conducive for a good night's rest, and when I woke well into the afternoon it was with the nagging edge of a headache.

Izzy had disappeared out again, and so I did what I usually did when left home alone to my own devices: I shut myself in my study and I worked.

If there was a chance my skill with cards could help the Aviary, then I wanted to begin thinking about it right away. I laid the playing cards out on the desk in front of me, along with the trusty guide to card games that I'd acquired from the library, and began moving through the gameplay. Immediately, it was clear that the mathematics of draw poker was significantly more complex than in vingt-et-un, where I had only to worry about the cards the dealer had on show, as well as the cards in my own hand. Here, there were many more variables, many unknowns.

I bent my head to my notes, turning cards and working through calculations. When my stomach rumbled with hunger and I found a plate of biscuits balanced on a full tea tray beside my elbow, I realized, blinking as though coming awake from a dream, that Wheeler must have been here.

I nibbled on a ginger nut, and pressed the back of my hand to the side of the teapot, which was still warm. Pouring myself a cup and leaning back in my chair, I took a reviving sip of tea as my eyes travelled over the pages of scribbled notes in front of me.

“Are you getting anywhere?” A familiar, smoky voice broke the silence, and I started, my gaze flying to the armchair by the window. There, a figure lounged carelessly in the darkness that had fallen.

“Ash.” The name escaped my lips before I could catch it and I didn’t like how husky it sounded.

He sat half in shadow, barely more than a flash of white teeth, eyes gleaming like a cat’s.

“It’s a real pleasure watching you work, Lady Felicity Vane.”

I fought to remain calm, although his appearance was a surprise. Perhaps I was still asleep, tumbled into those strange, restless dreams of earlier, where he and I had been—

“How did you get in here?” I managed, cutting off that train of thought. Not that I was averse to engaging in a little flirtation. Whatever else Ash was, he certainly wasn’t boring.

He tipped his head towards the window, which was slightly open, a slanted line of silver light pouring in and carving along the strong lines of his profile.

“I came up the pear tree,” he said, and that, at least, made perfect sense – I’d used the entrance many times myself, as the pear tree in question was conveniently placed, and I’d slipped our gardener a generous bribe to quietly keep its broad branches clear.

“I tried the front door first,” Ash continued, “but your butler informed me in no uncertain terms that you were not at home to visitors.” Here his eyes widened, innocent. “I don’t think the man took a liking to me.”

I pressed my lips together, imagining Wheeler's reaction to the rascally-looking figure in front of me. "So naturally you decided to break in to the house instead."

"Naturally," Ash agreed.

He stood up and walked towards the desk – though sauntered would be more accurate – emerging into the pool of light that surrounded me, a flickering gold cast by a brace of fat white candles. Yes, Wheeler had certainly been in, because I hadn't lit them and by the looks of it they'd been burning for some time.

Reaching into his pocket, Ash produced a sheaf of paper bills, dropping them carelessly atop my notes. "Your winnings, my lady."

I fanned the bills across the tabletop.

"Counting them, love?" His eyebrows arched. "Don't you trust me?"

"Now why would I do a foolish thing like that?"

He leaned over the desk towards me and tugged on the end of my hair, which I'd carelessly bundled into a long braid.

"Your hair ... is blue," he said, apparently fascinated.

I pulled the braid from his fingers. "I must have dipped it in the ink pot again," I said, rubbing ineffectually at the strands. The ends were a startling sapphire blue, and I knew from experience it would take days for it to fade, creating a challenge that Nancy would tsk disapprovingly over when she styled my hair. "What time is it?"

A smile pulled at his lips. "A few minutes after midnight."

I blinked. “I’ve lost track of time again.”

“So I can see.” Ash peered down at my notes, then shook his head. “This is like another language.”

I nodded. “It’s one of the things I enjoy most about it. Like being let in on a secret way of understanding the world.”

“And...? Are you getting anywhere?”

“I think so.” I rubbed at my forehead where that annoying headache persisted. “It’s an interesting puzzle. I believe it is possible to gain a distinct advantage against one’s opponents, though to play even with improved odds would still be a gamble.” I gnawed on my lip, as Ash dragged a chair over to sit across from me.

“Can you explain some of this to me?” he asked, and once again I was struck by the sincerity of his interest. Such a small thing – the barest effort, but sadly enough of a novelty to be notable.

“The basics of it will be familiar to any player – they probably don’t think of it as mathematical, but it is,” I said, tapping the deck of cards. “There are fifty-two cards in a deck, and a hand consists of five cards. That means that if we use the binomial coefficient we can calculate that there are 2,598,960 possible combinations.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Ash eyed the neatly written equation that I’d pushed in front of him.

“The beginning is simple. There are four suits, each with thirteen cards, so your chance of being dealt a heart card, for example, is one in four,” I said, turning five cards over on the surface between us. “In this hand I’ve been dealt the two of hearts and the seven of hearts. That means that there are now eleven heart cards left in a

deck of forty-seven, so the likelihood of me drawing another heart if I were to trade one of my other cards has reduced from 25 per cent to 23.4 per cent.”

Ash nodded. “But that only follows if you’re the only one drawing from the pack. Other players may hold any number of heart cards.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, pleased that he was so quick. “So it becomes about the probabilities of several things – the cards I am dealt, the odds that another player can beat the hand I currently hold, the likelihood of improving my hand were I to discard and draw, for example.”

“Hmmm.” Ash examined the cards. “I see what you mean. These are the same things I’d think about when playing, but I wouldn’t go so far as to calculate percentages.”

“That’s because it’s a complex problem,” I agreed. “It involves holding a lot of numbers in your mind. As the gameplay progresses, one could include statistics on the hands your opponents play and discard which could, in turn, alter the potential in your own hand. Really, it’s fascinating.”

“So let’s play.” Ash sat back in his chair with that crooked grin on his face.

“Are you any good?” I asked.

“I can hold my own.”

“Fine,” I said, eager to put my theory into practice. “You deal.”

Ash scooped up the cards and shuffled them deftly, setting the cards moving in a competent blur. The look he gave me then was smug. I tore up pieces of paper to work in place of coins for the betting, dividing them between us.

We settled into the game, and I watched as Ash exchanged two of his cards.

“You know,” he said easily, “poker is about more than mathematics. More than theory.”

“What do you mean?” I exchanged one of my cards and after some thought threw one of my paper tokens into the pot.

“It’s about reading your opponents, the art of the good bluff...” He threw his own token carelessly into the mix.

“You mean it’s the perfect excuse for you to stare at me,” I said, raising my next bet as I felt his gaze on my face. His interest in me was obvious, and I couldn’t deny I found it intriguing.

“I meant, it’s the perfect excuse for you to stare at me ,” Ash countered, matching my bet and throwing his cards down with a flourish. “Flush.”

“Two pair,” I said, laying my own hand down. “You win.”

“I usually do,” Ash said, scooping up the tokens and adding them to his pile.

“You’ve played a lot of draw poker?” I asked as he dealt the hands again.

“Picked it up in America – it was all the rage over there, but it’s getting more and more popular here these days. We have more people playing poker than Brag at the club now.”

“When were you in America?” I asked, envy creeping into my voice as I drew three cards.

“When I was in Her Majesty’s navy,” Ash said. “And you want to be careful of that.” Reaching over, he touched his finger gently to the corner of my mouth.

My mind emptied, as the world shrank down to the brush of his fingertip against my lips. My breath caught, our eyes met for a long beat.

“What?” I asked, my voice only slightly hoarse as he drew his hand back, a pink flush high on his cheeks.

“You smiled when you saw your cards. It’s called a tell. Now I know you have a good hand,” he said, and I thought he looked flustered. I was glad I wasn’t the only one affected by whatever sparked between us. The pull that I felt towards him was more than simply physical. I was enjoying him, enjoying his company, I realized.

“Or perhaps that’s what I wanted you to think,” I managed, gathering my wits. Still, I folded my hand and any uncertainty vanished from Ash’s face, replaced by the now-familiar smirk.

“Again,” I demanded, tapping the desk with my knuckles, and he complied, shuffling the cards once more. I tried not to think about how squirmingly enjoyable it was watching him, the cards flying from hand to hand with deft fingers.

“You were in the navy?” I asked.

“I was. For five years.”

“Five years?” I repeated, startled. “You must have only been a boy when you joined.”

“I was thirteen. So, yes, I was a boy. It was the best decision I ever made.”

He sounded sad.

“If you liked it so much, why did you leave?” I shoved my remaining paper tokens towards him.

He threw his own tokens in and sat back. “I didn’t have much of a choice at the time.” His mouth thinned, and I wondered how this fitted into what I knew about his secret life as the son of a gentleman. “But it worked out fine in the end. I met Joe and we opened the Penny together, and now here I am, a reputable businessman.”

“Reputable,” I scoffed. “Breaking into a young lady’s rooms in the dead of night to play her at cards.”

“To beat her at cards,” Ash said, laying down his hand. “Straight.”

“Not this time,” I crowed, delighted. “Four of a kind.”

“Huh.” Ash looked nonplussed as he rubbed a hand across his jaw. “You certainly didn’t give that away.”

“I know,” I said. “But the odds of you beating me with a straight flush were 72,192.33 to one so I was feeling reasonably confident about it.”

I looked up from where I was busy gathering up all the paper tokens to find him watching me with an inscrutable expression.

“Next time,” he said. “I won’t make it so easy.”

“Next time it won’t matter.” I sent him a slow, simmering smile, enjoying the way his cheeks took on that hint of pink again. However good he was, it seemed Ash had a tell of his own. “I’m a fast learner.”

“I’m starting to see that, princess.” He pushed away from the desk, but then leaned

over so that his mouth hovered only a breath away from mine. “I know a gambler when I see one.”

“I’m not a gambler,” I said primly. “I’m a mathematician.”

He was still laughing as he climbed out of the window.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning, I would probably have thought the whole encounter with Ash had been a strange dream were it not for the money he had left behind on my desk, as well as a scrawled I.O.U. on top of the pile of paper tokens from our game.

I didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved that he hadn't tried to kiss me. I was increasingly sure that kissing Ash would be a most enjoyable experience. He was extremely attractive, and the heat that snapped and sizzled between us seemed worth ... investigating.

"Are you ready?" Izzy asked, bustling into my study while adjusting her hat.

"Certainly," I agreed, pushing the money under a stack of papers. Izzy didn't need to know everything that went on in my life. "Let's go and meet the mysterious Mrs Finch."

The weather was pleasant enough for us to make the short journey to the Aviary on foot. We didn't speak much, and that was fine with me – I was perfectly happy to enjoy the spring sunshine. It had felt like a long, cold winter, and when you were a young woman of a certain station, that meant a lot of time cooped up under supervision – unless you made your own clandestine forays into the outside world, of course. I was used to the onset of spring feeling like a welcome relief, a loosening of the reins, the time when my world opened up a bit wider.

Unfortunately for me, this year the spring also heralded the start of my first official London season, which would include my presentation at a nonsensical event still

called Queen Charlotte's Ball, despite the fact the woman herself had been dead for the best part of a century.

I kicked a pebble, the familiar rush of frustration surging inside me. Less than three weeks to put an end to those plans. I had a notion that, once Mother was here, there would be no stopping things. Even if Izzy miraculously managed to get Max on board, it would hardly make a difference. My adventure at the Penny had been lucrative, but I still hadn't nearly enough money to pay for my own tuition. Without that particular card to play, I wasn't confident I'd be able to convince my well-meaning brother of my determination. I wondered if I could simply return to the Penny and play again. Would Ash stop me? I didn't think so, but Joe may not be so keen now that he knew I was related to Max.

We came to a stop outside the Aviary, and I glanced at the cheerful window display, real silver-bark tree branches arranged in a graceful arch, covered in silk and velvet ribbons in a hundred shades of pink and red, a river of gold buttons gleaming across the floor like spilled treasure.

Above the door, in swirling cursive letters, the sign read:

The Aviary For all a lady requires

I had, of course, visited this shop several times before, dragged along by friends or Izzy, but I had absolutely no idea that it concealed any kind of secret. I still hardly knew what to think. Perhaps somewhere inside this building was an answer to my problems. I glanced once more at the elegant facade. It seemed unlikely.

The bell over the door chimed as we entered, and I was struck, as I always was, by how warm and inviting the place felt, full of trims and trinkets that invited you to admire, to touch.

We were the only customers in the shop, but an attractive redhead stood behind the dark counter, a grin stretching over her face when she saw us. Stepping aside, she drew back the curtain behind her, revealing a door.

“Right on time,” she said. “Mrs Finch is waiting for you. And, fair warning, Sylla’s invited herself along too.”

Beside me, Izzy smothered a sigh.

My eyebrows rose. There was only one Sylla that I knew of – Sylla Banaji, the daughter of Lady Anne Stanton and Sir Dinshaw Banaji. As she had managed to make it to the ripe old age of twenty-two without accepting a marriage proposal – despite being both beautiful and extraordinarily wealthy – I considered her something of a role model. She was also such an intimidating presence that I’d barely ever spoken to her.

“Max really is going to kill me,” Izzy muttered.

Apparently the young woman behind the counter knew my brother well enough to laugh at this. “You’d better not keep them waiting.” She shot me a friendly wink as Izzy led the way through the door and up a short staircase.

When she swung another door open, I was surprised to find that we were standing in a salon that must have occupied the entire first floor of the building.

An enormous double-sided fireplace sat in the centre of the room, with velvet-upholstered chairs and sofas arranged around it in cosy groupings. Everything was opulent, the colours a jewel box of dark emerald green and gleaming amethyst. There were bookcases spilling over with books and periodicals, and a piano stood in one corner, the top of it covered carelessly in unfurled maps. There were chess tables, some with games still in play, and I found myself itching to run my fingers over the

pieces. The walls of the space were painted white, but covered in murals of plants and flowers. I didn't know the names of any of them – though Izzy's friend Marigold Lockhart would, I was sure – but they seemed to me to be exotic, bright and spiky things crawling wildly up the walls. No sedate English roses here.

Along the back wall, the flowers vanished, replaced instead with the words:

I am no bird; and

no net ensnares me:

I am a free human being

with an independent will.

It was painted in tall, bold black letters. I knew the quote – Jane Eyre – and approved heartily of its sentiment. Whatever this place was, I liked it. I liked it a lot.

I had only a moment to take this all in, because despite the intriguing nature of my surroundings, my attention was commanded by the presence of the two women standing near the fireplace.

Sylla Banaji was sleek and graceful, her simple gown a slash of narrow-skirted cherry-red silk that might have looked flashy on anyone else, but was, on her, the picture of refined elegance. Her dark hair was pulled back from her finely boned face, and she watched me with hard eyes that gave nothing away.

The woman beside her must, I decided, be Mrs Finch. In contrast to Sylla, this woman was the picture of softness. She was perhaps forty years old, with a heart-shaped face dominated by eyes the same golden brown as her hair. She wore a pale pink gown that was feminine and pretty, and clung to her generous curves. When I

met her eyes, her gaze was so direct it cut through me like a warm knife through butter. It was as if she could see everything, as if the secrets I collected and hoarded to myself were there, between us, ready for her to pick up and look over at her leisure. I wasn't sure I liked that very much and I frowned, which brought an amused smile to her face.

"Felicity Vane," Izzy said, "I think you're already acquainted with Sylla Banaji, and this is Mrs Finch."

I dropped into a brief curtsey, and Mrs Finch gestured to the low table beside us, laid with a neatly arranged tea tray, the china teapot gently steaming.

"Please, Lady Felicity, take a seat," Mrs Finch said, and her voice was low and sweet, and once more at odds with the keen edge of her gaze.

Sylla remained silent, though that silence felt almost as weighty as Mrs Finch's scrutiny.

We sat down and were absorbed for several minutes in the familiar ritual of the tea tray, while Mrs Finch poured and made airy small talk. It was enough for me to catch my breath, to feel myself relax into these peculiar surroundings.

"So," Mrs Finch said finally, her teacup almost to her lips, "I should perhaps begin by telling you something about the work that the Aviary does."

"It would be a logical place to begin," I agreed. "I take it we're in some sort of..." I let my eyes move around the room. "Well, I imagine this is a more feminine version of a gentleman's club."

"In part," Mrs Finch said. "We provide a space for like-minded women to gather, but we're also an agency – an investigative agency of sorts. We take on cases for women

from all areas of society who for one reason or another need our help.”

“Help with what kind of thing?” I asked.

Mrs Finch spread her hands. “All manner of things. They might be victims of theft, blackmail, murder.” She ticked the words off carelessly. “And then of course there are any number of crimes perpetrated against women that don’t technically fall outside the law. A woman suffering at the hands of her husband, a young girl coerced into a relationship she doesn’t desire, a daughter whose father finds her inconvenient and wishes to lock her in an asylum, financial neglect, abandonment... The list is, unfortunately, endless.”

“That’s an important undertaking,” I said softly, seeing my sister-in-law in a new light. I had no idea that the work she did was not only so necessary but so radical. To tackle cases that were undoubtedly disturbing, but considered family matters by the law, where women had no recourse, nowhere to turn...

As if she’d read my mind, Mrs Finch continued. “In order to be as effective as we are, we occasionally work outside the rigid and limiting legal framework of this country.” Her voice was a purr now. “Therefore it is important that our agency remains secret.”

“I bet Max loves that,” I said, glancing at Izzy. “Oh, I wish I’d been there to see you explain it to him in the first place. Working from outside the law.” I laughed. “I bet he said you should hand everything over to the police.”

Izzy grimaced, but Sylla gave a choke of laughter. I don’t know who was more surprised by it – me or her.

Mrs Finch grinned. “Your brother may still be a work in progress,” she conceded. “He’s also a good and decent man. You must be fond of him. We certainly are.”

“Let’s not get carried away,” Sylla muttered into her teacup, the first words she had spoken since our arrival.

“It’s easy to love Max,” I agreed. “But to return to your work here, I take it that this Edward Laing character, the man I ran into at the Lucky Penny, is connected to one of these cases you’ve taken on?”

At this question, the other two women looked to Izzy. “You either trust me or you don’t,” I said impatiently. Sylla’s eyes narrowed, but Mrs Finch nodded. “Quite right,” she said, and she sat back in her chair, examining the fingernails on one hand. “In point of fact, Edward Laing is connected to several cases we’re currently looking into.”

Izzy took up the story. “A few weeks ago, a client came to us,” she said. “She was convinced that her sister had been murdered and that her sister’s husband was the culprit. He had much to gain from the death financially. However, his alibi was convincing.”

“How convincing?” I asked, trying to look unmoved by the conversational turn towards murder.

“He was giving a speech in the House of Commons,” Sylla said crisply, reaching forward to take a pale golden biscuit from the plate on the table.

“Oh.” I frowned. “Quite convincing, then.”

“Indeed,” Izzy said. “We took the case, and during our investigation, we came across a man who at first glance seemed an unlikely suspect: someone eminently respectable and mild-mannered – a wealthy, well-liked man. Initially he was merely a footnote, a slight connection, but, as a matter of routine, I looked into him. I didn’t like what I found.”

“Laing,” I guessed. “Does he have some sort of unsavoury past?”

“Quite the opposite,” Izzy replied. “He’s a model citizen.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Something about him felt wrong,” Izzy said slowly, “so I pushed a bit further. I still don’t know why. Instinct, I suppose.” She leaned back in her chair, blew out a deep breath. “Anyway, that’s when I realized that this particular model citizen had only existed for six years.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Only existed for six years?” I repeated. “What on earth do you mean?”

“Precisely that. The only Edward Laing I could trace of the right age died almost a dozen years ago in Somerset. There’s no information about the current Edward Laing before 1894 – no official information, that is.” Izzy drummed her fingers on top of her knee, her face a picture of concentration. “No birth certificate, no census information – though several people claim they went to school with him. They say he’s originally from a prominent northern family who emigrated to the continent before his birth, and sent him back to Britain for his schooling, but I can’t find any official records of this.

“The man we now know as Laing popped up in London six years ago, as if he’d been here all along,” she continued. “He has friends in high places, holds an extremely tidy sum of money in his bank account – apparently made through canny investments only over the last six years – and moves in all the right circles, though how he infiltrated those circles without a personal history I can only guess. He is well liked, welcome at all the best homes, viewed as an eligible bachelor by even the most discerning mothers, for whom his personal fortune and good manners do much to outweigh his lack of title. Even Edward Laing could not fabricate one of those.”

“So Laing is ... an alias?” I hazarded. “But how did he do it? Establish himself so neatly?”

“It might be bribery or blackmail,” Izzy said. “Only a few key figures need to claim him as an old friend for society to accept him.”

I looked from Izzy to Mrs Finch and Sylla. “And how is he involved in your murder?”

“We don’t know yet,” Sylla said. “We don’t have enough information.”

“We wouldn’t have any information at all if I hadn’t been following him.” Izzy’s voice was heated, unusually so for her. “I’m telling you, there’s something wrong. The man is rotten . The other women...”

“What other women?” I interrupted.

“It would appear that Mr Laing, or at least a man of his description, may be connected to several other crimes in the city,” Mrs Finch said calmly. “Or crimes made to look like accidents. Some cases are open with Scotland Yard, others have come through us. Mr Laing was present either at or near the scene of every one. His presence was never remarked upon or deemed suspicious. It seems he makes a lot of effort to be nondescript.”

There was a moment of chilled silence.

“Several other...” I repeated, my voice low as I trailed off and collected myself. “You believe this man may be responsible for more than one murder?” It had been only twelve years since the Whitechapel murders – the image of a homicidal monster was not confined to the stuff of nightmares; it haunted this city in a very real way.

“We don’t know yet,” Sylla said again, her face placid.

Mrs Finch smiled. “It goes against Sylla’s professional pride to allow that a single man has had his finger in so many of our pies without us being aware of it,” she said.

“What a delightful image.” Sylla’s lip curled.

“Nevertheless,” Mrs Finch continued, “it does seem possible, likely even, that Laing has been involved in multiple crimes. I suspect he is – among other things – a murderer for hire. A criminal of extreme calculation and ruthless efficiency, happy to fix any problem if the price is right. I’ve reviewed Izzy’s findings and I agree that there are some troubling patterns.”

“This is the man I met?” I said doubtfully, trying to recall the cheerful if unremarkable figure. “He didn’t seem particularly threatening.”

“That doesn’t mean much,” Sylla said archly. “But the truth is that we could be jumping at shadows. It is far too early in the investigation to be bringing anyone else in.”

“I don’t disagree” – Izzy frowned – “but if I’m right, we haven’t got the luxury of time. One way or another the man is dangerous, and if we don’t put a stop to it, he’ll hurt someone else. I’ve had my charm following Laing for several days now, and something is going on, and I think it’s to do with this poker game next week.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, for one thing there’s been a lot of irregular activity – visits to several banks, meetings with multiple unsavoury characters. Laing seems to have hired an impressive assortment of men we know as brawlers and thugs. He’s also taken out a lease on an old abandoned building near the docks under the name of Roberts. At the moment it stands empty so there’s nothing there to help us, though we’re keeping an eye on it. And this poker game he’s planning – big players, highly exclusive.”

“Who’s on the guest list?” I asked. “Anything of interest there?”

Mrs Finch poured herself another cup of tea. “No one stands out. There’s a bored young buck, a dour man who made his money in textiles, an ambitious American

entrepreneur – all of them are as they seem, as far as I know, and the only thing they have in common is fat bank balances. And that they like playing cards.”

“So he’s doing it for the money, then,” I mused. “I thought you said he had significant personal means.”

“He does. So why does he suddenly need such a sum? I believe that, whatever his scheme, it’s something on a larger scale than he’s undertaken previously,” Izzy put in.

“Perhaps,” Mrs Finch said. “But as Sylla says, we don’t have much to go on. Ash contacted me today to let me know that the game has been set for next week, in a private room at the Penny.”

“So the obvious next step is for us to infiltrate that game and see if Laing lets any clue of his plans slip,” said Izzy. “At the very least we can stop him from winning a tremendous sum of money which might be put to nefarious uses. As I mentioned yesterday, Felicity has an advantage at cards, based on her mathematical knowledge. She’s agreed to join us as a consultant, to help prepare whoever we send in.”

“Nonsense,” I said, straightening my skirts, and keeping my voice steady. “You’ll be sending me in.”

“We certainly will not!” Izzy exclaimed. Sylla only watched me, Sphinx-like, while Mrs Finch cleared her throat. Izzy glanced between the two of them. “I thought perhaps Winnie...”

Sylla snorted. “You want to send Winnie in to play poker at a gaming den? She’d be more likely to blow the place up.”

I wasn’t sure who this Winnie person was, though she sounded interesting, but the

point still needed to be made. “Izzy, Ash said Laing is either a cheat or an incredibly skilled player. I can’t possibly teach someone the things I know – I’ll barely have time to prepare myself in a week. I spent three months getting ready to play vingt-et-un, and the mathematics of that are far less complex. As it is, I can only create a slender advantage and that’s because of the information I can hold in my brain. If you want to ensure Laing doesn’t win, then you need me.” In truth, the thought of coming up against a potential murderer had me feeling more than a tad nervous. But, after all, I wouldn’t be alone with the man.

“So we don’t do it,” Izzy said, firm. She held up her hand before I could protest. “This isn’t me being overprotective. We have rules. We don’t put people in the field without considerable training. Six months, minimum.”

“It may be that in this case we could make an exception.” Mrs Finch’s voice was quiet and Izzy’s eyes flew to her. “It’s clear that Felicity is the best, the only person for the job on such short notice, and if your suspicions are correct – which for the record, I am inclined to believe – then the situation is dire enough to warrant extreme measures.” Her eyes took on a distant look for a moment. “Yes,” she said, almost to herself. “I really do fear it is.”

There was a pause, and then she smiled at me. “I’m sure you’ll be pleased to know that Ash had already anticipated this situation. He’s arranged for Felicity to join the game as his guest under a false name. She’ll be masked, of course, and he will assume the hosting duties himself. I’m assured that Felicity’s safety is his highest priority.”

“Oh, well, if Ash says he has it all in hand.” Izzy rolled her eyes.

“I know the boy is a rascal” – Mrs Finch’s eyes twinkled – “but give him some credit, Izzy. I think he might surprise you.”

“This is my sister we’re talking about,” Izzy said fiercely.

“Izzy, I’ll be perfectly safe,” I sniffed, trying to cover the quick burst of emotion I felt at her fierce declaration. “Stop fussing. I’ll simply go to the game and stop Laing from winning too much money. I should think between Ash and myself, we’ll be able to work out if and how he cheats. I’ll keep my ears open for any information you might find useful, then I’ll get in a carriage and come home. It’s hardly scaling walls and ducking knives. All of which I know you do, by the way.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Izzy murmured. She turned to Sylla. “What do you think?”

Sylla was silent for a moment. “I think if Mrs Finch believes it necessary, then we’d be wise to listen. If your suspicions about this Laing character do prove accurate, then he’s a dangerous, unknown quantity, and that simply won’t do. Lady Felicity appears” – here, her eyes drifted over me, taking inventory – “at least fairly competent. She’s clearly outwitted her brother on several fronts.”

I grinned.

“Of course, that particular task is hardly difficult,” she added, delivering a quick, sharp prick to any inflation in my ego.

“I suppose you’re right,” Izzy said reluctantly. “Though I cannot like it.”

“Then it’s settled,” Sylla said firmly. “We have a week to prepare. Felicity may receive at least some training.”

I perked up at that. I didn’t precisely know what training at the Aviary might look like, but I had a feeling it was going to be markedly different from the sort of finishing lessons I’d been subjected to at home. I thought about the moment when I

had twisted Davey's wrist. How I'd felt powerful and in control. Perhaps here I could feel more of that.

"I believe there's also the matter of reimbursement," Mrs Finch said.

"Oh," I said. "Money?"

"Money," Mrs Finch repeated evenly. "Our cause may be an important, moral one, but as a woman it's crucial that you demand what you're worth. You say you're the only person who could do this? That because of your talent, skill and long years of study, you are the best person for the job?"

"Yes," I agreed, wishing that my answer had sounded more certain. No one had ever spoken to me this way before.

"Then you should be compensated accordingly." Mrs Finch brushed her skirts. "Do you think your brother doesn't get paid for his work? Do you think all the powerful men in this country are out there doing what they do out of the goodness of their hearts? Too often we see women come through these doors because the law and our ridiculous social rules mean that it's only men who are allowed to care about money, to deal in it, to talk about it, to work for it, to manage it." She leaned forward. "It may not be pleasant, it may not be right, but it is a fact: money is freedom. If you work for the Aviary, then you will be paid fairly for that work."

I felt breathless, as if I'd run some great distance. I glanced at Izzy and she wore a small smile.

"Thank you for that," I said softly. "I believe I needed to hear it."

"I believe we all did." Izzy sighed. "So that's decided, then." She looked at me, then took a deep breath. "Welcome to the Aviary, Felicity." She held out her hand, but

when I reached to take it, she hesitated. “On a strictly temporary and perfectly safe basis,” she finished.

“Of course,” I agreed, smiling angelically.

CHAPTER TEN

I was in heaven. Funny that it had never occurred to me before that heaven would look like a laboratory above a haberdasher's, but here we were.

“And, of course, this is a complete catalogue of scientific and mathematical papers and publications,” Winnie said, pushing her glasses up her nose and gesturing to the bookshelves in front of us, which teetered with bound manuscripts. “Thanks to Mrs Finch's connections we can get hold of things before anyone else. Quite a few of these are awaiting translation, but we have a team that takes care of that. I'm sure you know: the gears of academia grind slowly, so anything we can do to move them along...” Here, Winnie Phillips, third daughter of the third son of the Earl of Newborough, grinned at me.

I was already grinning back. In fact, I hadn't stopped smiling since I had been introduced to Winnie, and she'd blinked and said, “F. Vane is Max's sister? How wonderful! Dr Volterra and I have been discussing your work on harmonic progression and I find myself a touch out of my depth. Would you go over some of the figures with me?”

That was three hours ago. Since then, Winnie and I had been locked in her lab, while she peppered me with questions about my work, and I peppered her with questions about hers. I might be a mathematician, but I had more than a passing interest in the scientific world, keeping myself up to date on all the latest studies.

“My work is in natural sciences,” Winnie had said, “though everything must be underpinned by a sound foundation of mathematical study. I'm not working on the

same level as you, of course, but...”

It was like music to my ears. Here was someone who was not only a potential friend but a true colleague, a person whose work intersected with mine in several fascinating ways. Already she had shown me several of her experiments that had promise and that might benefit from collaboration. Winnie may not have quite my mathematical skill, and I may not have her breadth of scientific knowledge, but each of us knew more than enough about the other’s field to get lost in excited conversation.

It felt as though something inside me had opened up. As though I had been walking around for years speaking a different language to everyone else, only to finally stumble across someone who understood me. Having been confined to written correspondence with great men who didn’t even know who I truly was, this afternoon with Winnie felt like a gift, a moment bursting with joy.

Was this, I wondered, what university would be like? To be surrounded by people who cared and understood and valued the work with the same fervour and enthusiasm that I did? I’d always been a solitary sort of person, often alone but rarely lonely. I liked my own space to think, but now I felt the same pull of recognition that I had when I met Cassie. Perhaps university would fill out parts of my life in unexpected ways. I felt my determination to reach such a place solidify, there and then, into something sure and unbending. Whatever happened, I decided, I would find a way.

“Sorry to interrupt.” The redhead from the shop downstairs popped her head round the door. I knew now that this was Maud, another of Izzy’s colleagues. She gave Winnie a fond look and said, “I know you’re having the time of your life, Win, but there’s quite a lot to do to get Felicity ready...”

“Yes, of course,” Winnie said, tearing her eyes away from the chalkboard where she and I had been looking over some of the mathematical principles that I was using in my card play. “Although I do think we’re on to something here.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to work on it,” Maud said soothingly, and when she came and rubbed Winnie’s shoulders, Winnie gave a small sigh of contentment. “But first I need to take Felicity to the next stop on her tour.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“The training room.” Maud grinned, a dimple appearing in her right cheek. “At least Sylla agreed to let you start off with me. She’s the one you need to be afraid of facing in there.” She gave a delighted shiver. “Bloodthirsty woman.”

“Right,” I said, looking longingly towards the chalkboard.

“I’ll keep working,” Winnie promised. “I’ve had a few ideas that might prove helpful.”

“What sort of ideas?” I asked, but Maud was already tugging me out into the corridor on the second floor of the Aviary.

“It will be some scientific doodad,” Maud said cheerfully. “Something that explodes, or something that’ll poison someone. My Win has taken a liking to you.”

Maud pushed a door open, and I followed her through to another room. I should have stopped being surprised by the Aviary at this point, but I couldn’t conceal my shock at discovering myself in a space that contained an actual boxing ring. Leather punching bags hung from the ceiling on iron chains. On the wall, a large glass cabinet had been mounted, holding an enormous display of—

“Swords!” I breathed, heading straight for them.

“Fencing foils, mostly.” Maud followed behind me. “And there are some sabres in there too. But as we only have a week you’re not going to be learning swordplay.

We'll just have time to cover some rudimentary self-defence."

"Oh, but ... please?" I turned to her, trying to look as winning as possible. "I've never held a real sword before."

Maud gave me a long look. "Let me guess," she said finally. "Anne Bonny?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed.

Maud's eyes took on a conspiratorial twinkle. "For me too. All I wanted to be when I grew up was a lady pirate. I think that's why I joined the Aviary. Closest I could get." She went to the cabinet and carefully removed one of the shorter, lighter-looking fencing foils before holding it out to me. "You want to grip it like this." She showed me.

"So how long have you been part of the Aviary?" I asked, giving my foil an experimental sweep. It felt clumsy in my hand, but the sound it made was satisfying.

"I was twelve when I came," Maud said, selecting her own weapon and spinning it effortlessly in her hand, before slicing deftly through the air in a flash of steel. I wanted to learn how to do that. "My mother had died, and I didn't have any family to speak of – although I thought myself fully grown back then, anyway." I thought of Ash – he had been the same sort of age when he joined the navy. But he hadn't been alone. He had a family that he must have turned away from. "My mum worked in a factory, and I suppose I would have followed in her footsteps, but the owner, Mr Spigot, he was a bad man. Tried to hurt me. Hurt some of the other girls too. I ran away, and one of Ma's friends sent me here to Mrs Finch. She took me in."

Maud spun round, dipping low to the floor and sweeping out with the sword in her hand. She looked like a warrior, fierce and formidable, as she flew back up, delivering an imaginary opponent a killing blow.

“And she did for Mr Spigot too.” Maud’s grin had a feral edge. “Oh, yes, she took care of him good and proper.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, thinking of the elegant woman I had met with the keen gaze.

“Let’s just say, when she was done with him, he couldn’t hurt any other little girls. And I learned to look after myself.”

“I think you and Winnie might be my favourite people in the whole world,” I said.

Maud laughed. “Well, you’re part of the family now,” she replied, and there was that feeling again. Like a key turning smooth in a lock. Uncomplicated, undemanding. I simply ... belonged.

“Now,” said Maud, her tone brisk. “I’ll give you ten minutes of sword training, but then it’s on to hand-to-hand, like I promised Sylla.”

“Twenty,” I countered, attempting to brandish my sword in a rakish manner and almost poking myself in the eye.

“Let’s see how you get on,” Maud said knowingly.

Ten minutes later my arm felt like it was on fire. Or, perhaps more accurately, it felt like it had already been on fire for some time and had now melted down into something limp and useless.

“Why ... is it ... so heavy?” I panted. “It wasn’t always so heavy. Is it getting heavier?”

I dropped my arm to my side, muscles screaming.

“It’s you fancy ladies,” Maud scoffed. “You’ve got to practise lifting something heavier than cucumber sandwiches.”

“That ... is offensive,” I said, lying on the floor. The cool, cool floor.

Maud came to stand over me, then bent down to pick up my fencing foil. She hadn’t even broken a sweat. After she had replaced the foils in the cabinet, I heard her approach once more.

“Now it’s time for the real work,” she said, looming into view, holding out a hand to me.

“Just leave me here to die,” I grumbled, but I placed my fingers in hers.

“Come on, Anne Bonny.” She hauled me up. “Let’s see what you can do.”

“Izzy taught me a few things. I did incapacitate a giant,” I said.

“That’s my girl.”

Maud and I moved through the exercises that Izzy had taught me, drawing a sound of approval from my new instructor.

“Fine,” she said. “But we can do better. I don’t reckon you’ll need to defend yourself; Ash will have it in hand, but it’s always better to be safe than sorry.”

“What do you know about Ash?” I asked as Maud gently manipulated my arm behind me.

“Not much,” Maud admitted. “Now, see how I’ve got your arm here? If I pull up...”

I winced. “Yes, I see.”

“It’s likely that you’ll be smaller than the person you’re fighting,” Maud said. “You have to be clever. You can’t use brute force. If in doubt, always aim for the soft parts: stomach, nose, in between the legs.” She smirked. “Especially the last one.”

“So Ash is a bit of a mystery, then?” I said, taking advantage of the brief pause.

Maud’s brows arched. “Why are you so interested, Lady Felicity Vane?”

“I’m going to be working with him. Don’t you think I should be asking questions?”

She smiled at me. “That’s not why you’re asking, but I can’t blame you. If I were that way inclined, I’m sure I’d be the same. He’s a handsome man.”

“That is an objective fact,” I agreed.

Maud’s smile grew. “Piratical, in fact.”

“Well, he was in the navy.”

“Told you that, did he?” she asked. “To be honest, I don’t know much more about his past than that. I trust him, though. He’s a terrible flirt – had more affairs than I can count, but they never last long with Ash. Somehow he always manages to leave things on good terms – you’ll find few with a bad word to say about him, and plenty who’ll tell you he showed them a good time.”

“Yes,” I said, my interest sharpening. “I can imagine that.” I could imagine it very well indeed.

“He and Joe are tight,” Maud continued thoughtfully, “and they run that club like a

well-oiled machine. They've helped the Aviary out many a time – Joe has a list of contacts you wouldn't believe. They're not always strictly by the book, of course. Joe is one of the best fences in town."

"Fences?"

"A fence sells on stolen property. A sort of bridge between thief and buyer."

"Oh," I said, fascinated.

Maud nodded. "And Ash seems to be able to get his hands on anything. His old sailing pals, I think."

"They sell smuggled liquor at the club," I said.

"Well, of course," Maud said. "It's good business sense. Anyway" – she put her hands on her hips – "that's enough of a rest for you. We've got a week to work on you. Let's see what else you can do."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“It’s a good thing Max is still away,” I said as Izzy busied herself, doing up the long row of buttons that ran down the back of my gown. “This time at least I can leave by the front door, rather than via the pear tree.”

It was the night of the card game – one week since my first visit to the Aviary, and my life had been transformed from something quiet and solitary into a busy, bustling whirlwind. It was not lost on me that this was precisely what Mother and Max had promised me when it came to preparing for the season, though I was finding nothing but pleasure in this alternative experience.

Mother’s fast-approaching visit loomed over me, with under two weeks to go until she was due to arrive. I was clinging to the hope that, by the time she was here, Izzy and I would have convinced Max that a season was unnecessary. Max’s continued absence was making this particular plan harder to put into place – whatever business was keeping him away appeared to be dragging on, and we had no definite idea when he would return.

“I used to use the trellis up the wall at my mother’s house,” Izzy replied with a nostalgic sigh. Then she gave her head a shake. “Besides which, if Max were here, you’d still be using the door, because we would have told him everything.”

My eyes met hers in the mirror. “Of course we would,” I said on a laugh.

“No, Felicity, don’t,” Izzy protested. “You make me feel wretched. I hate the thought of lying to your brother. I’m sure when he returns and we explain it all to him, he’ll

understand perfectly.”

“And if he doesn’t, you can kiss him until he forgets,” I said lightly.

Truthfully, I knew what Izzy meant about deceiving Max. It felt as though I’d accidentally forced her to take sides against him. I may not always agree with Max’s decisions but not for one moment did I doubt that he loved me, that he wanted what was best for me.

Whatever qualms Izzy herself was feeling, she must have pushed them aside, smiling brightly at me in the mirror. “This gown is so becoming, Felicity, and a different style to your usual wardrobe.”

“Mrs Finch arranged it for me from her dressmaker,” I said. “I’m supposed to be playing the merry widow, so I could hardly go out looking like the debutante I am.”

The gown in question was a gorgeous rustle of peacock-blue silk with an emerald sheen that glinted in the light. It was scooped low at the front, though a frivolous fluttering of Italian lace stopped it short of being indecent. I found that I much preferred it to the insipid pastels I was typically laced into.

“Mrs Williams,” Izzy said, as though trying the name out.

“An ordinary name, isn’t it?” I murmured, still a bit disgruntled. “Mrs Williams . You’d think I’d have something with a bit more flair. After all, I’m about to infiltrate a late-night poker game with a potential criminal.”

“That’s precisely why you don’t need flair,” Izzy said firmly. “You look dashing, but you must remember that you’re not there to take any risks. You’ll stop Laing from winning too much, and you’ll observe and listen. That’s all, Felicity, do you hear me? Or I really won’t be able to look your brother in the eye.”

I'd been preparing hard for the game all week. If I wasn't training with Maud (or on one, particularly terrifying occasion, Sylla), then I was calculating equations with Winnie, or playing cards with Mrs Finch. The latter had been an instruction in the art of the bluff – I had never met someone so inscrutable.

When I asked Mrs Finch how she kept her face so still and blank while she was playing, she said, "I simply imagine I am listening to a man expound on the subject of financial planning. I find that usually does the trick."

Before this evening, Izzy and I had hardly seen one another. Her charm (the name, I discovered, that described a group of Aviary agents – or "Finches" – who worked together) was still keeping an eye on Edward Laing, though I understood his movements had not been suspicious.

The upcoming game had occupied so much of my time that I had begun dreaming about it – terrible, clawing dreams mostly, of smiling men and endless streams of numbers that kept jumping out of reach, of giant playing cards and smoky rooms lit by ruby-red light. Occasionally, these dreams were punctuated by an appearance from Ash who I hadn't seen all week, and those ones troubled me in a very different way ... mostly because I was disappointed to wake from them.

"You worry too much," I said now, adjusting the neckline of my gown. "Honestly, I've been getting away with far more daring scrapes than this over the last two years. Only, you didn't know about them."

Izzy briefly closed her eyes, looking pained. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Yes," I said staunchly. "Have a bit more faith in me. Maud said I was a natural."

"A natural at getting away with things?"

“It seems to me that is a huge part of the job,” I replied.

There was a pause.

“You’ve worked hard this week,” Izzy said, and something tentative played around the edges of her words. “I know Mrs Finch has been pleased with you. Would you join the Aviary?” she asked finally. “On a permanent basis, I mean. If they asked you?”

It was a question I had asked myself many times over the last seven days. I turned to look at her, trying to gauge her expression, but it was hard to read. I shook my head.

“No,” I said softly. “I don’t think I would. I want to study. I want to learn. I’d like to have some of my own adventures. Though obviously I’d be more than happy to offer my help if it was needed.”

Izzy let out a slow exhale. “I don’t know whether to be pleased or disappointed.”

“Let’s concentrate on the challenge in front of us, for now,” I suggested, picking up the golden silk mask I had worn the last time I entered the Lucky Penny.

In the excitement of the week that had slipped by, it had been easy to see this all as a sort of game, but the work the Aviary did was real – lives hung in the balance. And for tonight at least, I was a key part of that work.

“I’m ready to do this,” I said, as much for myself as for Izzy, because it was true, I was ready, I wanted to get started in earnest. Mixing in with the nerves was plenty of anticipation. Holding the mask up to my face, and tying the silk ribbon at the back, I was forced to admit that some of the restlessness I felt had to do with Ash and the fact I would see him again.

In his absence I had only found myself thinking about him more and more. The crooked tilt of his lips, the dark, treacle gleam of his eyes, that tantalizing glimpse of the tattoo on his arm. I couldn't remember ever feeling so unsettled by a person before. He was a puzzle, this rogue pirate, this secret gentleman, and I loved puzzles. I wanted to solve him; I wanted to unravel him like a string of numbers across a page and find the secret truth at the heart of him.

Clearing my throat, I shook the idea from my mind. There were more important things to focus on, and I needed my brain sharp, my thoughts clear.

“Well, then,” I said, pulling my shoulders back and lifting my chin. “I believe Mrs Williams has some gambling to do.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

This time when I arrived at the Penny, I arrived alone and was greeted by Davey at the door. He gave me that surprisingly sweet smile, and rumbled, “My lady,” in his most respectful tones. I found myself smiling back up at him.

“Ash says I should stay close tonight,” Davey murmured low in my ear, “so if you see anything you don’t like, you tell me and I’ll sort it.” He cracked his knuckles with an impressive crunching sound. The man had fists the size of cabbages, cabbages made of stone. It was certainly reassuring.

I felt, when he led me inside, a strange sense of homecoming. The champagne fizz of excitement in the air, the noise, the explosion of energy... It was already familiar, and the warmth of the scene crept into my bones, chasing away any chill of fear and nerves. This was an adventure. I was eagerly looking forward to playing cards and finally putting all my theorizing into action.

Davey led me across the crowded floor of the main room, and despite his size we didn’t draw much attention – after all, they knew him here. The rabid focus of the crowd was on the dice, the turn of a card, the roll of a wheel. Davey pulled back a curtain in the far corner of the room and tapped four short, sharp knocks on the door concealed behind it. Almost at once, the door swung open on silent hinges, and a pool of golden liquid candlelight spilled out.

Before I could enter, Davey put one of his enormous hands on my shoulder.

“Remember,” he said. “Anything you don’t like, you give me a sign.”

“What should the sign be?” I whispered back.

His forehead crumpled. “Perhaps you could scratch your nose? Or we could choose a code word?” He tipped his head, thoughtfully, clearly getting into the spirit of things. “Sarsaparilla is a good word.”

“Sarsaparilla is an excellent word,” I agreed solemnly. “Or I could yell, ‘Davey! Help!’”

Davey nodded. “Right you are. Either of those things happen and I’ll start knockin’ heads.” There was the knuckle crunch again.

“Perfect.”

On that note, we entered the private room.

It was, as I had expected given the rest of the Penny, furnished tastefully, and it felt warm and inviting. There was a fireplace, already lit and emitting welcoming pops and cracks. A large window to one side gave barely any insight into our surroundings. The only thing visible was the dim burning orb of the streetlamp outside, like a star hovering close in the darkness.

The centre of the room was dominated by a round table, and six deep, comfortable-looking chairs. Across the far wall another long table had been set up with food and drinks – despite the late hour, it seemed breakfast was served – plates of thinly sliced ham, pink and tender, sunny-yolked eggs, freshly baked bread, a platter of fruit and cheeses, a covered dish, which when opened revealed a fragrant, steaming tumble of kedgeree. In place of tea and coffee, however, were pitchers of wine and beer, and a bottle of expensive brandy. Breakfast in the dead of night. It seemed at once to have the childish appeal of a midnight feast and an adult sense of decadence.

Arranged around the table of food, piling their plates high, were four men. One of these gentlemen, a dapper man in his fifties, who was tall and wide with laughing eyes, strode towards me. His voice was loud, his accent clearly American. He balanced his plate in one hand and used the other to pump mine up and down enthusiastically.

“This must be the charming lady Ash told us to expect! What a pleasure! I hear you’re quite the whizz at cards!” Every sentence was clearly punctuated with an exclamation mark. “Now, don’t tell me. Mrs ... Wilson? No, Williams!”

“How do you do?” I murmured. He was still clutching my hand.

“Horatio. P. Peabody!” he said, as though announcing a great circus act. “Delighted. Delighted!”

He finally relinquished his grip on me.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” I said, summoning my most charming smile. In truth, it wasn’t hard. Horatio P. Peabody was extremely winning, with his kind eyes and boyish enthusiasm.

“Allow me to introduce you to this band of reprobates!” he said cheerfully. “This here is Mr John Johnson – hell of a name, if you’ll beg my pardon!” He gestured towards a man who had the look of a watchful spider. Older than Horatio by a good few years, he was tall and thin, almost to the point of gauntness. His mouth remained firmly in a flat, straight line as he muttered an unconvincing “Charmed.”

“And this is Lord Jasper Covington,” Horatio continued, gesturing to a younger man, much closer to my own age, who wore an expression of utter world-weariness, and whose face, when I examined it more closely, was aged by a sense of dissipation – a bleary pinkness to his eyes, which were lined with blue shadows, a pallor to his skin.

His eyes flickered over me, taking no trouble to conceal their path along the lines of my dress, the curves of the body within it.

“Mrs Williams?” he said, almost on a sigh. “I don’t believe we’ve met.” That, it seemed, said it all, and I was dismissed as someone of no interest. If I had been worth knowing, then Jasper Covington would already know me.

“No, I think I’ve been denied that pleasure,” I agreed.

“And, finally, we have my good friend, Mr Edward Laing!” Horatio boomed, delighted.

I steeled myself to face the man who Izzy believed to be a ruthless killer, but saw, as I had before, only a friendly, open countenance and an air of polite interest. He was handsome in a mild, non-threatening sort of way, and immaculately turned out, shoes gleaming, everything perfectly buttoned up, starched and pressed. I was flooded with doubt. Had Izzy got the wrong man?

“I believe I had the pleasure of meeting you last week, Mrs Williams,” Edward Laing said, his voice smooth and rich, full of the playful amusement I remembered from our last encounter. “When you were dazzling with your skill at vingt-et-un.” He grinned at me.

“I don’t think dazzling is quite the right word,” I demurred.

“Don’t undervalue yourself,” a voice came from behind me. “Dazzling is precisely the right word to describe you.”

I turned, and there was Ash with his lopsided grin, and my heart jumped in a peculiar way. Ash lifted my hand to his mouth and brushed his lips across my fingers. This resulted in a sensation tearing through my body that I imagined was something like

the experience of clutching a live wire.

“Mrs Williams,” he said. “Lovely, as always.”

I tugged my hand away and found Laing watching us with interest.

“I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced,” Laing said, directing the words to Ash, and though they were easy I felt something rippling beneath them, something hard to pin down. An edge, perhaps. He stepped towards Ash and held out his hand. “I’m Edward Laing.”

Then the two of them were shaking hands with a heartiness that spoke of much masculine muscle flexing.

“Ash,” the pirate said, all ease, with a smile that showed his teeth.

“So it really is only Ash?” Laing’s brows raised.

“I am an economical man, Mr Laing,” Ash replied lightly. “One name suits me fine.”

“Ah.” Amusement crept into Laing’s voice. “But I’m afraid your reputation precedes you, Ash.” He gestured around the room. “Economical is hardly the first word that I’ve heard used to describe you.”

“Fair enough.” Ash turned his gaze to me, eyes glittering. “I must admit that in most things I do enjoy a bit of excess.” The words were almost a purr.

“Well, perhaps you’ll allow me to steal you away, Mrs Williams, and escort you to your seat?” Laing said, offering his arm with a chivalrous bow that tidily dismissed the other man.

“Don’t you want something to eat first, love?” Ash plucked a grape from the table and threw it in the air, catching it in his mouth. He winked at me as I gaped at his lack of manners. Clearly he had decided to behave outrageously.

There was the faintest crinkling of Laing’s nose, and he squeezed my arm as if reassuring me. “Perhaps I could fix you a plate?” he murmured, all good breeding.

“I’m not hungry,” I said, shooting Ash a quick and daggering glare.

Unrepentant, Ash shrugged. “Suit yourself, but don’t blame me if your stomach starts growling during the game.”

“A gentleman does not talk about a lady’s stomach,” I said. “In fact, I don’t think a gentleman is supposed to acknowledge that ladies have stomachs.”

“Ah, but as I have told you several times, Mrs Williams, I am no gentleman.” He didn’t need to add, “ and that’s why you like me ,” because I heard the words anyway, as clear as if he had whispered them straight in my ear.

“Perhaps you could show me to my seat,” I said, turning to Laing. “Is there a particular seating plan?”

“Indeed there is,” Laing said as he guided me in the direction of the table, his body curved gently over mine as if protecting me from Ash’s uncouth ways.

I had believed Izzy when she’d told me that Laing was some sort of criminal mastermind. Now I was here, beside him, it seemed impossible. He was so ordinary and our surroundings were so elegant and comfortable. It seemed the wildest fancy that a world full of conspiracy and murder could even exist.

“Now, the dealer will sit there.” He gestured to one of the seats.

“That would be me,” Ash said from around a ham sandwich that he had slapped together.

“You?” Horatio P. Peabody’s eyes lit. “But you never deal.”

“For my favourite clients there can always be an exception,” Ash said smoothly. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like some ham, Mrs Williams? It is very good.”

“Well, well.” Horatio rubbed his hands together. “You shall have to play with us more often, Mrs W, if it means Ash will join us. Perhaps you’ll even tempt him to play.”

“Yes,” Lord Covington said, perking up for the first time. “What do you say, Ash? Get one of the other dealers in and join the game. I’ll advance you a five-hundred-pound stake myself.”

I swallowed. It was an enormous sum, and yet Covington threw the words off easily.

“Kind of you,” Ash said, “but you gentlemen know I never play at my own tables.”

“Wise,” Laing said with a nod. “One must always be careful not to mix business and pleasure.” He slid a chair out for me to sit. Davey wheeled over a silver drinks trolley and then came to stand silently several feet behind me, and I felt comforted by his nearness.

“Oh, I don’t believe that old adage.” Ash shook his head cheerfully, as the rest of the men sat. “What’s the point of denying oneself? Don’t you take pleasure in your business, Mr Laing?”

The man seemed to think about it for a moment, and then he smiled. “You know, I do. I really do.”

“And what line of business are you in, Mr Laing?” I asked quickly, keen to dig out more information. I wondered what he would say. Murderer for hire seemed unlikely.

“I dabble in several areas,” he replied thoughtfully, reaching over to the drinks trolley and picking up a carafe of wine. “I manage money – my own and other people’s.” He poured the wine into a heavy cut-crystal glass, the deep burgundy colour picking up the light from the candles, and it was as if the drink itself flickered with some dark flame, a blood-red deal with the devil.

“Investments?” I accepted the glass from his hand, telling myself not to be so fanciful.

“Certainly, I invest. In companies, in people. And I’m a collector of sorts. When I see something I desire, I can be quite ruthless, Mrs Williams, quite determined.” He smiled above his own glass of wine. “Nothing stands in the way of what I want.”

“I think that’s enough chit-chat, isn’t it?” Ash cut in, sounding bored. He held a pack of cards in his hand and sent them into one of those lightning-fast shuffles, the kind that left the edges of the cards a blur and that drew a murmur of appreciation from Horatio.

Before anyone could answer, four sharp knocks rang through the room. Ash’s eyes raised above my head, and I realized he was looking to Davey, a crease of annoyance between his brows.

Davey lumbered round the table to see who was at the door.

“I thought we weren’t to be disturbed,” Mr Johnson said, his tone peevish.

“We weren’t,” Ash replied shortly.

Davey leaned over Ash's shoulder and whispered in his ear, before handing him a sheet of paper.

I watched as Ash unfolded the note, his eyes scanning the words. His face gave nothing away; it was utterly still, and that, I thought, was his true tell. Nothing about Ash was still – even when he wasn't moving, he was so entirely alive that some wild restless energy sparked about him. Now he looked like a book that someone had closed with a thump.

“Not bad news, I hope?” Laing asked lightly.

Ash carefully folded the note and slid it into his pocket. “Not at all,” he said, the words even. “A business matter, but nothing that won't wait. Shall we play?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As soon as the first hand of cards were dealt, the atmosphere in the room shifted. All humour, all niceties, faded away. Only Horatio seemed unaffected, filling the air with mindless chatter, his drawling American accent undulating musically in the background.

There was no playing with paper tokens in this game. The money on the table was enough to pay for my university education several times over, and the other players seemed barely to register that fact.

When Mrs Finch had handed me the envelope full of bank notes that I was to wager with, I felt all the air temporarily leave my lungs.

“What if I lose?” I managed.

“Don’t,” she said.

Which was wonderful. Because sitting here between the man I couldn’t stop having bizarre pirate-themed romantic fantasies about, and a man who was potentially a murderer, it was also relaxing to know that I was gambling with a small fortune belonging to a woman whom I had come to fiercely admire, and which would in other circumstances probably be used to do something like fund an orphanage.

My life had taken a strange turn of late.

For the first couple of hands, I was tense, distracted. I folded early, feeling the

numbers jumping around in my head, like fleas on a dog's coat. I watched the money I had bet slip across the table, ending up in front of Edward Laing's seat and I knew a moment of panic. All this time, telling people how clever I was, and at the first opportunity to prove myself I was going to fail.

No .

The voice in my head was firm. I watched carefully as the men around me discarded and drew their cards. I looked at my own hand, and for a moment I imagined myself back in Mrs Finch's office, playing her across the desk. I remembered the confidence she had displayed in me, heard her telling me that I had a gift, and that I was using it to make a difference.

"Discard two," I said, and my voice was steady. The numbers stilled, everything stilled, and it was as if I could breathe again. My focus narrowed down to the cards in my hand, the hands that the other players discarded. I kept a count, I calculated the odds.

And I started to win.

Just a small amount at first, but then more and more. Soon, I wasn't focusing on the money, the extraordinary amounts that I threw about with abandon. The only thing I cared about was the sequence of the cards as I drew them.

Occasionally, when my calculations left too big a gap for chance, I found I had to play the men themselves. This was harder. I noticed Lord Covington had a habit of touching his eyebrow when he was thinking about folding, that Horatio's small talk sped up when he was excited about his hand, and that Johnson's lip curled when he was feeling pleased with himself. Edward Laing, though, was a complete enigma.

He wore the same expression of mild interest throughout the game, even though he

won several large bets and then lost them to me. He had beautiful hands, I noticed, soft and well cared for, with neatly trimmed nails and a tasteful gold ring on his right little finger. They looked like the hands of an aristocrat.

Ash handled the cards as if it were a game of the kind that schoolboys played for a lark. He sent them skipping lightly across the table, moving to a music only he could hear. I knew his hands had callouses. I knew because I'd felt them against my skin.

My attention wavered for a moment. I lost. Refocused.

While I played in dogged silence, the others began to make conversation. Horatio was the source of most of the talk, as he shared his thoughts on everything from cheese to steam engines, to the migration patterns of Canadian geese. Keeping half an ear on him, I was impressed by the bizarre breadth and depth of his knowledge on so many seemingly unconnected subjects, including the upcoming social season.

“Queen Charlotte’s Ball!” he exclaimed, puffing his chest. “Got my daughter an invitation to that, and it was a trial, let me tell you.” He chewed on the end of the unlit cigar he had produced from his pocket. “But nothing’s too good for my girl. She wants something, she’s going to get it, and she’s got her heart set on the full experience. She’s going to steal the show, a real jewel she is, my Sadie. And she’ll look the part, oh yes siree – it’s costing a pretty penny what with the gown and the veil... My God! These English customs! Girl’s got to wear a veil!”

“Ridiculous,” Johnson muttered, folding his hand.

“The whole thing is always a sad crush,” Covington drawled, checking the bet. “Shouldn’t bother, if I were you. They’ll let anyone in these days.”

If his words were meant to insult Horatio, the man seemed not to feel it, only nodded eagerly. “Well, that’s what I said, but of course after we sent our Sadie over to a

British boarding school it was bound to happen that she'd want to do the same as all her friends, and when she came to me in tears – in tears, Mrs Williams! – saying how she needed to be a debutante and be presented to the royal court if she was going to find an acceptable man to marry ... how could I argue?"

Covington looked queasy. "Good God, man, you sound like a matchmaking mother hen."

"Isn't that what this whole season business is about?" Horatio waved the cigar in the air, bluff face suddenly shrewd. "I'm not above buying a title. Plenty of dusty English aristocrats who'd like a slice of the Peabody fortune."

I wondered if this peculiar statement was a roundabout offer in Covington's direction, and from the startled light in his eyes it seemed the thought had occurred to him as well.

"Of course" – Edward Laing broke in, his eyes on his cards – "there will be one less eligible bachelor in the running this season. I hear poor old Peregrine Archer passed away this morning."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

"Archer is ... dead?" Covington's bored facade dropped away, leaving him looking shaken.

Johnson's expression was grim, his mouth thinning further. "Bad end. Not that it's exactly a surprise. Nevertheless, a shame. He was young yet."

"His poor parents." Horatio looked dazed, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. "I must send my condolences to his father."

Ash didn't react at all, but there was that unnatural stillness about him again, telling me that something was wrong.

Peregrine Archer. I tried to place the name.

"I'm sorry for your loss, gentlemen," I said. "I take it Mr Archer was a friend of yours?"

"Lord Archer," Johnson corrected, almost absently. "He was Baron Ely."

"One of Peabody's dusty aristocrats." Covington reached for his drink with a hand that wasn't quite steady. He gave a humourless laugh, too loud in the quiet room. "There's a man who'd have been happy to accept ... what was it? A slice of the Peabody fortune."

"This is no way to speak of the dead," Johnson snapped. "I thought the pair of you were friends."

Covington laughed again, knocking back a generous gulp of brandy. "After a fashion. Though lately, he'd been hanging about with some strange sorts. Anyway," he continued petulantly, "there's no need to act as if you care. Perry owed money all over the place – probably to everyone at this table, in fact."

Perry .

The name hit me like a bullet. All of a sudden I was back in that library, the first time I'd heard Ash speak. "I don't want Perry to die."

Peregrine Archer was Ash's brother. I was sure of it. In fact, I'd bet money that the letter Ash received had been informing him of his brother's death. My eyes flew to his face now, but his expression remained neutral. I wondered how Laing had known

about it beforehand. And was it only a coincidence that he was bringing it up here and now?

“I certainly didn’t mean to spring the news on you, gentlemen,” Laing said. “My understanding was that Lord Archer had been ill for quite some time. He sustained an injury, I believe.”

“Attacked in the street!” Johnson exploded. “Shot by a common criminal!”

“Oh, goodness,” Laing murmured. “How terrible.”

“A reminder to us all to be on our guard,” Ash’s voice broke in, his tone bland. “Crime is ever-present in this city. Still, let us remember there is a lady present.”

“Yes.” Horatio still sounded upset. “Quite right. It’s a damned shame is what it is, but there, as Ash says, it’s a dangerous world. A dangerous world.”

He shook his head, and in a much more subdued mood, we returned to our game.

It seemed I was not the only one to be distracted by this information, and Laing had no trouble at all in winning the next two hands. My mind was spinning as I tried to piece together what I knew and to see how it all added up. Did Laing know that Ash was Perry’s brother? Had he brought up his death to rattle him? Why? But Ash hadn’t seemed rattled, so perhaps Laing had no idea of the connection at all. Perhaps he’d mentioned the news to shake the other three men... He had certainly been more successful there.

Attacked in the street. Shot by a common criminal...

A thought occurred to me then. Could Laing be connected to Peregrine Archer’s death? Or was I seeing connections where there were none? There were too many

possibilities, too many unanswered questions, and it was no good filling the blanks with useless conjecture.

I pushed the thoughts aside. Right now, I had one thing to concentrate on – winning this game. Whatever Laing was planning, he wouldn't use that pile of money in the middle of the table to do it. I sat up straight in my chair and felt determination course through me. It was time to end this.

Covington was the first out. He seemed fully recovered from the shock about Perry, and merely shrugged, stretched like a cat in his seat, pouring himself another huge glass of brandy, seemingly bored by the entire experience.

Johnson fell next, trying to bluff on a pair of fours, getting sloppy as the pressure intensified. He cursed, low and wicked under his breath, while Horatio blustered once more about there being a lady present. I couldn't care less about the language. It was close now, the end of this fraught game – I could feel it. A bead of sweat ran down my spine, as I fought to keep myself steady.

We played on for a while – how long I don't know. It could have been thirty minutes; it could have been hours. My focus narrowed down so far that I felt as if the only thing that remained was the numbers. I was getting tired, I realized. The wine and the late hour crowded in on me. I felt my mind lagging the same way a runner might at the end of a long race, desperately fighting to hold back the exhaustion long enough to cross the finish line.

Finally, after a particularly frenzied round of betting, I beat Horatio, who had, I knew, been certain he held the winning cards.

“Well played, my dear,” he said, but I noticed that his face was pale and his eyes lingered a long moment on the stack of bank notes that were now in front of my place at the table. I felt guilty, but reminded myself that everyone at the game tonight had

plenty of money to lose. The main thing was to stop Laing from winning it – and in that mission I was unfortunately far from done. A small fortune sat before us that could easily be used for nefarious purposes. I resisted the urge to wipe my damp palms on my skirts. There could be no signs of weakness.

Now, it was only Laing and I left. It all came down to this. As far as I could tell, he hadn't been cheating. He hadn't needed to – he played impeccably and seemed to have no tells whatsoever. Still, I had a sense of him now. I'd spent the evening collecting an endless stream of information, each piece of numerical data forming a fuller picture. I knew which hands he favoured, the likelihood that he would draw or stay. I had been paying close attention.

And there were always patterns if you looked hard enough for them.

We battled on, hand after hand, as the night drew on.

And then, like the loosening of a knot inside me, I knew the precise moment that I had him.

I looked down at the pile of money in front of us, at the not-so-small fortune, and my voice was utterly calm when I spoke.

“Call,” I said.

There was a beat, and then Laing fanned his cards out on the table.

“King-high flush,” Ash announced, and I thought for the first time that tension had crept into his voice. It was a very strong hand.

I allowed myself a moment, a dizzying moment of lightness, and then I laid my own cards down. Three sixes and two queens.

“A full hand,” Ash managed, sounding slightly winded. “Sixes over queens, the lady takes the pot.”

My eyes raised and I looked straight into Laing’s face. I had been expecting anger, frustration, disappointment, but what I saw instead surprised me – a look of greedy excitement that chilled me to the bone.

And it was directed straight at me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“You don’t need to be exposed to the gaming hall at this time of the night, my lady,” Davey muttered, guiding me through a service tunnel towards the back of the building. “Wouldn’t be proper.”

While I appreciated his concern, I was also disappointed. I wondered what sort of debauchery was taking place and if I could talk Ash into letting me see it some time. He and I hadn’t had a chance to say much of anything to one another before Davey had shepherded me from the room, a ludicrous amount of money held safe in his enormous hands. It was three o’clock in the morning and I was to go to the Aviary to report to Mrs Finch and – thankfully – to deliver my winnings.

“I’ll have the carriage brought round,” Davey said. “You wait here.”

No sooner had Davey departed than the door behind me, the one we had just come through, swung open hard enough that it banged loudly against the wall. I spun round, heart thumping – then I realized who it was.

“Ash!” I exclaimed, taking an impulsive step towards him, but there was no need for me to bring myself any closer... The man was striding towards me, a look of great concentration on his face.

He barely slowed down as he reached me, and heat leaped in his expression, a candle flame of desire that I felt flickering inside my own body. For half a heartbeat, he paused in front of me, a question in his eyes. There was only a breath of space between us, and I tipped my face up, closing it, my hands winding round his neck as

he drew me hard against himself, with a groan that tasted like relief against my lips.

Instantly, my entire body lit up like one of the firework displays over Crystal Palace. It turned out that kissing Ash was worth the wait.

In my brief but enjoyable kissing career, I had never been kissed like this before. This kiss was a rush, a demand, a tease, and then it slowed, deepened into something else, something slow and ripe and luxurious, like warm honey running through my veins. His mouth slanted over mine, firm and demanding. His fingers tugged lightly on my hair, pulling my head back further so that he could take more, give more. It was a pirate kiss, a plundering.

My own hands were on his shoulders and I clutched at the fabric of his shirt, drawing him tighter against me, thrilling at every inch of his body pressing into mine. I was no passive prisoner in this kiss, and I bit down lightly on his beautiful bottom lip. I slid my fingers to his chest, and felt his heart beating wildly under my touch. He murmured endearments against the curve of my mouth, trailed his lips along the side of my jaw. My own heart clattered. I felt powerfully, utterly alive.

Finally, we broke apart, and I stared up at him, air sawing in and out of my lungs.

“What was that for?” I managed, straightening my mask and waging an internal war with my knees, which seemed to have forgotten their only job in the moment was to stop me from melting into the floor.

In response to my question, he lifted me by my waist and swung me round in a circle.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for hours!” he said, and his eyes dropped to my mouth. “Well, I’ve been wanting to do it for over a week, but the last few hours have been particularly unbearable. You were staggering, Felicity Vane. Watching your brain work is the most attractive thing that I’ve ever seen. It was torture not to be able to

haul you across the table and kiss that beautiful, clever mouth of yours.”

“Oh.” I felt colour rush to my cheeks. That compliment ranked fairly high on my list of romantic moments. Right below the kiss we’d just shared.

“I have to get back to the club, but we’re not done. Do you hear me?” He reached for my chin, tipping my face so that I was looking deep into his eyes. For once they were utterly serious. “You and I have unfinished business.”

The words were a promise. Something shifted inside me, an insistent awareness that I was playing with fire, that whatever this was, it was no simple flirtation, that it never had been.

“Yes,” I breathed, because why would I argue when I wanted him so badly, when I could still taste him, cool as peppermint, tingling on my lips.

“Davey, you see that Lady Felicity gets safely to the Aviary with her winnings,” Ash said, glancing over my shoulder, and I realized, dazedly, that my giant friend had returned.

I swung round in time to catch Davey trying to hide his grin behind his hand. “Right you are, boss. Precious cargo.”

And with that, Ash turned and left the way he had come, hands in his pockets, whistling something jaunty, excessively pleased with himself.

That was when I remembered the letter he’d received, the news that was surely about his brother, and I felt another rush of surprise. He seemed so untroubled. I cast my mind back to the conversation I’d overheard between Ash and his father three months ago. It had seemed there was no love lost between Ash and his brother, but still...

“Ready to go, my lady?” Davey asked, still grinning at me, presumably because to his eyes I was standing frozen like some sort of lovestruck fool.

“Oh. Yes.” I cleared my throat. “Yes. Let’s be on our way.”

With that, we made our way out into the cool of the night. A carriage had been pulled up into the alley behind the club, and I took in my surroundings with interest. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much to see. It appeared to be a dingy storage area of sorts.

“Owner’s entrance,” Davey said grandly. “This is how Joe and Ash come and go, bit more clandestine.”

“And they often need to move about in a clandestine fashion, do they?” I asked.

Davey only gave an eloquent shrug and greeted the driver. He clambered up behind me into the carriage, before hitting the roof with one of his dinner-plate-sized fists. With a rocking motion, the carriage began to move, and we continued the journey in silence.

I didn’t mind. Between Laing, the poker game, Peregrine Archer’s death and Ash’s kiss, I had quite a bit to think about.

At this time of night, it didn’t take long for us to reach the Aviary. The traffic that typically choked the city streets was absent, and we passed quickly along the empty roads, lit dimly by the streetlamps, hazy ember-orange smudges struggling against the blanket of smog. It was a new experience for me, seeing London like this – it felt like a secret, an eerie, atmospheric secret.

The lights still burned in the windows above the shop, and I let Davey walk me all the way to the door, where he pressed the carefully wrapped bundle of money into my

hands.

“Your winnings, my lady,” he said, and he hinged at the waist in a bow.

“Thank you, Davey,” I said. “You’ve been a very chivalrous escort.”

His cheeks turned adorably pink and he ducked his head, pleased. “Right you are, miss ... my lady. You have a good night now.”

I let myself in through the shop door and up the stairs towards the offices of the Aviary, where I knew Mrs Finch would be waiting for me. What I didn’t expect was to find Maud, Winnie and Sylla in her office as well, all bent over a parcel on the desk.

“What are you doing?” I asked, making my way into the room.

“We’re defusing a bomb,” Sylla said, in the same tone of voice one might use to comment upon the weather.

“A ... a bomb?” I managed.

“A small incendiary device,” Winnie said, and I realized that what she was leaning over was a bundle of wires disappearing into a brown paper parcel.

She held a pair of clippers in one hand, and her glasses were practically fogged up with the heat of her concentration. I was torn between wanting to run away and wanting to get closer so that I could examine the thing myself.

“It’s on a fixed timer,” Winnie continued, gesturing to a small gold pocket watch nestled in the wires. “The watch has been wound and I believe at a certain time it will close the electrical circuit. It’s a clever thing, far more elegant than the time bomb

used in the Winter Palace.”

“That was twenty years ago,” Sylla pointed out.

“Someone left it on the doorstep at the shop,” Maud said cheerfully. “Dynamite, by the looks of things.”

“Oh,” I said. “Shouldn’t we ... leave? Or, I don’t know, throw it out of the window?”

Sylla fixed me with a stare. “Please, Felicity, you’re embarrassing yourself. You act like you’ve never seen a bomb before.”

“I haven’t seen a bomb before,” I said. “Most people haven’t.”

Sylla scoffed.

Mrs Finch came round the desk towards me, a soothing smile on her lips. “It’s all under control. I have every confidence that Winnie can defuse it.”

“But someone must be trying to threaten you,” I said. “I thought your location was a secret.”

“It is,” said Mrs Finch carefully. Her smile sharpened. “Still, anyone who dares to take a shot at the Aviary will learn their mistake soon enough. Now.” She looked down at the bundle of bank notes I was clutching. “I take it your evening went well.”

I swallowed, trying to ignore the bomb ticking away only a few feet from me. “Yes,” I said. “I won.”

“Oh, well done, Felicity!” Maud cheered.

“We knew you could do it,” Winnie added, eyes on the project in front of her.

“We absolutely did not know it,” Sylla said, her tone quelling, before grudgingly adding, “But it is a pleasant surprise.”

I think that counted as a compliment.

“So you stopped Laing from winning the money,” Mrs Finch said, taking the bundle from me and flicking casually through the notes before depositing them inside a small safe in her wall.

“I did,” I said carefully. “But it’s strange. He didn’t seem too upset about it. In fact he seemed almost ... pleased .”

“Pleased?” Mrs Finch frowned. “Pleased that he lost?”

“More like pleased that I won.” I tried to explain. “There was something about the way he looked at me...” I remembered those eyes, lit with a gleam of excitement, and felt a shiver run down my back. “It’s difficult to describe.”

“Your intuition is hard at work,” Mrs Finch said. “It’s always important to pay attention. Was there anything else you observed that may be helpful?”

“During the game, Laing mentioned a man who had died,” I said. “Peregrine Archer. He was shot in the street some time ago and died yesterday morning of his injuries.”

Mrs Finch’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, I received word of it earlier this evening,” she said, and I knew it shouldn’t be surprising that she had the news before anyone else.

“The other players were upset,” I began, but I was interrupted by Winnie.

“Huh,” she murmured.

Mrs Finch’s head whipped round. “Anything the matter, Win?”

“No, no,” Winnie said, sounding distracted. “Only the device is a touch more sophisticated than I expected and there does seem to have been a failsafe that I might have accidentally ... activated.”

“What do you mean, activated ?” I squeaked.

“Right, on to Plan B,” Sylla said, scooping up the parcel while Winnie made a sound of protest, and carrying it over to the window.

“I thought you said that throwing it out of the window was an embarrassing suggestion,” I murmured as Sylla lifted the glass and glanced out at the street below.

“It was at the time,” Sylla replied coldly. “However, one must be prepared to adapt to ever-changing situations.”

With that, she hefted the device out of the window as hard as she could. A heartbeat later, the room filled with a flash of light and the floor beneath us trembled as a deafening boom split the air.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

An hour later, I arrived back at home, well and truly done in. It had been a long night, culminating in an actual explosion, and I was ready to collapse into bed and sleep for three to four days.

I had left the Finches in a cheerful enough mood. There had been no damage to the building, the device being relatively small. (“If they’d really wanted to blow us all up, it would have needed a much greater charge,” Winnie had said. “Though that failsafe was ingenious. I suspect it was the order in which I cut the wires that did it. I wonder if there’s anything in the debris I can examine...”)

Pushing my way through the front door, assuming that even Wheeler was not awake at this hour, I was startled when Izzy erupted into the hallway, looking pale and anxious. I should have known she’d be waiting up for me.

“Oh, Felicity!” she exclaimed, wringing her hands. “It’s terrible .”

How on earth had she found out already? I wondered.

“It was only a very small bomb,” I said, my tone reassuring.

“I—” Izzy came to a halt. “ Bomb? What bomb?”

“I don’t... What were you talking about?” I asked, confused.

“I was talking about your mother. She arrived early – not long after you left. What’s

this about a bomb?”

“At the Aviary,” I said. “My mother is here? Now?”

“At the Aviary!” Izzy exclaimed.

“Goodness, Izzy, you act like you’ve never seen a bomb before,” I said distantly, because in the grand scheme of things, the (very small) bomb had already happened and I was demonstrably fine, but my mother arriving almost two weeks early in a fit of excitement over my first season was a real catastrophe.

“What did you tell her about where I was?” I asked.

Izzy sighed, but seemed to accept the shift of priorities. “I told her you’d already gone to bed because you were up late last night corresponding with one of your academic friends.”

I nodded. “Excellent,” I said, then my shoulders slumped. “Only now she’s going to expect me to be up shortly, and I’d like to sleep for a week at least.”

“Poor Felicity,” Izzy said, coming forward to take my hands. “You do look tired. How did it go at the club?”

“I won,” I said with a yawn. “Laing didn’t seem too worried, which is worrying in itself. I took the money to Mrs Finch, and there was a parcel there that exploded. Sylla threw it out of the window first, so it didn’t damage much except my ears, which are still ringing.” I was overcome by a wave of exhaustion that left me swaying on my feet.

“All right,” Izzy said, calmer now, and I took a moment to think how nice it was to have a sister-in-law who wasn’t perturbed for long by bombs and murderers and

unexpected mothers-in-law. “At least your work with the agency and Laing is finished now, so that’s one less layer of subterfuge we’re managing.”

“I know,” I said miserably, “but she’ll want me to prepare for the season.”

“I suppose we’ll have to go along with whatever she has planned,” Izzy said. She saw my expression and her grip on my hand tightened. “Only for the time being. I promise. We’ll tackle her together, but we must wait for Max. He wrote to say this business was taking longer than he expected, but that he’d be home within the week. He’s the only one who will have any influence over her.”

She was right, I knew. Izzy and my mother were not well acquainted, and if anything were to really change about my situation, then such instructions would have to come from my brother.

With the money Mrs Finch was going to pay me for my work, I almost had enough to put my original plan into motion, but I still needed my brother’s agreement. I’d hoped that would be in place before Mother’s arrival.

Izzy was rubbing her forehead. “You don’t think it was Laing who planted the bomb?” she said suddenly.

“Laing was with me all evening, so he certainly didn’t plant it himself. And there’s no reason to think he even knows about the Aviary.”

Izzy sighed. “You’re right. Still, I cannot like the timing.”

“You concentrate on the Aviary,” I said, straightening my spine. “I’ll take care of my mother. I can play the part of the doting daughter for a few days, until Max comes home.”

It was nothing I hadn't done before, but, even so, the prospect was tiring. I had spent a long time trying to squeeze myself into someone else's idea of me; that feeling had been lifted over this last week. Now that it returned, I felt it crash over me with unexpected violence.

It had been good to be needed. To be valued for my real self. To be seen, not only by Izzy and the Aviary but by Ash too, as someone more than Lady Felicity Vane, a young woman on the marriage mart who didn't quite fit in. It felt, for a moment, as though the world had opened up in front of me, wide and green, but now the door had slammed shut. It was a lonely feeling.

Only for the time being, I told myself, repeating Izzy's words in my head.

And yet, as I dragged myself up the stairs to bed, something heavy settled in my chest. It seemed that my adventure had already come to an end.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Are you sure you’re perfectly well, Felicity?” Mother asked for the third time as I fought to keep my eyes open over the breakfast table.

“Hmmm?” I raised my gaze from the plate of toast in front of me, forcing myself to concentrate on her.

“I asked if you were well,” Mother repeated. “You’re looking a trifle pale.” A look of concern flashed across her face, and she half rose from her seat. “Don’t you think she’s looking pale, Isobel?”

“Um, slightly perhaps,” Izzy replied, uncertainly.

“I didn’t sleep well,” I reassured Mother quickly, accepting the cup of coffee that Wheeler handed me with an unhealthy amount of gratitude.

“It’s all these late nights you’ve been having,” Mother said, and I tensed. “Writing your little letters,” she continued, and the tightness in my shoulders eased. It was only the usual disapproval of my actions not an insight into my recent secret life as an agent working outside the law. What a relief.

“Honestly,” Mother continued. “I don’t know why you bother. When I was your age, the only letters I was interested in were love letters.” She eyed me over her teacup. “Are they love letters?”

“Of course they’re not love letters.” I drained my coffee wearily, wondering how

much trouble I would get in if I licked the cup clean.

Mother let out a small sigh and I watched her toy with her breakfast.

I had complicated feelings about my mother. She was a young woman when she had married my much older father, and from what I could gather she had outshone all the other debutantes of the season to land such a catch. She'd been lovely looking, sweet-natured, properly behaved, and always immaculate. She was still all those things, with a surprising will of iron beneath it all.

With her silver-blond hair and pansy-blue eyes, it sometimes felt that looking at her was a glimpse into my own future, though I could never hope to be half as elegant or ladylike.

As my father died when I was so young, I had barely any memories of him, and none at all of the two of them together. What I did remember of my early years was that my mother simply ... didn't understand me. I was noisy, full of questions, endlessly chasing something or falling off something or jumping in something. I think she'd expected her daughter to be a lovely porcelain-doll version of herself, and so I was something of an oddity, driving off governesses who tossed around words like "hoyden" while they fled.

My mother loved me, but she found me exhausting. When I was a child she kept the sort of wary distance a person might from an overeager and untrained puppy when they were wearing their best gown. Max – who was handsome, solid, dependable, and always utterly right and proper – was her pride and joy. Now that I was an adult, she still seemed unsure exactly what to do with me.

Aside from her children, the things she cared most greatly about were what she wore, what other people wore and other people's love affairs. She was excellent at finding ways to arrange herself picturesquely, like a cat unerringly finding a sunbeam, and

she enjoyed the compliments that followed her. She didn't care for reading, nor any exercise more taxing than a short stroll through her well-maintained gardens to enjoy the roses. I doubted that even as a child had she ever climbed a tree or torn her stockings.

It wasn't that I disliked my mother – in fact, I was fond of her; the problem was that we had absolutely nothing in common. If one were to draw a Venn diagram of my mother and myself, we would simply be two circles sitting side by side and touching nowhere. I wished things could be different, but I didn't see how to change them.

Perhaps because of this, there had never been any question that Max would take care of me, that I would live with him wherever he chose to be, while Mother preferred the comfort of the dower house in the country, and the familiar company of her small circle of devoted admirers. Since Max had married Izzy and we'd been permanently based in London, we'd not seen a lot of her. I think my brother felt guilty about that, and this in turn would make it more difficult for him to defy her wishes when it came to my future.

Families were a complicated matter.

"I must say," Mother piped up brightly, "that's a fetching gown, Felicity. You've grown even prettier since I last saw you."

"Thank you," I said, trying my best to match her tone. "The Dowager Countess Wynter recently told me I looked like you, so I think that's a compliment to us both."

Mother laughed, pleased. "I always liked Lady Wynter. She used to terrify us all. One never knew what she was going to say next. I remember" – a dreamy look flitted across her face – "that when I was at the Simpsons' ball there was the most tremendous scene when she was particularly withering about Lady Simpson's gown. My friends and I had to hide our giggles behind our fans." Her smile widened. "I had

so much fun during my season. And now I finally get to share that with my own daughter! I've dreamed of this since you were a baby. It's why I couldn't wait to arrive," she said, clapping in delight. "I know we said we'd wait, but there are already some social events beginning to take place, and who knows, darling? You might meet your future husband at any of them!"

I could feel Izzy's sympathy from across the table.

My mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. I was torn. Hearing how much it meant to my mother to share her daughter's first season, the excitement and obvious pleasure she felt, followed at once by the news of imminent parties and husband hunting... I longed to connect with her, but it seemed it would never be possible in a way that would please us both.

"I'm glad you're here," was what I settled on. Not exactly a lie; not exactly the truth.

Mother's smile widened further. "And we can go shopping! Even buried away in the country, I've heard about this Madame Solange who is taking London by storm. I want a whole new wardrobe to take home with me."

"Madame Solange is wonderful," Izzy agreed, sipping her tea. "I thought you might like to visit her shop and I took the liberty of making you both an appointment for this afternoon."

I repressed a groan at the thought. Mother, however, looked delighted. "Oh, Isobel, how thoughtful! But won't you be joining us?"

"I'm afraid I have several appointments today," Izzy said apologetically. "And Max has bought me more gowns than I know what to do with. If I went with you, I'm certain I'd end up coming home with more, and soon every cupboard in the house would be bursting."

“He enjoys spoiling you,” Mother said, satisfied. “As a husband should. Felicity, you have that to look forward to.”

I scowled. “I wouldn’t want to be spoiled, like a child.”

“Oh?” Mother’s eyes glimmered dangerously. “So you have given some thought to the matter? Tell us, Felicity, what do you want in a potential husband?”

It was a neat trap, and I was able to admire it, even as my mind flashed to a certain piratical figure whose kiss had discombobulated me more than an actual bomb. I pushed the image firmly aside.

“Well, for a start, he has to understand Newtonian kinematics,” I said as serenely as possible. “And I would prefer that he have a firm grasp of Poincaré’s qualitative theory of differential equations.”

Izzy laughed, but Mother only nodded wisely. “A man must have a quick brain to keep up with my daughter,” she said, and for a moment I thought there was even a note of pride in her voice.

“There are six or seven possible candidates on my list who should fit the bill,” she continued.

“Your ... list ?” I asked, the word coming out more sharply than I had intended.

Mother’s nod was solemn. “Well, of course there’s a list ,” she said. “We’re not approaching this carelessly. One must have a rigorous system in place when it comes to such important decisions.”

I felt as though I was trapped in some strange nightmare. Lists, systems. For once my mother was speaking the same language as me – only because she wanted to marry

me off. My head was aching again.

Before I could say anything, my mother leaned forward, her gaze intent on mine. “I know I’ve left too much of your upbringing to your brother, that I haven’t always been the best mother to you, but here I can be useful. I am going to do this for you, Felicity. I’m going to give you a perfect season and find you a perfect husband.”

“But perhaps...” I began, hating how tentative I sounded. “Perhaps I shan’t find a husband. I mean, perhaps there isn’t a suitable match for me.”

“Nonsense,” Mother said briskly. “I know you’re a tad late in coming out – I let your brother persuade me on that. And you’ve always been an ... unusual child. Still,” Mother sailed on, “you’re a bright, beautiful young woman with an extremely healthy inheritance. You’ll have your pick of them. We’ll find you a clever, handsome man who will take care of you.”

She beamed at me, delighted that I would be able to choose my own destiny – as long as that destiny was as a wife and a mother. As long as I left my brother’s house for another man’s and traded one place where I didn’t quite fit for another. As long as there was someone to take care of me .

“And we’ll begin the hunt tonight!” she continued, oblivious to my inner turmoil. “I’ve already secured us invitations to Lady Wellerby’s ball.”

“A ball ?” I said, unable to disguise the horror in my voice, so that the word sounded synonymous with a tooth-pulling.

“Only a small get-together,” Mother carried on, her enthusiasm undimmed by my response.

“Your Grace,” Wheeler interrupted then, all apologies. “You asked me to let you

know at once if you received any correspondence.” He carried a note on a silver platter round to Izzy’s side of the table.

“Is it from Max?” Mother asked.

“No,” Izzy said, breaking the seal on the note, which I recognized as Mrs Finch’s stationery. “It’s from the friend I’m due to see today.” She scanned the note and stood. “In fact, she needs to meet a touch earlier. I do apologize.”

“Of course you must go!” Mother exclaimed. “It’s my fault for arriving unexpectedly. Besides, it will give me a chance to spend time with Felicity.”

“Yes, go,” I said, knowing that whatever was in that envelope was much more important than the tension simmering at this breakfast table. “We’ll see you later. At the ball .”

“Of course,” Izzy agreed, sending me a look of moral support before she whirled out of the room. I envied her sense of urgency and purpose.

Mother and I were alone, and I listened to her enthusiastic chatter, careful to keep a pleased smile on my face the whole time, trying not to dwell too much on what was in store for me.

“... And of course one tries to keep abreast of all the town gossip, though it can take a day or two to reach us,” Mother said. “I rarely miss the city, but I must admit I am looking forward to getting all the latest news.”

An idea struck me then. Perhaps I could make use of Mother’s love of gossip.

“I found out only yesterday that a young baron had passed away,” I said, carefully casual.

“No!” Mother exclaimed. “Who?”

“Peregrine Archer,” I replied.

“Peregrine Archer,” Mother murmured thoughtfully.

“Baron Ely,” I said. “I believe.”

“Ah, Viscount Ely’s eldest.” She nodded. “I don’t think I ever met him, though I am acquainted with his parents. But what a shame! He can’t have been much older than Max, poor man.”

“Apparently he was the victim of some sort of attack,” I added woodenly. Truly, I was going to have to work on the art of espionage.

“Oh, yes.” Mother’s eyes widened. “Now I do remember. It was the most shocking thing! I heard that he was shot in the street, an attempt at burglary that went awry. It was put about he was on the mend, but clearly that wasn’t true.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “If the man who killed him had known what he was about, then he’d never have bothered in the first place, because the Archers haven’t two pennies to rub together. Now that poor young man is dead, and the desperate soul responsible will hang for it if they catch him.”

“You say you know his parents?” I asked, digging further.

“Mmm...” Mother nodded again. “Though not well. We moved in different circles, and Lady Archer was several years older than me. A proud woman, from what I recall. The viscount’s title is an extremely old one, but the family fortune has dwindled over the years. Bad investments, apparently. They have one of those great old piles somewhere that they can hardly afford to keep.” She sighed. “It’s becoming a more and more common problem, you know. Of course, we’re lucky that your

brother is such a responsible steward. The Roxton estate is certainly in a safe pair of hands.”

“And do they have more children?” I plucked at my napkin, trying to seem like I wasn’t too invested in the answer.

Again, Mother looked as though she was trying to recall the details. “Yes,” she said. “I seem to recall they did have another son ... but he died too.”

“He died ?” The words came out too loud, too shocked. “I-I mean, that’s terrible. To lose two sons,” I covered quickly.

“Isn’t it?” Mother agreed. “I believe it was about four or five years ago.”

“So who will inherit the title now?” I asked, my brain trying to rearrange the pieces of information to fit with what I knew about Ash. Had I made a mistake? Was he not Perry’s brother?

If Mother thought the question strange, she didn’t show it. “I’m not sure,” she started. “Oh, no, wait... How could I forget? It was such a scandal! There’s a third son.”

“A third son?” I murmured.

“Yes, though the rumour was he wasn’t Archer’s son at all.” Mother seemed to catch herself, as though remembering who she was talking to. “But really, Felicity,” she said, suddenly prim, “we mustn’t sit around gossiping. We have appointments all over town!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As I looked around at the happy, excited crowd, I wondered – not for the first time – if they were superior actors, or if these people were really enjoying themselves. Was it possible that a person could be squeezed into a ballgown and then squeezed into a ballroom and feel anything other than a simmering sense of panic combined with crushing boredom?

Lord and Lady Wellerby's "small get-together" consisted of roughly two hundred people. Mother had been instantly swallowed whole by a hungry gaggle of chaperones: friends from her own season who were delighted to welcome her back to town and into the familiar ritual. I'd been deposited by the dance floor like an item of lost luggage, and then had danced every dance with an interchangeable partner: he was always expensive-looking, always knew the steps and asked questions by rote, always utterly dull.

"You look charming tonight, Lady Felicity," the one who currently had his arm round my waist said. I couldn't recall his name, but he was about my age, with a bobbing Adam's apple, and I thought he was counting the steps in his head. At least it meant there had been less awkward small talk.

"Thank you," I replied. The dance floor was hot and crowded and, as we danced, I felt eyes on me – weighing, measuring eyes. I tried taking a deep breath to steady myself and the young man's gaze dipped to the neckline of my dress. His Adam's apple bobbed harder, a flush crawled up his neck.

Not that there was anything indecent about the gown. Mother had chosen it, and it

was a demure blush pink, trimmed with ivory lace, pretty as a strawberry mousse. Personally, I much preferred the dress I'd worn to play the part of Mrs Williams. Mother had found it hidden in my wardrobe earlier and I'd had to hastily pass it off as one of Izzy's, accidentally misplaced. Such a daring creation was not for young debutantes: no, we had to look like puff pastries, sweet enough to cause indigestion.

The song came to an end, and my dance partner escorted me to the edge of the dance floor, bowing and saying the right, polite things that they all said.

Goodness, I was bored. And hot. And frustrated. Itching to get away from everything, suffocated by the whole foolish business but forced to smile through it like a well-behaved young lady.

I would only have a moment of respite, I knew. I used it to fantasize about fleeing through the front door.

"Perhaps I could have this dance?" a voice said from behind me, and time slowed as I turned to find myself confronted by the sight of Edward Laing.

Everything stilled, for an instant, as his eyes met mine. The music dropped away, and something like fear crawled in my throat.

"I'm sorry." My voice was wondrously calm as my heart threatened to hammer clean out of my chest. "I don't believe we've met."

He smiled, the same charming smile I'd seen at the Penny. He looked more handsome in his evening suit, as put together and polished as always, but sharper with it. The lights from the ballroom gilded his hair, his gaze was focused on me, honed as a knife edge. In contrast, his movements were easy, relaxed. It was the combination that left me off-balance.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I feel as though we already know one another.” He paused here, long enough for panic to rear up inside me, but then he carried on. “I’ve heard so much about Lord Vane’s clever sister, Lady Felicity. I’m Edward Laing.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I managed, watching him as closely as I dared for any flicker of recognition. There was none, but then he might be a good actor.

“So?” He raised an eyebrow, held out his hand. “Is it too forward of me to ask you to dance after such a brief introduction?”

“Not at all,” I replied, knowing that it was much less suspicious to accept his invitation. “I’d be happy to.”

A lie. An utter lie. I wasn’t happy at all. I wondered what he was doing here, wondered if Izzy, who hadn’t arrived yet, knew that he was at this gathering. Had he been invited? He seemed utterly at ease, as comfortable in these surroundings as he’d been in the gaming den. An accepted member of society, despite his lack of personal history. Where precisely had he sprung up from?

When his fingers wrapped around mine, his other hand went to my waist, and his movements were smooth and sure. I tried not to flinch and found myself looking fixedly over his shoulder. I must not panic. That would achieve nothing.

“I wonder if there’s something interesting happening behind me?” he asked in a teasing voice as the music swelled and he guided me around the floor. “Perhaps a more handsome suitor?” He darted a glance over his shoulder, following the path of my gaze.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was ... thinking.”

“Ah,” he said sympathetically. “Not much time for that at events like these. I suppose

they've all been talking you to death over the usual topics."

"What are the usual topics?"

"Oh, the weather, the entirety of their social calendars, the latest gossip on the royal family, their horses ..."

As this was exactly what every man I'd met tonight had talked about, I couldn't suppress a sound of amusement.

He grinned. "You know, I would swear that you and I had met before," he said softly.

Any levity fled at that. "I'm rarely out in society," I said, trying for a careless shrug. "Perhaps I have a common face."

"Oh, come now," Laing chided. "That is fishing for a compliment, Lady Felicity. You must know that you're anything but common. You're quite lovely. Indeed, you are ... unique."

"I suppose I've never been good at fitting in," I said after a beat.

The music came to an end. Laing pulled me into one last turn, and bowed over my hand. When he straightened, I removed my fingers from his as quickly as I could.

"Why would you want to fit in with the rest of them?" he asked. His voice was pitched low and he leaned forward, stepping into my space and making the moment somehow intimate. "When you could be extraordinary?"

"I..." I began, but thankfully we were interrupted by another man who came over, slapping Laing on the shoulder.

“There you are, old fellow!” he boomed. “Got a friend or two who would like to talk to you about this canal scheme – come and have a hand of cards.”

“Of course, Carlton. I’d be happy to,” Laing agreed cheerfully. “Thank you for the dance, Lady Felicity. I hope we shall repeat the event soon.” Lingered over these last words, his eyes moved across my face, and I had the strange feeling he was cataloguing my features.

He left without a backwards glance, but even when he disappeared into the crowd, I couldn’t shake the feeling that he was still watching, waiting to see what I did next.

As my next partner approached, I excused myself with more haste than grace, murmuring something about retiring for a moment. Noting that my mother was fully occupied, I slipped through the crowd in the direction of the ladies’ retiring room, but – making sure no one was looking my way – I took a sharp turn, heading instead for the doors that led out to the garden. The need to get away was an itch crawling across my skin and I could ignore it no longer.

The night was clear and calm, and the sudden dropping away of the noise and the lights gave the same immediate relief as plunging into cool water on a punishingly hot day. I exhaled a long, shaky breath.

A soft giggle came from behind me, and I realized that I wasn’t the only one taking advantage of the privacy provided by the slippery oil spill of darkness out here. I moved further away from the sound, skirting round the side of the house, putting even more distance between myself and the ballroom, between myself and Edward Laing.

I was overlooking a more formal garden area now, though it was hard to see, given the only light was that streaming out from the house. It was a large space for a London home, but the Wellerbys were an old, rich family and they liked people to know about it. I wandered down several long, shallow stone steps and felt the crunch

of a gravel footpath under my thin silk slippers. High, perfectly clipped hedges rose up on either side of me, as I walked into a sort of avenue, leading down towards a stone fountain.

It was even darker here, and I picked carefully across to where the fountain stood, white stone glowing quietly under the moonlight. Leaning over, I trailed my fingers through the water, an icy bite like teeth against my skin.

“What’s a nice girl like you doing all the way out here?” A voice came from so close behind me that I started, teetering for a second over the water. Before I could plunge in head first, a strong hand wrapped around my arm and tugged me backwards. My body knew who the voice belonged to even before my brain did, because I softened instinctively into his hold.

“Ash,” I whispered. “What are you doing here?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Turning to face him, I found Ash already looking down at me, our bodies pressed closely, easily together. What little light there was touched that midnight-dark hair, those gleaming eyes. He looked at home in the shadows, I thought, as if he slipped them on as anyone else would a coat or a pair of gloves.

“Would you believe me if I said I was invited?” he asked, stepping back and dropping to sit on the broad side of the fountain, his legs stretched out. I sat beside him, deciding not to question the rush of happiness I felt that he was here, the way his presence eased the worst of the tension I’d been carrying.

“No, I would not,” I said. “Lady Wellerby is a woman of notoriously discerning taste.”

“A direct hit.” Ash clapped his hand to his chest. “In that case, would you believe I came because I couldn’t stay away from you?”

I treated him to a long look. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I found I could trace the hollows of his face, the firm line of his jaw. I realized then that I’d been staring at him for longer than was polite. The way his mouth kicked up to one side made me certain he didn’t mind.

“No, I don’t think I would believe that, either,” I said finally.

He laughed. “I might have had some club business to discuss with Wellerby that couldn’t wait,” he admitted. “But finding Felicity Vane creeping about in the gardens

was an excellent bonus. I'm surprised to see you at a party like this."

I let out a sound of exasperation. "It certainly wasn't my choice," I said. "My mother arrived nearly two weeks early and she's excited about giving me a season."

"I see." Ash leaned back, braced on his arms. "Is that something you're excited about?"

"It makes me want to throw myself on the floor and indulge in a tantrum. Isn't it a shame that one has to grow out of tantrums? Feeling those big feelings and then letting everyone know about it sounds a lot better than pushing everything down, being demure, being small and quiet and polite and smiling all the time ." The last words came out almost on a snarl.

"Sounds exhausting," Ash said. "It's not such a problem for the men in polite society – they're encouraged to go on having tantrums as long as they like."

They , he said, not we . He didn't consider himself polite society, and he wasn't wrong. I felt a trickle of unease – if the two of us were found here like this it would create a scandal. I didn't want to think about that, I only wanted to sit with him a while longer.

"Men are allowed to do a lot of things women aren't," I grumbled. "Especially young, unmarried women. It says something, doesn't it, that the women with the most freedom are the widows?"

"Makes you wonder that there aren't more murdered husbands lying around," Ash agreed, his tone mild.

I laughed, the sound surprised out of me, loud in the still night air.

“No, no.” Ash shook his head sorrowfully. “Don’t smile. I know you don’t like it.”

“Smiling in there” – I gestured back towards the house – “that’s china-doll smiling. That’s a performance to keep everyone happy with a version of me that doesn’t exist. A Lady Felicity Vane with smooth edges who fits in perfectly and doesn’t cause trouble.”

“She sounds boring.”

“She is,” I said, enjoying him, how easy I felt with him. “That’s the worst of it, I think, although I know it sounds petty. The boredom. It’s crushing. I can feel my brain slowing down. Like I’m wading through a swamp of treacle.”

“A swamp of treacle sounds like a boyhood fantasy of mine.” Ash nudged me with his elbow. Then he relented. “But it doesn’t sound petty at all. I understand all too well the feeling that you don’t quite belong, that you’ll never be what other people want, however hard you might try. Better to give up on that, and be who you are. Damn the lot of them.”

“That,” I said, “is much, much easier for you to say.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” Ash sounded suddenly weary. “Though you might be surprised.”

“Besides,” I said, changing the subject, “boredom wasn’t the only thing I was escaping. Edward Laing is inside.”

I felt Ash stiffen. He muttered a rough curse, which I enjoyed and saved up to use myself at a later date. “What is he doing here?” he said, almost to himself, echoing my own earlier question. “He typically steers clear of the managing mamas and their eligible daughters, happier to do business at one of the clubs or gaming dens. Stay

away from him,” he warned.

“Easier said than done,” I sniffed. “He asked me to dance. I don’t think he recognized me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Ash said grimly. “When it comes to Edward Laing, every interaction is a chess match, a calculated move. There will certainly be an ulterior motive when it comes to asking Lady Felicity Vane to dance.”

“Perhaps he found me attractive,” I said sharply. “People do, you know.”

“Oh, I know.” Ash’s voice was laced with laughter.

“And I handled the situation well enough.” My mother’s words came back then, her determination to find a husband to take care of me. “I’m perfectly capable of managing things. I don’t need anyone else to look after me.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest that you did.” Ash sounded startled by the vehemence in my tone.

I rubbed my forehead. “I’m sick of being underestimated.”

“People will refuse to see what’s right in front of them. They can’t understand your brilliance, and that’s their loss. I hope you know that I’d never be so foolish.”

“No,” I mused. “You didn’t underestimate me. You kissed me instead.”

“An act I shall be happy to repeat, any time you like,” Ash said hopefully. “Moonlit gardens always seem the perfect backdrop to such a scene.”

“Kissed a lot of people in moonlit gardens, have you?” I asked, and then raised my

hand as if to stop his response. “No, don’t tell me. I already know the answer to that.”

“I shouldn’t really have kissed you in the first place,” Ash admitted. “I don’t make a habit of romancing eligible young ladies fresh out in society. I’d be poison to your reputation, you know.”

“That would be an issue,” I said, trying to keep my tone easy. “If I cared much for my reputation.”

“ You may not.” Ash leaned closer, and there was something rueful in his eyes. “But I know the truth. You care too much for your family to do damage that may reach them. You’re a protector, Felicity, whether they realize it or not. You sacrifice tiny pieces of yourself for them every day because you love them.”

I stilled at the words, at the understanding in his eyes, an understanding mixed with something sad and heavy. I felt laid bare in a way that I’d never experienced, as if Ash were looking straight through to some secret, hidden part of me.

Then he grinned, and the feeling dissipated. “Me, I’m much more selfish,” he continued. “Which is why I can’t find it in myself to apologize for the kiss.”

“I’d be offended if you did,” I retorted. “And I’d like to remind you that it takes two people to make a kiss ... at least one like that . Maybe it’s me who should apologize to you.”

“There’s your chivalrous streak again.” He sighed. “Perhaps we can call the matter a draw.”

“So it won’t happen again?” I asked, hoping that he wouldn’t hear the disappointment in my voice.

“I didn’t say that,” Ash responded. “Only that it probably shouldn’t happen again.”

“No. It definitely shouldn’t,” I agreed.

“A very bad idea,” Ash murmured.

The distance between us was evaporating. I could feel the last words against my lips, as his breath mingled with mine. His body was kicking off a heat and need that matched my own and was so intense it edged towards pain. I couldn’t tell if touching him would bring relief or send me up in flames.

“Felicity?” Izzy’s voice shattered the moment as thoroughly as if it had been a china vase swept from a shelf.

Ash’s eyes fluttered closed. “Your sister-in-law has such impeccable timing,” he groaned, pulling back from me as Izzy stepped into our hidden enclosure.

“There you are!” she exclaimed. Her gaze moved to Ash, and her eyes narrowed, though she had clearly learned her lesson about interfering. She restrained herself to a short, clipped: “Ash.”

“Your Grace.” Ash got to his feet and tucked his hands in his pockets, looking boyish for once, as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t.

Izzy’s lips pulled up at the corners. “I came to rescue you from the ball,” she said to me. “Though it looks like you made your own escape.”

“Only a brief respite,” I replied briskly, standing to dust off my skirt. “I’ll be glad to go home.” I needed to think. About a lot of things.

“Good.” Izzy’s smile was that of a conspirator. “I already told your mother I made a

mistake in coming, that I have a headache and that she should stay and catch up with her friends, while we go back. I should think she'll be hours."

"Tell Izzy about Laing," Ash said.

"Laing?" she asked.

"He was inside," I explained with a wave of my hand. "He danced with me, but as I already told Ash, I don't think he knew who I was. It's nothing worth making a fuss over. I'm fine."

Ash and Izzy exchanged a look that had me bristling. I was being managed again, by two people who I thought knew better.

"Felicity—" Ash began gently.

"Let's go," I said abruptly. "There's no reason to stay here any longer than we have to. Goodnight, Ash."

Without looking back, I strode back down the path towards the house. As I left, Ash's quiet words chased me into the dark: a soft, desperate warning.

"Please. Be careful."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Three days later I was sitting at a tea party in Bloomsbury, wondering if a teaspoon might be used as an effective weapon.

“And so I said that of course if one were simply to multiply the new coefficients by the suggested figure, then the answer is quite obvious,” said the pink-faced Mr Trent from his seat beside me.

Wrong .

“Well—” I began, but he cut me off with an indulgent smile.

“I apologize. I’m getting carried away again,” he said. “You can hardly be interested in the specific details of a tricky paper. I know such problems will go over the head of a young lady like yourself, but I promise you, it’s fascinating stuff.” A note of pomposity that I was all too familiar with had entered his voice.

We were sitting side by side on a small settee in an alcove framed by feathery green palms. Quite honestly, I’d lost track of whose house we were at, but the place was grand and stuffed full of people eating tiny cakes and milling around having the same conversations they had at every single one of these interminable events.

I noticed Mother hovering nearby, chatting with a friend of hers. She flashed me an encouraging smile, and I tried to force my own lips up, even as Mr Trent waffled on.

“Mr Trent is a Cambridge man ,” Mother had said when she introduced us, her words

heavy with meaning. Clearly Mr Trent was on her list of appropriate suitors. She was, after all, trying to find me someone clever, as well as proper.

Mr Trent was only a year or two older than me, with the look of a pale, handsome scholar. Light brown hair brushed back from a long, slightly melancholy face, round spectacles framing shy brown eyes. When asked why he wasn't in Cambridge at the moment, Mr Trent had answered with a nervous chuckle.

“Oh, got sent down for a couple of weeks. Harmless prank with some pals of mine.”

He was polite, blushed easily and was perfectly nice in a bland sort of way.

I hated him with a great passion.

Not only was he studying mathematics at Cambridge, but from what I'd observed so far he had no aptitude for the subject. This would have been bad enough, but that he had been foolish enough to get himself suspended for two weeks and then not care ? He had the opportunity to attend lectures and to learn at the feet of great teachers, and he had neither the wit nor the good sense to appreciate the privilege. It made my blood boil. I eyed him as he continued to make small talk with no need for my input.

This was the seventh social event I had been dragged to in three days, which was at least partly responsible for my fantasy of stabbing Mr Trent with a teaspoon. I felt simultaneously squeezed and stretched, as though I were being crushed in a tiny box, and spread so thin, you'd soon be able to see straight through me, all at once.

The press of people and their expectations was unbearable. I hadn't had a moment to myself to walk or read or think or even take a deep breath, because we seemed to move from one social event to the next. From a tea to a dinner to a party or the theatre. There were always people talking to me, poking and prodding at me. I was engulfed constantly in a wave of noise from which there was no respite.

If we weren't socializing, then we were shopping. Madame Solange, a flamboyant woman with a dubious French accent, had measured me for an entire new wardrobe, and the obligatory white gown and veil for the debutantes' ball, which would kick off the official start of the season in just over a week.

"You weel be zee belle of zee ball, non?" Madame Solange had said as she draped a skein of pearlescent silk across my shoulders.

"I certainly hope not," I muttered under my breath.

After Madame Solange, there was the milliner to visit, and the hairdresser who chopped several pale blue inches off the bottom of my hair and coaxed the rest into sleek ringlets.

The more we did, the brighter my mother shone, like a diamond polished up and dazzling. She was so happy, and I... Well, I was trying . I was trying to be the daughter she wanted.

Izzy had been notably absent. In our snatched conversations when we crossed paths in the house, she told me that they were still trying to find out who had sent the bomb to the Aviary, and that Laing remained under surveillance. She was worried about his appearance at the Wellerbys' ball, but after three days with no repercussions, she cautiously accepted that I hadn't been recognized.

No one was sure what his next move would be – particularly in light of his poker losses. I could tell she was frustrated by the lack of progress, and also she was worried that Max still hadn't returned home. He wasn't usually away for so long.

I tried not to care too much that I was once again largely in the dark about their lives. I'd done my job for the Aviary. It wasn't my concern any longer what happened.

“Don’t you agree?” Mr Trent broke through my musings and I glanced up to find him looking at me expectantly.

“Oh ... yes?” I managed, and, from the pleased expression on his face, I supposed it had been the right answer.

When I caught Mother staring at us again, I tried, only for a moment, to imagine some kind of spark, some kind of romantic potential between Mr Trent and myself.

Impossible.

Instead, the memory of strong arms wrapped around my waist reared up again as it had so many times over the past few days. It had been the best part of a week and it felt as though my body was still tingling from Ash’s kiss. Had Izzy been a moment later arriving at the Wellerbys’ I knew that the performance would have been repeated. It was fascinating, the way I thought about him so often, the way I craved his touch—

“Excuse me, Mr Trent.” A familiar voice broke in from over my shoulder, and I dropped my teaspoon against my saucer with a startling clatter. “Your mother has requested your company.”

“Ah!” Mr Trent’s already pink face grew even more heated. “Yes, of course, poor Mama – excuse me.”

Tripping over himself and murmuring his goodbyes, Mr Trent departed.

“Alone at last, Lady Felicity,” the voice said again.

I took a deep breath, then turned in my seat and looked up into the face of the last man I had expected to see.

Edward Laing.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Mr Laing,” I said, automatically falling back on the rules of polite conversation. “We met at the Wellerbys’, didn’t we? How nice to see you again.” I hoped I wasn’t showing any of the nerves I felt.

Laing smiled at me, a knowing twinkle in his eye. “Come now, Lady Felicity,” he said, dropping gracefully into the seat beside me. “I think it’s time to do away with pretence, as fun as it has been. I believe you know me to be no slow top, just as I know the brilliance of your own mind. Mrs Williams .”

My heart lurched when his smile only widened. The smile of a cat, toying with a mouse, perhaps. I knew I’d been foolish, hoping a scrap of gold lace would conceal my identity, but I wasn’t sure what game we were playing now. However polite Laing may appear, however innocuous our surroundings, Izzy was certain the man was dangerous.

I sat in silence for a moment, considering the best course of action. As far as I was aware, he knew nothing of the Aviary or my connection to them, only that I’d infiltrated the gambling den under a false name. Laing seemed not to mind the quiet; if anything the look he gave me was approving, as if he could see that I was weighing and measuring all the likely outcomes. He brushed an invisible mark from his immaculate suit and waited patiently.

“It seems there’s little point in dissembling,” I said finally. “Though sneaking out to play draw poker can hardly be considered an acceptable activity for a young lady. I hope I can count on your discretion, Mr Laing?”

His smile returned, and again it felt as though my answer pleased him. “Oh, you have nothing to worry about there,” he assured me. “I know how to keep a secret. It seems a crime to keep a mind like yours caged up only because of society’s silly rules.”

“It can be ... difficult,” I agreed cautiously.

“I can imagine how tedious this sort of business must be for you.” He scanned the crowd milling in front of us, and I caught disdain in his tone. “Not a soul here on your intellectual level, and yet they treat you like some fragile bloom to be admired only for her looks.”

“I— Yes,” I said, startled.

“Please don’t mistake me,” he said, his expression mischievous. “You’re a lovely young woman, Lady Felicity, but, of course, I know that you’re so much more than a beautiful face.”

I was suddenly aware of how close he was, the two of us sitting on this small sofa. There was real understanding in his voice. I wondered again if Izzy had made a mistake. Could this sympathetic man really be the ruthless villain she took him for?

“You’re too kind,” I murmured, trying to cover my confusion.

“Oh, no.” He moved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. “No need for that bland politeness, I beg you! I’d much rather talk about the poker game.” His tone was boyish, eager, his enthusiasm infectious. “Tell me, have you been playing for long?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Not terribly long,” I said, “but I must admit I found it fascinating.”

Though his posture remained casual, something came into his eyes then, as if he were

anticipating what was to come next.

“And you seemed to be acquainted with the owner of the gambling establishment we were in...” He let the statement linger like a question.

“Oh, him,” I said mechanically, again wishing I was better at this game of deception. “Not really. We met the night I played vingt-et-un. He accused me of cheating, if you can believe it.” I let indignation bleed into my words. If in doubt, I thought, a version of the truth was probably the best bet.

“Unfortunately, I can believe it.” Laing nodded. “He’s amiable enough, but a man of limited imagination. However, he seemed quite taken with you.”

“I believe he has a reputation as a flirt,” I said, as coolly as I could manage.

“I think you do yourself a disservice, Lady Felicity.” Laing still carried that strange intensity. “It’s likely a man like Ash would be susceptible to your particular ... charms.”

I really didn’t know how to respond to that.

He smiled at me then, changing the subject. “I suppose you were keeping a count of the cards when you played vingt-et-un?”

After a moment of hesitation, I nodded.

“It was a pleasure to watch you play with such skill. Your gift of concentration is a powerful thing.”

“I suppose it’s important to focus if one wants to win,” I replied. “And you, Mr Laing? Have you been playing draw poker long? You’re an accomplished player

yourself.”

“Thank you.” He chuckled, pleased. “I’ll admit that I’ve been considered something of expert in the game for a while now. It was quite a thrill for me, to finally come up against a worthy opponent.”

“You took your loss well,” I said, aiming for a playful note.

“You believe I lost?” His words were soft. “Sitting here with you, Lady Felicity, I assure you, I feel like the true winner of our game.”

I opened my mouth – to say what, I wasn’t sure – but he cut me off.

“I can only assume from your presence here that you’re being launched into society.” His eyes cut to my mother, who was trying to spy on us inconspicuously by standing behind a stout gentleman and darting looks around his shoulders. “Time for you to have a season. In other words, your family are trying to find you a husband.”

“That’s very forthright of you, Mr Laing,” I managed, attempting to keep up with this turn in the conversation.

“Forgive me, I felt that you’d prefer to speak plainly. It’s a difficult situation for a young woman of your quality to be in.” His voice was gentle, once again full of understanding.

“If we’re to speak plainly,” I said, nettled, “then I should tell you I have absolutely no intention of taking a husband.”

If I had expected to surprise him, I was to be disappointed.

“I understand perfectly.” He nodded, as if what I said was extremely sensible.

“Though I hope I’ll be able to change your mind.”

“Excuse me?” I blinked.

Whatever he might have said in response to this was cut off by my mother’s approach.

“Felicity,” she said brightly. “Won’t you introduce me to your friend?”

Laing got to his feet at once and bowed over my mother’s hand, his charming smile slipping into place.

“Edward Laing, Lady Vane. I’m delighted to meet you.” He straightened. “I hope you won’t mind me commandeering your lovely daughter’s attention. I’ll readily admit that I’ve been fascinated by her from our first meeting.” Here he shot me a look, as though we were both in on some joke, as I sat, still reeling from his previous words. Had Edward Laing implied that he wished to ... marry me ?

“Oh?” Mother couldn’t conceal her delight at Laing’s obvious flirtation. “And where might that have been?”

“At the Wynters’ wedding reception some months ago,” Laing lied smoothly. I was certain he hadn’t been at the wedding at all.

“Ah, yes.” Mother nodded. “I’ve been out of town for some time, so I missed the wedding, though I heard the ceremony was delightful.”

“It certainly was,” Laing said. “So delightful, in fact, that I’m sure it turned more than one bachelor’s mind in the direction of matrimony.”

“I’m certain you must be right, Mr Laing,” Mother said, pleasure in her eyes. She was

more than happy to follow the trail of breadcrumbs Laing left for her – and who could blame her? He was hardly being subtle. “But tell me: how are you acquainted with our host?”

“Ah, Lady Endsleigh,” Laing said, with a nod in the direction of the lady herself, magnificently clad in a puce gown with matching turban. “An old family friend. I was at school with her son.”

The answer clearly pleased Mother, though I was certain she’d have already asked someone about Laing before making her way over to us. When it came to prospective husbands, she was nothing if not thorough. I could see her taking note of his beautifully tailored suit, his perfectly polished shoes, his relaxed posture. Everything about him screamed that he belonged here.

And yet I knew from Izzy that Edward Laing was simply an alias, a man with no history at all. How was it possible that Laing had school friends? Was it, as Izzy had suggested, that he had bribed or blackmailed people to lie for him? Too much was happening and all under the guise of horribly polite conversation. My head was reeling.

“Oh, yes, Lady Endsleigh’s son is a charming boy,” Mother said, then gave a small laugh, “although I’m showing my age by calling him so. He must be five and twenty by now.”

“But how could anyone accuse you of showing your age, Lady Vane, when one could take you and Lady Felicity for sisters?”

Laing was laying the compliments on thick now, though Mother continued to beam at him. Once again he glanced at me, and there was a look in his eyes, a look that said we were sharing a joke, that we were in on something together, and I didn’t know how that had happened. I didn’t want to share looks with him, or private jokes. I

stood abruptly.

“I feel unwell,” I said, the words coming out too loud.

Mother looked startled, as well she might. It was hardly a graceful moment.

“I think we’d better return home,” I continued in a softer voice. I kept my eyes on my mother, careful to avoid looking at Laing.

“Well, of course,” Mother said, instantly at my side, holding my arm. “My daughter is somewhat delicate,” she said to Laing in apology.

“I’ll have someone call your carriage round at once. I do hope you feel better soon, Lady Felicity,” Laing said, all sympathy. He took my free hand in his, bowing elegantly over it, and brushing his lips against my knuckles. His fingers squeezed mine, the pressure a touch too hard.

I felt nothing but a chill sense of dread at the contact.

As we took leave of our hostess and made our way through the crowds, I knew without looking that his eyes were following me, cool and possessive.

This, I thought, was a serious complication.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The flowers arrived that afternoon.

I was trying to snatch a moment of peace, to regain some equilibrium by retreating to my study, an unfinished and long-neglected letter to Dr Volterra in front of me, when the door swung open.

“Felicity, you have an admirer!” Mother trilled, excitement bubbling over as she whirled in. “And I’d wager I know who it is.”

With a great deal of jostling, and despite my grumbled protests, she tugged me downstairs. The perfume from the enormous bouquet of honeysuckle and lilies was overpowering, filling the entrance hall of the house with its sweet, clinging scent.

My heart sank as I opened the envelope nestled in the bouquet and read the note inside.

I very much look forward to resuming our conversation.

Yours in admiration,

E.L.

“Mr Laing!” Mother said, peeking at the note over my shoulder. “You seem to have made quite the impression on the man. And I must say his manners were excellent, and he had a fair countenance, didn’t he? Not the most handsome man there, but there

was something so charming about him that made up for it. Don't you think, Felicity?"

"I'm not sure," I hedged. "I didn't really talk to him for long. I don't know what has inspired this."

"Bah!" Mother exclaimed. " You have inspired it, my girl! You're going to be the hit of the season and Mr Laing is sensible enough to want to steal a march on the competition. I must write to Lady Endsleigh and find out all about him! So far, it seems he's a good match. No title, of course, which is a shame, but from what I've heard, he's a well-liked gentleman with impeccable manners, a tidy fortune and a bright future. He is considered quite the catch, but he's never shown an interest in anyone before, so the other mamas had set him down as a confirmed bachelor. And I hear he's extremely clever, Felicity..."

The scent from the flowers was overwhelming and giving me a headache, only intensified by Mother's unceasing enthusiasm. I had no idea what to say to my mother – actually, Edward Laing is currently being investigated for murder by the secret agency your daughter-in-law works for and when he looks at me sometimes I feel like a fly caught in a spider's web , didn't really seem appropriate.

I hated that he had sent something to my home; it felt like an intrusion. Later, in my room, I watched the street below out of my window, feeling a strange certainty that someone was outside hidden in the darkness, looking straight back. A man loitered near one of the streetlamps on the square, smoking a cigarette. Had he been there earlier? Now that I thought about it, I was sure I'd seen someone standing in the same place yesterday, not that I'd thought anything of it at the time.

I tried to put it aside as I got ready for tonight's activity – a visit to the theatre. As Nancy laced me into a gown of pale lilac silk, I wondered if I should try and get a message to Izzy, but what had really happened? A man had sent me flowers. It was hardly an emergency.

No. There was no need to make a fuss. I wasn't some nervous creature.

By the time the carriage drew up outside the theatre in Covent Garden, I was calmer, despite the thronging crowd. At least at the theatre I wasn't expected to make conversation. Still, I couldn't shake the idea that I was being watched.

I was behaving like a fool, I thought. I was always under scrutiny at social events; there was no reason to think it was anything more than that.

Mother seemed untouched by my nerves. She was like a child let loose in a sweet shop.

"We don't get theatre like this in the country." She beamed, gripping my arm. "I did get dragged to an amateur production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at one of Lady Wentworth's house parties, but, darling, it was atrocious. Lord Wentworth's Bottom left much to be desired," she carried on in hushed undertones, and I choked, horrified until I remembered that this was the name of a character in the play.

"That's a shame," I managed faintly as we stepped through the doors and into the crowded foyer. "Hopefully tonight will be an improvement."

The play was a new production and it had drawn a fashionable crowd. Mother was busy greeting people, her fingers still clamped tightly round my arm, when I spied someone I knew.

"Lady Felicity." Sylla Banaji didn't need to raise her voice to be heard through the crowd; somehow that crisp, regal tone of hers cut clean through the noise, scalpel-sharp. Beside me, I felt Mother quiver with delight.

"I didn't know you were acquainted with the Banajis," she hissed. Mother may have been a dowager duchess, but no one was immune to the glamour of Sylla and her

family. I was certain that she had read all the latest gossip about them in the fashionable periodicals.

I introduced the two of them, and wondered exactly how I could get Sylla alone to confide my worries.

“Your Grace,” Sylla said to my mother, a smile on her face that was a far cry from the scowl I was usually treated to. “I wondered if I could borrow Lady Felicity for a moment. I promised to introduce her to Dr Floyd, a friend of my father’s—”

“Dr Floyd!” I exclaimed, delighted, all thoughts of Laing temporarily wiped from my mind. “But his theories on automorphic functions are fascinating!”

Sylla’s smile seemed to grow more fixed. “I’m sure he’ll be pleased to hear you say so.” Then she dragged me off into the crowd.

“Do you think Dr Floyd will have time to discuss his latest paper?” I asked breathlessly. “Oh! I wish I’d known, and then I could have brought his book with me to get it autographed. I have a first edition, you know. I—”

“For heaven’s sake, Felicity,” Sylla snapped as we moved away from the crowds, turned down a corridor and bundled through a door that swung into a small area that appeared to be used for storing surplus stage make-up and hair supplies.

“What is Dr Floyd doing in a cupboard full of wigs?” I asked, confused.

Sylla’s eyes fluttered shut, and she took a deep breath, exhaling steadily. “There is no Dr Floyd.”

“Of course there’s a Dr Floyd—” I began, but Sylla cut me off.

“There’s no Dr Floyd here , Felicity.” She rubbed her forehead with her fingers in a weary gesture. “I just wanted to get you away from your mother.”

Understanding finally dawned. “I’m not going to meet Dr Floyd?” I asked, crestfallen.

Sylla huffed. “I’m sure I can arrange an introduction for another time. I assume you have something to say to me?”

“How did you know that?” I asked.

“I am a highly trained investigator,” Sylla sniffed. “And I haven’t the least idea how you won a single hand of poker when your every thought is written across your face, plain as day.”

“Oh?” I said grumpily. “And what am I thinking right now?”

At that, a cool smile broke across Sylla’s face.

“You’re thinking thoughts unbecoming to a lady, and you haven’t had the required training to carry them out against me. Now, I understand you met Laing at the Wellerbys’ ball. Any further developments?”

“He was pleasant to me, even charming,” I continued, frowning. “And today he turned up at Lady Endsleigh’s afternoon tea. I think he was there ... to see me.”

“I would imagine so.” Sylla shuddered. “I can’t think of a single reason to voluntarily appear at such a dreary event. Nothing but dry cucumber sandwiches and spiteful sniping under the cover of polite society.”

“Exactly!” I exclaimed, then, returning to the matter at hand. “He said something –

and I'm not quite sure, but he gave the impression that..."

Sylla gave an exaggerated sigh. "While we're still young, if you don't mind," she said, and made an impatient rolling gesture with her hand.

"I think he wants to marry me," I blurted out.

Sylla's eyebrows shot up. "You think ? Isn't that the sort of thing that should be reasonably obvious?"

"Well, I don't have a lot of marriage proposals to compare it to," I said, flustered.

"I've had a great many," Sylla said, without conceit, "and though the quality of them has varied, the salient central point has always been clear."

"We were interrupted," I managed. "But he definitely gave the impression of romantic interest. Then he sent me flowers afterwards."

A look of displeasure crossed Sylla's face.

"That is troubling," she said thoughtfully.

"What should I do?" I asked.

"Well, I wouldn't marry him, if I were you," Sylla snapped, but it was obvious the wheels in her clever mind were turning.

"Of course I'm not going to marry him," I said impatiently. "But don't you think I should tell him that?"

"Yes, if he asks you," Sylla replied distractedly, still deep in thought. "It's a

complication, but there's nothing you can do," she said finally. "Not right now, at least. We'll continue to monitor the situation. If anything happens that causes you concern, you get a message to Izzy, or me, or the Aviary at once." She reached out a hand, as though she were about to lay it comfortingly on my arm, but then – catching herself – scowled, as though I had tricked her into an almost act of kindness, and snatched it back.

"I have to wait and see what happens?"

"Much of our work is waiting to see what happens," Sylla said, and her tone had softened fractionally, I think because she understood and shared my frustration. "But after that there comes a reckoning." The smile that spread across her face then was as bloodthirsty as any pirate. "And the Aviary always gets her man."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Despite Sylla's reassurances, I knew that the instruction to "wait and see" was going to be difficult to follow. The truth was that I wasn't really a "wait and see" sort of person.

During the night, I woke and slipped over to look out of the curtains in my bedroom to the street below. The world was still and silent, but in the dingy shadows I caught the red glow of the end of a lit cigarette, a profile turned in my direction and my heart thumped.

Dropping the heavy fabric of the curtain, I got back into bed and pulled the covers over my suddenly cold body. It could be nothing, of course, but I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching me. I hadn't been able to voice this suspicion to Sylla – at the time it seemed melodramatic at best. And yet ... I thought again of that possessive, intense glimmer in Laing's expression, and shivered. Was he the sort of man who would have a woman followed simply because he believed she belonged to him somehow? It sounded like something from a penny dreadful.

Still, now I knew that he'd recognized me from the poker game all along, it cast things in a different light. The Wellerbys' ball, Lady Endsleigh's... Perhaps it was not by chance that I encountered him at those events. I heard Ash's voice telling me that Laing wasn't usually found in such places, his warning to be careful rang in my ears.

My mind swung back and forth. Was I imagining things? There was nothing I liked less than unanswered questions. I wished that Laing had asked me to marry him, so I

could have told him, quite clearly, that I wasn't interested.

Then and there, I decided I didn't want to wait and see, after all.

The next morning, I waited until Izzy had gone out for the day before approaching Mother with a bright smile and a sense of purpose.

"I know we have plans this afternoon, but I wondered if you might like to take a walk in the park this morning?" I said innocently. "It's such a lovely day."

Mother's look of surprised delight made me feel guilty, but I told myself it was for a good cause. "What a nice idea!" she exclaimed. "You know I don't like to overtax you, darling, but the season is short – one must make the most of it."

She said the words earnestly. I was beginning to understand her thinking. She had a goal – it wasn't a goal I liked or shared, but it was one that she was pursuing with a single-minded focus that I could admire. To her, finding me a husband was a problem as knotty, complex but ultimately solvable as any equation. Increasing exposure to potential suitors was a logical step, and today it was a step that worked with my own secret plans.

Unfortunately, as with everything to do with high society, a casual walk in the park had to be planned like a military operation, and I had to be primped like a doll. It was another hour before Mother pronounced my appearance perfect.

"Just right, Felicity." She smiled approvingly. "Effortlessly lovely."

Hardly effortless, I thought, as my appearance had taken a great deal of effort (four people fussing over me, all directed by my mother, a conductor producing a great symphony) but I was forced to swallow my retort. Dressed far too finely for any sort of real walk, the kind where one stomped around, breathing deep and clear and

uncaring of mud spatter, we finally set out for the park.

It was a ritual, this promenade through the city's green spaces. Like any good cattle market, such an activity allowed a man the chance to examine his potential purchase from all angles, while for the women it was an opportunity to show themselves to their best advantage. I hated the shameless, ruthless efficiency of it, and generally avoided it like the plague, but for today, at least, I was not above using this particular setting to my own advantage.

If, as I hypothesized, Edward Laing was having me followed then he would surely take the opportunity to catch me in a private moment. A visit to the park provided precisely that. It was not a typical activity for me, and it was spontaneous enough so he would have no prior knowledge of my being there. If he turned up it wouldn't prove definitively that he was keeping an eye on me but it would strongly suggest it.

Worst-case scenario, I would spend the morning making small talk with chinless aristocrats. Best-case scenario, I would draw Laing out and firmly decline his offer, hopefully putting an end to his interest in me. It made logical sense.

Unfortunately, logical was the last thing I felt as we approached the park, Mother's arm was through mine, the latest gossip from the night before on her lips. (When people had the time to get up to all this scandalous behaviour during a three-hour performance, I had no idea.) My heart was thumping, my palms sweating. I couldn't stop my gaze from darting around, looking for Laing, or perhaps for anyone he had following me.

"And then Mr Kent said something extremely indiscreet about Lady Thurlow's sister," Mother was saying. "Which was bad manners on his part but could have come as absolutely no surprise to her."

"I should think not," I agreed, having not the faintest idea what she was talking about.

“Have you seen anyone who you might be interested in?” Mother asked in a low voice, her eyes scanning the park. “I know it’s early days, but there are several interesting matrimonial candidates to my mind.”

“I don’t think—” I began, but Mother cut me off with a squeeze of her hand.

“And here comes one now!” she hissed.

My heart in my mouth, I turned and found myself faced not with my quarry but with the disappointing sight of Mr Trent walking towards us with his mother, a lady who constantly looked as if someone had served her a piece of undercooked chicken.

“Your Grace, Lady Felicity,” Mr Trent said, bowing. His hand went anxiously to his neck tie, as if it were too tight. His mother cleared her throat rather pointedly and his fingers sprang away from his collar as though it burned. “How lovely to see you.” The words were slightly strangled, and I wondered if his shirt really was cutting off his supply of oxygen.

“Mr Trent!” Mother trilled. “What auspicious timing. I wonder if you would keep Felicity company, while I have a quick chat with your mother? I’ve been wanting to pick her brains about her lovely gardens for some time.”

“Yes, Geoffrey.” Mr Trent’s mother practically shoved him into my arms. (I suppose there’s no room for subtlety when a duke’s sister is up for grabs.) “You entertain Lady Felicity.”

The two women smiled wide as alligators.

With a resigned sigh, I fell into step beside Mr Trent. For a while neither of us spoke and as we walked in blissful silence my opinion of the man temporarily increased.

Then he opened his mouth.

“I have learned since our last conversation that you are something of a dabbler in mathematics yourself, Lady Felicity,” he said with a good deal of condescension. “It’s a surprising trait in a young lady, but now I understand why you were so happy to listen to talk of my Cambridge studies.”

“I would not call myself a dabbler ,” I said stiffly.

Mr Trent only smiled indulgently. “No, perhaps, hobbyist is a better word?”

“It certainly is not ,” I managed, and the man seemed finally to understand that I was about to start spitting fire.

“Forgive me!” He raised his hand as we wound our way along the footpath, emerging at the side of the large pond around which other couples were walking endless circles, like painted horses trapped on a carousel.

“I was clearly misinformed,” he continued. “I didn’t mean to imply that you were anything other than a gentle, well-bred lady. I have no problem with women being exposed to a little education.” He said this as though it were a generous concession. It was clear in that moment he believed himself an enlightened young man. “After all, a woman’s role as wife and mother requires her to be a helpmeet and companion to her husband, does it not? And if that husband is an intelligent man, he requires a wife who is happy to listen to him talk about his world. But I realize I may have offended you. I did not mean to imply you were some sort of ... bluestocking!” He chuckled here.

“Mr Trent,” I said through gritted teeth, my mouth stretched into an unholy imitation of a smile, so as not to alert my mother that her plans were going deeply awry. “Let me be clear. I am not a dabbler. I am not a hobbyist. I am a mathematician. In fact,

I'm one of the most promising young mathematicians on this continent, which is far more than I can say for a man who possesses not even the most basic grasp of Weierstrass's theory that a continuous function on a finite interval of the real line can be uniformly approximated arbitrarily closely by a polynomial."

"I..." a pink-faced Mr Trent attempted to interject.

"It is a source of great frustration to me that you're in a position where you can so cavalierly treat your university education as a game – one which you are playing badly," I continued. "I find you to be entitled, obnoxious and of extremely average intelligence."

We had come to a halt by this point and Mr Trent was gaping at me, open-mouthed, like a fish heaved unceremoniously on to dry land.

"Well, I never ," he began in the startled tones of a society matron. "Really, this is—"

I'm not precisely sure what happened next. I think that, in his fit of indignation, Mr Trent simply tripped over his own feet. All I know is that one moment he was there, mottled and outraged beside me, and the next his arms were windmilling as he tipped backwards into the pond. I reached out for him but it was too late. He hit the water with a tremendous crash.

A deathly hush fell over the park, dozens of pairs of eyes turned in our direction. With a shuddering gasp, Mr Trent emerged from the pond. His suit was soaked through. His hat was lost. There were several unfortunate strands of algae clinging to his person.

I tried hard to stifle my laugh, but a snort escaped; my hand flew to my lips.

Mr Trent's eyes narrowed, his chest was heaving. " You! " he hissed. "You pushed

me!”

“I certainly did not!” I said hotly. “Though now I wish I had!”

Mother and Mrs Trent appeared at my side, the latter of the two making the sort of wailing noises of anguish that implied her son had drowned and was lost for ever in the briny deep, rather than having ruined a perfectly mediocre suit in a scant few inches of water.

“Oh, Geoffrey!” She clasped her hands. (I noticed that despite her loud distress, she didn’t seem to want to help him out of the pond, or let him near her own pristine ensemble.) “Whatever has happened?”

“An accident, Mother,” Mr Trent said, scrambling up the side of the pond, and sending me a darkling look when his foot slipped in a patch of mud, and I found myself trying to disguise another laugh.

“I noticed that you had lost your hat, Mr Trent,” a voice said from beside me, and I turned to see that Laing had finally appeared.

My heart sank.

It seemed likely, then, that he really was having me watched. The fact I was right about that was cold comfort. Now the theory was proved I had no idea what to do with the results.

Laing’s tone was perfectly steady, as was his hand as he held out Mr Trent’s sodden hat, though I thought amusement was in his eyes. “I have retrieved it for you.”

“Thank you,” Mr Trent said, snatching it away. “If you will excuse me. Good morning.” He sent me another glare and turned on his heel, striding down the path

with his mother trailing after him.

“Oh dear,” Mother said faintly. “Poor Mr Trent.”

“I’m sure he’ll recover,” Laing said, seemingly unruffled by the events of the past few minutes. He bowed. “It’s nice to see you again, Your Grace.”

Mother rallied. It seemed that she wasn’t about to be cast down by so minor a setback as me almost drowning a potential suitor in broad daylight.

“Mr Laing,” she all but purred. “How charming.”

“It’s serendipitous that we should run into one another so soon.” Laing’s eyes lingered on my face. “Perhaps,” he continued solicitously, “I might have some private conversation with Lady Felicity?”

“I’m sure my daughter would be delighted,” Mother answered for me. “I’ll hang back here and admire the scenery.” She twinkled conspiratorially at Mr Laing, and he chuckled warmly. He tucked my hand through the crook of his arm and we strolled on.

“I’m glad to get this opportunity to speak with you,” I began, calling to mind the speech I had prepared. It was to be diplomatic and elegant, a quick, painless severing of any expectation he may have. Hopefully, if I made it clear I wasn’t going to marry the man, he would turn his attention away from me and back to whatever nefarious deeds Izzy was investigating. Sylla had called my involvement a complication and I was inclined to agree. Best for all concerned if I removed myself from the equation altogether.

“As am I, Lady Felicity.” Laing nodded. “I’m keen to continue the conversation we had when last we met. The one about your aversion to marriage.”

“Oh!” I faltered, not prepared for him to be so direct. “Well, yes,” I said more firmly, trying to steer us back to my prepared remarks on the subject. “That is precisely what I wished to discuss with you .”

“Wonderful,” Laing said mildly. “As I suspect may often be the case, you and I are of one mind. So while I quite comprehend your lack of interest in the ... gentlemen who may approach you in society” – at this, he glanced back towards the pond where Mr Trent had suffered his great indignity – “I hope that you’ll agree that you and I might deal quite differently.” He leaned in towards me, and his voice dropped, low and intimate. “I see you, you know. Though you’re a member of the ton, you’re not truly one of them. You long to break free of these foolish conventions.”

He placed his hand over mine, lightly squeezing my fingers. “I see a dazzling intelligence and a quick wit. And, to continue speaking plainly, I find that extremely attractive. I hadn’t thought I would marry,” he said thoughtfully, “but you are a rare jewel indeed.”

A rare jewel – that was how he thought of me. A valuable object to be collected. And, perhaps, guarded. I shivered at the thought.

“So you do ... wish to marry me?” I managed.

“I do.”

Even though it was precisely what I suspected, the words still struck me like a blow. He walked beside me, cool as a February day, while I tried to gather my wits.

“I’ll admit I haven’t received many proposals of marriage,” I said, aiming for a breezy tone, while I calculated how best to deliver a rebuff he would accept, “but this strikes me as a most unusual way to go about it.”

“Naturally I’ll have to court you first. Convention demands it.” He sighed. “But I suppose it’s a small price to pay. I intend to have you for my wife.”

“Well, I don’t intend to have you,” I said, the words out of my mouth before I could think about them.

So much for diplomatic and elegant.

“A mind such as yours is naturally disposed against the idea of marriage,” Laing replied, and I found myself furious that he believed that he knew or understood me.

“While I’m currently determined not to marry anyone ,” I said, trying hard to keep control of my temper and the situation, “I don’t wish there to be any misunderstanding. I’m afraid we will not suit, Mr Laing. I’m grateful for your proposal, but I’m sorry, I cannot accept.” There. That was certainly clear and to the point.

His hand twitched, tightening round my arm. “I think if you were to reflect on the advantages of such a match, you would come to change your mind,” Laing said tensely. “I know you to be a pragmatic young woman. You should have a husband worthy of your intellect.”

“Please do not presume to know me.” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady while I felt like a moth trapped beneath a glass. I turned back to signal my mother, who made her way towards us. “Let me be utterly clear, Mr Laing, as that is what you say you prefer: nothing could induce me to marry you.” I went to pull away, but he continued to grip my arm, his fingers pressing hard enough to leave a mark, and I made a small sound of distress before I could stop myself.

“This conversation is not at an end,” he said. His voice was low, but something sparked like a flint in his eyes. “I told you once before: when I set my mind to

something, nothing stands in the way of what I want.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

All evening and the next day, the deliveries kept coming. An entire flower shop sprung up in the entrance hall. At every ring of the doorbell, Mother's eyes widened with delight.

It was, as far as she was concerned, an extremely romantic gesture – a small fortune's worth of flowers. Not only honeysuckle and lilies but enormous bouquets of roses, a rainbow of carnations, along with sunflowers and tulips and asters. Every bloom you could think of. But it didn't feel romantic at all. It felt sinister, and I had the marks on my arm to prove it. When I looked at the cluster of small bruises in the shape of Laing's fingers, I knew I was seeing a glimpse of the real man behind the mask of gentility.

Each delivery to the door was more and more oppressive, as if I were under siege. I could run but I couldn't hide from his attentions, and it seemed he was letting me know that. In my mind, I heard Laing's words: nothing stands in the way of what I want.

And what he wanted was me. Far from putting an end to matters, in confronting him, I had done nothing but stoke the fire.

What I really wanted was to talk to Izzy, but I hadn't seen her since before Lady Endsleigh's tea party. As far as I could tell, my sister-in-law hadn't been home in the last twenty-four hours, though of course Mother was carefully kept under the impression they were just missing one another.

I'd promised myself I wasn't going to feign illness unless the situation was dire. The last thing I wanted to do was to give Mother more reasons to fuss over my "delicate nature", but this ... well, this felt dire.

"I'm sorry, " I said now, eyeing the teetering piles of flowers. "I think I was overzealous in my suggestion that we go out walking. I have a headache, and I'm not sure I should go with you to Lady Verne's this evening."

"Oh, darling." My mother was all sympathy as she clucked over me. "I did think you were still looking a bit peaky. I'm afraid it's been something of a whirlwind since I arrived. I know it's terribly exciting, but we must remember how easily tired you are, that you haven't the constitution for anything too rigorous. And, goodness, one forgets how large the park is – I swear we must have walked miles !"

It had barely been one mile and at the most horribly sedate pace, but who was I to disagree? I pressed a hand to my forehead and murmured in agreement.

"I'm sure it must be all this reading and letter writing that keeps you in such a fragile state," Mother continued. "You have been left far too much to your own devices and mentally exhausted yourself – that much is obvious. You need pulling away from those dusty old books, and to be with other young people."

"I don't think—" I began.

"We mustn't rush our fences," Mother swept onwards, "but it's clear to me that you've fallen into the clutches of melancholy, spending too much time in solitude. It's like these poets!" she exclaimed, seemingly at random.

"Poets?" I repeated, confused by this strange conversational turn.

Mother nodded furiously. "Dreadful, the lot of them. Anaemic creatures, draping

themselves over the furniture and constantly spouting off about rain clouds on even the nicest of days.”

“Do you ... know a lot of poets?” I ventured.

Mother sniffed. “Sir Percival has one staying with him. A horrid woman.”

“Ah,” I said, keeping my tone soothing. My mother had always had a legion of loyal admirers – Sir Percival was one of her favourite suitors out in the country. He had been devotedly in love with her for three decades now, and, while showing no signs of accepting any of his many marriage proposals, it was clear that Mother enjoyed having him dote on her and didn’t want his attentions elsewhere.

“Actually, you’re quite right,” I said. “I met a young man who compared my eyes to violets at a party recently and he was anaemic-looking. Like an extremely silly glass of milk.”

Mother burst into giggles, and I felt something warm inside me.

“You sound dangerously poetic yourself, Felicity.” Her expression sobered. “And I’ve told you time and again that you’ll end up disordering your system with all this ... endless studying. It’s a good thing I have come and so I will tell your brother if he ever appears! Clearly he’s been neglecting you.”

“Oh, no...”

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” Mother cut me off, her voice soothing. “You and I will have a comfortable night in together.”

This was decidedly not the plan.

“No, no!” I exclaimed again. “I wouldn’t dream of it. I know how excited you were about the party this evening. You’ve been talking about seeing Lady Verne again since you arrived. You must go. I’ll have an early night and be right as rain tomorrow.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Mother said, but fortunately at that moment I was visited by genius.

“And didn’t Madame Solange deliver that blue silk ballgown for you this morning?” I asked innocently. “You can’t miss the opportunity to show that off. I know several women who will be green with envy. You look so lovely in it.”

Mother seemed struck by this. “Well,” she said. “If you’re certain you won’t mind, I suppose I could stop in for an hour or two. It would only be polite as we did accept the invitation.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “And what good could it do for you to be cooped up here if I’m only going to be asleep, anyway? It’s not as though I will benefit from your company.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Mother said, brightening. Her eyes turned to the clock ticking in the hallway. “I’d better start getting ready!”

“And I’ll turn in.” I gave an exaggerated yawn, which immediately felt like a bad pantomime performance. Fortunately, Mother didn’t notice, already swept up in the excitement of preparing for another party.

I had to lie in bed for an awfully long time, waiting for her to leave. I spent half of that time fretting about Edward Laing and his intentions, and the other half in a state of dazed relief to be lying in a dark, quiet room rather than being paraded around a ballroom.

Finally, when I heard the front door close and decided enough time had passed to be safe, I got up and dressed myself quickly in a gown of dark navy silk – the best I could manage for a night-time excursion at short notice. Perhaps I should try and procure some boy's clothes like Izzy had. I imagined that such a disguise brought with it a significant amount of freedom.

One quick trip down the pear tree later and I found myself slipping as inconspicuously as possible round Grosvenor Square. It wasn't as if this was my first time sneaking out of the house at night, but for obvious reasons I felt more jittery than usual. There was none of the thrill – only a strange itch between my shoulder blades, where I was sure I could feel someone watching me.

I would have to be careful to avoid anyone Laing might have keeping an eye on the house, and I stood for long moments listening and observing before I moved. I stared into the darkness, focusing particularly on the spot where I had seen the glow of the cigarette, but it seemed totally clear. Once again I was forced to question whether I was only overreacting to a series of coincidences.

It was past midnight; certainly the street seemed deserted. Overhead, the moon was a silver crescent, sending long, sharp shadows slicing ominously across the paving stones. A shrill sound had me freezing, pressed against the wall of a nearby building, my heart pounding. It took me several deep breaths to realize it was only the call of an owl in the trees above me.

I took the most roundabout way to the Aviary that I could manage, checking back over my shoulder often, but I couldn't see anyone following me. At one point, a noisy group of young men weaved their way down the opposite side of the street and I tucked myself into the darkened entrance to a narrow alleyway until they had passed. Aside from them, there was no one who caused any alarm.

When I reached the Aviary, I was relieved to see the lights upstairs. I wondered if

there were always lights burning up there. The shop seemed like a lighthouse in the inky black sea of the night surrounding it, a beacon calling me towards safety, and given the work that the Finches did, I guessed that was rather the point. I was certain I wasn't the first woman to arrive in the middle of the night, in need of help.

The door to the shop was locked and I had to ring the bell and wait, still looking back behind me as the feeling that I was being watched persisted, despite my careful efforts.

After a moment, it was Izzy who appeared, dressed not as a boy but in a plain dark gown similar to my own. Behind the glass window I saw her eyes widen.

"Felicity!" she exclaimed, wrenching the door open. "What on earth?"

"I wasn't sure where you were," I said, making my way inside, keen for her to close the door behind me, to shut the world outside. "I hoped I'd find you here."

Izzy took my hands in hers. "Is it something to do with Edward Laing?"

"Yes, how did you—" I began, then shook my head.

"You spoke to Sylla. And you had someone watching him – they saw him talk to me in the park?"

"Right." Izzy nodded, and I noticed that her face was pale. She looked tired. "Come upstairs," she said, already heading for the hidden door. "Mrs Finch is here with Sylla. We can talk about it all together."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I followed, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders. Somehow it felt as though everything would be all right now. I realized that, after only a brief acquaintance, I had absolute faith that Mrs Finch could fix any problem.

Upstairs, a handful of women were making use of the salon, and – had the circumstances been different – I would have wanted to linger, wanted to watch the furious chess match taking place in one corner, to listen in on the raucous story being told by the elegant woman in the dinner suit that reduced the group around her to hopeless laughter. I would have wanted to stay and hear the jaunty jangle of the piano, to drink one of the glasses of fine-looking brandy that had been handed around.

Here, it was easy to forget why I had sneaked out in the middle of the night, and I felt myself drawn to the thing I had been craving all along, a place where my awkward edges would fit perfectly, where I wouldn't have to try to be anything other than exactly myself.

With a longing backwards glance, I followed Izzy up the second flight of stairs towards Mrs Finch's office. The woman herself waited inside, poring over a map spread out across her desk, with Sylla beside her.

"Did you—" Mrs Finch started to say, and then her eyes fell on me, and a flicker of surprise showed. "Lady Felicity," she said softly, any small loss of composure immediately smoothed away. She sighed. "It's Edward Laing, I suppose?"

“You seem to know all about it already,” I replied.

Sylla frowned. “Only that he waylaid you in the park.”

“Waylaid me is right.” I slumped into a nearby armchair. “He asked me to marry him.”

For the first time, I got to see Mrs Finch look truly startled.

“He did what?” Izzy asked.

“Well, he told me that he intends to marry me, so I suppose it adds up to the same thing,” I said with a bravado I didn’t exactly feel. “I thought Sylla might have told you.”

“At the time we spoke, you seemed unsure whether or not a proposal had actually taken place,” Sylla said, flicking an invisible fleck of dust from her sleeve. “I simply told them that he had expressed an uncomfortable interest in you. Besides which” – she pinned me with a sharp glare – “I thought we had agreed that you were going to leave the situation alone.”

“I can’t believe Laing proposed to you.” Izzy worried at her bottom lip.

“And then he sent an entire greenhouse worth of flowers to the house,” I told them. “Wheeler has been practically bringing them in by the barrow load all day. Mother is in fits of delight. I, however, have developed a twitch every time the doorbell rings.” I narrowed my eyes. “Something else has happened, hasn’t it? That’s why you’re all up here.”

Izzy rubbed her forehead, a crinkle of concern marring her brow. “It seems that the bomb the Aviary received last week was no isolated threat. There has been another

attempt, and only this evening we managed to trace the evidence back to one person...”

“Edward Laing.” I exhaled deeply.

Mrs Finch went on. “We were lucky that it was found in time for Winnie to deal with it. It was hidden in a delivery for the shop. There’s every chance it could have detonated downstairs.”

Another bomb. No wonder Izzy hadn’t been home.

“But no one was hurt?” I asked quickly.

“No.” Sylla turned to look out of the window and on to the darkened street below. “And as Winnie was able to defuse it this time, she could pull it apart and examine the pieces. It’s how we managed to find the maker, and through him, Laing.”

The shivery feeling that had haunted me since my conversation with the man intensified, and I rubbed my arms. It was true then, what everyone had suspected: Edward Laing was a dangerous man. I’d already known it, of course, but here was proof, incontrovertible.

“So Laing knows about the Aviary,” I said hollowly.

Izzy nodded, clearly upset. Sylla and Mrs Finch were much harder to read, though Sylla’s fingers had curled into a fist at her side.

“But do you think Laing knows about my connection to you?” I asked. “Does this explain his interest in me?”

“I don’t know,” Izzy said. “I keep thinking – it wasn’t as hard as it could have been to

trace the bomb back to him. What if he wanted us to know? What if he's letting us know he's on to us. Playing with us."

"What did he say to you, Felicity?" Mrs Finch sat in the chair behind her desk and pulled out a notepad and pen. "Let's hear it from the beginning."

I told them. I was fairly sure I remembered every word that we had exchanged, because it had felt so uncomfortable, so charged with meaning.

"He seemed ... predatory," I said in the end. "It was as if he had decided he was going to have me and therefore that was what was going to happen."

"He may be genuinely taken with you," Mrs Finch said slowly. "A man like Laing, perhaps there is something appealing about that wonderful mind of yours. He sees you as something rare, someone who can match him intellectually."

"Like a brain in a jar?" I asked.

"Like a brain in a pretty package," Mrs Finch said.

"I think he's been watching the house," I admitted.

"What?" Izzy snapped.

I explained my suspicions and the fact that Laing had turned up at my location several times.

"The man is a threat." Izzy's voice was clipped. "Even more of a threat than I thought. He knows about the Aviary; he knows we're on to him. And now he's taken an interest in Felicity." She looked worried. "He realized that you played cards against him at the Penny. He's sending things to the house. Whether he knows of

your connection to the Aviary or not, it's too much." She gnawed her lip. "We should get you out of London."

"I can't leave London!" I exclaimed. "How on earth would we explain that to Mother?"

"Perhaps we could say you're unwell," Izzy mused.

"If you wish to leave London, it can be arranged without any need to concern your mother," Mrs Finch said calmly. It was a fact, simply stated, and I believed it completely. I knew that somehow this capable woman would have my mother believing it was all her own idea that I'd abandoned both her and my long-awaited season.

"But shouldn't I ... help?" I asked. "I might be able to assist you in collecting more information about Laing."

Sylla began to reply, but Mrs Finch stood and came towards me, taking my hand in hers.

"Right now it's not your job to tackle Laing. It's your job to protect yourself from him."

"I'll consider it," I said reluctantly.

"You do that," Mrs Finch said. "And remember: the Aviary is here to assist you. We take care of our own."

"Thank—" I started to say, but a furious hammering on the door stopped me short.

The door flew open, almost off its hinges, and Maud tumbled in.

“Something going on in Whitechapel,” she said breathlessly, taking in my presence with no sign of surprise. “I was watching that empty warehouse Laing bought and there’s finally been some activity. Men delivering boxes. One of ’em was open and I saw a distillation bottle like Win has. It’s gone quiet now, but I don’t know how long that will last. If you want to have a look, it had better be tonight.”

Sylla was already pulling on a pair of dark gloves. Izzy had lifted a ring from a hook on the wall that held a set of lock picks, then tucked it away into her pocket.

“Should have worn my breeches,” she muttered.

“There’s a change of clothes for you in the store cupboard,” Mrs Finch told her. “We have time to wait if you hurry.”

Izzy left the room without another word.

“You should take me with you,” I blurted.

“Felicity,” Mrs Finch said gently.

“I take it you haven’t got time to reach Winnie?” I asked.

Maud shook her head. “It would take too long to sneak her out at this time of night.”

“And Maud saw a distillation bottle,” I pointed out, feeling my determination harden. “I’m not Win, but if there’s scientific equipment in there, I’ll at least be able to make a guess at what it means.”

The words hung in the air for a moment. Mrs Finch nodded. “Felicity is right,” she said to the others.

Izzy hurried back into the room, dressed in boy's clothes.

“Felicity is coming with us.” Sylla spoke the words flatly, clearly anticipating – as I had done – that Izzy would protest.

Izzy's eyes flickered to me, and then she nodded. “Good,” she replied, and I had the sudden urge to throw my arms around her, despite the whole life-or-death situation. All four of them hummed with energy, and it was clear that they were relieved to have something tangible to do. I understood; I felt the same.

“Well, ladies.” Mrs Finch's eyes gleamed. “Shall we go?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“There are only two guards,” Maud said, once we were all in the carriage, pulling a notepad and pen from her pocket. She drew a rough plan of the area and marked where the sentries would be on guard. “Unfortunately they look like they know what they’re doing.”

“Anyone you recognize?” Izzy asked.

Maud shook her head. “Never seen them before.”

“We’ll need to incapacitate this one nearer the front at least,” Sylla said, tapping the paper. “That way Izzy can get past and pick the lock on the side door here. Any chance we’ll be able to pull a distraction on the other?”

Maud tipped her head to one side, considering. “A bit of flirtation might work. If not, I’ll ... help him into unconsciousness.” She winked at me.

“We can’t risk running a distraction with the man closest to the front,” Sylla said, her brisk tones those of a commander utterly focused on her plans. “Not with Izzy so exposed. He needs to be taken out at once. As quietly as possible.”

“I can handle that,” Mrs Finch said calmly. “Maud, make sure you empty the man’s pockets. Better if we can make it look like they were the target of a simple robbery.”

Maud nodded in agreement as Mrs Finch continued.

“I’ve told Sara to stop here,” she said, referencing the silent woman in a dark coat who drove the carriage we currently occupied. She gestured on the plan to a short, dead-end road one building over from the warehouse that we were focused on. “You three get into position here. Once I have my man incapacitated, I’ll signal, then stand guard. Izzy can pick the lock, and Sylla and Felicity will enter the building with her.”

Izzy turned to me, her face serious. “You must follow every instruction you are given,” she said. “This is no game, Felicity, it could be dangerous. If Sylla or I tell you to go, then you start running and you don’t look back. Do you understand?”

I nodded, swallowing hard against the sudden knot of fear rising in my throat. I wondered if the four other women were as calm as they looked.

“If you don’t hear from us in fifteen minutes, assume we’ve been compromised,” Sylla said to Mrs Finch.

The carriage came to a wavering, silent stop. Mrs Finch met my eye and nodded, and I was sure I caught a twinkle of excitement. But then the door opened and we all melted out into the darkness. I kept my eyes on Sylla, following close behind her in the direction that had been agreed.

At some signal from Izzy, Sylla came to a stop, and so did I, heart pounding. I pulled my coat tighter around myself, trying to blend into the shadows thrown down by the buildings looming over us. It was the early hours of the morning, so the place was deserted. The area we were in was one that housed several warehouses and factories, larger buildings, utilitarian and unloved. Here, near the docks, we were far from the glamour and elegance of the London that I knew. The warehouse that Laing had purchased, the one we were breaking into, was an older building that showed signs of serious neglect. Several of the windows were boarded up, and I could see no sign of light or movement inside.

We stood, still and silent, for what felt like hours, before there was a sound in the darkness. The soft, repetitive twitter of a goldfinch.

“Let’s go,” Izzy whispered, and I realized Mrs Finch had done her job.

We approached the side door to the building and Izzy let out a low whistle. “You don’t put this kind of lock on a building like this one unless you’re hiding something big.”

“Can you pick it?” I asked.

Beside me, Sylla snorted and Izzy smiled. “Don’t worry about that.”

Izzy turned her attention to the lock, and the sound of another bird call reached my ears. Sylla’s head snapped up.

“Sounds like Maud’s flirting didn’t work,” she said. “That’s two men who’ll be waking with a serious headache.”

With an audible click, the lock gave beneath Izzy’s clever fingers, and she pushed the door open.

Sylla smirked. “Slow.”

“I’d like to see you do it faster,” Izzy huffed, before giving a reluctant smile. “But, yes, it was slow for me. I’m out of practice.”

“Duchesses don’t get much time for lockpicking,” I said comfortingly.

“This duchess will have to.” Izzy pushed her shoulders back. “Right, are we ready? Maud said there was no sign of men being posted inside, but we should be prepared.”

In response, Sylla pulled a small pearl-handled pistol from her pocket. “It may be tiny,” she said, “but looks can be deceiving. It’ll do plenty of damage.”

“Do I get one of those?” I asked.

Sylla looked down her nose at me. “As you’d be more likely to shoot yourself in the foot, or one of us, it would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“I happen to be an excellent shot,” I returned. “Max taught me to handle a gun at a worryingly young age. Mother was outraged. I have excellent reflexes too.”

Izzy nodded. “It’s true,” she said. “I’ve seen her hit a target from fifty yards.”

“In that case, take it.” Sylla sighed, handing me the gun. “Goodness knows your hand-to-hand combat skills are abysmal.”

“Hey!” I protested. “Maud said I showed great improvement.”

“A polite way of saying abysmal .”

“We should hurry,” Izzy said, glancing over her shoulder.

Without any further conversation, the three of us crept through the open door. My eyes had grown used to the darkness outside, but it still took me a moment to get my bearings. There were no lights burning inside the vast space of the warehouse.

Izzy pulled a couple of stubby wax candles from her pocket and Sylla lit them with a match. The pool of light they cast was small and dim, but I still worried that it would be noticeable from the outside if it was seen moving around. On the other hand, we could hardly do much investigating in the dark. It was a risk we’d have to take.

The warehouse was a mostly empty cavernous space, with a high ceiling and a shallow platform running round the top half of the building. I could see bulky piles arranged to the side, as though objects had been simply heaped into corners – bits of old factory equipment, I thought. There were several large crates stacked against one wall.

“We’re not getting inside those without a crowbar,” Sylla murmured.

“One of them is open,” Izzy whispered from the corner. “It’s like Maud said, it’s full of scientific equipment.”

I made my way over to where she was standing and peered inside the box, spying several glass beakers used in the distillation process. “Nothing specific,” I said. “Just a lot of glass.”

“There’s some sort of workstation in here.” Sylla’s voice came from further inside the dank space.

We followed the sound of her voice until we caught up with her. She stood next to a long wooden table, her hand cupped round the weak flame of her candle.

“Get the flame back,” I snapped, my voice loud in the quiet space. Chemicals were laid out in dishes on the table.

Turning her back so the lick of fire was nowhere near, Sylla hissed out a slow breath.

“Explosives?” she whispered.

“Stay back but hold the candles up,” I instructed as I approached the workstation, tucking the pistol into the pocket of my coat. There was a flask of clear liquid over an unlit Bunsen burner, a shallow saucer full of white powder. Carefully, I picked up the

dish and examined it before replacing it softly where I found it. I turned my attention to the liquid. Tilting the glass carafe to the side, I recognized the oily texture and fought to keep my tone level as I gently rested it back above the burner.

“I’m fairly sure this is nitro-glycerine,” I said, gesturing to the liquid. I leaned over, so that I could more closely examine the stoppered bottles of chemicals that were lined up neatly to one side. “Mercury, nitric acid, ethanol,” I murmured, turning my eyes to the white powder. “Oh, God, it’s mercury fulminate.”

“Not all of us speak whatever language that is,” Sylla said tensely.

“Look for copper,” I said, turning to face them. “And whatever you do, don’t come near this stuff again with those candles.”

“There’s some copper piping over here,” Izzy called. I made my way over to where she was standing, Sylla on my heels.

“It’s for the percussion caps,” I said weakly.

“Again, Felicity, not all of us live with our noses in science books. Tell us what’s going on.” Sylla’s hard tone cut through my growing fear.

“They’re making dynamite,” I said, my voice steady now. “A lot of it.”

“Are you sure?” Sylla asked.

“Fairly sure,” I said. “They’re formulating the different parts; they just haven’t been put together yet. Was dynamite used in the bombs sent to the Aviary?”

“Yes.” Izzy nodded, the candle she held throwing harsh shadows across her face. “We need to move,” she said, pulling a watch out of her pocket, holding it close to

her eyes. “We’re almost at fifteen minutes.”

“Do one last quick look around,” Sylla said. “Felicity, you stay with me.”

Sylla and I moved back over to the stacked crates, looking for any that were open, or any writing on the boxes themselves that might offer some clue about what was inside.

“There are some papers here,” I whispered, finding a few loose sheets on top of one of the stacks. Sylla came towards me and held the candle close enough that we could read.

“It’s in French,” I said.

““ Let us occupy ourselves with chemistry and set about making bombs, dynamite and other explosives ,”” Sylla translated aloud before I could do so. ““ These are more powerful than guns and barricades as a way of leading to the destruction of the state... Courage, comrades, and Long Live Anarchy! ’”

“Anarchists,” I said with a shiver. “Like the Greenwich Observatory park bombing?” The bungled bombing, which had ended in the death of the bomber himself, had taken place only six years ago, and was still spoken of in hushed tones, the source of many unanswered questions. Those answers had been lost with the man who’d died, but one thing that was clear was the fact the bomb had been intended for many more victims.

Izzy reappeared at my side. “We have to go,” she said, and Sylla slipped the paper she was holding into her pocket.

“Did you find anything else?” I asked Izzy as we made our way back to the door.

She shook her head. “There are some bolts of fabric piled up, but I think those were left over from when the warehouse was last in use. Strange, though – they’re very good quality.”

Sylla hesitated on the threshold of the doorway, scanning the surrounding scene, then deciding the coast was clear, she tugged me out after her. Behind us, Izzy closed the door, re-engaging the lock. The guards would awaken and tell how they’d been attacked, but if there was no sign of entry to the warehouse, it would hopefully be accepted as the sort of ruthless robbery common in this part of town.

Or Laing might know exactly who had been here tonight.

By the time the three of us reached the carriage, Mrs Finch and Maud were already there. We bundled inside, and Mrs Finch tapped on the roof. We moved off once more, and I looked around at the other women, before bursting into a wave of laughter, tinged with hysteria.

“I can’t believe we did that!” I said, flexing my cold hands, feeling them prickle with pins and needles.

“Nothing like getting away clean to make you feel invincible,” Maud said.

“Did you have any trouble with the guards?” Sylla asked.

“None at all,” Mrs Finch said serenely, not a hair out of place. She looked as though she were returning from an afternoon tea party.

“Mine didn’t seem interested in flirting with me.” Maud examined her fingernails. “But he let his guard down enough to make it easy to knock him out. And maybe I know why we didn’t recognize him – he had an accent. French.”

“Interesting,” Sylla said, and she filled the others in on what we had uncovered in the warehouse.

“Laing is working with the anarchists?” Maud frowned. “He hasn’t shown any leanings in that direction before. Not as far as we know.”

“If what Izzy suspects is true and Laing is a killer for hire, then it’s more likely that he has been employed by the anarchists to help them carry out some scheme,” Mrs Finch mused. “Presumably a bombing.”

“On a large scale, if what we saw was any indication,” I said, feeling a chill creep into my bones again. It had been easy for a moment, to forget the severity of the situation we were in, but this scheme had the potential to hurt a huge number of people.

“We’ll talk it all over when we get to the Aviary,” Mrs Finch said. “It seems it’s time to increase our efforts where Edward Laing is concerned.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When we returned to the Aviary, I went over what I'd seen in the warehouse several times, and wrote down everything I could remember for Winnie to look over later. After that, it was clear I was surplus to requirements. It was time for the Aviary to make plans.

"I'll have a carriage take you home," Mrs Finch said in a tone that invited no arguments. "We're always here if anything else happens. In the meantime, get some rest."

A hackney was waiting for me outside the shop, and I clambered inside. Despite the fact that I was bone-tired, my brain refused to quiet, the excitement of the evening still buzzing through me, a hundred angry bees in my bloodstream. I fidgeted against my seat, my mind running swiftly through the possibilities, turning over everything I had seen and heard. I was so distracted that at first I didn't notice we were headed in the wrong direction.

I knocked on the roof of the cab. "Excuse me," I called. "We're going the wrong way. We need to head for Grosvenor Square."

There was no response. The carriage only picked up speed, bumping over the uneven surface of the road.

"Hey!" I shouted louder, banging on the roof as hard as I could. "Stop at once. You're taking us the wrong way!"

Again, there was no reply.

I knew in that moment of ominous silence that something was very wrong. The cab hurtled faster and faster down the road, and we took a corner at a speed that had the whole carriage swaying wildly.

I gave up banging and crawled to the window, leaning out and twisting as best I could to see the driver. They were nothing more than a dark huddled shape up on the box, but given the size of the figure, I was sure the driver was a man – not someone who worked for the Aviary.

“Are you trying to kill us?” I yelled. “Stop this carriage right now!”

“Shut yer mouth,” was the answer I got, yelled over the rattle of the wheels. “I got my instructions, lady, and you ain’t going to Grosvenor Square.”

I might not know who the man was, but I was sure who he worked for. There was only one person who would kidnap me from outside the Aviary’s front door: Edward Laing.

Willing myself to remain calm, I sat back down in my seat. The carriage rattled relentlessly, and it felt as though my brain rattled along with it. What could Laing want with me now? Was all of this because I had refused his proposal? That seemed unlikely, given how certain he’d been of changing my mind. I turned the problem over. Did he know that we had been to his warehouse? If my connection to the Aviary was the reason for this rash action then that was even worse, because it was more than possible he hoped to use me against them in some way. My heart sank. Izzy would do anything to keep me safe.

I had tried all day to find answers but everywhere I turned there were more questions. The only thing I could be certain of was that I was in danger.

There was no sense in panicking, I told myself sternly. I would not sit here and allow myself to be abducted. I wasn't about to become a pawn in Laing's game or to let him use me against my friends. I might not be a true member of the Aviary, but I was no mouse. I'd made plenty of my own daring choices recently.

Leaning out of the window once more, I knew we were driving too fast for me to escape unharmed by simply jumping free of the carriage. I calculated the odds of serious injury and they were decidedly not in my favour.

The sensible thing to do would be to slow the carriage enough to effect an escape. I tried to pinpoint where in the city we were and thought we were headed south. I gnawed on my lip, looking about the carriage. The space was empty, a dark, shabby cab like any other. I ran my fingers across the panels of the wall but found nothing useful.

Standing as best I could, I turned my attention to my seat. The upholstery was ripped in several places and, for lack of a better plan, I dug my nails into the torn black fabric, pulling it further back. This revealed the innards of the cushion, and I tugged until I held the small horsehair pad in my hands. Underneath were a collection of springs, but I couldn't see any use for them.

The most logical way to slow the carriage would be to tamper with either an axle or a wheel at the best possible moment – when we were slowing for a corner, perhaps. The axle was not something I could access, but perhaps a wheel... I glanced out of the window again, wishing I were more familiar with the area. Then I noticed a road I did recognize from my own night-time adventures. We were, in fact, not too far from the Lucky Penny – a place where I knew I'd be safe.

Whatever I was going to do, I needed to do it soon. There was a turn coming up that would require the driver to slow down at least a fraction, and it was probably my best chance at escape.

Reaching into my pocket, my fingers closed round something cool and hard. In the excitement of the evening, Sylla's pistol had been forgotten, but now it presented all sorts of opportunities.

I could wait for the carriage to stop and threaten the driver with a gun. The problem with that was twofold. Firstly, I wasn't at all sure I could go through with shooting someone, and secondly, there was every chance the place he was taking me would contain more thugs – any of whom could be armed. Escaping the carriage while in motion remained the best plan. I looked out of the window again, towards the box, and then back at the wheels. I wouldn't be able to shoot the driver from this angle even if I wanted to, and I couldn't bring myself to think of shooting at the horses, but perhaps I could destabilize a wheel enough to force us to a stop. At the least, it would slow us down.

A plan came together in my mind: a reckless plan that might end badly, and yet with time running out I knew my only option was choosing the best of the bad options. Lying on my stomach, I crawled towards the door and took a deep breath. Reaching up, I tugged on the handle. The door swung wide on its hinges, flying open and then crashing back towards me. I took the impact on my shoulder as I slid forward, bracing the door open with my upper body.

The ground flew by beneath me, horribly fast, and with each bounce of the wheels I was threatened with the possibility of falling beneath them. My brain screamed that this was an awful idea, but I had no others. Gripping the gun with both hands, I twisted so that I was facing the back wheel, my shoulders clear of the carriage. The air whipped past me, a violent sting that made my eyes water.

I hadn't lied to Sylla – I was an excellent shot, helped along by an exceptional understanding of angles and velocity. However, shooting at the wheel of a moving carriage while lying on the floor of it was no small task. I took a deep breath, using my left hand to cradle and steady my right as I lined up the shot and squeezed the

trigger.

Everything happened fast then. The bullet went wide, glancing the side of the wheel rather than hitting the centre as I had intended, but this still had the effect of causing the wheel to wobble, to falter enough to slow our speed. There was also a factor I hadn't allowed for – the sound of the gun spooked the horses, who pulled wildly. For a moment I thought I'd sabotaged my own plan as we seemed to gain speed, but then I heard the driver swear filthily as he pulled hard on the reins, trying to get the horses back under control as we headed for the corner. He had no choice but to haul the animals ruthlessly in line, and after a couple of breathless seconds we slowed significantly.

It was enough – it would have to be enough – and I didn't allow myself to think further. I threw myself through the door, as wide of the carriage as I could manage, curling into a ball before I hit the ground.

It hurt like hell. I may have slowed the carriage considerably, but hitting the hard road was punishing. I felt every bone in my body jar, my teeth rattled in my head, and I saw stars, but I was still alive, bruised and panting, lying to the side of the road.

I scrambled to my feet, dimly registering the pain that crashed over me. The carriage was already slowing to a stop, several yards ahead of me, and so I turned, diving down a nearby alley and running like my life depended on it.

I was briefly disorientated, but then, thankfully, I recognized a building, and from there I knew how to get to the Penny. Not the front, I thought, my mind working as fast as my legs. The front was too exposed, but the back entrance that Davey had showed me – the one that allowed for clandestine comings and goings – that was precisely what I needed.

Hearing heavy footsteps behind me, I pushed myself, flying faster until the almost

blind entrance to the alley loomed on my left. I turned into it and saw there was a carriage pulled up there. Without giving it much thought, I yanked on the door and tugged it open, throwing myself inside.

There was nothing then but the laboured sound of my breathing, a darkness wavering at the edge of my vision that threatened to drag me under. I forced myself to take several steadying breaths until slowly, slowly, I came back to myself.

I was, once again, on the floor of a carriage, only this was much nicer than the one I had recently vacated. Dragging myself up on shaking legs, I sat on the plushly padded bench seat behind me and pulled my knees up to my chest. I took the gun from my pocket and pointed it at the door, hand trembling. In the dim first light of morning I waited to see if I would be discovered.

I don't know how long I sat like that, curled furiously in on myself, the knuckles on my hand white where I gripped the pistol, but no one came. I was just thinking that perhaps it was safe enough for me to try and get inside the building itself, when I heard someone approaching the back of the carriage. There was a groan and a thud as if they were hauling something heavy on to the back, tying it in place.

"I dunno what you've packed." Davey's voice reached my ears, and I decided it was absolutely understandable that I felt tears prickle in my eyes. The urge to fling myself out of the carriage and yell "Sarsaparilla!" was strong.

"I thought you were only going for a couple of days," he continued.

"I am," Ash's voice replied, and one or two tears may have slipped free then. "I won't be hanging around beyond making the essential arrangements."

"And the funeral?" Davey asked.

There was a pause. “We’ll see.”

I was about to stagger forward and announce my presence when Davey’s voice raised: “Oi! What are you doing there?”

“No bother, mate, I’m looking for someone. Seemed she came this way.” The words were conciliatory, but I recognized the harsh voice of the man who had kidnapped me.

“This is private property,” Ash said. “So I suggest you take your search elsewhere.”

I could almost hear Davey’s knuckles cracking.

“Right you are.” A nervous edge crept into the kidnapper’s words. “I’ll be on my way.”

I sat, frozen and silent once more. I couldn’t leave the safety of the carriage while Laing’s man was still in the area. And there was Ash and Davey to think of. This man of Laing’s could have a gun of his own, the two of them could be caught up in the crossfire.

The carriage swayed as Ash climbed on to the box. “You know where to reach me if there’s any trouble,” his voice called to Davey.

“Yes, boss,” Davey rumbled.

I settled back in my seat, thinking hard. I didn’t want to risk being tracked down once more by the man who was chasing me, and I couldn’t risk going home, which was the obvious place to look for me. Ash’s words made me think he must be heading to his family for a couple of days to settle his brother’s affairs. I could let him drive me out of the area, away from my pursuer, and then ask him to help me get a message to Mrs

Finch. She would know what to do.

Ash clucked for the horses to move and we rumbled away from the gambling den. I winced as I shifted in the seat, pain singing in every part of my body. It was a miracle that I hadn't broken anything.

Now that the panic and excitement of the last hour were leaving my system, exhaustion was like a punch in the gut, and I rested my forehead against the edge of the window as the streets of London rattled by. Blackness wavered in my vision once more and this time I could feel it dragging me under. I told myself I was safe for now. My eyes closed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

When I woke, it was with a start. It took a moment for me to get my bearings, but when my surroundings rushed in, I remembered I was in Ash's carriage – and that he had no idea of the fact. Gingerly, still aching, I turned to look out of the window.

Green. Far, far too green for us to still be in the city. The sun was fully up now – a beautiful golden day – and the countryside rolled out on either side of us like gentle waves of jade silk. I wondered how long I had slept, then raised my fingers to my head, hissing when I felt some sort of cut on my temple.

In some ways I had accidentally hit upon the perfect plan – after all, if I had no idea where I was, then how could anyone who was looking for me? Of course, the downside was that Edward Laing wasn't going to be the only one wondering where I had disappeared to. There was going to be hell to pay explaining everything to Izzy, never mind my mother.

I considered banging on the roof to alert Ash to my presence, but what good could it do at the moment? I was exhausted. He would stop eventually, and then I would explain.

Ash's carriage was pristine, brand new, with gold inlay in the doors, and plush seats, well padded and covered in a deep crimson velvet, comfortable enough to lull me back to sleep.

The next time I opened my eyes it was because the carriage had stopped and there was the sound of activity outside. Peeping out of the window, I saw Ash jump down

from the box and hand the reins to a young boy. They exchanged some words, and Ash slipped him a coin.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed the carriage door open and stepped down. I held my hand up to my eyes, shielding them from the sudden blaze of sunshine. My head was aching and I felt a bit foggy. I was standing in the bustling courtyard of what looked like a village inn: a long building with a thatched roof and a sign proclaiming it to be the Red Lion.

I turned back and both Ash and the young boy were watching me with matching looks of astonishment.

“Hello, Ash,” I said, pasting on a bright smile to try and cover the fact that I really wanted to throw myself into his arms and cry into his shoulder. It had been an awfully long day.

“Felicity?” He sounded stunned, as though he wasn’t sure I was really there at all.

That was when my own state of disarray truly struck me. I looked down at my skirts, thick with smears of mud and dirt. My hair was falling down around my shoulders; I dreaded to think about the state of my face. I raised my hand to my head, remembering the cut I had felt there. It was entirely possible that blood was mixed in with the dirt.

Ash followed my movement, and his expression turned from one of bewilderment to fury in the flicker of an eye. His face was pale as he strode towards me, reaching out to grip my arms.

“Who did this to you?” he asked, his voice kept steady under a vicious control that I could feel vibrating through his whole body as he held me.

“Technically, I suppose, I did it to myself,” I said, gently pulling away from him. He was pressing down on the bruises on my arms, and I really didn’t want to start crying here in the middle of the busy yard. I had a horrible feeling that once I began, I wouldn’t stop. “I threw myself out of a moving carriage.”

Ash clenched his hands at his sides, as though he wanted to reach for me again but was fighting the instinct.

“Of course you did,” he said after a moment, matching my deliberately light tone.

“Is this...” I trailed off, looking around us and finding the young boy who was still holding the horses watching with interest. “What are we doing here?”

“I stopped to change the horses. We need to have someone take a look at you, find you a fresh set of clothes. I’ll ask Patty to sort you out.” His voice still held that careful lightness, but I could tell it was an effort, could tell he was upset.

“Who is Patty?” I asked as he placed a hand at the base of my spine, guiding me towards the entrance of the Red Lion.

“Patty is the proprietress of this establishment,” Ash said, and then he turned. “We won’t be long, Sam. Make sure you rub them down properly.” He threw the words over his shoulder at the boy, who looked indignant.

“Yes, Ash,” the boy said in a tone that implied he was offended Ash felt the need to make such a demand.

The inn was clearly looked after with care; the smell of beeswax polish and the light yeasty scent of the beer mixed in a surprisingly pleasant welcome. The wooden surfaces were polished and smooth, the floor ruthlessly swept, and yet the scene was one of easy comfort – several patrons were sprawled in deep, well-worn-looking

chairs, while two more perched at the bar, glasses of dark amber beer in front of them. As one, everyone turned to look at us, but no one betrayed any surprise at my appearance.

A woman who looked to be in her forties, small and sharp-faced, her dark hair pulled tightly back, emerged from behind the bar, rubbing her hands on her apron.

“Hello, Ash,” she said coolly, eyes running over me. “Been rescuing strays again?”

Before I could open my mouth and retort, Ash laughed again, and I thought no one would hear the forced note in it but me. It was odd, how clearly I saw him. “Not this time, Patty. This one is perfectly capable of rescuing herself. Felicity, this is Patty. Patty, Felicity.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” I said.

Amusement leaped into Patty’s eyes at my formal response, which must have been quite a contrast with my appearance.

“Felicity has run into some trouble,” Ash said. “Perhaps you can arrange a bath and a change of clothes for her?”

He raised his hand to my face, gently cupping my cheek. He tipped my head to the side, examining the cut on my head with an intensity that was at odds with the easy way he spoke.

“Patty is used to patching up brawlers; she’ll make sure you’re looked after,” he said to me, his voice soft.

“Follow me, then,” Patty said without any further discussion.

She moved briskly towards a narrow staircase and I followed in her wake. I think I would have followed the devil himself if he had offered me a warm bath at that moment.

Patty led me up to a neat bedroom, which, while simply furnished, was as clean and welcoming as the rest of the establishment. It also contained a large copper tub in front of the fireplace. "I'll ask Ruth to draw a bath for you and hunt out a change of clothes," she said. "It won't be what you're used to, but it'll have to do."

"Thank you," I said, hesitating. "I was forced to leave home without any luggage. I'm afraid I don't have any money with me, but I assure you that I'll make certain you're compensated as soon as possible."

Patty waved a dismissive hand. "Ash's money is no good here," she said. "Any friend of his is a friend of mine. I'll get something for that cut." Her brisk, businesslike tone did more to steady me than anything else.

She disappeared again, and I decided I'd better remove my stained dress before sitting on the pristine bed sheets. This also gave me the opportunity to assess the bruising on my body. It was bad, particularly on my right-hand side, but not as terrible as I had feared.

Patty bustled back in, holding a small dish of water and some linen cloths, followed by a girl with a shy smile. She looked a couple of years younger than me; I took her to be a sibling of Sam's, due to the family resemblance.

"This is my Ruth," Patty said. "She's brought you something to wear after your bath." She eyed the ugly bruises. "You're going to need one or you'll not be able to move tomorrow."

"Yes," I agreed distantly. "Thank you."

Instructing me to sit on the bed, Patty perched beside me and set about cleaning the cut on my head with surprisingly gentle hands, while poor Ruth hauled hot water up from the kitchen.

“Oh, I’m used to it, miss,” she said brightly when I mentioned that I only needed enough to clean myself up. “Lots of our guests enjoy a nice bath by the fire, and Ma don’t believe in those gas geysers.”

“Boiling people up in the bath like soup,” Patty muttered.

Ruth looked me over with a practical eye. “And she’s right. You need to soak for a while, or you’ll be awful stiff.”

“I’m grateful,” I said, swallowing against the sudden sting of tears. “To both of you. You’ve been so kind, and I’m a stranger.”

“Anything for Ash’s lady,” Ruth said, unconsciously echoing her mother’s earlier sentiment, before flashing me another smile and leaving the room, the door pulled closed behind her.

I found Patty giving me another long look. “Are you in trouble?” she asked, her tone quiet. “Has a man put his hands on you?”

“I got the injuries in an accident,” I said carefully.

Patty pursed her lips. “Well, if you ever need help, you come here,” she said finally. “We know how to keep people safe.”

She stood and made her way to the door. She drew a jar and some linen from her apron. “Now, you have a good soak, and then use these to cover those bruises.”

With that, she left, and I was alone.

Undressing and climbing into the bath, I gave a hiss of pleasure that edged its way into pain as the hot water touched my skin. After a moment, the overwhelming sensation eased and my limbs relaxed. Here, I felt safe at last. Perhaps it was that feeling of safety that meant I could let the tears finally come. I wrapped my arms around my knees and pulled them to my chest, indulging in a good, soul-clearing bit of weeping. Finally, when I felt stripped clean like the air after a summer storm, I lay back in the water.

I'm not certain how long I lay there, dazed in the soothing steam. Ruth had added some sort of oil to the water with a herbal scent and I found I liked it enormously. Eventually there was a knock at the door.

"Hello?" I called out, my voice surprisingly rough.

"It's Ash." His voice came from the other side of the door. "I'm going to order some lunch. I bet you need feeding. Would you like me to ask Patty to send something up to you?" There was something in his voice that made me think either Ruth or Patty had mentioned the bruises.

"No," I said quickly. "I'll get out and come down."

He paused, then said, "If you're sure."

"I am."

It took me the best part of half an hour to remove myself from the bath, and to rub ointment into all the bruises I could reach. The balm that Patty gave me smelled wonderful, of mint and something sweet. Ruth's dress of plain blue wool was not a bad fit and I bundled my hair up as best I could with the ribbon she had left me. I was

touched by the fact she had donated one – a strip of fine blue silk that I knew must be something treasured. I was determined to send her a whole rainbow-coloured drawer full of the things, courtesy of the Aviary, when I got home.

Glimpsing myself in the small mirror over the dresser, I saw huge eyes staring back from a pale face. Only a hint of pinkness gave away that I'd been crying, and I hoped Ash wouldn't notice. The cut at my temple had been cleaned, but a nasty mottled bruise surrounded it, and I dabbed at it with ointment, then fussed with my hair, pulling it forward to cover the injury as best I could. It would have to do.

When I finally made my way downstairs, it was to find Ash seated in an alcove at a table heaving with food. I caught the relief on his face. I must really have looked dreadful when I first tumbled out of his carriage.

"I guessed you'd be starving," Ash said, gesturing to the table. I dropped into the seat across from him, my fingers already grasping a slice of generously buttered brown bread, which I shoved hastily in my mouth.

"Yesh," I said thickly, too hungry to worry about good manners.

Ash gave me his lopsided grin, although I thought it didn't quite reach his worried eyes, then he poured me a large glass of water and began piling meat and cheese and tiny pickled vegetables on to a plate for me. When he cut into a golden-crustied pie filled with fragrant cured pork, I let out a whimper that had that false smile of his looking more real.

After several minutes of dogged eating, I looked up to find his watchful gaze on my face, as if carefully cataloguing every detail.

"So," he said, leaning back in his seat and clasping his hands on his stomach. "It seems that I have kidnapped you, Felicity Vane. Care to tell me why?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“I’m not sure it can be called kidnapping if you knew nothing about it,” I said, taking a sip of water, my movements less frantic now the mean edge of hunger and thirst had been tempered. “Actually, I think I should be considered more of a stowaway.”

“I suppose I should be grateful I wasn’t sailing off to the Americas,” Ash said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the silver coin I had seen before, rolling it along the top of his knuckles in an absent gesture. “You’re quite intrepid enough to have smuggled yourself aboard.”

“What a nice thing to say. I don’t think anyone has called me intrepid before. I like it.” I paused, glancing at him. He looked back steadily and I knew I could trust him with the whole truth. “Although, would you be disappointed if I confessed that when we arrived here I wasn’t feeling very intrepid?”

His expression softened. “Felicity, when you emerged from the carriage looking half dead, I wasn’t feeling very intrepid either.”

I exhaled. “No, I expect it was a bit of a shock.”

“That’s one word for it,” Ash replied dryly.

“Only it’s frustrating, you know,” I rubbed at my arm where the bruises ached. “I’ve always wanted to be brave and adventurous, but I’ll admit that so far this particular endeavour hasn’t been much fun. I’d almost rather be at one of Mother’s awful social events.”

Ash made a sound that was something like a laugh mixed with a sigh. His eyes were glued to the spot that I was rubbing on my arm and the muscles in his jaw tightened. “That’s a damning assessment indeed,” he said, finally. “But I’d like to know the whole story. What exactly prompted you to stowaway in my carriage?”

In between bites, I told him everything that had taken place since the last time I saw him. His face gave nothing away, but there were several moments when that coin stopped its fluid movement across his fingers. The first was when I told him about Laing’s proposal. The second was when I revealed that the man he and Davey had spoken to outside the Penny was the one who had tried to kidnap me.

“I didn’t show myself then, because I didn’t want to drag the pair of you into it,” I explained. “I couldn’t let you get hurt.”

He went utterly still, and I saw a brief glimpse of something wild and dangerous in his eyes, but it was gone in a moment, replaced by his usual lazy grin.

“Davey will be disappointed he missed the opportunity for a good brawl,” was all he said.

Patty came over to clear some of the plates from the table, replacing them with platters of fresh fruit and a bowl of sweet, whipped cream. Ash tucked the coin back in his pocket and selected an apple from one of the plates in front of him, cutting a slice out of it with a knife, his movements swift and economical. “So what do you want to do now?”

I was surprised. I’d assumed that Ash would want to take control of the situation. I should have known better, that he would treat me as a rational, intelligent person, because he always had.

I sat back in my own chair, pleasingly full, though I accepted the fruit that he

prepared for me, the slices of crisp apple, a bright ruby of a strawberry that I dipped into the cream.

“Where exactly are we?” I asked.

“We’re in a small village called Pebton in north Hertfordshire,” Ash replied promptly.

“And this isn’t your final destination?”

He shook his head. “No, I was planning to drive up to Cambridge. It’s still a couple of hours’ ride from here.”

“Cambridge?” I sat up straighter in my seat. “Cambridge Cambridge?”

“I’m not sure what that means, but there’s only one Cambridge I know of.”

“I didn’t know you were from Cambridge,” I said.

Cambridge was a city that had loomed large in my imagination for a long time.

“What makes you think I’m from there?” Ash frowned, folding his arms.

This position, coupled with his rolled shirtsleeves, made the muscles in his forearms tense. Once again, the black-ink edge of his tattoo was on display. A wash of heat moved over me, and I wondered what it was about Ash’s flexor carpi ulnaris that stimulated such a peculiar physical response in me.

Perhaps it was because I was distracted by these typically uninteresting muscles that I said unthinkingly, “Because you’re going to settle your brother’s affairs and attend his funeral as the new Baron Ely and next in line for the viscountcy.”

When I finally tore my eyes away from Ash's arms, I found him staring at me with a look of such profound shock on his face that a nervous giggle escaped my lips before I could think better of it.

"How could you..." Ash began, voice rough with surprise. "Hardly anyone knows about..." He trailed off again, and I could almost see his clever brain working. Finally I saw the realization hit, and his expression cleared.

"The pretty slippers," he said at last, his tone rueful.

"Yes," I conceded sympathetically. "In my defence, I wasn't trying to eavesdrop on anyone's family secrets. I only wanted to get away from the crowd."

Ash scrubbed his hands over his face, made a noise that sounded like a growl. "So you've known all along?" he asked.

"That you're a gentleman?" I asked.

The growl again, louder this time.

"I didn't know the details," I said, eyeing him warily. "Not until the poker game, when you got the note. That's when I realized you must be Perry's brother." He still looked grim and I wondered why he was so annoyed that I had discovered his secret.

"Would it help," I said tentatively, "if I told you I never thought of you as a gentleman?"

This surprised a laugh out of him, breaking the strange tension. "Actually, it would help a lot."

"Would you like to talk about it?" I asked. If his parentage was really something only

a few knew about, I supposed that he hadn't had much opportunity to do so.

"Why not?" Ash shrugged. "You already know the worst of it."

I thought it strange that he'd consider being the son of a viscount "the worst of it", but kept this to myself. He looked at some fixed point over my shoulder for a moment, face stony, before he began.

"I was born the third son of the Viscount Ely." He spoke as though he was making a confession. "My father already had his heir in my eldest brother, Perry, and a spare in his middle son, Christopher. My parents are not ... fond of each other." I nodded; this was common in my circles, where matches were often made for practical reasons rather than any romantic feeling.

"Having done her duty to my father and produced two healthy sons, my mother engaged in a number of affairs with other men." He said the words as though they couldn't touch him. "It's always been clear to me that I was the result of one such affair."

If he expected shock he wouldn't get it; not only did I already know this piece of gossip from my mother, but I wasn't so naive that I didn't know that many society marriages had similar rules. Turning a blind eye to such things was only one of myriad hypocrisies that "polite" society enjoyed.

"Do you know who..." I asked.

He shook his head. "No, and I've got no desire to find out. Neither of my parents has ever had the slightest interest in me; I don't feel the need to go searching for another."

Again, the words were said with no bitterness or pain, as though he were speaking

about strangers, but I was quite sure that we were touching on an old, deep wound.

He blew out a long breath. "I was something of a wild child." He paused at my sound of amusement. "Hard to believe?"

"Not at all." I grinned. "I was only thinking what scrapes the pair of us would have got into together. My mother had not the least idea what to do with me."

The look we shared then took me by surprise. It was a look of friendly recognition, something sweet and simple, as if in that moment I saw the boy he had been and the man he was now, and knew that both were kindred. I felt certain that he was having a similar experience.

"Then you understand," he said, a smile still warming his eyes. "I decided that rather than being sent away to school I'd like to go and have an adventure. I asked my father if he thought I might have a career in the navy."

"When you were thirteen?"

"I was actually twelve at the time." He cut another slice of apple. I liked watching his teeth bite into it.

"It's not uncommon," he continued. "I went on board as Boy First Class, employed as a sort of valet for one of the officers. It's the start of a quick climb up the ladder for members of the aristocracy. Most of the boys stay on land for those years, while officers log fictitious hours at sea for them so that they can gain a promotion, but I was adamant I wanted to be put to work. My father didn't care enough to argue."

"And you enjoyed it?" I asked.

"I loved it." There was no restraint in his grin now. "Took me a while to convince the

rest of my crew that I was there to work, not too high and mighty to get my hands dirty. I proved myself. Made friends, travelled the world.”

The sigh that escaped me was wistful. It sounded wonderful.

“Why did you leave the navy if you loved it so much?” I asked. I’d put this question to him once before, but this time I hoped he would answer.

“Christopher died in a carriage accident,” Ash said. “He and I hadn’t been in contact for years and it was a big shock. Suddenly my father had an heir but no spare, and he found that unacceptable. The risk that I’d be injured or killed while in the navy hadn’t troubled him before, but it did now. It was time for me to come home and start behaving like a gentleman.”

“But you were eighteen,” I said, remembering that he’d said he had been in the navy five years. “It should have been your choice.”

“My father is close friends with several admirals – it was how I got the position in the first place. If they decide you’re not going to sail, then you’re not going to sail. There was nothing I could do about it.” I heard the anger and frustration in his voice. “So I came back, but I refused to go home. I used the money I’d saved and went into business with Joe. I had some helpful connections through my travels and we built the Penny. My father wasn’t happy, but we hardly had anything to do with one another. He’d got his way by yanking me out of the navy and, after all, he had Perry.”

“But then a few months ago your brother was shot?”

“Yes.” Ash narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “In some ways it wasn’t a surprise. Perry had a habit of making friends with unsavoury characters. It was ironic – my father always thought of me as the bad seed, because Perry’s awful friends were all gentlemen . In name, at least, if not in deed.” He said this with a sneer. “My family

are notoriously terrible with money – any fortune the Archers once held is long gone, frittered away by generation after generation of gambler or fool. Father lost a fortune through bad investing. Perry had a taste for fine things, and a whole lot of debt. He borrowed from friends, ran up bills all over the place with no hope of paying them. There were rumours he was in deep with some unscrupulous characters. But then, before he died, he seemed to come into some funds. He was flashing his new-found wealth all over town.”

“You think someone killed him over it?”

Another shrug. “It crossed my mind.”

“Was Lord Covington one of his friends?” I asked thoughtfully, remembering the dissolute young man from the poker game and his shock at Perry’s death. “And the others at the game?”

“Covington and Johnson, yes. Peabody, not as far as I know – although he is an acquaintance of my father’s.”

“And Laing?”

“I don’t know.”

I thought about this for a moment. “Does Laing know you’re Perry’s brother? Did anyone else at the game?”

“No,” Ash said firmly. “It’s a secret I’ve kept carefully. It hasn’t been in my father’s interest to broadcast the connection either. He is ... displeased with my career choices.”

I digested all this information, and Ash seemed comfortable to sit quietly while I did

so, though I felt him watching me with an intensity that felt a little like plunging into the hot water earlier.

“Any other questions?” he asked.

I thought about it.

“What’s your name?”

Ash leaned forward, elbows on the table, and I mirrored his pose. He reached out, gently brushing the hair away from my temple, his eyes lingering solemnly on the bruise there. My skin tingled where he touched me, a feeling that seemed to connect with my stomach, where fluttering sensations erupted. When his eyes met mine it felt as though we had stripped away any pretence between us, as though I was seeing him, really him, exactly as he was. And he was looking right back at me.

“Frederick Ashton Archer,” he said finally, the words almost a whisper, a caress. “A secret few people know, Felicity Vane.”

I felt another golden thread stretch between us, another confidence that tied us closer together, and I wanted to rub my face against his hand like a cat.

“I’ll keep it,” I whispered back instead. “I promise.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“I think it’s best if we continue to Cambridge,” I said later. “I’ll be able to easily arrange a telegram to the Aviary, and I can get a direct train back to London. I don’t think they take too long.”

“Less than two hours,” Ash confirmed.

“So why on earth have you travelled by carriage?”

Ash groaned and slumped in his seat. “I’ve been asking myself the same question. The carriage belonged to Perry. He’d just bought it, though I can’t find any record of the purchase. My parents got wind of the carriage’s existence and insisted I bring it up with me for their use. At the time it seemed like a small concession, given that I’m going to be telling them I have no intention of being involved with the estate or anything the title carries, nor shall I help them out of whatever mess Perry has left them with before the funeral.”

“Well, I’m glad you got roped into delivering it,” I said. “Otherwise I might never have had the opportunity to live out my dream of being a stowaway.” I didn’t say that I might also have found myself caught by Laing’s man, but the thought hung between us anyway.

“Do you mean to go straight back to London?” Ash asked, shifting in his seat.

“I don’t know.” I chewed my lip, thinking. “As long as Mrs Finch can smooth things over with Mother, I think it might be best to stay out of the city for a time. I still don’t

know exactly what Laing wants with me, if his actions are down to my rejecting his proposal or if – which I think is more likely – he knows about my connection to the Aviary and wants to use me against them somehow. Either way I'm in danger and a potential threat to my friends. Perhaps I should keep out of the way and let them get on with uncovering Laing's plans."

"Then maybe you should stay in Cambridge."

"Maybe."

"Why do you sound unsure?"

"Because I want to visit Cambridge!" I burst out. "And I'm trying to be sensible and decide what the most practical thing is. I can't have my judgement clouded by this ... this ... want."

Ash's mouth kicked up into a smile. "It's perfectly all right to want things, love." The words had a rough sensuality to them that I was also trying hard to ignore in the name of remaining sensible. Cambridge wasn't the only thing clouding my judgement. Despite the circumstances, I found myself wanting quite desperately to be wherever Ash was, and that didn't seem practical at all.

"I'd have to find a hotel until I heard back from Mrs Finch. She'll be clear-headed over the matter, will know what's best. She may have an update on Laing. But I haven't any money – even the clothes I'm wearing are borrowed from someone else."

"Come now," Ash chided. "Is that any way for an intrepid stowaway to talk? I should think that having nothing but the borrowed clothes on your back would be part of the adventure."

"It does sound romantic," I admitted. "But the reality is quite uncomfortable. They

never really go into that in books, do they?" I turned the matter over in my mind. "Perhaps I could win some money at cards again."

"A clever scheme," Ash agreed. "Only you've nothing to stake. As it happens," he continued before I could deflate too far, "I happen to know somewhere you could stay for a few days."

"You do?"

"I do. And I think you'll like it too." He refused to be drawn further on this cryptic comment.

"So we carry on to Cambridge?" I asked.

"If that is what my lady desires," he said, unfolding himself from his chair and getting to his feet. I was struck once more by the grace of his movements, there was something catlike about them. He held out his hand to me, and when our fingers touched and twined, I wondered if it would ever wear off – the electric feeling that crackled between us.

"I'm sorry I've delayed your journey," I said, after we bid farewell to Patty and Ruth, heading back out into the sunshine.

"Believe me, I'm in no rush to reach Cambridge," he said, and I thought perhaps there was some relief that he had someone who he could say such a thing to. "It's nice to have the company." He smiled down at me, and it was the sort of smile that set off starbursts in my chest.

"Now," he continued, opening the carriage door for me, "you're going to rest and relax for the rest of the journey."

“I thought I’d ride up on the box with you,” I protested.

“Absolutely not. You’re injured. The best thing you can do is sleep, so that you’re sharp when we arrive in Cambridge.” Despite his easy expression, his jaw tensed, and I knew he was determined. For once, it felt nice to be looked after. It didn’t feel as if Ash thought I was weak or delicate; it was simply that he knew I was tired after a great deal of adventuring.

“Fine,” I said, stepping up into the carriage. I noticed as I did that the gleaming black door was painted with a golden coat of arms depicting lions and roses. “For all his faults, your brother had excellent taste in vehicles.” I settled myself back against the seat, luxuriating in the comfort.

“He had expensive taste,” Ash replied, and he closed the carriage door with a click, whistling as he climbed up on to the box and shouted out a hearty farewell to Sam.

We rattled out of the courtyard and back on to the road, and Ash spent the next few minutes entertaining me by singing loudly above the clatter of the wheels. I hadn’t heard any of the songs before, but they were both rude and funny, and I assumed he’d picked them up on his travels. One did not become a pirate enthusiast without learning a good sea shanty or two.

Giggling to myself, I snuggled down and closed my eyes. Thanks to Patty’s ministrations, I felt much better than I had, the blaring pains now reduced to an aching tenderness. It wasn’t long until the gentle swaying of the coach had me drifting into sleep.

This time when I woke there was no feeling of disorientation. Ash was whistling, and I knew somehow that he had kept up a constant stream of cheerful noise, so that I would be certain I wasn’t alone.

I looked out of the window and noticed that we were no longer lost in a sea of green but moving through a more built-up area – it felt as though we were probably on the outskirts, the edges of the spill of city life. As we turned down roads that got narrower and busier, the number of vehicles steadily increased.

I wondered where exactly Ash's family estate was – it was unlikely it would be in the city itself. I thought about the difficult discussion he was going to have with his parents. Ash could have refused to bring them the carriage, sold it and used the money towards Perry's debts. The fact that he hadn't – that he was delivering it to them – told me he was perhaps not as determined to leave his family to fight their own battles as he had said. I hoped they wouldn't take advantage of that.

I ran my finger over the fine gold inlay. I had admittedly never bought a carriage myself, but it seemed to me that something like this would have cost a small fortune. It was as elegant as anything Max owned, and he was a duke with a profitable estate behind him.

As I continued to absently trace the sweep of gold down the side of the seat, something rustled against my fingertip. It felt like a piece of paper. I pushed my hand further down the side of the cushion, scrabbling to get a grip on it. Once or twice I dropped it and it sank down further, but eventually I managed to extract the crumpled sheet from where it had fallen.

Smoothing it across my knees, my heart gave a hollow thump. I'd seen this handwriting before, in Laing's warehouse.

It was not an entire document but one page of a letter, and the words were written in French. I translated it quickly as I read.

... would be if only others of your station would join our righteous cause! Only think what you with your resources have been able to do in such short a time. There must

be others who feel as you do, and with your help we can find them. The system can be dismantled from the inside, and you are the key. In times like these, violence can be the only answer. Courage, comrade, and Long Live Anarchy!

Long Live Anarchy! The sign-off was the same one that had appeared in the leaflets in the warehouse.

My mind was racing. Had someone written this letter to Peregrine Archer? Was he a member of the anarchist organization linked to Laing? And could this be the reason for his murder?

I was so busy dwelling on these questions, reading the fragment over and over again, that I didn't notice the carriage pulling to a stop. Indeed, I didn't notice anything until Ash wrenched the door open with a flourish and an expression that said he was pleased with himself.

"We're here!" he sang, but then, taking in my shocked face, his posture changed in an instant. It was something I'd seen him do before: shed that casual, happy-go-lucky demeanour, revealing instead someone knife-sharp and ready for action. I wondered if it was the sailor in him.

"What is it?" he asked, swinging himself up on to the seat beside me, his arm round my shoulders, his presence a heavy, reassuring weight at my side. Whatever it is, his body seemed to say, we face it together. I melted into his hold even as I passed him the paper.

"I'm fine," I reassured him. "But I found this down the side of the seat. It's the same handwriting as the leaflets we saw in the warehouse. Somehow Perry was involved in whatever Laing's scheme was. I'm certain of it. Everything is tangled up together, I just can't see how."

A frown marred Ash's handsome face as he scanned the letter. I was about to ask if he needed help with the translation, when he spoke. "I don't believe it. Not for a moment. Perry, an anarchist?"

"He's the only one to use the carriage," I pointed out. "And this reference – the system can be dismantled from the inside, and you are the key. Your brother was a baron; he was part of the system. On the inside."

"Perry never had a thought in his head that wasn't about money, women or good times." Ash's frown deepened. "It's simply not possible that he'd get embroiled in any kind of anarchist plot; he would never be a believer. If anything, Perry adored the system – it was his station in life that allowed all his bad behaviour. Had he not been in line for a viscountcy, the man would have been in prison! Plus, he was lazy, Felicity, intellectually lazy. He'd have about as much interest in politics or tearing down a governing body as he would in shearing sheep."

"But" – I bit my lip – "what is this letter doing here, then? Who else could have left it behind?"

"I don't know." Ash shook his head. "There's too much about Perry's last days that remains a mystery. There was some gossip about him having friends in low places. Clearly, he was up to something, but this..."

"It must be a clue," I decided. "It's too much of a coincidence not to be. If it's all right with you, then I'll pass it to Mrs Finch. She'll know what it means."

"Of course," Ash agreed. "It is too strange a coincidence, and I don't like it. Perhaps I can gently nudge my father over it, see if he gives anything away. Although" – he rolled his eyes – "I should think any accusation of his son being involved with anarchists would be enough to send the man to an early grave, and then where would we be?"

“Well, Ash, then you’d be a viscount,” I said.

He groaned, dropped his head to my shoulder. I gave in to the desire I had felt since the first time we met and raised my hand to stroke the dark waves of his hair back from his face. His hair was like the slip of cool, dark silk between my fingers and he stretched into my touch, eyes closed and a smile on his lips.

It was a different kind of intimacy, one I had never felt before. It was overlaid with the fidgety, flustered attraction that I felt around him – the heart-thumping, butterflies-fluttering, palms-sweating want of it, but underneath that was something else, something quieter: sweet and tender. I liked it and I knew it meant something, something I wasn’t quite ready to face.

“Well,” Ash said, after a long, golden moment. “Now that we’re here, shall we get out? I thought you might like to see Cambridge.”

“Oh, yes,” I sighed, pleasure sinking all the way down my toes. “Yes, I would.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

We wandered for about an hour. Stretching our legs after the long carriage ride was a relief, and I was wrapped up in the excitement of it all. Well used to the hustle and bustle of London, I found Cambridge to be a charming blend of calm and chaos. It felt smaller, more intimate than my city, but there was an unmistakeable vibrant energy here, thanks to the huge number of students swarming the place. They were young, animated, chatting in groups, and among them were several women my own age. These clusters of students – even more than the beautiful buildings that loomed elegantly over the pavements – captured my attention. Harried-looking lecturers sporadically appeared too, hurrying down the street, their black robes billowing dramatically behind them.

And there were bicycles, so many of them – again, several ridden by women. I felt increasingly as though my heart was about to beat out of my chest. The glimpse that I caught of King's College chapel from across the banks of the river was a tantalizing invitation.

Ash seemed happy to walk in silence as I absorbed this new environment. Once or twice, I caught him watching me with a smile, but he didn't ask any questions, only occasionally pointing out some landmark or building I might find interesting. We stopped in briefly at the telegraph office so that I could send a message to Mrs Finch.

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Ash included an address at the end where I could be contacted.

“This is where you’ll be staying,” Ash said when we reached it. We came to a stop in front of a tall, thin house of four storeys, which was part of a leafy terrace not too far from the centre of town. Stone steps led up to a front door painted a sober shade of blue. I gripped the iron handrail as we climbed the stairs, tipping back my head to take in the tidy appearance of the building, the tall Georgian windows, the neatly trimmed box hedges that lined the path.

In the relief of having a place to stay, I’d given alarmingly little thought to where this would be and with whom. I’d instinctively placed my trust in Ash, but now I found myself nervous.

“Who lives here?” I asked as he rang the brass bell that hung by the door.

“Now you ask,” he teased, then seeing me scowl, he relented. “An old friend. She’s quite ferocious, but her bark is far worse than her bite.”

“That is not at all reassuring,” I said.

The door was finally answered by a shuffling man who must have been in his eighties (at least). He wore the stiff, old-fashioned uniform of a butler from fifty years ago and, despite his slightly stooped figure, his clothes were immaculate.

Looking out of rheumy blue eyes, he examined Ash and myself for a long moment.

“If it isn’t Baron Ely,” he said, his voice strong, tone mildly disapproving.

“Hello, Smythe,” Ash said cheerfully, resting his forearm against the edge of the door and leaning in that carelessly casual way of his, as if his own bones couldn’t support him. “Is she in?”

“Madam is about to host a dinner.” Smythe pursed his lips, the disapproval deepening.

“Well, I’ve brought someone for her to lecture at, so could you fetch her?” Ash said, and I felt my alarm at the situation grow.

Smythe only sniffed and disappeared back into the house. (The disappearing took quite a long time and was accompanied by some heavy wheezing.)

“This person can’t be expecting a house guest,” I said, twisting my fingers together. “I don’t know what I was thinking; this is extremely rude.”

“Oh, extremely,” Ash agreed cheerfully.

At that moment, a woman appeared in the doorway. I guessed she was in her early sixties, and though she was not much taller than me, she had a great deal of presence. Something in the snapping look of her dark eyes had me standing up straight, though Ash continued to sprawl about the place, grinning at her.

For a fraction of a second it was possible that those eyes softened, but it might have been a trick of the light because her thin lips remained pressed in a straight line as she looked us both over. When she spoke, her words were clipped and cool.

“So, Freddie,” she said. “What have you done now?”

“Freddie?” I whispered, temporarily diverted, and Ash scowled, peeling himself away from the door jamb.

“You know perfectly well it’s Ash, you old harridan,” he said, and far from looking upset by his words, those fine, dark eyes glinted back at him.

From inside the house, however, came a wheezing honk of outrage.

“I see the years have not improved your manners, boy,” the woman said. “Are you planning to introduce me to your friend ?” Her gaze swept over me once more.

“Tiff, this is Lady Felicity Vane.” Ash gestured to me. “Felicity, this is Tiff.”

“Um, nice to meet you,” I managed, wondering what sort of name Tiff was.

“Tiff here is one of those academics you’re so interested in.” Ash turned to me, mischief writ large on his face. “Though her expertise is in economics, which is – if you ask me – excessively dull.”

“You always were a poor student,” Tiff replied.

“Tiff,” I murmured, then gave a start. “But ... you’re Laetitia Tiffins! You wrote *The Economics of Capital* ! I found your thoughts on the law of normal value to be extremely compelling.”

Laetitia blinked. “Well,” she said after a moment. “That is unexpected. How unlike your usual company.”

Ash’s grin only grew. “I feel certain there’s an insult directed at me in there,” he said. “But I’m not here to argue, Tiff. Felicity finds herself in a bit of bother and she needs a place to stay for a couple of days. She’s a rather brilliant mathematician. I told her you’d take her in.”

“O-only if it’s no trouble,” I stammered, mortified that I was meeting an eminent Cambridge lecturer, a woman I greatly admired, in a borrowed dress, covered in bruises, carrying no luggage, in the company of a shameless – if charming – rogue. It was not exactly as I had pictured it.

“Why not take her up to Ely Hall?” Laetitia sniffed.

“For God’s sake, Tiff. I’m halfway in love with the girl – would you wish that on her?”

I stiffened at this. He was always so playful, so casual with words, and I didn’t know how I was supposed to react to such a statement. His mouth curled into that lopsided smile and he leaned down towards me, his nose brushing against my hair as he whispered in my ear, “Breathe.”

Daring a glance at Laetitia, I saw that a small smile had settled on her lips. “Fine,” she said, though the smile hadn’t reached her voice, which remained clinically neutral. “She can stay.”

“I knew I could count on you,” Ash exclaimed, surprising me when he reached out and gathered the older woman in his arms, pressing a smacking kiss on her cheek.

When he released her, Laetitia Tiffins was pink and rumped. It seemed no one was totally immune to Ash’s charms. She smacked him across the chest, but the small smile stayed in place.

“Get on with you now,” she said. “I can take care of your Felicity – though the ladies are here for dinner. It’s my turn to host.”

“Oh, I think my Felicity will believe herself to have died and gone to heaven,” Ash said. “I expect she’s heard all about the Ladies’ Dining Society.”

I felt all the blood leave my head. “The Ladies’ Dining Society.” The words came out a croak. “The private women’s discussion club that champions women’s education and campaigns to grant degrees at Cambridge?”

“We rarely use the full title,” Laetitia said dryly.

I only gaped at her, which I worried did little to convey my intelligence.

“I can see that I’m surplus to requirements,” Ash said, turning to me. “So I’ll leave you in Tiff’s capable hands.”

Giving myself a mental shake, I turned to face him and placed my hand on his arm. “Will you be all right?” I asked in a low voice.

“Worried about me?” Ash’s expression softened, as he covered my hand with his own, gently squeezing my fingers. “I’ve been dealing with that lot my whole life. They don’t scare me.” Despite his words, I knew that he was dreading the encounter with his parents and I wished desperately there was something I could do to help.

Something of the desire must have shown in my face because Ash made a sound low in his throat. It was a sound that went fizzing straight through my bloodstream.

“You growl much more than any gentleman I’ve ever met,” I said.

He dropped a kiss to my cheek, the lightest brush of his lips against my skin, and my breath hitched.

“How many times must I tell you, I am no gentleman.” Ash stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned away, walking back towards the carriage. “I’ll be back to call in the morning. Don’t let Smythe bully you.”

I watched him leave, before turning back to Laetitia, who was watching me carefully.

“So,” she said finally, stepping back and gesturing with her arm. “I suppose you’d better come in.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“My apologies, ladies,” Laetitia said, leading me into a well-ordered and welcoming living room. The walls were crammed with bookshelves, and there were five women arranged around the place, deep in conversation, who looked up at our entrance. “I have an unexpected house guest joining us,” she continued. “This is Lady Felicity Vane. Mathematician.” I noticed that she made no reference to Ash at all.

There was a murmured greeting from the group and one of the women stepped forward. She was younger than the rest, perhaps in her twenties, and she smiled in welcome.

“How nice to have a new face join us,” she said, her words soft. “I’m Caroline Post, and I teach English literature at Newnham College.”

“I’ll go and check with Smythe about the dinner,” Laetitia said. “Perhaps you could make the introductions?”

“Certainly.” Caroline took my arm and pulled me gently to the worn but comfortable couch, where two more women sat holding glasses of wine and looking relaxed. “This is Ellen Marshall – she’s a classicist – and Mary Balfour, physicist.”

“Mrs Balfour,” I exclaimed. “But I was speaking to a friend of mine about your work only the other day!” I couldn’t wait to tell Winnie that I had actually met Mary Balfour.

“And you’re a mathematician, Lady Felicity?” Mary asked.

I found myself floundering. Despite my confidence in my abilities, in that moment I heard Mr Trent's words about hobbyists and dabblers slither through my mind.

"Yes," I said. "That is, I'm not... I'm largely self-taught, but I hope to attend university classes in the near future."

"Here in Cambridge?" Mary asked, and I experienced such a sense of relief that she hadn't dismissed me that I felt my shoulders drop.

"I had thought I'd stay in London," I replied, and for the first time I wondered exactly when I'd made that decision.

Mary only nodded. "There are some strong programmes in the city."

"This is Louise Sidgwick," Caroline continued, moving towards the pair of women standing near the fireplace. "She's secretary of the Cambridge Association for Women's Suffrage. And finally Martha Creighton, the author. You may have read some of her work on women's education?"

I nodded eagerly. "I found it fascinating. What you said about no good work or training ever being wasted, even if a woman was later forced to give it up—"

Martha sighed. "It's difficult when our critics point out that it's hardly worth the expense and effort of training young women for a profession, only for them to leave that profession upon their marriage."

"But such a statement is based on the assumption that a young woman will marry," I said. "Many women don't. After all, it's been half a century since the census revealed that there are now far more women than men in the country – what are all these spare women expected to do? Is each man now to have three wives?" The frustration that I felt erupted to the surface in an instant. "And what about those of us who would use

our brains, who want to learn and train? Why should we choose marriage if it means giving that up? I could never marry a man who would ask such a thing of me.”

Louise looked at me with something like amusement, but she nodded. “You’re perfectly right to be angry, Lady Felicity. You won’t find a woman here who disagrees with your position.”

“In fact” – Laetitia came back into the room, neatly picking up the thread of the conversation – “I remember reading an interesting article in the *Nineteenth-Century Review* a couple of years back, which followed the lives and careers of university-educated women.”

“Oh, yes!” Caroline exclaimed. “I read it too. The author said that only about ten per cent of the women who had taken honours chose to marry.”

“And,” Laetitia carried on, “she drew the conclusion that one valuable result of education was that it makes women more fastidious and less likely to hurry into improvident marriages, perhaps because they would have the ability in many cases to support themselves financially.”

“The report said seven hundred of the women were teachers and two hundred were married, so if a mother sends her daughter to university, it seems she is more likely to become a teacher than a wife,” Caroline put in with a laugh. “Well, it was perfectly true in my case.”

The other women joined in her laughter, but I felt as if someone had pressed a live wire to my skin. Never had I heard women talk like this, as though such arguments were simply common sense rather than something that shattered the model of what it had meant to be a woman for so long. It was invigorating, to say the least.

“You must come over to the college, Lady Felicity,” Caroline said. “Perhaps I can

give you a tour?”

“I’d like that,” I managed, trying to rein in an almost delirious spike of excitement.

I found myself swept up in conversation then, enjoying myself enormously – not having to temper or moderate my opinions, not needing to worry over whether I sounded too angry or sad or outraged. These women moved easily between such emotions, mixing amusement and indignation into everything they said.

When Smythe next appeared in the doorway, I thought it was to announce dinner, but instead he addressed me in frigid tones.

“A delivery has arrived for Lady Felicity. And a telegram.”

“Thank you, Smythe,” Laetitia said, easing herself up from her seat to follow me into the hallway, where a small trunk waited. “I suppose Ash has sent on your luggage,” she said, not knowing that I didn’t even own the clothes on my back.

“I suppose he must have done,” I agreed, unsure what else I could say. I accepted the telegram, which was brief and to the point.

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Despite giving no detail, and the fact the message didn’t mention Izzy or my mother at all, I felt a strange sense of calm, that everything would be handled. I wondered what it must be like to be a woman as competent as Mrs Finch – that the people around her had such absolute faith in her ability to resolve any problem.

“I’ll help you up to your room,” Laetitia said, gesturing to the trunk.

“I can do that, madam,” Smythe said stiffly, and I was relieved when Laetitia gave him a sharp look of reprimand. I thought getting the trunk upstairs might be the death of the man.

“I would rather you see to our other guests, Smythe. They are important women, you know, and I’m neglecting them. I believe Mary’s drink was perilously low.”

Smythe straightened as much as his stooped form would allow. “Of course.” He hurried off.

“Man refuses to retire,” Laetitia explained to me as we carried the trunk between us up the narrow stairway. “He’s been with my family since before I was born. I think the fact that I never married means he can’t bear to desert me.”

She pushed open the door to a room on the second floor, which was elegantly furnished: a floral paper on the walls, and a window looking down on to the leafy street below.

We dropped the trunk on the bed.

“It’s nice that he’s so attached to you,” I said, thinking that I could see Wheeler doing much the same thing.

“Hmmm.” Laetitia made a nondescript noise and then glanced around the room. “If there’s anything else you need, then please do let me know.”

“It’s kind of you,” I said, curiosity burning. “May I ask ... how you and Ash are acquainted?”

Laetitia gave that thin-lipped smile. “Our families are distantly connected,” she said. “When he was a boy, I was his tutor for a brief period. Unfortunately, Freddie was far

more interested in catching frogs and releasing them in the schoolroom than in mathematics.” I might almost have missed the reluctant affection in her voice had I not seen the two of them together. I knew enough about Ash’s childhood to imagine that affection meant a great deal to him.

“But never mind all that,” she said, brisk once more. “I’ll leave you to freshen up before dinner. It should only be ten minutes or so, and we’re not terribly formal.” I saw her gaze come to linger on my face, where I was sure the cut on my temple must be visible.

After she’d gone, closing the door behind her, I sprang towards the trunk, opening it. On top of the clothes neatly arranged inside was a note.

Thought you might need these. A

There were three gowns that were prettily made in fine fabrics, as well as undergarments and nightclothes. It was an incredibly inappropriate gift for a young woman to receive from a man. I didn’t want to think too much about how Ash had managed to arrange the delivery of gowns and underwear that were a near-perfect fit within the span of a couple of hours of arriving in Cambridge. Did he have a dressmaker on retainer? And he seemed to have a startling familiarity with my measurements. That thought brought heat to my cheeks.

I changed quickly into a gown of navy-blue silk. It was cut in the modern way, with a skirt so light and narrow that my movements felt utterly unrestricted. It was high at the neck, with long sleeves, carefully covering all the bruises, which had stopped hurting too much, but which still made a gruesome picture.

At the washstand, I splashed water on my face and pulled my hair into a long braid, tying it with Ruth’s blue ribbon. Although I planned on sending her more than one replacement, I knew that I’d keep this one, that it would always remind me of the

adventure I found myself on now. With a final glance at the mirror, which reflected a face quite different to the pale, frightened one of earlier, I ran from the room, keen to join the dinner party.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I was sitting across the breakfast table from Laetitia early the next morning, when Smythe announced Ash's arrival. I looked up in surprise from the newspaper to find the man in question standing there, looking quite as rumpled and disreputable as ever.

I hadn't expected him to be an early riser, but then there was every chance he hadn't been to sleep. I was so glad to see him that the feeling leaped up inside me – a quicksilver flash like a salmon jumping out of a stream – and I tried to tamp it down.

Ash eyed the scene with a sort of amused fondness that I couldn't understand. Laetitia and I were simply sitting across from one another in silence, both concentrating on our own reading as we drank coffee and ate toast spread with thick jam the colour of garnets. It was the perfect way to start the day, as far as I was concerned.

"I'm afraid it's bad news," Ash said from the doorway.

He was forced to step into the room when Smythe appeared behind him with another coffee cup. Smythe set the cup and saucer on the table with a doleful glare, and Ash laughed, taking the seat and accepting the hot drink without comment, which I knew from the mischievous sparkle in his eye was a great concession.

"What bad news?" I asked, my mind flying to Laing and the Aviary.

"Oh, no – not that," Ash assured me, with a glance at Laetitia, who sipped her coffee with a bland look. She seemed to have chosen to adopt a "don't ask, don't tell"

position on the matter of my sudden appearance in her life. “Although in some ways it might be worse. My parents caught wind of our arrival together yesterday. I couldn’t think how to explain... I had to protect your reputation, so I told them you were here visiting Laetitia – that you’re considering a course of study in Cambridge and that I simply drove you up as I was on my way.”

“That seems a sensible plan,” Laetitia said serenely, and I warmed even more to this tough, clever woman.

“Yes, but” – Ash placed his cup carefully back in the saucer; he seemed to be avoiding meeting my eye – “they want you to come to the house for dinner tonight. They know all about you, Felicity – they know your mother, apparently. They see my interest in you as a sign I’m taking my responsibilities seriously. That I intend to ... settle down.”

My heart stuttered in my chest. Whatever there was between Ash and myself, it was nothing to do with the rigid system of etiquette and rules that governed me at home.

“I am considered a good catch,” I said, the words mechanical, and colour washed Ash’s cheeks. I could only imagine what his parents had said to him.

“I see no problem.” Laetitia broke through the tension with her calm tone. “It’s perfectly possible for a man to show interest in a woman only to have his suit rejected further down the line. Let Freddie’s parents believe he’s trying to win you over. It will keep them happy, and they can’t force the two of you down the aisle, after all. I can come to dinner as Felicity’s chaperone, so there will be no impropriety.” Her eyes moved between the two of us. “Unless there is another problem I don’t know of?”

“No,” I said as evenly as possible. “That’s a most practical solution.”

Ash cleared his throat. “Thank you. I’ll let my parents know. I thought perhaps I

could take Felicity for a tour of the city this morning?"

"You do understand I am not actually her chaperone?" Laetitia said dryly, shaking out her newspaper. "Felicity is a sensible young woman, more than capable of making her own decisions. You'll find the rules in a university town are a lot less rigid than they are under the eyes of London society."

"I'd be happy to," I said, smothering the laughter that rose up at Laetitia putting Ash so smartly in his place. I thought I had a glimpse of the dynamic between the two of them when they were teacher and student.

"The weather is nice; we can go punting on the river," Ash said.

"Ah, you are to show off your nautical prowess?" I raised my eyebrows.

Ash smirked. "I hardly think it will test anyone's sea legs, but it's a pleasant way to spend a morning, and an excellent way to see the city."

"The morning post has arrived," Smythe intoned, shuffling into the room with a silver tray trembling precariously in his hand.

Laetitia accepted the neat stack of letters.

"There's something here for you, Felicity," she said, replacing the envelope on the tray so that Smythe could bring it round to me. "I must go and see to my correspondence. I'll be in my study should you need me." She strode off, every line of her full of purpose. I wanted quite desperately to grow up to be her.

"It's from Mrs Finch," I said to Ash, recognizing the seal on the back of the envelope as I tore into the letter.

“ Dear Felicity ,” I read aloud.

Thank you for your telegram – while I had already received word of your plans to head for Cambridge from a contact in Pebton, I will admit that your sudden disappearance caused quite a stir here. You’ll be relieved to know that Izzy was careful to conceal the truth from your mother, who believes that your friend Cassandra Weston was taken ill and that you rushed to her bedside. Cassandra is aware of – and happy to maintain – this pretence. Sylla, who is gifted at mimicking the handwriting of others (she informs me that she finds the term forgery “vulgar”), is in correspondence with your mother on your behalf. I believe it will suffice for the time being, but with Queen Charlotte’s Ball only four days away, I do not anticipate her patience with the situation holding much longer. Best for all concerned if we wrap up the case as swiftly as possible.

You will, I am sure, be keen for an update on the situation with Laing, and, while we have not yet been able to determine the precise target of the anarchist plot, we believe the attack to be imminent. We’ve routed out several of the more minor players and interrogation is in progress. This is another area in which Sylla excels, and I’m confident that soon we will have sufficient information on that to proceed. Once we have enough evidence, we can hand Laing over to the authorities, making it safe for you to return. We are forced to tread carefully here – Laing’s influence is far-reaching and without an iron-clad case he may slip off the hook. This is unacceptable to the Aviary.

For this reason, I advise you to remain where you are as long as you feel safe to do so. Given the unorthodox and, crucially, unplanned nature of your escape, we have no reason to believe your location to be compromised. With his scheme at a critical point, we can assume that Laing may likely cut his losses where you are concerned. Nevertheless, remain on your guard.

Mrs Finch

“She knew we were headed here practically before I did,” I exclaimed.

“The Aviary are good at their jobs.” Ash lounged back in his chair. “Which is a relief, given Laing’s involvement. I knew from the first moment I met the man that something wasn’t right with him.”

“He seemed to take a great dislike to you too,” I said, frowning down at Mrs Finch’s letter.

“Probably jealous,” Ash said. “I think he saw that you and I were friendly.”

I shook my head. “It’s funny. I think he did notice that – but he didn’t seem jealous, he seemed pleased, almost. It’s like when I won the poker game – he should have been angry, but he wasn’t. He looked happy. I don’t understand it. I’m afraid Edward Laing is playing a deep game and we don’t even know the half of it. Reading between the lines, I think he has Mrs Finch worried.”

Ash sat, absorbing this for a while. I laid the letter down.

“I take it that Patty from the Red Lion is the one in contact with Mrs Finch,” I said curiously.

“The Aviary has locations all over the country for women who need a safe place to land.” Ash shrugged. “The Red Lion is one of them.”

“Patty and Ruth seemed devoted to you,” I pushed.

“I’m a loveable man.” Ash kept the words light, but I treated him to a stern look. He sighed, unbending slightly. “It’s nothing to make a fuss over. Joe and I both help with the Aviary’s work when we can.”

“And what shape does that work take?” I asked.

Ash shrugged. “A bit of this, a bit of that. We can provide places for people to lie low. The Penny is a good source of intelligence. The Aviary have their own useful contacts. They help us; we help them. We fund some of the projects that Mrs Finch puts in place.”

“Like the work at the Red Lion?”

After a moment he inclined his head, but clearly he saw some of the admiration in my face. “You needn’t go all gooey. It doesn’t make us saints, Felicity. We’re businessmen and working with the Aviary makes practical sense.” I could tell he was uncomfortable, which only made me like him more.

“Now,” he said, pushing away from the table. “As Mrs Finch has advised you to stay here, and Tiff has made it clear that you require no chaperone, shall we go and explore?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“I hope you’re ready for this,” Laetitia said as the hackney arrived at Ely Hall later that evening. “The viscount and viscountess are ... difficult people.”

I eyed the facade of the great house. It must have been extraordinarily grand once, but now it felt oppressive and vaguely neglected.

“Elizabethan,” murmured Laetitia as we descended from the carriage. “Note the E-shaped structure of the building in the monarch’s honour.”

We stood a moment under the vaulted loggia that marched the length of the building, and I stepped back, looking up at the multitude of towers and turrets reaching into the sky, each topped with a large silver cross that seemed to have lost its shine. There were hundreds of windows, and even in the last light of the day, it was easy to see that many needed their glass replacing, or new casements. It was a gothic nightmare of a place, and when I thought about Ash growing up here, my heart ached a bit.

When the huge front door was opened, we were greeted by a butler and ushered into an entrance hall that knocked the air out of my lungs.

“It’s quite something, isn’t it?” Ash’s voice drifted over as I gawped at the ceiling and walls that surrounded the wide, Y-shaped staircase in front of us.

He came to stand beside me. “It’s called the Hell Staircase,” he said. “The ceiling was painted between 1697 and 1699, the walls around a century later.”

“It’s ... extremely powerful,” I managed.

Ash laughed. “How diplomatic.”

What I wanted to say was that the murals that covered the walls and ceiling were like something from a bad dream. The entire ceiling was painted in startling fiery shades of orange and red, featuring the mouth to hell and the Grim Reaper clutching his sickle. There were paintings of bodies everywhere.

“What a lot of ... writhing ,” I said weakly.

“I always say a house isn’t a home unless there are plenty of writhing bodies flinging themselves through the gate to hell,” Ash agreed cheerfully.

Tearing my eyes from the artwork, I took my first good look at Ash. He didn’t seem nervous or worried about us being here. He was buttoned up into an expensive-looking suit, pressed and polished and almost impossibly handsome, with his dark hair brushed back and tied in a black ribbon. My fingers itched to pull it undone.

“Why are you frowning at me?” Ash asked, glancing down and dusting some non-existent dirt from his sleeve.

“You look all wrong,” I said. “As though you’re wearing someone else’s clothes.”

“I’ll have you know that this suit is impeccably tailored,” Ash grumbled, clearly offended.

“No, you look beautiful ,” I said quickly, receiving a delighted grin in return, a flash of white that was a stark contrast to the funereal darkness of his suit. “Only, you don’t look ... like you.”

“She thinks I’m beautiful,” Ash said to Laetitia, nudging her with his elbow.

“I suppose beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” Laetitia sniffed.

“Frederick!” Another voice joined us, and a woman in a fussily trimmed black dress appeared, sweeping down the staircase. “You didn’t tell us our guests had arrived.” She continued down towards us, and I noticed the way she clung to the banister, how her steps weren’t entirely steady.

When she came to a stop in front of me, I saw the resemblance to her son in the elegant slash of her bone structure, the liquid darkness of her eyes – only hers were red-rimmed and slightly unfocused. She must have been lovely once, but now she looked pale and faded, neglected like the house.

“Lady Archer,” I said. “Thank you so much for inviting us into your home.”

“We’re delighted to welcome you, Lady Felicity,” she replied, taking my hand and holding it for a beat too long. Her fingers were cold as ice. “It has been a long time since we had guests. Laetitia.” She nodded in her direction, and it was clear that one curt word was all the greeting Laetitia was to expect.

“I was sorry to hear about your son,” I said gently.

“Thank you.” The words came out dully. “It’s been a terrible shock. The funeral takes place in a couple of days.” Her mouth stretched into a horrible impression of a smile. “Please, come through to the parlour for a drink.”

She drifted off towards a door to our left, and Ash tucked my hand through his arm.

“Laudanum,” he said grimly. “And it’s not because of Perry, though that hasn’t helped. She’s been using the stuff for years.”

“Oh!” I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I squeezed the arm under my hand.

Ash exhaled, pushed his shoulders back. “I told you it would be awful,” he said, his tone holding a warning, and for the first time since we arrived I saw the tension he was trying to hide for my sake.

“I can handle it,” I insisted.

Inside a rather gloomy sitting room, Lady Archer was already pouring herself a drink from the well-stocked drinks trolley.

“We prefer to be informal,” she said, with all the brightness of a bouquet of badly made artificial flowers. “Can I get you something, Lady Felicity? A sherry, perhaps? I know Laetitia will have one.” Lady Archer flicked her glance over my would-be chaperone in a dismissive gesture. I remembered that Laetitia had said there was some distant family connection between them.

“That sounds lovely,” I replied. I wondered whether the “informality” Lady Archer mentioned was in reality due to a lack of staff.

“So you’re staying with Laetitia,” Lady Archer said, once we were all seated. Ash had not said a word yet, only sat silent and watchful near the fireplace.

Like the clothes he wore, everything about his posture seemed wrong – stiff and still, no spark of the half-wild creature I knew him to be, no sign of the laughing man who just this morning had sat in a boat with me, trying to keep the whole thing from tipping over as I had been so determined to learn how to punt for myself. (A quest in which I had largely succeeded and which only resulted in us getting slightly damp, despite Ash’s repeated resigned claims that a captain always went down with his ship.)

“Yes,” I said, sipping my drink and glancing at the woman beside me. “She’s been kind enough to play hostess. I’m enjoying my time in Cambridge.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been subjected to the company of Laetitia’s dreary intellectuals!” Lady Archer trilled. She leaned forward in her chair towards me, so far that I feared she would fall out.

I glanced at Laetitia, who watched Ash’s mother with a neutral expression. “I was fortunate to meet some of Miss Tiffins’ associates. I found their company stimulating,” I said.

“How remarkably tactful of you.” Lady Archer’s mean-spirited words were drenched in honey.

“Lady Felicity has a keen mind,” Laetitia said evenly. “Our gathering benefitted from her fresh perspective. It’s encouraging to see a generation of young women who would choose not to be limited by the bounds of tradition. It gives us hope that lasting change is truly taking place.”

I felt something glow bright in my chest, even as Lady Archer made an inelegant noise of derision.

“I hope you’re not corrupting our new friend with your radical ways, Laetitia.” The hearty words came from the doorway, and I turned to find Ash’s father entering the room. Lord Archer’s appearance absolutely matched the voice of the man I had overheard arguing with his son at the wedding. He was a couple of inches shorter than Ash, stockily built with sandy hair, a ruddy complexion, and a face that was softening around the jaw, giving him a dissolute look.

“I apologize for my lateness,” he said, once introductions had been made. “Estate business, you know.”

“Lady Felicity was just telling us about her encounter with Letty’s bluestocking brigade!” Lady Archer exclaimed, and the words were slightly slurred. She had already poured herself a second drink.

“I’ve been enjoying my time in the city,” I said. “Your son has been an excellent tour guide.”

Lord Archer’s smile widened so far that I could count all his teeth.

“I’m glad to hear that Frederick has been displaying his chivalrous side.” Lord Archer lowered himself into the seat beside his wife with a heavy sigh.

“I didn’t know I had a chivalrous side,” Ash said, looking into his glass of wine.

Lord Archer’s smile became fixed and he gave a laugh that held a jagged edge. “What a wicked sense of humour my son has. He is entertaining, is he not, Lady Felicity?”

I met Ash’s eyes. “I have certainly not known a moment of boredom since we met,” I said dryly.

“A pretty compliment.” Ash’s smile glinted in the light from the fire.

“A pretty compliment from a lovely young lady.” His father’s voice had taken on that false heartiness once more. “We were delighted to hear that our son was keeping such distinguished company. Tell me, Lady Felicity, how is your brother, the duke?”

“He’s well, I believe,” I said. “Some business has called him away from home at present.”

“Takes his responsibilities seriously,” Lord Archer said approvingly, shooting Ash a

look.

“And his wife?” Lady Archer lowered her voice conspiratorially. “A curious choice for a duke. That match was all the gossip! I expect it must have been hard for you, Lady Felicity. Your brother making such a ... surprising choice. When one thinks he could have married anyone .” Her eyes held mine, her interest avid.

“It has not been hard at all,” I said stiffly. “Her Grace is the perfect match for my brother in every respect. I’ve never seen him so happy.”

“Quite, quite,” Lord Archer said, his killing look now transferred to his wife. She seemed not to notice, burying her face in her drink. “A strong marriage – and a commitment to continue the family line, that’s what matters. Succession! That is the thing! The aristocracy is a dying breed; it’s important we keep the bloodlines pure .”

He regarded me approvingly. Such obvious, detached inspection made my skin itch. It was a sensation I would never get used to, knowing that Lord Archer saw me not as a person but a brood mare.

To my relief, the doors to the parlour opened, and the butler appeared. “Dinner is served,” he announced.

It was up to Ash to escort me through to the great, draughty Tudor hall where we would be eating. “Still think you can handle it?” he asked softly.

I thought of Ash growing up in this place with the two of them, a small, brave boy full of adventure. I thought about him now, tied to his parents and to this awful old house by a title he didn’t want.

“They don’t scare me,” I said firmly. I smiled up at him, hoping that he knew there was someone here on his side.

His eyes locked with mine, and his jaw tightened for a moment. I watched the tic of the muscles.

“Brave girl,” was all he said to me as we went in to dinner.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Dinner was as wretched as I had expected.

Lady Archer drank more and more, until eventually her comments trailed off and she sat with an absently glazed expression. Lord Archer paid her not the least bit of attention, leading me to believe this was commonplace. His conversation was split neatly in two – either he was making pointed jabs at Ash, who ignored him, or he was fawning over me with an eagerness that bordered on lechery and made me uncomfortable.

A part of that discomfort came from the dawning realization that what Ash's parents were angling for was hardly beyond the realms of possibility. There was something real and important between Ash and I, and on paper we were even an appropriate match in the eyes of society now, given his elevation in status. The thought of marriage between the two of us wasn't exactly a leap. Except that I didn't want to marry anyone.

Thank goodness for Laetitia, who sat beside me, absorbing the scene in near silence and only speaking when directly questioned, but who nevertheless was a reassuring presence.

“Try to ignore them and enjoy the food,” she whispered to me at one point, her attitude philosophical.

At least the Archers' chef was almost worth the trip, and the table heaved with dish after expensive dish, each elaborately prepared. There was cold poached salmon with

ravigote sauce, mutton cutlets, fricandeau of veal, curried lobster, artichokes with mayonnaise, rabbit quenelles – it was an endless parade of beautifully presented food.

“Monsieur Henri is an angel in the kitchen,” Lady Archer simpered, rousing herself temporarily from her stupor.

At first I was confused by the evidence of an expensive French chef, but soon I realized that it was part of a wider pattern. The food, the wine, the clothes the Archers wore – everything was the finest available. I wondered if this was perhaps a clue as to where Perry had got his profligate tendencies from. Clearly what money they had was being spent on finery rather than tackling what needed to be done with the house or the estate.

I couldn't see Ash sharing this attitude. I wasn't sure how much money one made from a gambling den, but he certainly didn't live in this kind of luxury, and I already knew that at least some of the profits must go to worthy causes like the Red Lion. I wondered what demands his parents were making.

At last, the butler was clearing dessert and about to serve coffee. I felt I had been pushed to the limits of polite conversation. It wasn't exactly my strong suit at the best of times, and this evening would have taxed even the most gracious and tactful socialite. My head ached, my shoulders were so tight I was surprised they weren't brushing my ear lobes. If Lord Archer made one more inappropriate comment, I feared I might simply snap and throw my dessert spoon at him. The image was so appealing that I felt my fingers tighten round the handle.

“I think Lady Felicity might need some fresh air,” Ash said suddenly, and all heads swung in my direction.

“Yes, yes,” Lord Archer said with barely suppressed glee. “Why don't you show the young lady around the grounds. They are lovely by moonlight. Many a poet has

found inspiration at Ely Hall!”

“I will chaperone, of course,” Laetitia said, pushing her chair back with such haste that the scrape echoed loudly around the enormous room. Lord Archer looked put out, and I couldn’t help thinking he’d be absolutely delighted to find I had been compromised by his son, followed by a hasty trip down the aisle.

“Thank you,” I said, getting to my feet. “I am feeling a bit warm.”

As the cavernous hall was draughty and heated by a single fireplace, this remark was patently false, but everyone seemed happy to pretend they believed it.

Ash escorted Laetitia and me through to the back of the house and into a dark and overgrown garden that could not possibly inspire poetry – unless it was of the deeply melancholic variety.

“Don’t mind me,” Laetitia said, pulling a cigarette from the pockets that were cleverly concealed in her skirt. “I’ve got no intention of trailing around in the dark after the two of you, but I had to get away from that pair.”

I felt a rush of affection for her: this spiky, independent woman who had taken me under her wing. I was certain that she had come along tonight only to be a supportive presence to Ash. And to me.

“Come on.” Ash held his hand out to me, and I slipped my fingers through his. “I hear this place is lovely in the moonlight.”

We walked around a winding path in silence, the darkness swallowing us up with thirsty haste.

“You once told me that moonlit gardens were the perfect scene for kissing,” I said,

and half a heartbeat later I was in his arms.

“Kissing you sounds like the only possible way to salvage this evening,” he said, pulling me tightly against him. It was as though I could feel his heart beating through my whole body in perfect time with my own. “You are my hero, Felicity Vane.”

“I don’t think I did anything terribly heroic,” I said, trying to focus on forcing the words out in some sort of coherent order. His face was angled temptingly close above mine. With one small movement I could bring his mouth against my own.

Ash’s low laugh was without humour. “You navigated that dinner without crying or screaming or throwing things.”

“So did you.”

“Practice,” he murmured. “I used to regularly do all those things. It was quite enlivening.”

“I’m sorry that you have had to deal with them on your own.” I placed my palm on his chest, pressed my fingers lightly against the firm muscle.

“I didn’t have to tonight,” he said softly. “Tonight you were there.”

The words were the only encouragement I needed, and I surged up on my toes, pressing my lips to his.

This time the kiss was different. Instead of a crash, it was a long, slow, delirious fall. Ash’s mouth caressed mine as if this moment between us were something to be savoured. My fingers wound round the back of his head, pulling him closer, as they delved into the cool silk of his hair.

His nose brushed my own, his hands raised until they cradled my face, his thumbs tracing the line of my jaw in slow, sweeping strokes. My mouth opened, and the kiss deepened, a small, desperate sound that I didn't recognize escaped from me as I pushed harder against him, wanting his body pressed against every inch of my own. I felt his smile against my lips and found the experience curiously arousing. Nipping my lip, he laughed and I wanted to drink the sound.

When we finally broke apart, he continued to hold me, velvet eyes looking down into my own with such open affection that I was struck by a sudden wave of panic.

Clearly sensing the change in my mood, Ash let his hands drop at once, putting several inches of air between us.

"Too much?" he asked, his voice rough. "I'm sorry."

"No." I shook my head, and my own voice sounded high, a little breathless. "It's not that. Not at all."

"What, then?" Ash kept a careful distance between us, but somehow I knew that he was fighting the urge to touch me.

"I—" I cut my sentence short, not sure how I could possibly explain what was going on in my mind.

"Hey." His finger came to my chin, lifting my face as he had that first night in his office at the Penny. I held his gaze, seeing nothing but patience and understanding there. "You can talk to me about anything."

"I don't want to get married," I blurted. "Not now at least, perhaps not ever."

His eyes widened in surprise, and I pushed on, the words falling over each other in an

anxious tumble. “Not that you’ve said anything about marriage. I don’t mean to presume. It’s only ... I am a duke’s sister and you’re a gentleman and a few lingering kisses is one thing, but there are ... conventions , rules that are usually followed...”

“You don’t wish me to have false expectations,” Ash said carefully, and I watched his face for any flicker of anger or upset but found none.

“Well, no. I suppose not,” I said, still trying to find the words to express what I really meant. “I have feelings for you, but I don’t know what to do with them. If we are to have a future.” I hesitated here, afraid for a moment that I might have misread him. “Though perhaps I am getting ahead of myself, perhaps you don’t...” I trailed off hopelessly, then tried again. “I don’t know what a future between us looks like if it’s not marriage. It’s what’s expected of me. And your parents said—”

“My parents have nothing to do with this.” Ash cut me off. “I won’t let them near whatever this is, Felicity. I have feelings too, and I won’t have the two of them come between us. Not a chance. Whatever the future looks like, it’s the two of us together.” He smiled, that charming, crooked smile. “I knew it from the second you stormed into my office, incapacitated Davey and offered to draw me some mathematical tables.”

I relaxed then, a small sigh escaping my lips as I leaned forward, dropped my forehead to the centre of his chest. His arms came up at once, wrapping me in a hug that felt as though it were anchoring me in a safe harbour. “I think I knew it from the first time I heard your voice, before I even saw your face. You touched the curtain in front of me, and I felt it in my toes.”

“In those pretty silk slippers.” Ash grinned, and then his mouth found mine again, and we didn’t talk for quite some time.

“I’ve never felt this way,” I admitted when we finally broke apart. “Right from the

start, it's as if I recognized you, as if I'd been waiting for you all along."

"I know exactly what you mean," Ash murmured, dropping another kiss against the corner of my mouth. "You walked into the room, and my heart rolled over and I thought, there she is."

I smiled at that, at the wonder in his face.

"I'm sorry that my parents made you uncomfortable," he said.

I shrugged inside his hold. "It all makes me uncomfortable," I admitted. "Over the last year, everything has changed for me. I should have been prepared for it, but I am suddenly treated like ... a thing rather than a person. Like a prime bit of horse flesh up on the auction block, simply because I am a woman of a certain age and background."

"I can understand that," Ash said softly. "It's not the same, but I've felt trapped by the expectations of my family, of society."

"When you were yanked out of the navy," I murmured, pulling back to look at him.

Ash nodded, paused, and then took a deep breath, brushing a lock of hair gently away from my face.

"Honestly, it broke my heart." He spoke the words like a confession, and I knew somehow that he hadn't said them aloud before. "I was finally happy. I felt like I belonged somewhere for the first time, thought I had control of my own destiny, and in an instant I was reminded that my career, my life was at the mercy of my father's whims. I don't pretend to understand your situation, but I know what it is to have someone else dictate the course your own existence should take."

“But you didn’t let that happen,” I pointed out. “You struck out on your own, started the Penny with Joe, made something for yourself away from your family.”

Ash sighed. “Yes, but for how long?” He ran his hand through his hair, hair that was already rumpled by my fingers, the tie that had held it back lost in the darkness, a fact that brought me a strange sense of pride.

“The title brings responsibility. Not to my parents,” he said quickly at my sound of protest. “They’ve made their own beds, as far as I’m concerned, and I’m not about to pretend to feel affection for them. But they oversee an estate: one that is ailing, and one that employs a huge number of people. There are livelihoods at stake. When it comes to being the Viscount Ely, I’ll hold more than one life in my hands. It’s not something I wanted, but I can’t ignore it, however appealing the idea is.” He looked at me, and I saw vulnerability in his gaze. “I haven’t admitted that to anyone else. I don’t think I had even admitted it to myself. With Perry’s death, my life has taken another turn that I neither wanted nor asked for.”

I reached across the space between us and pulled his hand into mine, letting him know that this time he wouldn’t face the challenge alone. I admired him for his selflessness, even while I felt sad and frustrated for him. He squeezed my fingers, understanding me without the need for words.

Here in the darkness, on the brink of whatever wild, magical thing was between us, it felt like a time for sharing secrets. He had given his and I knew I should give mine.

“When I was nine, I was very ill,” I said the words quickly, wanting to get them out. “I don’t remember much about it. For the worst of it I was delirious or unconscious. The doctor diagnosed scarlet fever and I almost died.” Ash’s fingers tightened round my own but he didn’t interrupt. I was glad, because this was a story that I hadn’t shared with anyone, though I knew Max had told Izzy.

“Max was seventeen,” I said. “Younger than I am now, and a year away from officially becoming my guardian, but he was at my bedside through the whole thing. The recovery took a long time, had several setbacks. My mother is a good woman, but she’s not a person to turn to in a crisis – that person is my brother. She didn’t handle it well. She was ... absent.”

I thought about Mother’s determination to help me into a good marriage. “I think she carries a lot of guilt over that,” I said slowly. “That in her own way, she sees my season as a way to be here for me as she wasn’t then. It’s difficult in a different way when people try to control you out of love. Max sees me as someone delicate; he almost lost his sister once before and now he wishes that he could wrap me in cotton. For him, seeing me married to a good man is a way of keeping me safe.”

“And your mother wants to help you now because she felt helpless then?” Ash said gently.

“Yes,” I agreed. “They’ve both sheltered me – too much, perhaps – for my whole life. I feel as though I am banging against the bars of a cage that’s grown far too small. It might be a lovely, gilded cage, but it’s a cage nonetheless. I’m ready for my life to begin. When Laetitia invited me to dinner, I met women who spoke easily about real challenges, big ideas, about changes they wanted to make for women everywhere, and I wanted to be a part of it. Badly.”

I pressed my other hand to my stomach, as though I was trying to keep everything I felt inside me. “I want to study, to learn, to travel and have adventures.” I could hear the wistfulness in my own voice. “I’m not ready to disappear into the respectable role of wife and mother when I have seen and done so little. I want my world to grow wider, not shrink. I think ... you can truly understand that. Perhaps you are one of the only people who could.”

“Yes,” Ash said, and he raised my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss into the palm

like a promise. “I can understand that.”

The air between us buzzed, so thick with emotions I was surprised we couldn’t see them dancing through the air. Again, I had that sense of a connection between us, an invisible thread that seemed as if it had always been there.

“Would it make you feel better,” he asked after a long moment, “if I promise, very solemnly, that I will never ask you to marry me?”

My eyes flew to his, which I saw were back to their normal state, lit with mischief. “Yes, actually, it would,” I replied.

“Then I swear it. Felicity Vane, whatever you and I are will be perfect and ours. We will never be respectable.” Ash laid his other hand against his chest like he was taking a pledge. I heard the echo of the words Iris, Cassie and I had spoken months earlier.

And I looked up at the stars and laughed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“What are you doing here?” My heart hammered as he wrapped his fingers around my arm. “How did you find me?”

“As it happens, I was here on some other business when I became aware of your presence,” Laing said. “Quite a serendipitous turn of events, don’t you agree?”

“No, I don’t. Let go of me.” I tried to pull myself out of his hold.

“Now, now,” Laing said through a smile that was more a gritting of teeth than anything else. “It would be unwise to draw attention to either of us. We wouldn’t want anything to happen to your new friend, Laetitia.”

I stilled. “What do you mean?”

“Only that an acquaintance of mine is currently outside Miss Tiffins’ home, and should he not hear from me shortly, then he has certain ... instructions.”

“You’re not even going to pretend you’re not a criminal any more, are you?” I demanded, fear leaping like a flame inside me. The man in front of me was a ruthless killer, capable of anything.

Laing made a tsking sound of disapproval. “Criminal is such a common word. There’s really no need at all for any unpleasantness. I’d much rather do this in a civilized manner. Over tea, perhaps?”

He was guiding me down the narrow street towards a tea shop.

“You wish for us to have tea?” I said, dazed.

“I wish for us to have a rational conversation,” he said, nudging me through the door and smiling at the waitress, who hurried over to greet us. “A table for two, please.”

“Certainly, sir.” The waitress beamed, clearly assuming we were a young couple in love, as Laing held me close, his hand clamped round my waist. “Right here in the window, our best table.” She winked.

“Thank you.” Laing smiled warmly back at her. “My fiancée and I would both love the Assam tea, and we’ll try a scone too. I hear they’re very good.”

“Finest in Cambridge,” the waitress agreed brightly, and she bustled off to fill the order while I sat stiffly, watching Laing in silence. If he truly had someone watching Laetitia, I could do nothing that might threaten her safety.

He was utterly relaxed and didn’t try to resume our conversation until our tea and cake had been delivered. Then he leaned forward and poured a cup for me.

“Milk?” he asked. “Sugar?”

I looked at him. His face was a mask of politeness. This felt like a joke – the domestic scene of the tearoom, all frilly tablecloths and carefully pressed napkins, while I sat across from the man who had kidnapped me and tried to blow up my friends.

“Just milk,” I said finally, willing my voice to remain calm and steady. No one was going to be helped by me falling into hysterics.

Laing treated me to a look of approval. “You see,” he said, leaning back in his chair.

“I knew you were a woman of good sense. Now, I feel certain that we can resolve our differences with some plain speaking.”

“You tried to kidnap me,” I said, lifting my teacup and taking a sip.

An expression of displeasure flickered across Laing’s face. “I wanted only to speak with you. Had you not flung yourself so cavalierly from a moving carriage, you would have found yourself taking only a simple detour on your way home. None of this would have been necessary. It became expedient for us to talk when you and your colleagues infiltrated a certain warehouse.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, but the words sounded weak even to my own ears.

“Come now,” Laing chided, spreading butter over one half of the scone on his plate and transferring it to my own. “There’s no need for pretence between us. I’m perfectly aware of the little organization your sister-in-law is caught up in, the one running out of the haberdasher’s on St Andrew’s Square. Did you think a man in my position would miss such a threat?”

I only stared at him.

“Unlike many of my contemporaries, I’m not blind to the potential of women,” Laing continued, picking up his half of the scone and munching thoughtfully. “I’ve been rather impressed by the Aviary’s skills. They have – unwittingly, of course – thrown a wrench into several of my own schemes. The matter of Samuel Morland, for instance – although that was easily rectified.”

Samuel Morland was a politician who had died a couple of years ago. I had no idea what his connection to the Aviary was, but it seemed there was one.

“I could have dismantled them, of course,” Laing continued, “but our interests have aligned more than once. They’ve been doing an excellent job of removing my ... shall we call them competitors ?”

“Villains,” I said firmly.

Laing laughed, and the laugh was full of easy charm. “Certainly an improvement on criminal . But now their interference is proving difficult. And then, of course, there’s you.”

“Me?” I asked. “If you know anything about the Aviary, you know that I’m not an agent.”

“No,” Laing said coolly. “That simplifies things. When they sent you to infiltrate my poker game, I was delighted. Here, I thought, was finally a woman with a mind as brilliant as my own.”

“Thank you,” I said, the words dry as sand. He seemed not to notice the sarcasm, only nodded.

“I saw that you would be able to grasp the true scope of my ambition, the intricacies of my vision. The Aviary are playing chequers, my dear. I am playing chess. My goal is no ordinary one.”

“So you keep implying. But I don’t understand what your goal is .”

“Power, of course.” There was a flash of something unbalanced in his eyes then, a slip of that jovial mask. “It’s what all men want, but it is what I am made for. My destiny was forged in the fires of my early struggle. I’m not soft like those currently in power are, but a truly gifted, self-made man. Someone who could – should he choose – have the world dancing to his own tune. I’ve been working from the

shadows for years, pulling at many strings, and my greatest personal achievement is about to be realized.” He sat back, toyed with the teaspoon in his saucer, a pleased look on his face. “My mind doesn’t work like the rest of theirs. And neither does yours.”

“I’m nothing like you,” I said, deciding I’d had enough of this game. “And I don’t want to sit here having tea with you. Tell me what you want and let me go.”

His expression hardened. “I had hoped we could avoid threats. That you would see the benefit of a true partnership. What I intend, Lady Felicity, is for the two of us to marry.”

“I already told you that will never happen.” I had to fight the urge to shoot to my feet, to fling my cup of tea in his face.

“It will happen, for several reasons,” Laing said flatly. “Firstly, your position will legitimize my business in ways that I will find helpful. Secondly, the access I will have to your brother and his government work will also be useful. Thirdly” – he trained those not-quite-sane eyes on me – “I want you. You interest me, and I have decided you will make a pleasant wife. Once I’ve made a decision, it is set in stone, Felicity. And you would do well to remember that, if you care for the safety of your family and friends. Winnie Phillips, Sylla Banaji, Maud Crestwell, the woman they call Mrs Finch.” He listed the names with a cold indifference. “Your mother, your sister-in-law, of course, and your brother.”

“You wouldn’t get near my brother,” I hissed, but my heart clattered in my chest. I tasted fear, sharp on my tongue.

“No?” Laing raised his brow. “Why do you think he’s been kept out of the country on business for so long? Because I wanted him out of the way. I have influence you cannot imagine. If I decided I wanted him removed on a permanent basis, he would

be extinguished as easily as blowing out a candle.”

I felt all the blood leave my face. “You wouldn’t,” I managed.

“Not unless it becomes necessary,” he replied silkily. “I rather fancy having a duke for a brother-in-law. You will agree to marry me, Felicity, and return to London, where we shall be seen attending several important social events including, naturally, Queen Charlotte’s Ball. There’s a train this afternoon and you’ll be on it. I will meet you in London once my business is concluded.”

A moment stretched between us then, a moment where I tried desperately to see some other way through.

“I can be on the train,” I agreed finally. Anything to keep my friends safe, anything to get away from him.

“My man will be pleased to escort you.”

“Your man?”

“Oh, don’t worry about Milton,” Laing said easily. “An excellent fellow. He won’t hurt you unless instructed to do so, and there won’t be any reason for him to hurt you, will there?”

“Of course not,” I replied, my throat dry.

“Wonderful.” Laing reached into his pocket and began placing coins on the table to cover the bill. “But, Felicity, I must warn you. If you attempt to contact any of your friends, there will be consequences. I am having all of them watched.”

There was still Izzy, I thought desperately. He couldn’t prevent me talking to her.

“And, of course, your sister-in-law is unfortunately out of town,” Laing said as if reading my mind. “I’m afraid I set a false trail for her that should keep her quite busy up north for a while. Oh, I almost forgot!” Laing exclaimed. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a sheet of paper and a pen. “I’ll need you to write a note to our friend Baron Ely. To apologize for your unexpected departure.”

I felt my blood freeze then, the last flicker of hope truly doused. Laing was looking at me with the twisted enjoyment of a predator toying with its prey. He was glad to separate Ash and I, I realized. He took pleasure in the pain that it would cause me to part from him.

“The young baron is going to find himself a jilted lover,” Laing mused. “Still, no need to break his heart yet. A simple note saying that Mrs Finch called you back to London and that she has assured your safety. You’ll see him there when he returns.” He gestured to the paper. “And don’t try to be clever, Lady Felicity. Only the words I’ve said.”

“Why do you dislike him so much?” I asked. “I felt it from the first time the two of you met.”

Something leaped in Laing’s eyes. “I don’t care for people who try to take what is rightly mine.”

I leaned against the table to write the note. There would be no reason for Ash to question it, I knew; no reason for him to guess that I needed help.

Laing glanced out of the window.

“Here is Milton now. He’ll escort you back to Miss Tiffins’ house where you can gather your things and say your goodbyes. We don’t want to alarm her.” He stood from his seat and gestured for me to walk out of the tea shop in front of him. I kept

my chin high. I would think of something, I told myself, some way out of this mess. I was not helpless.

We stepped out on to the street where Laing's henchman waited for us. I recognized his lumbering shape as the man who had attempted to kidnap me.

"Thank you, Milton," Laing said. "Lady Felicity is pleased to have you as an escort."

Pleased was not the word.

"Hey! Reeves! Is that you?" A young man who had been strolling past came to a sudden stop beside us. He looked like a student who was a touch worse for wear, having spent his afternoon in the pub rather than the lecture theatre. His face was currently scrunched up in an expression of delight. "Reeves!" he said again, the name slurred. He put his hand on Laing's arm. "What are you doing back in town?"

"I'm afraid you have mistaken me for someone else," Laing said, barely glancing at him.

"But..." The man frowned. "My apologies," he said, "'m a trifle bosky!" then he shrugged and bobbed off, tossing a confused glance over his shoulder.

Laing returned his attention to me, giving a small bow, his mouth curling in a smile. "I shall see you in London soon, Lady Felicity."

He made the promise sound like exactly what it was: a threat.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I racked my brain for any way out of this situation as Milton escorted me back to Laetitia's house in silence. It seemed that Laing's hired muscle was a man of few words. It felt like a bit of a cliché to me, to have a strong silent henchman follow you about.

I knew that Laing had to have a far larger scheme than the one he had shared with me. For one thing, there was the matter of the anarchists and the bomb-making materials. For all his talk of power and chess matches, he'd been extremely light on details, but then I supposed one couldn't hope an arch-villain was going to happily lay out all his plans.

When we reached Laetitia's house, I was informed by a doleful Smythe that she was out at the college. He eyed Milton with great suspicion, but as he looked at everyone that way, it seemed unlikely I would be getting any help from that quarter.

"My friend has asked that I return to London at once," I said carefully, sticking to the script Laing had impressed upon me. "She sent Mr Milton here to accompany me. Please pass on my thanks to Laetitia for having me to stay. I'll be certain to write to her when I get home."

"As you like," Smythe sniffed, already shuffling away.

I packed my few belongings – the ones Ash had purchased for me – under the watchful eye of Milton, and as slowly as possible. I needed time to think. There was no way to alert the Aviary – Laing had made sure of that. They were being watched,

and I couldn't risk their safety.

That was when it hit me: there was one name that Laing hadn't mentioned. Someone he probably didn't know existed.

"I'd better write my letter to Mari," I said as casually as I could manage, striding towards the small writing desk.

Milton's hand closed round my shoulder, his fingers like iron bars, and I longed to hurl him across the room as Sylla would undoubtedly have done.

"Nice try," he jeered. "Laing already told you; you aren't allowed to warn any of your friends about what is happening."

"And I'd be a fool to do so," I said primly. "If you know anything about me, I should hope it's that I am no fool. Marigold Lockhart is a friend of mine. I'm supposed to be leaving here to visit her in Yorkshire tomorrow. If I don't write her a letter to cancel the engagement, she'll worry and ask questions. Mr Laing will not like that." I eyed him coolly.

Milton made a sound of annoyance. "Write your letter, but I'll read it before you seal it. And don't try any funny business."

"I have no desire to place my friends in danger," I said. "Mr Laing has already made his threats to their safety clear. I can promise you, I won't do anything to upset him. You can read the letter, and you'll find nothing amiss. You're welcome to tell him all about it."

I set pen to paper and chewed on my lip.

Dear Marigold,

Thank you for your charming letter. I was sorry to hear you are having trouble with the begonias, but I'm sure the rhododendrons will perk up beautifully. Cambridge has been lovely – though there are not so many flowers here as in your glorious gardens. Tell me, is the peach blossom in bloom? I expect the place is full of butterflies – I saw a particularly fine *Aricia agestis* here yesterday, but I'm sure it's nothing to your summer visitors.

Thinking about your home makes it harder for me to tell you that I will have to postpone my visit – Mother has called me back to London so that I can attend Queen Charlotte's Ball. You know how much I hate these social events, but she is determined.

I will write to you with more later, but I remain your friend,

Felicity

"There," I said, handing the letter to Milton. "I think you'll agree there's nothing at all incriminating in that."

"What's all this stuff about flowers?" Milton's brow creased.

"Mari used to be a florist," I said. "Her gardens in Yorkshire are a wonder. We talk about flowers all the time. I'm trying to sound as I normally would, rather than like someone being threatened and held hostage. I'd have thought you'd approve."

"What's this?" He tapped the paper. "Aree... Arick..."

"*Aricia agestis*," I said promptly. "The Latin name for a type of butterfly. We can look it up in one of Laetitia's books, if you like."

Milton read the letter once more, taking his time, and I felt as though I were holding

my breath. Then he nodded.

“All right,” he said. “You can send your letter, but don’t think I won’t be reporting back to Mr Laing.”

I could only continue to hope that Laing had no inkling of Mari’s links to the Aviary. There was no reason he should – Mari lived in a gothic castle out in the Yorkshire moors with her husband, a noted recluse.

“That is your business.” I wrote out the address on the envelope, and Milton checked that too, sealing the letter himself with a look of satisfaction.

I got to my feet, dusting off my skirts. “Now, will you help me downstairs with my trunk? I don’t like to ask Smythe; it might be the end of him.”

Milton glowered at me, but hefted the trunk up on one shoulder and strode for the stairs. I followed behind, calling for Smythe when we reached the bottom.

“Thank you again for your hospitality,” I said, pressing the letter into his hands. “I wonder if you would mind sending this out in the post as soon as possible.”

“Certainly.” Smythe gave a stiff bow. “Madam has several letters that need delivering today, so I will put it with those.”

“Thank you, Smythe,” I said, and we walked away from the house where I had experienced a brief and surprisingly wonderful respite.

I could only cling to the desperate hope that Mari would get my message – and that she would know what to do with it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Two days later I lay in bed, having a stern word with myself. There was no need to panic. I was not going to fall to pieces. I was simply going to have to think my way out of this.

It was past midnight, and I was about to spend my second night in a row tossing and turning. I had not heard a peep out of the Aviary since returning to town. That's probably for the best, I thought.

I had received a gratifyingly romantic letter from Ash, to which I was too scared to reply, certain that Laing would be having our post monitored. He had stayed in Cambridge to attend Perry's funeral after all, and I wasn't surprised that he had chosen to support his parents in this, however little they deserved it. I was sorry that I hadn't been there to support him. It felt like one more crime to lay at Laing's door. I wasn't sure how long it would take for Ash to begin to worry at my silence. I thought there might already have been a faint note of hurt that I had rushed off without saying a proper goodbye.

Mother, of course, had been delighted by my reappearance.

"I know you were being a good friend, Felicity," she had said, almost wilting into the sofa with relief, "but it would really have been too much to miss Queen Charlotte's Ball, after all the preparation we have done. Madame Solange sent over the most beautiful gown, but there was some problem with the lace edging and it had to go back to be altered again, and I've had Monsieur Fantine in near hysterics; he's spent hours on your headpiece." Her tone had turned scolding, and she rubbed her fingers

against her temples. “And with your brother gone, and then Isobel haring off on some business with the estate in his stead, I’ve been left rattling around here like a lonely ghost.”

“I’m sorry,” I said soothingly. “It was unfortunate timing that we were all called away at once. One of those horrible flukes, but I’m here now. I hope you haven’t been too lonely.”

“Oh.” Mother sniffed, clearly pleased to finally have someone to smooth her ruffled feathers. “Well, I have been busy, of course. If you couldn’t be here charming the sons, then at least I could be paving the way with the mothers.” Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

I tried to smile, though after all that had transpired in Cambridge, the thought of suitors and marriage and balls seemed even more ludicrous.

I hadn’t seen Laing since I’d arrived back in town, though the evidence of him was everywhere – not only in the flowers that continued to arrive at the house but in the figures I had seen lurking in the street below. I also got the occasional glimpse of Milton when Mother and I were out continuing the endless preparations for the ball. I was sure Laing too meant to attend, he’d told me so himself.

The thought was enough to make me shudder. I had a horrible feeling that Laing’s plans were about to be revealed – and I was certain I would not be the only victim.

“Right, Felicity,” I said now, aloud, clutching at the bed sheets. “You cannot simply lie here. It is time to come up with a plan.”

“You already came up with one,” a dry voice came from the doorway. “And it wasn’t even completely terrible.”

“Sylla!” I shot out of bed as Sylla Banaji stepped out of the darkness. “How did you...” I felt a moment’s panic. “You can’t be here! Laing’s men—”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Sylla smirked, careful to stay out of view of the window. “Those fools downstairs have no idea we’re here.”

“ We? ” I breathed.

“Put your robe on,” Sylla said. “There’s much to discuss.”

Bundling myself into my silk robe, I followed Sylla down the stairs, through darkened hallways and down the servants’ staircase to the kitchen.

There, sitting at a scrubbed table, drinking steaming cups of tea, I found Mrs Finch, Maud, Winnie and—

“Izzy!” I exclaimed, throwing myself into her arms. “How are any of you here? Laing—”

“Has people watching all of us,” Mrs Finch said calmly.

“And sent me on a wild goose chase.” Izzy squeezed me in a tight hug before releasing me. “We know.”

“Thanks to you,” Maud put in.

“Mari got my note,” I breathed, slumping into a seat at the table. “And she understood.”

Maud immediately set about pouring me a cup of tea and I cradled it in my hands, letting the warmth seep through my whole body. They were here. My friends were

here. Everything would be all right now.

“You did extremely well, Felicity,” Mrs Finch said, and I wanted to have the words inked into my skin.

“Mari knew all the flower references, of course.” Izzy dropped into the chair beside me. “Begonia for beware, rhododendron for danger, violet for watchfulness.” She ticked the flowers off on her fingers. “The peach blossom gave us a moment’s pause, but when Mari said it could mean I am your captive , we took that to mean you had fallen into Laing’s hands.”

“It was Win who worked out the bit about the butterfly,” Maud said.

“ Aricia agestis ,” Winnie piped up with a pleased grin. “The Latin name for the brown argus. Very clever of you, Felicity.”

“Argus was called the hundred-eyed, sent by Hera to keep watch over Io to stop Zeus from approaching her,” Sylla said, as though reciting from a book where she had looked it up. “Once we realized Laing had us under surveillance, it was easy enough to slip past his men.” She sniffed. “For a master criminal, I’d say he needs to employ better henchmen. The ones stationed outside my house were practically asleep.”

“Mari wrote to you?” I asked.

“She telegraphed at once with a copy of your message,” Mrs Finch said. “And by then I already had my suspicions that Izzy had been sent on a fruitless mission. Once I had word you were back in London, the pieces slid into place. Laing was at the bottom of it all. I called Izzy back, and Mari and Oliver travelled down, in case we require their assistance. Now, tell us everything that transpired in Cambridge.”

I did so, giving as much detail as possible, while also concealing the identity of Ash’s

family. He had told me that few people knew the truth about who he was; I'd have wagered good money that one of those people was Mrs Finch, but I intended to keep my promise to him. His secrets were mine now, just as mine belonged to him, and I would share nothing without his say-so.

"So Laing said he was in Cambridge on some other business?" Sylla asked.

"Yes." I nodded. I thought for a moment. "And there was one other thing, but it could be nothing."

Maud grinned. "So many of our best clues start that way."

"There was a man in the street. He was drunk but he seemed to recognize Laing. Only he called him by a different name." I screwed up my face, trying to remember. "Reeves," I said finally. "He called him Reeves. It could have been a case of mistaken identity. Laing didn't seem bothered by it."

"It could be something," Mrs Finch said thoughtfully.

"We know Laing isn't his real name," Izzy added. "Could it be Reeves?"

"There was something else too," I said. "He talked about his struggles in the past, something about being a self-made man ... he said ... that his destiny had been forged in the fires of his early struggle . That was it. And that he wasn't soft like the people in power are. The way he talked about the aristocracy, it was with disdain. I know his past is a mystery, but I think he comes from humble origins. His obvious dislike of the nobility could link him to the anarchists."

Mrs Finch shook her head. "It's certainly possible that Laing sympathizes with them, but I don't believe that he is an anarchist. I think whatever Laing is up to, it's personal rather than political."

We sat absorbing that for a moment.

“Do you know—” I began, but I was interrupted by the sound of the street-side kitchen door being shoved open.

Izzy was on her feet in an instant. Sylla had a pistol trained on the doorway before I could move. Mrs Finch continued to sip her tea.

“Where the hell is my wife?” My brother came stomping into the room, dishevelled and covered in dirt. His stride ate up the floor as he reached for Izzy.

“Max!” she had time to squeak, before he was pulling her into his arms and covering her mouth with his. My sister-in-law seemed to have no problem with this greeting, melting into his embrace with a murmur of approval.

I exchanged a glance with Sylla, who was tucking the pistol back in her waistband. She rolled her eyes and I tried to smother a giggle. When it seemed as though the kissing was not going to stop any time soon, Mrs Finch delicately cleared her throat.

Izzy emerged from the cocoon of Max’s body, looking pink and adorable, a wide smile stretching across her face.

“Sorry,” she murmured.

“Why are you apologizing?” Max asked, his eyes tenderly searching her face as if memorizing every freckle. “We haven’t seen each other for weeks. I didn’t care for it.”

“No,” Izzy admitted, leaning into the side of his body as he slipped his arm round her waist. Her face wore a look of relief. “Neither did I. Let’s not do it again.”

“I heard there was trouble. I was worried.” Max finally tore his attention away from his wife and turned to face the rest of us. His brows dipped into a frown when he caught sight of me sitting alongside the head of the Aviary.

“Felicity,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here,” I said serenely.

Max looked from Mrs Finch to Izzy to me. “What,” he said coldly, “is going on?”

“Max,” I said quietly, but his eyes were on Mrs Finch and they had narrowed dangerously.

Though Mrs Finch seemed perfectly calm, it was as if the temperature in the room dropped several degrees. “You have dragged my sister into some scheme,” his voice was under rigid control, “which is a line we agreed would never be crossed. If you’ve placed her in danger, then you’ll have me to answer to.”

“Max.” Izzy tugged at his arm. “It is all my fault. You must listen.”

“No,” I said, taking my life in my hands because I had rarely seen Max so furious. “It’s my fault. I talked them into letting me help. I made it so they practically had no choice in the matter.”

For a smouldering second, Max’s focus fell on me, and he frowned. “That does sound like you,” he admitted.

“Perhaps we should make him a sandwich,” Winnie put in. “You know how grumpy he gets when he’s hungry.”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m a child,” Max barked.

“So you don’t want a sandwich?” Maud asked innocently, already making her way towards the pantry.

“I didn’t say that,” he grumbled. He sighed and scrubbed his hand over his dirt-streaked face. “I don’t mean to be grumpy. I’m trying to catch up here. It’s been a long and exceedingly trying day, and the message I received was light on details except to say that there was a threat to my family.”

“But we’re all here, and we’re all well,” Izzy said soothingly. “Yes, Felicity knows about the Aviary, and about the work you do for the government. But she’s always known, because she’s quite brilliant and we have underestimated her.”

“Eat your sandwich,” Maud said, sliding a plate across the table before Max could respond.

With another beleaguered sigh, Max picked up the sandwich in one of his big hands and munched into it, letting out a sound of pleasure. “I haven’t eaten since yesterday,” he admitted.

“As yesterday was less than two hours ago, that is hardly a convincing justification for coming in here acting like a bear with a sore head,” Sylla said, examining her fingernails.

Max glowered at her but, catching Izzy’s eye, he sighed again. “You’re right,” he said. “I apologize.” He came towards me, opened his arms, and I stepped into them, feeling the reassuring warmth of his hug. “I’m sorry for snapping, Felicity. I’ve missed you.”

I relaxed into his comforting embrace, then stiffened as I suddenly remembered the threats Laing had made against him.

“But wait.” I wrenched myself free, fear a sudden chill in my veins. “Did anyone see you come in? Did—”

Max laid a gentle hand on my arm. “Mrs Finch contacted me. I had my suspicions that I had been sent off chasing my tail, and so did she. When I heard from one of my men that there were people watching the house, I was careful.”

There was something cold and precise in his voice, something that made me suddenly aware that my big brother was a powerful, even dangerous presence. Strange that it hadn’t occurred to me before, despite knowing something about his work. I suppose that he was not the only one stuck in the patterns of our childhood relationship.

“So,” Max said, “it seems that Felicity knows everything and is in your confidence. And it’s clear that you have an investigation in the works. Is it something Her Majesty’s Government can assist with? Or will it be more help for me to lie low?”

Again, I was surprised. This wasn’t the attitude I expected from Max at all. Rather than riding in to fix everything, he seemed happy to defer to the group of women in front of him.

“Perhaps you can help.” Mrs Finch inclined her head in my direction. “But it’s Felicity’s story to tell.”

Max looked to me, and whatever he saw had a reluctant expression of amusement flitting across his face.

“I don’t know why I’m surprised.” He shook his head. “Wherever there’s trouble, my sister can be found standing in the middle of it.”

“I thought you’d be angry,” I admitted.

“I haven’t heard the story yet,” Max reminded me.

“Well, before I tell it, there are a couple of things I need to say.” I straightened in my seat. I wasn’t sure if this was the right moment to confront my brother, but I also knew that I couldn’t keep my feelings inside any more. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw Sylla smile, but it could have been a panic-induced hallucination. My heart was hammering.

“I’m not going to get married,” I burst out, the words a rush. “I know it’s what you and Mother want, but it’s not for me.”

Max blinked, clearly surprised by this conversational turn.

“I understand you feel like that now,” he said after a moment. “But when you meet the right person...”

“I’ve met the right person,” I replied, and Max wasn’t the only one to start at that. Mrs Finch smiled down into her teacup. “And I’ve told him what I’m telling you now: I’m not going to marry. Not now, and possibly not ever. I want to go to university. To Cambridge. I want to travel and see the world. I-I think I want to teach other women mathematics. I want to be part of a change I believe in with my whole being. I’m not settling for anything less.”

I eyed my brother. I hoped he would understand, but even if he didn’t, I meant every word. I would make it happen, with or without him.

Max only looked at me, dazed. “I...” He paused. “Perhaps we should talk about this later.”

“We can,” I agreed, “and I’m sure we will, but it won’t change anything. I’m telling you this now because I can’t go one more moment without sharing it with you.

You're my brother and I love you, but this is my life. I think I deserve a say in what it looks like."

"I had no idea you felt this strongly," he said finally.

"Because I didn't want to disappoint you or Mother," I admitted. "I know that you both want to protect and provide for me, but the life of a society wife is not for me. I can't stand it, Max." My voice lowered. "Trying to fit in has made me deeply unhappy."

It was these simple words that seemed to truly break through, and had my brother reaching across the table for my hand. "Felicity." He squeezed my fingers. "The last thing I would ever want is for you to be unhappy. Whatever you want, we can work it out." He glanced at Izzy and something passed between the two of them, some wordless, married-person conversation that had his mouth pulling into a rueful smile. "If my excellent wife has taught me anything, it's that I can be a touch overbearing in my efforts to protect the people I love."

I had to blink back tears, and when I looked at Izzy her expression was smug. It seemed I had underestimated my brother just as badly as he had underestimated me.

"If you really don't want a season, then we'll tackle Mother together," Max added, though he looked a bit queasy at the words.

"Thank you," I breathed, knowing that this in many ways would be the hardest part for both of us.

"I still think we need to have a conversation about this man who is not planning to marry you." Max frowned, and I gave a watery laugh.

"Thrilling as that sounds, it will have to wait," Sylla said.

“And as happy as I am that Max is going to accommodate your wishes, Felicity, I’m afraid your season isn’t over quite yet,” Mrs Finch added.

“Laing,” I sighed.

“Yes,” Mrs Finch agreed. “We received some intelligence from an anarchist contact we’ve been cultivating, regarding their plot.”

“Of course I leave you alone for two weeks and there’s an anarchist plot,” Max groaned, pulling Izzy on to his knee.

“After the bomb at the Aviary, and the equipment we found at the warehouse, we can assume it will involve explosives,” Sylla said.

“There was a bomb ?” Max looked alarmed.

“It was only a very small bomb,” Izzy, Sylla and I all said at once. It seemed by mutual agreement we decided not to mention that there had been a second one.

My brother closed his eyes, as if in pain.

“Our contact has indicated that the attack will be at a prominent social event, one attended by many notable figures...” Mrs Finch looked to me, and it took me a moment to understand what she was hinting at.

“You think they’re going to detonate a bomb at Queen Charlotte’s Ball?” I whispered, the words finally sinking in. “But it’s ... it’s at Buckingham Palace! There will be hundreds of people there!”

Mrs Finch nodded gravely. “Politicians, a significant portion of the aristocracy, even members of the royal family.”

“As a target for anarchists, it makes perfect sense,” I finished her thought.

“An attack on the palace?” Max’s entire body was taut. “You can’t be serious. My people have heard nothing about this.”

Sylla raised an eyebrow. “Your people are not the Aviary. It seems this is a small anarchist group and that they’ve employed Laing to handle the logistics of the operation. Not a terrible plan, given how badly they have bungled things previously, and how efficient Laing seems to have been in the past.”

“But that doesn’t make sense.” I shook my head. “I’ll be at the ball, and Laing wants to marry me, not kill me.”

“Laing wants to what ?” I was sure there was a muscle ticking under Max’s eye at this point.

“For heaven’s sake, Max” – Izzy poked him in the arm – “that’s hardly the surprising part of the story. Plenty of people want to marry Felicity.”

“I just don’t want to marry them,” I reminded him.

Max’s only response was to rub his temples with his hands.

“Maybe he’s changed his mind,” Sylla put in, “and he’s not worried about whether you blow up.”

“Thank you for that,” I muttered.

“On the contrary, I think it likely that Laing will try to extract you before the explosion, Felicity,” said Mrs Finch. “But we have no idea when that will be. We must infiltrate the ball and then locate and disarm the device as quickly as possible,

without drawing attention to ourselves or alerting Laing. We'll have Max arrest Laing at the palace, round up the anarchists and get them to turn evidence on him, save the future king of England, and all be home for supper."

"Oh," I said faintly. "Is that all?"

"Don't worry, Felicity." Sylla's smile held a feral edge. "This is exactly what we do. I told you, the Aviary always gets her man."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The next day I stood in my bedroom being dressed for a ball that was the target of an anarchist plot. While my mother fussed over the exact position of one of the ten thousand white flowers that covered my gown, I mentally went over Winnie's tutorial on bomb defusal.

It was a uniquely awful experience.

"I wonder if we should add another feather to your veil?" Mother fretted, standing beside me in front of the mirror.

I swallowed a groan. "I don't think I'll be able to stand upright if we add anything else."

The ensemble I was wearing was the most terrible thing I had ever seen. A white gown cut wide on my shoulders and covered in silk flowers. In contrast to the simple corset style of the top half, the skirts were a heavy, old-fashioned froth of so many layers of silk I wasn't sure I'd fit through the door. Attached to the shoulders of the gown was a three-feet-long white train. It was three feet long because that was the absolute shortest the train was allowed to be and I had been clear that "the absolute shortest" was the only length I'd accept. The train too was made of thick layers of silk, overlaid with white tulle.

If the uncomfortably weighty gown wasn't enough, I was also wearing a white veil, attached to the back of my head by a diamond clip with three curling white ostrich feathers in it. I looked ridiculous, but I was too busy worrying about Buckingham

Palace being blown up to care.

Despite Sylla's confidence, and Mrs Finch's reassurance that the Aviary had found themselves in tighter spots than this, I was finding it hard to maintain the same businesslike sense of calm that the rest of them possessed.

"You look wonderful," Mother exclaimed. "Oh, it reminds me of my own debutantes' ball. What a thrill it was. I danced with your father that night, you know. Perhaps this evening you'll dance with your future husband. Maybe that nice Mr Laing will be there," she added slyly.

"Mmm," I said noncommittally, resisting the urge to rip all this foolish decoration from my body. I wanted to scream. I wanted to order my mother to stay at home where it was safe and to lock all the doors, but of course nothing would give Laing a clearer sign that we were on to him. I had to pretend that everything was normal. Mrs Finch had been clear about that.

"You look lovely too," I said truthfully, looking at my mother in the mirror. She was willowy and elegant in a gold gown that looked as if it weighed a quarter of my own.

Her eyes shone with tears. "I always dreamed of sharing this moment with my daughter," she said softly.

I was surprised by the lump that rose in my own throat at her words. Suddenly, I found myself wondering, after I had so misjudged my brother, whether there was a better way for me to forge a relationship with my mother – a more honest one. There was nothing like the threat of imminent danger to give a person a sense of perspective. I'd been brave enough to tell Max how I felt and it had been worth the risk. Perhaps that might be the case here too?

There was only one way to find out.

“I know you enjoy these social events,” I said carefully, “but you and I are quite different.” She frowned and I pushed on. “I find social occasions to be quite overwhelming. I hope you won’t be disappointed if...” I hesitated. “If I don’t secure a husband at the end of the season. If that isn’t ... what I want for myself.”

There was a long pause, while our eyes remained locked in the mirror. It was a small admission, but I could hardly believe I’d dared to say so much.

“You know,” Mother said, her tone conversational, “that I have received more than one proposal of marriage since your father passed away.”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” I replied, uncertain where this was leading.

She smiled. “But I haven’t accepted any of them.” Now I felt that she was the one being careful. “I find I enjoy the independence of being a widow.” Her eyes met mine again, held. “Perhaps,” she finished quietly, “we are not so different as you think, Felicity.”

I blinked, surprised by the sudden rush of emotion her words inspired.

She toyed for a moment with my veil. “The world is changing so quickly.” Mother’s smile had faded. “And I don’t know if I will keep up with it. You have to understand ... for my generation, getting married, it was imperative. It was security. I know you find it mercenary, but it’s the reality faced by many women – including me, when I was your age – that a good marriage is the only secure future. I still want that for you. I want you safe and provided for.”

It was more of a concession than I had hoped for. And it felt like an opening, of sorts.

“I understand,” I said. “I’d like to talk more. I’d like to hear more about your life as an independent widow.”

Mother laughed and the tension between us dissipated. “And I suppose you can tell me about your ... mathematical interests.”

“But first, the ball,” I reminded her.

“Yes.” She turned, twirled me under her arm – a movement that ended with me tangled in all the unwieldy yards of my skirts. “You’re going to have such a wonderful time!”

My smile slipped away as I thought about the night ahead. “I’m sure it’s going to be eventful.”

I had never been inside Buckingham Palace before, and I wasn’t particularly enjoying the experience. I don’t think I would be, even if it weren’t for the knowledge that there was an explosive device ticking away somewhere. The first part of the ritual involved standing in line for hours, hot and miserable in our wretched gowns, while we waited to be presented to our royal hosts. As the sister of a duke, I was at least near the start of the queue.

The queen herself was not in good enough health to receive the endless line of fluttering young debutantes, so that position was being filled by the Prince and Princess of Wales. It was a strange thing really, to think that after over sixty years the time must almost be upon us to have a new king. Seeing him taking part in ceremonies like this one felt like a precursor to a change that, though inevitable, still felt almost impossible to imagine.

The presentation itself passed in a blur. I was ushered into a room of overwhelming gilded splendour in which two golden thrones were arranged. The prince and princess sat with impassive faces, showing neither pleasure nor the discomfort and boredom I was certain they must be feeling.

The Lord Chamberlain, a small man full of pomp and ceremony, announced my name in round, ringing tones. I approached the thrones as Mother had drilled into me, and dropped into a full court curtsy, my knee almost touching the floor. I felt the foolish feathers on my head wave. A bead of sweat ran down my spine, my legs shook, and I sent up a small prayer that I would not tip over.

When I managed to launch myself back to my feet without incident, I had to tackle the most treacherous part of the process: backing out of the room without stumbling over all the yards of material surrounding me, because it was not permitted to turn your back on royalty.

By the time Mother and I emerged into the ballroom where the celebrations were taking place, I was panting, as though I had run a race.

“You were wonderful.” Mother beamed, crushing my hot hand in hers. “I’m so proud of you.”

Seeing how happy she was made it almost worth it. Almost.

“Thank you,” I murmured, my eyes already scanning the room. The information that Sylla had wrung from one of the anarchists about their bomb making, indicated that given their range, the explosives were likely planted in the ballroom or one of the smaller reception rooms being used by guests for maximum impact. The throne room had been dismissed early on; Max had impressed upon us the impossibility of someone smuggling a bomb in there.

“Besides which,” Sylla had pointed out reasonably, “the prince and princess are due to join the guests at the ball afterwards, so it makes far more sense to target a much larger crowd.”

Sylla herself was somewhere in the room, already on the hunt for the device. Maud

had slipped Laing's watchdogs and entered the party disguised as a member of staff, thanks to Mrs Finch's connections.

It had been decided that Max's presence was too dangerous – it might put Laing on guard or cause him to panic – so he was grinding his teeth in a location nearby, accompanied by Izzy.

At Mrs Finch's request he had agreed to a slim window of time before the prince and princess would be removed from the palace. They were not to be allowed past the throne room unless the threat had been completely dealt with, so we only had the duration of the presentations to finish our search or the entire place would be evacuated. A couple of hours at best. Tipping Laing off would be awful, but the welfare of everyone else had to come first. Still, it was all a risk – what if moving people out of the palace caused Laing or his associates to detonate the device early? There were no truly safe options, apart from putting an end to this ourselves.

Max had men everywhere, all hunting for the device and ready to disarm it once it was found. Still, given the size of the rooms involved and the number of people within them, I felt my heart sink. It was no small task.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a head full of unique and lovely rose-gold curls. "I think I see a friend of mine," I said to Mother, who waved me away.

"Darling, go and enjoy yourself. I'll have a gab with my friends, and enjoy bragging about how graceful your curtsy was."

"Are you sure you don't want to leave?" I asked, one last desperate attempt to get her to safety. "It's so warm and you must be tired after all your hard work. Now the presentation is over, I can hardly be considered unchaperoned in the middle of this crowd."

Mother laughed. “Tired? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world!”

“Of course,” I said weakly. “I’ll come and find you later.”

With a wide smile, she disappeared into the press of people, and I headed in the direction of Marigold.

“For heaven’s sake, Lockhart,” I heard her say as I approached. “It’s a party in a palace . At least try to look like you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Bloom, if I get blown to pieces in the company of this bunch of stuffed shirts, I’m coming back to haunt you,” was the response from the devastatingly handsome man standing beside her. Marigold’s husband, Oliver Lockhart, was extremely grumpy and extremely beautiful. He seemed to actively dislike everyone apart from his wife, who he clearly adored, much to my brother’s amusement. Oliver and Max had some sort of strange friendship/rivalry that I couldn’t begin to understand.

“If you’re getting blown up, then I think we’ll all be haunting on the spectral plane together,” I said, sidling up to the couple.

“Felicity!” Marigold exclaimed, pulling me into a tight hug.

“Your brother’s not here, is he?” Oliver scowled. Then, when I turned to him, he reared back in alarm. “What the hell is on your head? You look like a swan that’s been the victim of bad taxidermy.”

“Oliver!” Marigold smacked his arm.

“No, he’s not wrong,” I sighed. “I feel as though I’m about to keel over at any moment. At least it’s not as hot as the seventh circle of hell in here. Oh, wait. It

absolutely is.”

Marigold smothered a laugh. She looked beautiful, her generous figure clad in a silk gown of silvery blue that flowed like water down her body. Her dipping neckline highlighted the stunning necklace that she wore, a sparkling circlet of the deepest red rubies and delicate green emeralds, fashioned to look like a chain of lush red roses. It was magic, and I suspected further evidence of her husband’s devotion – red roses meant passionate love, after all. Mari had taught me that.

“I know we’re supposed to be on guard in a dangerous situation,” Mari confessed, “but I can’t help getting distracted. Who’d have ever thought I’d be here, in Buckingham Palace? My family asked me to try to smuggle out a napkin so they could have it framed.”

“I’m glad you came,” I said. “I know you didn’t have to, but given that Laing doesn’t seem to have connected you to the investigation...”

Mari’s face went fierce. “We might not be in London now,” she said firmly, “but I’ll always be a Finch. Of course we came.”

“Then we should get to work,” I said. “Sylla, Maud and several of Max’s men have split the rest of the spaces between them. If you search the west side of this room, I’ll take the east. Given the amount of damage they’re hoping to do, Winnie believes the device must be at least the size of a loaf of bread, so there are a limited number of places it could be hidden. We’ve been informed there will be a timer, and that it won’t be set to detonate until after the presentations are finished, and the prince and princess are present.”

“That gives us some time,” Mari said. “Thank goodness those awful presentations are endless. We’ll find it.”

I nodded, then glanced over to where my mother stood with her friends. We would find it, I told myself. Because, after all, we had no choice.

CHAPTER FORTY

I had not got far into my search when a man stepped out in front of me, blocking my path.

“Lady Felicity.” Edward Laing smiled. “How nice to see you. Won’t you dance?” It was clearly not a request.

“You’re here,” I murmured as he pulled me on to the dance floor. I hadn’t been sure whether he would attend or not. On the one hand, it had seemed unlikely he would put himself in harm’s way. On the other, as I was learning, Laing was full of surprises.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked, the smile still on his lips. He looked every bit the affable gentleman, not a hair out of place, a perfect fit in his surroundings.

Was it possible we had it wrong? That the palace wasn’t the target at all? As I was twirled round the sweltering room in the arms of a villain, I found my head swimming.

“I’m only surprised,” I said stiffly, keeping my words careful. “You’ve been curiously absent.”

“Have you missed me, Felicity?” he asked. “Didn’t you get the flowers I sent?”

“Yes,” I said through gritted teeth. “And I noticed the men keeping watch too. They’ll report that I kept my end of our agreement.”

“I expected nothing less.” He inclined his head. “People are nothing if not predictable, particularly if one knows where to apply pressure.” His eyes moved over my shoulder and his smile widened. “Speaking of which, I think I must take my leave.”

With that, he came to an abrupt stop, bowing over my hand and striding away through the crowd.

I spun to see what it was he had noticed, and felt my stomach drop at the sight of Ash sauntering towards me in an impeccable dinner suit. A shock of fear that he was in danger mixed chaotically with a burst of pure joy at the sight of him, leaving me weak at the knees.

“What are you doing here?” I gasped, reaching for his arm at the same time as he asked, “Was that Laing? Why did he have his hands on you?”

When my words registered, his face showed surprise. “What do you mean, what am I doing here? You asked me to meet you here. Do you think I’d go to the trouble of wrangling an invitation and come to this hellish place for anything less? Do you have any idea how uncomfortable these suits are?”

I gaped at him. “You’re uncomfortable?” I asked, gesturing wildly at the acres of fabric that were trying to consume me whole, and to the feathers that quivered on top of my head. “You?”

A smile tugged at Ash’s lips. “You look ... fluffy.”

“That doesn’t matter at the moment,” I said, snapping back to attention. “What does matter is that I didn’t ask you to meet me here. Laing must have.”

“Laing?” Ash’s brow crinkled. “Why would he do that?”

“Possibly because the place is rigged with explosives, and he would be quite happy to get rid of you.”

To his credit, Ash absorbed this without any discernible surprise. “But wouldn’t that mean blowing you up as well?” he asked. “I thought he wanted to marry you.”

“Yes,” I said. “I did too, but either he’s decided I’m expendable after all, or I’m to be removed before the bomb goes off. He doesn’t know that we know it’s here. At least...” I paused. “I don’t think he does.”

With Laing you couldn’t be sure of anything. My head ached and I couldn’t blame it all on the ridiculous feathers.

Thankfully, Ash seemed to follow this garbled explanation. “So what you’re saying,” he said slowly, “is that I wore the dinner suit for nothing?”

A giggle slipped through my lips, a rising hysteria mixed with genuine gladness that he was here. “I think you look handsome,” I said, and it was perfectly true. Ash was drawing more than one set of eyes, his tall, rangy figure the picture of elegance. In other circumstances I would be happy to stand and admire him.

“Of course you do,” he said smugly. “Now, I suppose you’re searching for the device?”

“Yes,” I said. “And four eyes are better than two.”

Together, and as discreetly as possible, we began to search the room, including the tall flower arrangements that were scattered about the place. But there was nothing: no sign of where such a device might be concealed.

“I’ve checked all the arrangements along this wall,” Ash replied. “It’s not there. And

I don't see anywhere it could be. There's so little furniture here, because they've left all the space for dancing."

I was inclined to agree, when suddenly Mari and Oliver appeared at my side. Mari was pink-cheeked, while Oliver looked even more serious than usual. Mari gave me a brief nod.

"You found it?" I asked.

"Not us," Oliver replied. "One of Max's men. In the card room."

"Ash!" Mari exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" Her eyes narrowed. "And why are you all dressed up? I don't think I've ever seen you even wear a jacket before."

Oliver glowered. "Who is this man and why have you seen him in a state of undress?"

Ash's eyes sparkled and he opened his mouth, but before he could say something outrageous, I cut him off. "This is Ash, and he's not important right now. Take me to the bomb."

"Now that's hurtful," Ash murmured as a smirking Oliver led the way.

Glancing over my shoulder at the room, I froze for a second as my eyes met Laing's. He was standing a little apart from the crowd, watching us with a look of cool calculation.

The moment stretched between us, long and slow, and then ... he smiled. Touching his fingers to his head in a jaunty salute that managed to be mocking, he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

What did it mean? I wondered. Does he know we've found the bomb? But if so, then why had he seemed so calm? So ... pleased with himself?

"Felicity?" Mari's voice snapped me back to the moment.

There wasn't time to worry about it now, I told myself, and we exited the ballroom, heading for the card room. The Aviary would be keeping an eye on him; we'd found the device. We were almost safe.

A small, bemused-looking crowd milled outside in the corridor (though perhaps "corridor" was the wrong word for a space so big and grand), and two footmen stood in front of a nearby door.

"Heard them say something about a leaking pipe," huffed one of the gentlemen in the crowd. "In Buckingham Palace! Should've ignored the wife and stayed at White's where it's civilized."

"And I was about to trounce Scott with the hand I was holding," his friend grumbled.

We slipped past them and through the door. The footmen stepped aside wordlessly, so I assumed they had already been briefed on our arrival.

Inside, we found several card tables set up in an ornate room. The place was empty except for Sylla – resplendent in a gown of amethyst tulle – and a man, who I took to be one of Max's.

"Fenton here found it a few minutes ago," Sylla said without preamble. She gestured to the overturned table beside them. Hidden underneath was a slim wooden box of the same glossy walnut as the table itself. The top of the box had been removed, revealing the neatly packed dynamite, the tangle of wires and the familiar gold pocket watch.

I don't think I had truly believed the bomb was real until that moment, and my breath caught. Ash's warm hand slipped round mine and squeezed.

"How on earth did you find it?" I asked.

"I was thorough," Fenton replied, a clipped soldier-like response that earned one of Sylla's rare looks of approval.

Fenton kneeled beside the device.

"The good news is it looks as I expected." He ran his eyes over the device, then with a finger traced the line of several of the wires.

Now that I was so close, I could hear the gentle tick, tick, tick of the pocket watch, each second bringing us closer to disaster. My palms were slick and I wiped them on my skirts.

"Pass me the clippers," Fenton said, and Sylla held out the small wire cutters.

"You should all go." Fenton turned to look at us over his shoulder. "Until I disarm this there's still a chance it could detonate."

"We're fine where we are," Sylla said calmly.

Fenton's eyes moved to mine. In response, I crouched down beside him. I was going nowhere and I wanted to see what he was doing. Mrs Finch and Winnie would want a full report.

I felt almost alarmingly calm in this moment. I certainly wasn't about to run away and let a palace full of people – including my mother – get blown up. What if there was some way I could help? Ash hunkered down at my side, pressed his palm to the

centre of my back, a small, steady touch.

Fenton turned his attention back to the bomb, his focus so complete that I was certain that, for him, the rest of us had ceased to exist.

It took only a couple of minutes, though it felt like hours. Fenton snipped through wires and carefully separated the various elements of the device, lining them up neatly on the floor.

“It’s done,” he said finally, and I felt Ash exhale a long, slow breath of relief.

“We’ll still need to be careful with the removal,” Fenton said as coolly as if he had carried out some simple domestic chore, rather than saving hundreds of lives, including the future king of England. “There’s enough dynamite there to blow a nasty hole in the palace. I’ll go and report to Max – he’ll want a quiet removal.”

With that, he stood up and left.

“He did well,” Sylla murmured, which was the most effusive thing I had ever heard her say.

“I saw Laing leave a few minutes ago,” I said, and she nodded.

“Your work here is done,” she said. “You may leave Laing to the Aviary.” The smile she gave me then was one that made me glad she was on my side.

Oliver and Marigold drifted away, his arm round her waist, whatever he was whispering in her ear making her giggle.

“Now what?” I asked Ash, feeling strangely deflated.

“Now, we dance,” he said, reaching for my hand and tugging me towards the door.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Ash was a wonderful dancer. I suppose it shouldn't have been a surprise, given the grace with which he always moved, but being held close in his arms and spun effortlessly around the dance floor was a very different experience to my previous endeavours in the ballroom. Now, I could certainly see the appeal of being pressed almost scandalously close against a tall, well-muscled body, of the intimacy in the way his hand lingered on my waist. The way I could tip my face and look up into his, close enough to see the way his pupils dilated when he looked back at me.

I should have been feeling nothing but happy as I spun, safe in Ash's arms, knowing that Laing had been thwarted. And yet I couldn't shake the feeling that we had missed something.

"There's one thing I still don't understand," I said as we danced, and Ash gazed soulfully down at me. "Why did Laing plant the bomb in the card room? It doesn't make any sense."

"Who knows what goes on in the mind of an unhinged criminal." Ash shrugged. "I'm much more interested in how you manage to look so lovely, even when your feathers keep tickling my nose."

I laughed. "I'm sorry," I said. "I promise after tonight I'll never wear the things again."

The music we were dancing to came to an end, and Ash's hand went to the small of my back. He leaned over me as we walked through the crowd, and I could feel the

warmth of his body curved around me, could smell that delicious spicy smell that I knew clung to his skin.

“The ballroom is a far more effective target,” I blurted, unable to help myself. “They could have taken out the prince and princess as well as half the aristocracy.”

“Well, maybe he—”

“Frederick?”

Ash’s words were cut short by the exclamation. Standing in front of us was Lord Archer.

“Father.” Ash frowned. “What are you doing here?”

“Me?” Lord Archer demanded. “What are you doing here?”

“Ash?” Another voice joined the chorus of confusion, and I saw Horatio Peabody appear beside Lord Archer, looking dapper but anxious. “How do you... Did you say Father?”

“You’re acquainted with my son?” Archer sounded disgruntled. “The new Baron Ely.”

Horatio’s face was a picture of bewilderment. “Baron Ely, but I thought...”

“I forgot that you were going to be here, Horatio,” Ash said smoothly. “Your daughter is being presented, isn’t she?”

“Yes, yes,” Horatio said, recovering. “My Sadie. She’s here and pretty as a picture.”

I was trying to blend as unobtrusively into the background as my foolish dress and feathered headband would allow. The last thing we needed was for Horatio to recognize me as the masked lady who had beaten him at cards. Still, seeing Horatio again tugged at something in my memory. Hadn't I seen him when I was in Cambridge?

"Psst." I turned in the direction of the noise, to find Maud, dressed in a maid's uniform, hovering nearby. "I have a note for you from Mrs Finch," she said, surreptitiously passing me the folded paper. "It means nothing to me, but she said you'd understand."

"Thank you," I said, opening the note and scanning the words.

The world fell away. For a moment there was no sound but the rapid beating of my heart. The puzzle pieces slid effortlessly, devastatingly into place.

"Mr Peabody, did you go to Cambridge to see Lord Archer?" I asked, breaking unceremoniously into Ash's conversation. He followed my wide gaze to Horatio, who turned red and then white in quick succession.

"Well, I – yes, I did. To offer my condolences."

"I don't think that was it," I said. "I think you went there to persuade Lord Archer to attend this ball."

"How did you... I don't know what... Mrs Williams? Is that you?" This flustered response was all I needed.

"What is she talking about, Peabody?" Lord Archer demanded.

"Did Mr Peabody suggest you attend tonight?" I said, fixing my gaze firmly on his,

while Peabody spluttered beside us.

“Well, yes – he did suggest it. I wasn’t keen; these things are dashed expensive and there’s all the fuss. But he said he had a business opportunity to discuss and it would be worth making the journey because he had someone important to introduce me to. But why—”

“Get Sylla,” I said to Maud, who was watching me with careful attention. “It isn’t over yet.”

As Maud took to her heels, I dragged Ash away from his father and Peabody to the now-empty card room. There was no sign of Max’s men or the disarmed device, but they clearly hadn’t started letting people return in here yet.

“What’s going on?” he asked, looking at me with concern. “You’re pale as a ghost.”

I handed him the note, and he read it aloud, a frown pinching between his eyes.

“ Thomas Reeves, lately of Cambridge, is the son of Margaret Reeves, deceased. Margaret was a maid at Ely Hall. Shortly after Thomas was born, she committed suicide. Margaret was sixteen. Unmarried. No father is listed .” Ash looked at me. “I don’t understand. Who is Thomas Reeves?”

I closed my eyes, swallowing back the fear that threatened to overwhelm me. “Thomas Reeves is Edward Laing.”

Ash’s entire body took on a preternatural stillness. “And his mother was a maid at Ely Hall,” he said slowly. “ No father is listed . She ... killed herself.” He read the note again, and I saw him come to the same horrible conclusion that I had reached. The words, when they came, fell like a blow. “Edward Laing ... is my father’s son.”

“Which would make him your brother,” I said.

Ash shook his head. “I’m not Archer’s son by blood. Everyone knows that. Laing and I are no relation at all.”

“When we were in Cambridge, I asked him why he disliked you so much,” I remembered. “He said he didn’t care for people trying to take what was rightly his ... I thought he meant me.”

Dazed, Ash seemed to be working through the problem. “He meant the viscountcy. If anything, he has a greater claim to the title and the estate than I do.”

“He has no claim at all,” I said. “Not as an illegitimate son.”

“All the more reason to hate me,” Ash pointed out. “He cannot inherit. The truth is that I’m also illegitimate, but the hypocrisy of our society means that, as I was raised as a viscount’s son, I’m the heir. I get everything.”

“He also said that his greatest personal achievement was to happen soon,” I said, and the words were breathless. “Ash, all this business with the anarchists was a smokescreen. He had Peabody bring your father here. I saw Horatio when we were in Cambridge but I didn’t think ... Laing lured you here. He planned to assassinate you both, under the guise of an anarchist plot.”

“Putting an end to the line, once and for all,” Ash said, and his tone was distant. “You ... think he got rid of Perry too?”

“I would guess so. I don’t quite know how, but I wager it’s something to do with this anarchist group who was paying Perry.”

“And so that means... What does it mean?” Ash looked bewildered.

“It means that the threat remains,” I said stiffly.

“But we found—”

“No.” I shook my head. “We found the anarchists’ device. When Laing left the ballroom, he looked pleased. He knew we’d found the bomb and he didn’t care. He’s too clever. We should have known he had a backup plan. There was plenty of material in that warehouse for another bomb.”

“All right,” Ash said steadily. “Say that’s true – where is it?”

“I don’t know,” I said, frustrated. “Max’s men have been over the building with a fine toothcomb. There’s nowhere it could be.”

Ash thought for a moment. “Did you see anything in the warehouse that would give us a clue?”

I screwed up my face in concentration. “There was nothing,” I said. “Just the equipment. Izzy said she saw some bolts of fabric left over from the factory, there were some old crates... It could be anywhere!”

Ash made a thoughtful noise. “Hold on. Peabody was trying to take my father to the card room – under Laing’s instructions, we can assume. I suppose the card room is a likely place for me to be, because I enjoy gaming as long as it’s not at the Penny ... but my father and I rarely even acknowledge one another. I prefer to be as far away from him as possible. So how could he possibly bet on us being together?”

“That’s true,” I said. “Think! If you weren’t tempted to talk to your father, where could Laing be certain you’d go?”

Ash ran a hand through his hair. “The ballroom?” he said. “I don’t know. I’d be

wherever you were.”

His words hit me like a punch to the solar plexus.

“Oh God,” I whispered, my knees threatening to go from underneath me. “If you weren’t in the card room, you’d go wherever I was. Of course. It’s me .”

“What’s you?” Ash was already stepping forward, apprehension in his face, but I held my hand out to stop him.

“The fabric in the warehouse,” I said dully. “Mother said there was a problem with my gown and it had to be altered.”

“What are you talking about?” Ash took another step towards me, and again I kept him at bay. “I don’t understand. You look frightened. Will you tell me what the hell is going on?”

“It’s me,” I said. “I’m the second bomb.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“This isn’t exactly how I thought I’d be getting you out of your skirts.” Ash’s muffled voice was playful, yet I heard the tension underneath his words, the fear. I heard it in his voice and I felt it moving through me, in endless tiny shock waves.

We had removed my veil and train first, checking every inch of them together, but I had known all along that it would come to this.

“It’s in the gown,” I said, resigned. “I know it is. This would never have been possible if women weren’t forced to wear such stupid, impractical get-ups.”

“It turns out it’s extremely practical for smuggling explosives,” Ash said, emerging from under my skirts. “I think there’s something sewn into the lining, but you’ll need to remove the dress.”

My teeth were chattering. “The presentation has almost finished,” I said. “The timer could run out any moment. You should leave. Evacuate the ballroom and get out of here.” I couldn’t bear it, that he was here and that I was the one who had put him in such danger.

Ash took my hand, stroked his fingers down and along my palm in a soothing gesture.

“Neither of us is going anywhere. So, instead of wasting time we might not have” – Ash’s deliberately cool voice managed to penetrate my panic – “why don’t we accept the situation and get on with it? The sooner we disarm the device, the sooner I can go

and punch Laing in the face.”

“So long as I can punch him first,” I managed, forcing myself to give a weak smile.

“That’s the spirit.” Ash touched my cheek. “You’ve been saying you wanted out of that dress all day, love. Let’s make it happen.”

I nodded as he went round to my back and began the work to undo the hundreds of tiny buttons that held the gown together.

“Say something to distract me,” I said as Ash’s fingers gently brushed the nape of my neck.

“Remember when I told Laetitia I was half in love with you?” he asked.

Colour hit my cheeks. “Yes, I do.”

“That was a lie.” I heard the smile in his voice. “I was already the whole way in.”

“Oh,” I exhaled. “Me too.”

“Now that is convenient.” Ash kept his voice mild as I felt the glide of his touch along my spine. He seemed suspiciously competent at getting ladies out of their gowns. “When this is over,” he carried on, “I think we should make some plans for our future. What do you want?”

“I want to see your tattoo,” I said, blurting the first thing that came into my head.

Ash’s fingers stilled for a second, and then he went back to work on my buttons. “That can be arranged. But I was also thinking maybe we sail off into the sunset.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, you have had the good fortune to fall in love with a pirate. What if we took a tour of some far-flung places before you settle down to your studies?”

“You’d take me with you?” I said, and it felt as though my poor torn-up heart was stitching itself back together. “On an adventure?”

“We are the adventure, Felicity.” Ash stepped away from my back and moved round so that he was in front of me once more.

His thumb caught the tear on my cheek I didn’t know had fallen.

It was at that moment that Sylla burst through the door. She took in the sight of me and Ash alone in a room in Buckingham Palace, me half out of my ballgown, and closed the door behind her with a firm snick of the latch.

“I take it there’s been a complication?” she said.

“Laing has had another device sewn into my ballgown,” I replied.

There was only the tiniest hitch in her step as she walked towards us. “I see.”

“And I was distracting Felicity by telling her that after all this is over, we’ll travel the world in style – together,” Ash put in.

“I don’t have access to my trust yet,” I said shakily, determined to stay as cool and calm as the two of them. “We might not be able to do it in style. Not that I mind,” I added quickly as Sylla circled me, gesturing me to stand still. “I don’t care about being poor as long as I’m with you.”

Ash laughed, and Sylla made a sound of annoyance from over my shoulder.

“What?” I asked.

“Felicity, the man owns an incredibly successful gambling den and half of the East End of London,” Sylla said, speaking slowly, as though explaining something to a small child.

“You’re ... rich?” I frowned.

“Don’t tell my father,” Ash quipped. “He thinks I’m a lazy reprobate, and that’s the way I like it.” He looked me over. “Why do you seem disappointed?”

“I don’t know,” I said wistfully. “I liked the idea of being a pirate stowaway with you.”

“God, I love you,” Ash said with fond amusement. “Didn’t I promise we’d never be respectable?”

“Now that is all sorted,” Sylla said dryly, “I think we should probably turn our attention to the ticking time bomb in the room. It’s time for you to get out of the dress, carefully .”

With another squeeze of my hand, Ash moved back, only a fraction, and Sylla held the sleeves of the gown as I pulled my arms free and stepped out of my skirts. There was so much fabric that the thing almost stayed upright on its own.

I stood in my thin chemise and eyed the gown with deep dislike. “Let’s lay it out on the floor,” I said. “If it didn’t go off when I was dancing, it must be fairly stable. Careful, though.”

Ash stripped off his jacket and handed it to me, doing up the buttons on the front when I slipped my arms through the sleeves. It swamped me, wrapping me up in his warmth and delicious spicy scent. It was a small comfort.

Turning back to the dress, I rolled up the jacket's sleeves in brisk movements.

"What are you doing?" Ash asked, moving in front of me.

"I'm going to disarm the bomb," I said.

"Felicity." Ash's tone was carefully controlled, but again I caught the fear underneath. "You don't know how to disarm a bomb."

"She knows more than either of us," Sylla said. "And I sent for Max's men before I came but they might not make it in time."

"I watched Winnie do it," I said quietly. "I watched Fenton do it. And I understand the mechanics." Sort of, I added in my mind. "I know how Laing thinks. I realized the bomb was here, didn't I? I can do this." I said the words with more confidence than I felt, but Ash had just promised me the world... I wasn't about to let Laing put an abrupt end to that dream.

After another long look, Ash nodded. "You're right," he agreed. "If anyone can do this, it's you, Felicity Vane."

With that, I knelt and began running my fingers carefully over the fabric.

"Here," I said, when I reached a section at the back. "There's definitely something stitched between the layers."

Sylla handed me a pair of scissors from her reticule, and I cut the entire section free

from the rest of the dress, gently snipping through the tightly stitched seams. I forced myself to keep my breathing slow, my hands steady. Rushing this part could be catastrophic.

Finally, I unspooled the fabric to reveal the bomb. It was much smaller than the other device. A single, slim stick of dynamite, but it was made of the same component parts, including a small gold pocket watch.

I looked at the time on the face.

“It’s less than three minutes to the hour,” Sylla said calmly. “Do you think that’s significant?”

“It could be,” I said, knowing in my gut that it was. I reached for the scissors. “Let’s not find out. The two of you should really leave.”

“No one’s going anywhere,” Ash said. “We’re going to watch you do this, then I’m going to kiss you and tell you how clever you are, and Sylla is going to roll her eyes. All right?”

“All right.” I nodded, trying to ignore the wild wave of panic that was cresting through my body. I was no agent; I was a mathematician. I found attending parties stressful, for goodness’ sake. Now I was disarming an explosive device that threatened to kill me and people I loved. How had it come to this?

I took a deep breath, reeled in my mind, fought for control, and called all the information Winnie had shared to mind. There was no choice, I had to do this, and I had to do it now.

“It’s simple really,” I said aloud, my voice surprisingly steady. “I only need to disrupt the electrical circuit that will be completed when the watch reaches a certain time.” I

followed the wires from the watch and made my first cut. When the world didn't shatter around me, I exhaled. But I hadn't done enough to stop the countdown.

"There's a failsafe," I murmured. "The first time – Winnie said she activated the failsafe." I thought of Laing, remembered playing poker against that inscrutable face. I knew him better now. "He doesn't like to lose. He plays three steps ahead. He always has a backup plan."

I hesitated, my scissors poised to snip the next wire, shook my head. "No. that's not right." It took precious time, but I went back, followed the wires again.

I worked with dogged determination, my forehead beading with sweat. The seconds passed relentlessly, the ticking of the watch echoed loudly in my ears. One minute passed, then another. The countdown was almost complete.

I cut another wire.

"Finish it now," Sylla said urgently.

Ash's hand closed over my shoulder.

I cut the final wire.

And we didn't explode.

The percussion caps, the watch and the detonator were removed and laid neatly on the floor.

"It's disarmed," I managed finally, slumping bonelessly so that I was sitting sprawled on the floor.

Ash's hand came to the back of my neck, and I found myself being pulled roughly into the sort of delirious kiss that broke curses or signalled the end of the fairy tale.

"Felicity, you are so clever," Ash said roughly against my lips after a brief, wonderful moment. His hands were fisted round the lapels of his jacket that I wore, and I rested my forehead against his.

"You can't see me because your face is mashed against Ash, but I am rolling my eyes very hard," Sylla said, and I gave a breathless gasp of laughter.

"I know you want a life of adventure," Ash murmured, "but just to be clear – it doesn't have to be this much adventure, does it?"

In response I rolled on top of him, laughing and kissing every part of him that I could reach. "I. Love. You," I managed in between planting kisses on his jaw, his nose, his eyelid.

Wrapping his arms tightly around my waist, Ash squeezed me hard enough to hurt.

"When you children have quite finished," Sylla said, and I looked up to find her glaring down at us, arms folded, "we have a villain to confront." Her face transformed from a scowl to a smile. "I do enjoy this part."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Finding Laing was easy. The Aviary had been watching him from the moment he left the ball. He had positioned himself in a nearby building that looked upon the palace – presumably so he could watch the devastation that his schemes would have created from a comfortable spot.

When Sylla, Ash and I burst into the room, he didn't seem surprised. Running his gaze over my bizarre outfit, he smiled.

"I see you found my gift." He was sitting in a chair next to the open French doors, a drink in his hand, a full tea set laid out on a tray on the table beside him. A summer breeze drifted through, and from the iron balcony you had a clear view of Buckingham Palace. It was a cosy scene.

"And I thought you wanted to marry me," I said, forcing myself to match his conversational tone. Ash and Sylla were ranged behind me, and I knew that both of them were coiled, ready to leap into action at the first sign of violence. For now, Laing seemed happy simply to talk.

"That was my plan," Laing agreed. "The second device was only a reserve measure. Had you not found the explosives in the card room, I would have disarmed the one you wore and made sure you were nowhere near the palace when it detonated." He shrugged. "Alas, contingencies had to be put into place. There must always be a backup plan."

"The bomb stitched into my dress would have been a much smaller explosion."

Laing only sipped his tea. "It still would have removed at least one inconvenience." His eyes flicked to Ash.

"But not your father," I murmured.

Those fever-bright eyes turned back to me. "I see that I've underestimated you, Lady Felicity. Truly, you would have been a worthy wife." His expression cooled. "My mother killed herself when I was a baby because of what that monster had done to her. I was left to be raised in an orphanage. Me! The son of a viscount. And my father" – he spat the word – "didn't even have the decency to provide for my life, for my future. I was left in poverty while he and his family lived as I deserved."

The fire left his expression, and as he placed his teacup back on the tray he seemed calm and contained once more. "I knew one day I would make him pay. That I would make every one of them pay. And I have." His smile was cold. "Archer most of all." He leaned forward, pleased with himself. "I've been the man's personal torment for years, not that he had a clue. It has been greatly satisfying." He toyed for a moment with his sleeve. "It wasn't something to rush, you see. Revenge is a dish best served cold, isn't that what they say? Naturally, my first move was to remove the middle son from the board."

Ash made a sound of surprise and Laing's smile grew.

"A carriage accident." His voice was velvet smooth. He was enjoying himself. "It was almost too easy to arrange. That brought you back." He eyed Ash with a flash of venom. "The imposter, the cuckoo in the nest. But not to return into the fold of the family, no. You had your own plans. No matter, I knew I could see to those later." His fingers drummed lightly against the arm of his chair. "It's enjoyable, I must admit, to finally share the extent of my schemes."

"I'm glad you're having a nice time," Sylla said. "It will be a lot less pleasant for you

when you're in prison."

"Ah." Laing tilted his head. "But the final hand has not yet been played. Where was I?" He ran his fingers across his jaw in a thoughtful gesture. "Yes, ruining Archer. After his first son died, I bribed the family doctor to start feeding Lady Archer a steady diet of opium. It didn't take long for her addiction to develop. In the meantime, I set about ruining Archer financially. That too was almost embarrassingly easy. The man wouldn't know a good investment if it fell gift-wrapped in his lap. I move in those circles; I am seen as an astute businessman. It was easy to persuade him into bad decisions, always at one remove. He never even knew I was the one pulling the strings."

"And Perry?" Ash growled. I could feel the tension coming off him in waves, but I knew he wanted to hear the rest of it, as I did.

"Yes, Perry." Laing turned and looked out towards the palace. "Always so desperate for funds, he would have swallowed any wild story if it meant he got paid. I told him I worked secretly for the government, that I'd got wind of an anarchist plot. I offered him a huge sum to infiltrate the group and report back on their activity. I told him he was doing a service to his country, and he pretended to care about that as money flowed through his fingers like water. All the while, I was of course actually in their employ.

"When it was time, I revealed the traitor in their midst to my anarchist friends. Perry was, as I had anticipated, a careless spy so it was easy to offer up proof of his treachery. Then I had only to sit back and watch nature take its course. The group were rather sloppy in their handling of him, but thankfully he died in the end. I had hoped the scandal of his involvement with such an organization would cause a nice stir, create some discomfort for Archer, but I underestimated his ability to shut down that gossip. Oh, well." He gave another shrug. "He was still left without a legitimate heir, and I knew that would eat him up inside. Having to hand the title over to the brat

who was a result of his wife's affairs? It was almost poetic."

"So you were working for the anarchist group?" I asked.

"They were a means to an end," Laing conceded. "Though I certainly share some sympathies with their cause. The ruling classes are corrupt, hypocritical, smug. Working from the inside to take them down is no hardship. I've made a tidy fortune, and plenty of useful acquaintances through my work taking care of other people's problems. It seemed now that the moment was ripe to clean up a few of my own. Putting an end to the Archer line once and for all seemed ... right. Particularly when I was poised to marry the prize of the season." He smiled at me. "Money, power and status. I had come a long way from that orphanage."

"For what happened to your mother," Ash said brusquely, "I am sincerely sorry. But bringing Felicity into this was a mistake you should never have made."

"Perhaps," Laing said. "But I confess I saw an opportunity. My efforts to disrupt the business you built – the card sharps, the supply issues – fell a trifle flat. Stealing the woman you loved away from you was irresistible. It was almost as though fate had delivered her to me." The unholy glee in his face was no longer hidden behind a mild-mannered mask.

"She saw through your plans," Ash said, taking a step forward. "She caught your contingencies. She caught you."

"She? " Laing snarled, looking at me with loathing. "She may have made an adequate wife, but she is no match for my mind."

"Oh, I think she's more than a match," said Sylla, moving to stand beside Ash.

"And now the Aviary will put you in prison where you belong," I added.

“Ha!” Laing’s barked exclamation of laughter held nothing but derision. “I would like to see you try. Oh, I would love to see it. You and your little group of inconsequential nobodies. Women ,” he sneered. “You’re not ruthless enough to get the job done. I am sitting here, right in front of you and you can’t touch me, can’t lay a finger on me. You have no idea of the influence I have.”

“I wonder,” Sylla said, “if you mean the cabinet minister who Max is currently arresting?” Laing gave a small start and she went on. “Once we had several of your anarchist friends in custody it was simply a matter of contacting our agents in Paris. They uncovered quite the network, and that eventually led us to the blackmail material you held on Lord Faverly.”

Laing pushed himself abruptly from his chair. “A mere inconvenience.”

“Oh!” Sylla raised her brows. “Perhaps you are thinking of your friends in the police department or the judiciary system? Judge Davis or Sir Telford, perhaps? I’m afraid we’ve rounded them up too. You may have noticed the Duchess of Roxton was absent from the ball. She is a terribly thorough investigator. I trained her myself.”

“And there’s Horatio,” I said. “Do you think he won’t turn on you in an instant when he knows what you did? You tried to assassinate members of the royal family; you would have killed him and his daughter. I understand now.” I looked at him steadily. “You didn’t need to win that poker game. You only needed Horatio to lose so that he was desperate. You would cover his debts, asking only a small favour in return. He would journey with you to Cambridge and convince Archer to come back to London, to attend the ball and meet someone about a business opportunity. Archer was in Cambridge for Perry’s funeral. He wouldn’t leave immediately afterwards without a very good reason, without the influence of a friend he trusted.”

“I heard Mr Peabody had sunk an awful lot of money into his daughter’s debut,” Sylla said. “It seems he is not as flush as he’s been telling people. It will be simple to

get him to confess to your arrangement. I'm certain he had no idea he was luring Archer to his death."

"It seems that Vane and his men are going to have a great deal to discuss with you." Ash's voice was ice. "I do hope they take their time over the interrogation."

"Brick by brick, we'll dismantle what you have built." I stared him down. "There's no way you're escaping this time. You'll pay. For everything you've done, there will be a price."

Because I was watching so closely, I saw the precise moment Laing realized he had truly lost. The fury came down over his eyes, an instant before he charged at me, fingers held out like claws – a rabid animal prepared to strike. Time slowed as he lunged forward.

The crack of a gunshot split the air, and Laing froze. He seemed to waver for a moment, almost in mid-air, before crumpling to the floor. He tried to crawl forward, but his leg was stretched out at an unnatural angle. His hand went to his thigh, and came away red with blood. His eyes rounded in shock and disbelief and he let out a whimper of pain.

"You ... shot me!" he managed.

Beside me, Sylla held the still-smoking pistol in hands that were rock steady.

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully, dropping the gun into her reticule, which she shut with a snap. "That seemed pretty ruthless to me."

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Dear Max,

Well, we have finally left Venice. (A week later than planned, thanks to the invitation from Professor Volterra to extend our time in Rome – how could I possibly decline when his theory of functionals is so fascinating? I have much to think about in this area.) I shan't be able to post this letter to you before we reach Greece, but I couldn't resist taking a moment to write with our news. I have seen and done so much that I hardly know where to begin.

The waters in the lagoon can be choppy at times, but I haven't yet disgraced myself. Ash says I am a born pirate with extremely sturdy sea legs...

"I don't think I ever called your legs sturdy." A voice came over my shoulder and I gave a short laugh of surprise before leaning back against Ash's chest. His arm came round my waist, and he bent to place a gentle kiss against the side of my neck. In the mirror above the small dressing table that was nailed to the floor of the ship, his eyes met mine, full of mischief. He was damp and he had a smudge on his cheek that I wiped away.

"You shouldn't read other people's correspondence," I said primly. "What if I was writing scandalous things about you?"

"To your brother? I should hope not." Ash planted another kiss on my cheek before stepping back. His shirt was streaked with coal, and I checked my reflection to make sure he hadn't got it on my dress, otherwise I would need to change before dinner.

"I don't want you to undo my efforts with Max," Ash continued. "I had to use every

bit of my not insubstantial charm to persuade him to let you travel the world for the best part of a year.”

“I think Izzy should take the credit...” I began, but I trailed off, distracted by the sight of Ash pulling his shirt off over his head. The muscles in his stomach rippled as he leaned over to pull a fresh one out of our luggage. Running down from the top of his arm, the sinuous lines of his tattoo formed the image of a swallow in flight – a bird that always managed to make its way home and a symbol of good luck. Felicity, if you like.

He had another tattoo now, one on the left side of his chest, over his heart: a small mathematical symbol that looked like a figure of eight laid on its side. A lemniscate, representing the concept of infinity.

How scandalized the society I had left behind would be to learn that I had a matching one hidden on my own hip.

Ash’s tattoos disappeared beneath the fresh linen shirt that he tugged on, and he shook his head, then pushed his hands through his unruly hair, so damp that it was curling at the edges.

“Got a bit wild up on deck,” he said with a grin.

“You do know you’re not required to sail the ship yourself?” I replied, getting to my feet.

“Did I say anything to you when you and Vito were chattering for hours about mathematical equations?”

I laughed and stepped towards him, running my own fingers gently through his hair, still thrilled that I could touch him like this whenever I wanted. “No, you didn’t. But that’s because you were too busy flirting with his housekeeper so she’d keep feeding

you maritozzi.”

He caught my wrist, pressed his lips against my pulse, which still thundered, even after all these months together.

In the end it had been easier than I thought to slip away from society relatively unscathed; at least it had once Izzy had brought Max round to the idea. If your brother was a duke who was friends with the royal family, it seemed that people were happy enough to swallow a story about his sister using her vast inheritance to study in Europe. If anyone knew who I was away studying with, they were careful not to mention it. No one wanted to be snubbed by the Duke of Roxton or his influential friends. Money and power made hypocrites of almost everyone.

“It will be cream buns in Cambridge soon enough,” Ash said, looking down at me with amusement. “Are you sure you want to go back after Greece?”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s time. I want to see my family; Joe needs you at the club. Caroline is holding a place for me at Newnham, and Michaelmas term is not so far off. Besides,” I added, twining my fingers round his neck and pulling him closer, “it isn’t the end of our adventure, is it?”

His lips curled into a smile above my own. “It will never be the end of our adventure, love,” he murmured. “Just the start of a new one.”

“What a good answer. How nice it is, not being respectable.” I sighed happily. “I’d much rather be a scandal, after all.” And then I kissed him.