



A Heart Devoted (The Penn-Leiths of Thistle Muir #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: Living happily ever after should be easy. After all, Tristan and Isolde Gilbert, the new Duke and Duchess of Kendall, have overcome obstacles, confessed their love, married, and are eager to sail off into the sunset of their glorious future. But, of course, life rarely offers smooth sailing. After their honeymoon tour, an unexpected return to London sends the new couple reeling.

Tristan struggles to balance his new Isolde-loving self with his former role as the autocratic Duke of Kendall. Upstart relatives and scurrilous accusations complicate his efforts to find a purpose and settle into his altered standing within the ton. Worse, the still-scandalous Isolde—who never expected to be at the center of Polite Society—now finds she has to navigate meetings with the Queen, dodge vile rumors, and fend off the jealous attacks of other aristocratic ladies.

For Tristan and Isolde, falling in love was simple. But merging two disparate former lives into one proves more fraught. Can the newlyweds find a way to remain both true to themselves and one another in their new life together?

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August 24, 1849

Muirford House

Montrose, Scotland

Tristan Gilbert, Duke of Kendall, found the entire concept of family somewhat unnerving.

Aside from his twin sister, Tristan had never had a family, not in any real sense. Oh, he had relatives to be sure. Aunt Whipple who had acted as his hostess in the years after his father's death. Cousins like his heir, Mr. Aubrey Gilbert, who were always eager to demand money and favors of Tristan as the paterfamilias .

But a large, boisterous family—the sort with nosy parents and teasing siblings and an endless supply of aunts and uncles and cousins who swapped gifts at Christmas and made merry over Easter and loved one another with unabashed affection . . .

Well, that had been non-existent in his life until—

“Your bonnet is slipping, Tristan,” Andrew Langston, Earl of Hadley and Tristan's new father-in-law, said far too cheerfully. “Ye have to tie the ribbons secure-like.”

To emphasize the point, Hadley stepped in front of Tristan, frowned, and then tugged the bow under Tristan's chin, cinching the bonnet tighter to his jaw.

Mr. Mac Langston, Hadley's eldest son and Tristan's newly-acquired brother, guffawed in delight. And it was a guffaw—head back, teeth flashing, eyes glinting.

Mr. James Langston, Hadley's second son, said "Meow" and fisted his hands into paws, miming pulling the edges of a bonnet brim to his cheeks like a cat.

Tristan looked away, swallowing a sigh.

So . . . family.

Thanks to his marriage, Tristan now had an overabundance of family.

Hadley's family, to be specific.

The earl's large, noisy, rambunctious, chaotic family. A family that bantered and joked and needled and made merry at every opportunity.

Hence, the bonnet currently tied to Tristan's head.

Today, Hadley's brood, as well as the tiny portion of Tristan's own family that he liked, were gathered on the back lawn of Muirford House, Hadley's home in Scotland.

They made up a large party.

Isolde, Tristan's duchess.

Lady Allegra, Tristan's twin sister, and her husband, Ethan Penn-Leith.

Malcolm Penn-Leith, Ethan's older brother, and his wife Viola.

Lady Hadley, Isolde's mother.

As well as Hadley's two sons, Mac and James.

Currently, the ladies sat under a white canopy along the edge of an expanse of lawn watching as the men attempted to outdo each other in time-honored Scottish fashion—throwing heavy objects.

In this case, the heavy object was a stump-sized stone with a chain cemented to it, brought courtesy of Ethan Penn-Leith. The gentlemen were taking it in turn to see who could send the stone flying the farthest—grasping the chain and spinning as if they were performing a hammer toss. The loser of each round drew a penalty from a hat.

Unfortunately, Tristan had lost the first round and had to don a monstrosity of a straw bonnet covered in fake pomegranates and figs. James had lost the second and had to complete the remaining rounds while meowing like a cat—a challenge he had taken to with ridiculous enthusiasm, much to everyone's annoyance.

Ethan had lost the third round and was currently completing his penalty—milking a goat. His roots as a gentleman farmer's son had become readily apparent as he hooked the milking stool with his foot to pull it underneath him and set to milking like a professional.

Mac and James called encouragement to Ethan as he milked. Or rather, Mac yelled, "Ethan, ye sure ye got yourself a nanny and not a billy goat there?! Ye don't want to make that mistake again!" and James meowed in agreement. Everyone else had howled with laughter.

Tristan's logical brain knew this was how some families showed affection—relentless teasing and general piss-taking. However, such laughter and affection were nearly a

foreign language to him. His brutal, dictatorial sire had ensured that gaiety and humor were non-existent in his childhood—no stone-throwing or teasing, most decidedly no humorous meowing. Consequently, Tristan had always taken himself and his position as Duke of Kendall seriously. A bit too seriously, both Allie and Isolde would declare.

All that to say, Tristan found such boisterous behavior unnerving— unnerving being the politest adjective he could summon.

You love Isolde , Tristan reminded himself for the twelfth time (yes, he was counting). You would die for her. Humoring her family in this absurd game is a simple task.

As if seeking confirmation, his eyes drifted across the lawn to where Isolde sat under the shade of the canopy—a glass of lemonade in one hand and gesturing to Allie with the other. As usual, Tristan’s heart constricted at the mere sight of his wife, her red hair gleaming bright in the August sun, waist cinched in a blue muslin gown. How he loved her. The knowing hummed beneath his skin, a song of devotion he would carry to his last day.

On a steadying breath, he turned back to his father-in-law.

“Thank you, Hadley, for assisting me with my bonnet.” Tristan offered a polite nod. The fake fruit attached to the straw brim wobbled with the motion.

“Andrew.” Hadley gave Tristan a friendly slap on the back, causing the fruit to lurch ominously. “Ye agreed to start calling me Andrew, remember?”

Right.

That, too.

Sigh.

“Thank you . . . Andrew,” Tristan tried again.

Hadley grinned and gave Tristan’s back another hearty pat.

The ever-present Scottish wind caught the brim of Tristan’s bonnet, prompting the ribbon to chafe his chin. He tugged on it, struggling to swallow. How did women tolerate these things?

The ladies cheered on Ethan’s efforts from under their canopy. Isolde caught Tristan’s eye and blew him a kiss. In his mind’s eye, the kiss flew across the lawn and melted into his chest, spreading warmth across his skin.

His beautiful wife knew he was feeling uncomfortable and out of place. She knew he itched to drag the ridiculous bonnet off his head and stomp it under his feet. And she was telling him thank you —thank you for participating, thank you for being a good sport.

Today marked ten days since Isolde had said the words I love you to him. Ten days since Tristan and Hadley had called a truce. Ten days of familial cheer and marital bliss.

The ten happiest days of Tristan’s life.

Granted, everything in his life had changed for the better once he opened his heart and accepted the depth of his love for Isolde. He had become more self-aware, more capable of understanding his own emotions, and therefore more able to show affection to those he loved most.

The whole experience had been profoundly illuminating.

Over the short weeks of his marriage, he had realized that there were two clear components to his psyche—the coldly autocratic Duke of Kendall and the gentler, more open Tristan. The Kendall portion often shielded his soft Tristan core, particularly when in company. The problem, of course, was somehow merging those two aspects of himself into one cohesive whole. On days like today, with the teasing and the jesting, it took nearly all of Tristan’s fortitude not to retreat deep within his Kendall shell.

But for Isolde, he would continue to try.

And Tristan instinctively understood that the change he sought would be easier to accomplish in the company of friends and family. It was why he was here today, enduring humiliation on Hadley’s back lawn, instead of traveling south toward London. The longer Tristan and Isolde waited before plunging again into Polite Society—before confronting the specter of their former selves—the better.

Hadley had hinted at similar reasoning the day before.

“Do ye plan to return to London come autumn?” the earl had asked. Tristan and Isolde, along with Allie and Ethan, had just arrived in Montrose Harbor aboard Tristan’s steamship, the SS Statesman.

“No,” Tristan had replied. “Isolde and I will make for Hawthorn, my principal seat in Wiltshire, after our stay here. I have no intention of setting foot in Town before next spring at the earliest. Lords has made it clear I am no longer welcome in politics, and I need time to settle into my new role as husband.”

Here, Hadley had nodded, knowingly. “That is wise of ye.”

“Yes . . . also, I am loathe to subject Isolde to . . .” Tristan drifted off, not wishing to voice what he and Hadley both already knew. The earl had merely nodded again in

understanding.

Isolde's reputation had been precarious even before her hasty wedding to Tristan. He preferred to wait several months, or even a year, before attending ton events as a couple, allowing memories to dim and gossiping tongues to flag.

Tristan would not subject his beloved wife to the vitriol of Polite Society before it became absolutely necessary.

What he truly wished was to return to Canna, the small island where he and Isolde had been shipwrecked. There, in the crofter's cottage and along the white sands of a protected bay, Tristan had experienced a rebirth. A place out of time where he could woo his wife—race her down the beach during daylight hours, laugh with her before the fire while dining, and then snug her to his chest in their matrimonial box-bed at night.

Memories of Canna floated through his thoughts, and he felt at peace. At the moment, he would give a fair amount to have that peace restor—

A whoop went up from the ladies.

Hadley and Tristan turned to see Ethan Penn-Leith lifting a cup of milk above his head in triumph, his foot on the milking stool. Beside him, the mother goat butted her head against his hip.

“Success!” Ethan called, smile stretching wide. Even at a distance, Tristan could feel the tug of the poet's charisma and bonhomie.

“Excellent! Let's move on to the fourth round.” Hadley clapped his hands. “Whose turn is it to throw first?”

Though the earl had to be approaching sixty years of age, he wore it well. Hadley had the strength of a much younger man, despite the streaks of gray in his light-brown beard.

“Mine.” Malcolm Penn-Leith lifted a hand.

“And what does the loser have to do?”

Malcolm drew a scrap of paper out of Hadley’s hat sitting on the grass.

“Row the old dinghy across the lake and back ,” he read. Lifting his head, he pointed toward the water at the end of the lawn and the small boat already half sinking below its surface.

“Hah!” Hadley laughed. “That should be enjoyable to watch. I hope ye gentlemen can swim.”

Mac guffawed again. James meowed. Ethan marched his cup of milk over to a laughing Allie and presented it with an exaggerated bow.

As the only Englishman present, Tristan had to squelch the urge to show these rowdy Scots how a true gentleman behaved.

You love your wife , he reminded himself again. What number was he on? Thirteen?

Clearly reading his thoughts, Isolde caught his gaze and mouthed the words I love you .

Pinching his lips together, he stared at her, this lovely woman who knew him better than any other soul on earth.

You owe me , Tristan mouthed back.

Isolde lifted her eyebrows suggestively, a sultry smirk dimpling the corners of her mouth. Her expression promised all sorts of delectable wickedness once they were alone.

Tristan felt immensely cheered. He was an idiot not to have married Lady Isolde years ago.

Scratching his thick beard, Malcolm stepped up to the mark and grasped the heavy chain in both hands, the bulk of his muscular shoulders casting a wide shadow on the grass. A gentleman farmer himself, he was no stranger to physical labor.

“Hurrah for Malcolm!” cheered the man’s wife—the noted novelist Viola Brodure Penn-Leith—from underneath the ladies’ canopy, blond curls framing her face.

Saluting his wife, Malcolm spun in a quick circle—once, twice—before releasing the stone to fly down the lawn in a long arc.

James lifted a hand and marked off the stone’s location with a stick before wrapping the chain around his fist and dragging it back to the starting line.

Hadley was next, the stone sailing down the turf. Despite his age, the Scot made an impressive showing. Ethan, Mac, James, and Tristan would likely be vying for last place once more.

Ethan’s throw was respectable, as were those of James and Mac.

Tristan had just stepped up for his turn when he noticed everyone’s head swivel toward the house. Following their gazes, he saw Hadley’s stern butler striding across the lawn with what appeared to be letters on a silver salver. Tristan paused, frowning,

as he watched the man approach. The post had already come and gone for the day.

“What is it, Patterson?” Hadley asked as the butler drew near.

“Express post, my lord, for Mr. Ethan Penn-Leith and His Grace.” Patterson presented the salver to Tristan. “As both letters have Her Majesty’s seal, I assumed them to be urgent.”

Tristan took his letter from the tray. Indeed, it was sealed with the coat of arms of the British monarchy.

What the devil?

Brows drawn down, Ethan took his own letter with a shake of the head.

A flash of light blue flickered in Tristan’s peripheral vision. He looked up as Isolde stopped at his side.

“What is it, Husband?” She placed a gloved hand on his forearm. Her eyes flitted to his bonnet, lips twitching in amusement.

“Not a word, Wife,” he warned.

She valiantly tried—and failed—to stifle a smile. Letter forgotten, Tristan wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her into him. But as Isolde was only a few inches shorter than his own six-foot-two-inch height, the motion caused the brims of their bonnets to collide and sent hers tumbling down her back.

Isolde collapsed onto his chest in hysterical giggles.

Sighing, Tristan glanced at Ethan over her head, watching his brother-in-law read his

letter. The poet's frown had deepened, which for genial Ethan amounted to almost panicked alarm. Allie slipped her hand through her husband's elbow, a knowing look passing between them . . . as if a letter from the Queen wasn't entirely unexpected.

Worry tightened the muscles at the back of Tristan's neck. With brisk movements, he opened his own letter, quickly skimming the few lines written in Her Majesty's sprawling handwriting.

Isolde turned in his arms to read it as well.

"We've been summoned to attend a reading by Ethan at Buckingham Palace in five days' time?" She looked up at Tristan. He could see his ridiculous bonnet reflected in her summer-blue eyes. "That seems soon and . . . oddly specific. Are ye often invited to such events at the palace?"

Tristan shook his head. No, he was not.

They both looked back at Ethan.

"Now would be a good time to tell them," Allie said to her husband.

"Aye." Ethan bent his head to hers, darting a meaningful look at Tristan. "But have ye met your brother? He's a wee bit terrifying."

The poet didn't lower his voice as he spoke, ensuring all heard his words. No doubt intentionally.

Trust Penn-Leith to make a scene.

"Tristan is not that bad. You like him." Allie placed a palm on her husband's cheek.

“I do, but my knees always quake when he does that ducal thing of his.”

“Ducal thing?” Allie lifted an eyebrow.

“Aye! With the deep voice and the wrinkled forehead and the subtle threat of violence if—”

“What has occurred, Penn-Leith?” Tristan asked, trying (and surely failing) not to look sternly ducal.

Ethan gave a See what I mean? sweep of his palm.

“Ethan,” Allie chided.

Sighing, Ethan turned back to the assembled group.

“I might have done . . . something.” He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck.

“Something?” Tristan asked. Unfortunately, even he could hear the ducal snap in his tone.

“As ye all ken, I am a poet.”

“Aye.” Hadley rolled his hand. “That has been well-established for some years now.”

“Yes, well . . . I write poems on all topics and subjects, from contemporary ideas and experiences to historical events to figures of interest in—”

“You’re belaboring the point, my love,” Allie murmured.

“See, the thing is . . .” Ethan was practically squirming. “I wrote a poem last autumn.

An excellent poem, I thought. My publisher agreed with that assessment and included it as the lead poem in my new collection, *Voices of Legend* , that will be published next week.”

“Congratulations, Ethan,” Isolde said.

Given the trepidation on Ethan’s face, Tristan wasn’t so sure felicitations were in order.

“What is the issue?” Hadley’s expression was just as skeptical.

“The poem is titled . . .” Here Ethan closed his eyes. “. . . Isolde .”

“Pardon?” This time Tristan did nothing to stem the autocratic bark of his syllables.

“What was that?”

Ethan shot his wife a rather tortured look. Allie nodded as if to say, Get on with it.

Clearing his throat, Ethan continued, “The poem is about Isolde—not our Isolde, of course.” He held a hand out. “But the Isolde of legend—Princess Iseult of Ireland.”

“Ah. Because it is a collection of the *Voices of Legend* ,” James said, only to have Mac elbow him in the ribs. “What? Meow. It’s true.”

“Precisely.” Ethan beamed at him before turning back to Tristan and real-life Isolde. “And current events aside, Sir Tristan and Princess Iseult of legend are compelling characters.”

“And so ye thought to exploit my daughter, my Izzy?” Hadley growled.

Tristan nodded in agreement. When it came to protecting Isolde, he would always

side with his father-in-law.

“No!” Alarm flashed through Ethan’s eyes. “Not at all. I changed the spelling to the Irish Iseult—I-S-E-U-L-T— for that very reason. I didn’t want readers to think of Lady Isolde . . . uhm, pardon, Duchess . . . at all. But . . .”

“But that was before she married a duke named Tristan, and they both drowned and miraculously returned from the dead,” Malcolm finished for him.

Of course, Malcolm Penn-Leith with his perceptive mind would instantly connect the dots to illuminate the larger picture.

Ethan deflated. “It has rather focused attention on the poem.” He looked apologetically at Tristan and Isolde. “In my defense, as soon as ye announced your betrothal, I attempted to have the poem removed from the book, but it had already gone to press. So . . .” He spread his hands in a here we are shrug.

“And now Her Majesty has summoned us for a soirée and a reading.” Tristan waved the foolscap clutched in his hand. “Putting myself—and more significantly—my wife under the microscope of the ton , pinning her to a card like some exotic butterfly to be scrutinized and . . .” He trailed off, not wishing to finish that sentence. But the words found wanting lingered on his tongue.

The ton and his lovely wife’s scandalous reputation were like chalk and cheese—never to exist in harmony. However . . . Tristan and his duchess could hardly refuse a summons from the Queen.

A terrible sinking sensation dropped through Tristan’s bones.

This was all happening too soon.

He desperately needed more time to settle into being a husband before returning to his role as the mighty Duke of Kendall. He had changed fundamentally, and his psyche required time to set. To cure and harden into this new persona before facing the bracing winds of London society and the specter of his former autocratic self. Kendall and Tristan needed to merge into a new form. What that form should be, he couldn't say. Not yet, at least.

Before his marriage, Tristan had been focused on gaining political power. The quest had consumed his life. But Isolde and her unconventional past had put an end to those goals. A gentleman who wished for a future in politics could not marry an outspoken, fiery lass who had traveled halfway around the world for a university education. She was too scandalous. Yet, he had relinquished his aspirations with no regrets. Isolde's heart was a more coveted prize than the Prime Minister's seat.

However, who was he now? Aside from loving Isolde, what purpose or focus should consume his future? And how could he navigate London with the question so unsettled?

Grimacing, Tristan looked down at Isolde, noting the strained worry in her eyes. Surely, she must feel the same regarding her own past. Heavens above, he would do anything to spare her this. To spare them both.

"We're for London, then?" Mac asked.

"Appears so," Hadley grimaced.

Tristan hated this feeling—the sensation of a cage clanging shut, of events racing out of his control and trapping him without his consent.

"Well," Hadley continued, gaze dropping to the chained stone forgotten at Tristan's feet, "ye do still need to throw, Duke. I feel we all would like to know who is going

to be rowing that dinghy before we call it a day.”

As one, they all turned to stare at the boat wobbling on the lake’s surface.

“Go on,” Isolde murmured, eyes shining up at Tristan. “I believe in ye.” And to prove her point, she pressed a soft kiss to his lips before stepping back.

Predictably, Mac and James made loud kissing noises, teasing their older sister. Tristan gave the brothers his most ducal stare, waiting until they stuttered into silence.

Idioti , the both of them.

Holding their gaze, he leaned in and kissed his wife again, simply because he could.

That sorted, he turned back to the chained stone with a sigh. Motioning for everyone to stand back, he bent down and grasped the iron chain with both hands, sucking in a deep breath. Spinning in a tight circle, bonnet ribbons smacking his face, he grunted with the weight of the stone. With each turn of his body, questions whirled in his mind—How would he fare in London? What could he do to protect Isolde from cruel tongues? And how quickly could they quit Town for Wiltshire?

Unfortunately, his mind was distracted and, at the last moment, the fruit on his bonnet lost its war with gravity. The fruit slipped forward on the straw brim, causing the whole thing to sag and block his vision. Startled, Tristan released the stone.

It landed wildly off course.

Naturally, Hadley laughed.

“ Och , ye be having a poor run of luck today.” He slapped Tristan’s back yet again

before pointing to the bobbing skiff. “Tighten that bonnet. Ye have a boat to row.”

Tristan swallowed. You love Isolde , he thought for the fourteenth time.

Shooting her a long-suffering look, he nodded and trudged down to the water’s edge, praying this run of ill luck didn’t portend worse things for their future.

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Isolde leaned a shoulder against the door jamb between the bedchamber and bathing room, brazenly watching her husband bathe.

Poor Tristan had only made it halfway across the lake before the wee boat lost its battle with entropy and sank to a watery grave. Thankfully, he was a strong swimmer, but her brothers had teased him mercilessly when he pulled himself from the water—soaking wet with the bonnet plastered to his head and dripping into his eyes.

For her part, Isolde had merely enjoyed the sight of her husband's white shirt turned transparent and painted over the chiseled planes of his chest. He might be a duke, but Tristan was no stranger to exercise, and it showed.

Now, Isolde took full advantage of their marital state and ogled him freely as he rinsed the lake water from his bare skin.

Ever forward-thinking, her father had installed modern bathing rooms off every bedchamber when he built Muirford House nearly forty years ago. Each room was similarly fitted—a substantial iron clawfoot bathtub with a creamy painted interior sitting in the middle of a tiled floor, a porcelain washing basin to one side, and a commode in one corner.

At the moment, Tristan relaxed against the rear curve of the tub—arms resting on the brim, head tilted back, eyes closed—looking eerily like a Michelangelo sculpture come to life. It was moments like this when his Italian heritage surged to the forefront, acres of bronze Mediterranean skin and prematurely gray hair clinging in

curly strands to his forehead.

“What will you do about Her Majesty’s invitation, my love?” Isolde asked into the quiet.

If he heard her, Tristan didn’t show it. Instead, he languidly dipped a hand into the bath and scooped a handful of water onto his chest.

No one would take this man for a pampered English duke. He looked more akin to a Barbary pirate relaxing in a harem’s bath—the taut power of his broad shoulders merely wanting an excuse to spring into action.

“What shall I do?” Tristan said conversationally, eyes still closed. “Well, if you keep looking at me like that, Wife, you will soon find yourself ravished, which will result in us being late for dinner.”

The smooth rumble of his aristocratic vowels rolled over Isolde’s senses.

“Wouldn’t that be a tragedy?”

The faintest smile curved his lips. “It will be when your mother gives us a scolding, and your brothers say something lascivious that I find offensive. I should hate to have to challenge one of them to a duel.”

“Choose Mac. He’s a terrible shot.”

Tristan’s smile morphed into a low chuckle. “I was thinking more rapiers by moonlight, not pistols at dawn.”

“How very romantic of ye.”

“Romance, eh?” Tristan opened his dark eyes—pools of melting chocolate . . . Isolde’s favorite treat. “I appreciate the direction of your thoughts, but my original concern still stands.” His eyes flitted up and down, openly admiring her dressing gown and the loose chemise underneath. A low warmth gathered in Isolde’s belly. She could practically see all the delightful activities his look portended.

“Ye be misdirecting, my love,” she said.

“It’s working.”

“We should discuss Her Majesty’s summons.”

“Come here.” His eyes danced with hunger.

“Nae.” She knew this tactic of his and had no intention of finding herself toppled into his bathwater, dressing gown and all. If he kissed her, she would lose herself to his touch and forget everything else.

“Isolde.”

“Tristan.”

They stared at one another for two heartbeats.

“The fact that ye are avoiding the topic tells me all I need to know,” she said. “Ye be worried.”

“Of course, I’m worried. I would much rather sail back to our island and shut ourselves away from the world. Let Polite Society go hang for all I care.”

“Canna is hardly our island, my love. It belongs to Clan MacLean.” Though even as

she said the words, Isolde experienced a stab of longing. It did feel like their island. A refuge from pressure and expectation.

“Clan MacLean should sell it to me.”

“Now, ye are being ridiculous.”

“Hardly. Come here,” he repeated, this time using his stern Kendall voice. The one he knew turned her kneecaps to jelly, the wretch. “You are too far away, and I miss kissing my wife.”

Shaking her head, Isolde sashayed slowly into the room, carefully keeping her body out of reach of his long arms. “I’m not sure ye are to be trusted, Husband. Ye aim to distract me.”

“With a kiss?” His expression was pure innocence. “A kiss shouldn’t be distracting unless you wish it to be.” He lifted an eyebrow. “I am happy to oblige.”

Isolde tilted her head in skepticism.

“Or you could be particularly wifely and scrub my back,” he continued.

She studied his obnoxiously benign face.

“Promise to behave.” She pointed a finger at him, a grin tugging her lips. “And I will.”

A smile touched his eyes, but not his mouth. He pressed a palm to his bare chest. “Upon my word as a gentleman.”

Moving in a wide arc to avoid his grabbing hands—Isolde still wasn’t sure she trusted

him, word of a gentleman or no—she fetched a sponge from beside the wash basin and a bar of the housekeeper’s renowned lavender soap. Kneeling behind Tristan, she pushed on his spine, urging him to lean forward. He peered at her over his shoulder, dark eyes hooded and glittering. His expression said he knew she was avoiding him and like a giant black panther, he was content to wait for the right moment to pounce.

Dipping the sponge into the warm bath water, Isolde lathered it with soap and began to draw sudsy loops on his back.

“Let me guess what is concerning ye.” She drew the sponge in a bubbly line down the arch of his spine. “Ye be worrit that ye will return to your former autocratic ways once back in familiar London. Become Kendall entirely with only a small portion of Tristan remaining.”

It was her biggest concern, truth be told. That her beloved husband would find himself in London, surrounded by memories of his old ways, and would retreat deep within—protecting his soft Tristan self behind the steely armor of the Duke of Kendall.

“Perhaps a little.” He arched his back, muscles pulling between his shoulder blades. “I feel the key to avoiding that will be determining how to spend my days . . . what my purpose will be. As Kendall, I was obsessed with power and that necessitated a certain ruthlessness. That is no longer my focus, but my life requires a purpose. Some work to do. How do you think I should occupy my time?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? “I am sure my father would have suggestions.”

Tristan’s shoulders bunched. Isolde knew he was not a proponent of gentlemen directly managing their own business affairs, as her father did.

“I shall ponder it,” he said, neutrally. By which, Isolde understood he would not be

discussing the matter with Hadley. “Regardless of what I choose, I have faith that my formidable wife will lecture me should I slip into old habits.”

“True. I have never shied away from that.” She squeezed the water from the sponge, letting it drip down his spine. “So if it is not yourself . . . then perhaps I am the source of your concern?”

He said nothing, but those same muscles contracted, tensing with her words.

“Ah, so it is myself that worries ye,” she continued. “Ye be nervous about my ability to navigate Polite Society in London.”

“I do not doubt your abilities, Duchess.”

Her eyebrows raised in disbelief, but she let his words pass unchallenged.

He sensed her doubt regardless.

“That is my truth,” he said. “You are more than capable, my love. I am a duke. I lead. I don’t follow. You are an Amazon and a warrior. You will lead with me.”

She rewarded his kind words with a press of her lips to his nape.

Reaching back, he cupped the back of her head and, turning his head, tugged her in for a slow, hungry kiss. As usual, their mouths touched and she combusted, sparks igniting along her skin and stoking the heat simmering in her abdomen. How she adored this—the drugging give of his mouth, the rumble of need in his chest.

Hmm.

Maybe, they could be a wee bit late for dinner . . .

He broke off the kiss and she chased his lips, demanding more.

“Now who is proving a distraction,” he murmured against her mouth.

“It’s one ye like very much.”

“Indeed, it is.” He gave her one last searing kiss before turning and proffering his back once more, tapping his right shoulder for her to scrub there.

Isolde obliged him. “I am strong, my love. I am an earl’s daughter and the granddaughter of a duke, thanks to my mother. I was raised to know precisely how to navigate the upper echelons of the ton . I have often chosen not to do so, but that doesn’t mean I am ignorant of what my behavior should be.”

Tristan said nothing, but she knew him well enough to guess at his thoughts.

“Ye be concerned,” she continued, “that because I have made unorthodox choices as an adult—my education and university degree chief among them—I will remain an outsider, despite my pedigree. That because Her Majesty still does not approve of myself, others in the ton will take their cues from her and treat me poorly.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Isolde rinsed his back, water pouring over his shoulders and cascading down his spine.

“Once upon a time, you didn’t care about earning the ton’s approval,” he finally said, voice quiet. “I seem to remember some rather sharp words after our marriage.”

“Aye, well . . . that was before I fell in love with your surly self.” Isolde stood and returned the sponge and soap to the wash basin, drying her hands on a towel. “Before I started to see ourselves as united in our future. I want our children to have every opportunity. I want ye to be able to realize every political goal ye may have. And to

do that, I must begin rehabilitating my own reputation. An evening with the Queen will be the perfect place to start.”

She rounded the side of the bathtub, looking down at him.

“I don’t like this.” He scowled up at her. “I do not like that this odd summons from Her Majesty upset our tranquility. I do not like having to place you in situations where you will suffer others’ cruelty.”

“Ye can’t coddle me like a hothouse lily, Tristan.”

“Watch me.”

Smiling, she shook her head. “Ye be spouting absurdities again. I wish to be your duchess in every sense— ergo , ye will need to let me be your duchess.”

“Very well,” he sighed. “We will depart tomorrow for Gilbert House in London. But I want it noted that I refuse to stay long in Town. We will attend Her Majesty’s summons, listen to Penn-Leith recite whatever latest masterpiece he has written, and then we will leave the next morning for Hawthorn. There will be time in other years to mend worn reputations.”

“Very well.”

“Now . . . about that favor I am owed.”

“Truly?”

“Yes.” He abruptly grinned, looking far too much like a mischievous lad for Isolde’s peace of mind. “I shall be collecting it . . . right . . . now.”

She realized his intent too late. Lunging forward, Tristan snatched her wrist and tugged her to the side of the bathtub. Her balance upset, Isolde toppled into the bath with a loud screech. Warm water instantly soaked her chemise and dressing gown.

“Tristan,” she gasped, looping an arm around his neck, her shoulders coming to rest against one side of the tub and her knees crooked on the other.

“Much better,” he said, hand threading into her hair and pulling her mouth to his.

Isolde thought about protesting for approximately two seconds before melting into his kiss. As ever, the touch of his lips ignited her senses—like the world abruptly drowning in golden color.

Well.

This was actually lovely.

Tristan laughed wickedly and set about plundering her neck. Her arms wound around his neck, holding him to her.

Mmm, decidedly lovely in fact.

Dinner would simply have to wait.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am

3

Tristan stirred as the coach rocked to a stop in front of Gilbert House in Grosvenor Square in London.

Night had fallen hours ago. Quiet ruled over the street, broken only by the patter of rain on the pavement and the occasional steaming hiss from the gas street lamps.

Tristan peered out the carriage window to his townhouse, careful not to disturb Isolde lying asleep on his chest. He stared up at the five stories of his home, frown deepening with each passing second.

The entire edifice was dark, stone gleaming in the rain.

What the devil was going on? Gilbert House should be lit up like a Christmas bonfire in anticipation of their arrival—windows blazing with light and staff waiting to greet them with dinner, warm baths, and clean linen.

But, no, the gas lamps to either side of the door remained unlit, relegating the front stoop to gloomy shadows. In fact, except for a flickering candle in a window, the entire house appeared abandoned and foreboding.

Concern and worry sat heavy in his bones.

Something was not right.

The unease had begun when the SS Statesman had docked in St. Katherine's Wharf

just south of London. Tristan had sent a telegram from Norfolk, apprising Mr. Adam Ledger, the secretary in charge of his social calendar—and, by extension, the rest of his staff—of his and his duchess's imminent arrival. Further, Tristan had requested the ducal carriage be waiting for them at the docks. However, no such carriage had been sent.

Refusing to take a common hack—Tristan shuddered to ponder the sticky floors and rank interiors of such vehicles—he had finally sent a deckhand to hire a carriage from a nearby coaching inn. Allie and Penn-Leith had braved a hack and would be arriving shortly. Thankfully, Lord and Lady Hadley had opted to take the train down from Scotland and would be staying in their own home in Town.

Isolde stirred on his chest, lifting her head. “Are we arrived at last?”

“Yes, my love.”

Even tired, rather disheveled, and dimly lit, Isolde's timeless beauty—wide-set blue eyes with a constellation of freckles dotting her skin—kindled an ache in Tristan's chest. He pressed a soft kiss to her temple.

They waited as the coachman lowered the steps, chin tucked against his great coat to avoid the worst of the wet weather. Tristan descended and turned to help Isolde alight. Her gaze skimmed the dark facade, lips pinching. His clever wife had no doubt reached the same conclusion as himself—why were the staff not anticipating their arrival?

Hand in hand, they raced up the front steps, eager to escape the drizzling rain. Tristan's concern deepened as he noted the laurel wreath hung with black crepe adorning the front door—a sign of a death in the family.

“Is all well with your relatives?” Isolde pointed at the wreath.

“I have received no communication to the contrary.”

“Certainly the wreath isn’t for us?”

“I cannot imagine. The staff know we survived the shipwreck.” Tristan tried to keep the irritation out of his tone. “I sent Mr. Ledger back to London with clear instructions to inform others of our miraculous recovery.”

After their supposed drowning, Ledger had accompanied Lord Hadley north to Scotland, intending to retrieve Tristan’s body. Instead, Tristan had greeted his secretary in person and sent him back south with correspondence and instructions for managing the dukedom’s affairs, as well as a charge to inform others of Tristan’s health and wellbeing. Since then, Tristan had received the occasional communication from Ledger, but as there was little to report, his secretary wrote infrequently. Barring some tragedy, Ledger would be on the receiving end of Tristan’s displeasure. First, the lacking carriage, and now this—his house unprepared for their arrival?

Such incompetence was unacceptable in his employ.

Tamping down his frustration, Tristan tried the handle of the front door, only to find it locked.

Gritting back an oath, he thumped the knocker with thunderous force.

Boom, boom, boom.

The sound echoed through the entrance hall beyond.

And then . . .

. . . nothing more.

He pulled Isolde in front of him, trying to shelter her, his own shoulders hunched in his overcoat as rain pelted his back.

This was ridiculous. He was a duke! Dukes did not stand on their own front stoop in the dripping wet, pounding to be admitted.

He could feel his Kendall self rising—the haughty, autocratic epitome of his loathsome father. A tyrannical man, yes, but one who marshaled underlings, commanded obedience, and ensured competence.

After another moment, he knocked again, louder this time.

Boom, boom, boom.

His wrath rose with each resounding thud.

Someone's head would roll for this debacle. He might have spent the last five weeks on his honeymoon, but that was no excuse for slipshod household management in his absence.

Boom, boom, boom.

Finally, a scuffling noise sounded from within, feet scrambling on marble.

The lock turned with an echoing sha-shunk, and the door opened a crack, revealing the face of a young hall boy.

“Who goes—” was all the lad got out before Tristan pushed the door wide and stepped inside, pulling Isolde with him. The youth stumbled back, toppling onto his bottom in the middle of the grand entrance hall, mouth agape as if seeing a ghost.

“Y-Your Grace,” the boy stammered, skittering backward on the marble floor.

Tristan kicked the front door shut with a satisfying thwack that rattled the windows in their casements and echoed up the stairs.

“Fetch Fredericks, boy,” Tristan barked. His butler should have answers. “Also, summon Mr. Ledger immediately. And light the lamps.” He spared a glance at the one candle lit on a side table. “This place is hardly a graveyard.”

“Y-yes, Your Grace.” The lad jumped to his feet. “I-immediately, Your Grace.” The boy disappeared down the hall toward the servants’ quarters.

Good.

Someone needed to restore order here. Though a cursory look around the entrance hall with its shined marble and impressive rising staircase showed the house to be tidy and clean. At least his housekeeper, Mrs. Wilson, was doing her job.

Tristan turned to Isolde who remained silent and tight-lipped at his side. “I am most sorry you had to arrive home to this, Duchess.”

“Hush. All is well, my love.”

“It is not well, Isolde. It is an utter disgrace.”

His wife touched his arm. “Surely, there has been a misunderstanding that shall be easily righted. There is no need for such alarm.”

Tristan ignored the reproach in her tone. “We shall see.”

Some lackadaisical person would feel the sharp edge of his anger before the night

was over. If Tristan had to be Kendall in order to protect and provide for his duchess, then so be it.

Stripping off his gloves, he dropped them inside his hat and deposited the whole on a sideboard. Isolde followed suit with her own gloves and bonnet. Tristan had just shed his overcoat when a voice carried down the central stairs.

“What the devil is this racket?! Fredericks!” A stout figure in a lavish dressing gown stomped down the stairs, a flickering candle held aloft. “Fredericks!” the man called, leaning over the railing.

Fury rose so quickly in Tristan’s chest, he worried steam would pour from his ears.

This explained much.

The man turned his attention to Tristan and Isolde.

“How dare you call at such a late hour, sirrah!” he shouted, stomping down the stairs. “I do not care what your business here regards or how important you presume yourselves to be, you will return at a civil hour! Fredericks!”

Tristan’s rage coalesced under his sternum, anger retracting and turning to ice, hardening his ribcage to frosty steel. Stepping into the light of the single candle on the side table, he stared up at the man.

“Cousin Aubrey.” Tristan’s voice vibrated with the ducal outrage of every Kendall who had preceded him. “You will refer to me as Your Grace if I ever deign to speak with you after this outrage.”

Mr. Aubrey Gilbert—Tristan’s cousin and heir—staggered back on the steps, shoulders hitting the wall opposite the banister, face blanching pure white in the light

of his candle. His mouth flapped open, like a spawning salmon gasping for breath.

“Furthermore, how dare you commandeer my household,” Tristan continued. “It is appalling to return home and find you here—uninvited, unannounced, and decidedly unwelcome.”

“K-Kendall,” Aubrey stammered.

“Your. Grace. You will refer to me as Your Grace . What part of that instruction was unclear?”

“You’re alive!”

“Your. Grace. Truly, Cousin, I question your mental abilities.”

“Alive Y-Your Grace.”

“Of course, I’m alive, you dolt! Ledger informed you of that fact, I am sure. But perhaps your diminished mental acuity could not comprehend such simple information. Shall I have a doctor summoned?”

To his credit, Aubrey rallied, standing and continuing down the stairs. Though scarcely older than Tristan’s own thirty years, Aubrey’s receding hairline and rotund belly gave him the appearance of a man a decade older. Only the set of his eyes and the gray peppering his dark hair echoed his familial ties to the Dukedom of Kendall.

“I-I am g-gratified to see you well, Your Grace.” Aubrey managed a stiff bow. He flickered a glance at Isolde.

“Spare me your lies,” Tristan snorted. “It appears you heard rumors of my demise and raced to London to claim my home and title before receiving confirmation of my cold

corpse. Such appalling behavior is beneath any gentleman, particularly one who claims the surname Gilbert. Perhaps that should be reevaluated.”

Aubrey blanched. “W-We truly did not know, Your—”

“Nonsense! Did Mr. Ledger die on his way to London? Or did he arrive mute and dumb and unable to speak?”

“N-No, I gather he is well, but—”

“But what, Cousin?”

Aubrey spluttered for a moment, proving yet again why Tristan considered him a prize idiot. Honestly, he and Isolde needed to produce a son post-haste. The dukedom wouldn’t survive a year with Aubrey at its helm.

“Husband? Whatever is the matter?” a female voice called from the top of the stairs.

Tristan took in a deep breath before looking up.

Of course.

The true architect of this debacle.

Lady Lavinia Gilbert, Aubrey’s aristocratic wife.

Not registering Tristan’s presence, she descended the stairs in a cloud of French perfume and a fashionable silk dressing gown, an expensive beeswax candle held aloft in a silver holder. Short and thin with a large nose and a pinched sort of face, she resembled a ferret. Or rather, Allie once remarked upon the similarity and now Tristan couldn’t unsee it. A pretty ferret but a weasel nonetheless—sneaky and

conniving.

“Who has come calling at this late hour to inconvenience our household—”

Lady Lavinia froze on the second to last step, eyes widening as she finally recognized who stood in the entrance hall.

“Look who has arrived home, Wife,” Aubrey said with forced cheer. “Is it not a miracle?” He waved a hand in Tristan’s direction.

“Yes. A miracle,” Lady Lavinia said, voice monotone. “Welcome home, Your Grace.” She curtsied, elegant and neat, her candle flickering with motion.

The youngest daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Andover, Lady Lavinia took her husband’s designation as heir to the Duke of Kendall as a proclamation of fact—Aubrey would be the next Duke. Never mind that Tristan was hearty and hale. Never mind that his lovely duchess currently stood at his side, possibly already carrying his heir.

No, Lady Lavinia, along with her parents, assumed that their daughter would one day wear the eight golden strawberry leaves of a duchess’s coronet—Tristan and Isolde be damned.

“Lady Lavinia.” Tristan inclined his head. He turned to Isolde at his side. His clever wife hid her surprise well. Her expression remained bland and impassive though her eyes sparkled with some emotion. Outrage, like himself? Or was it . . . hilarity?

Regardless, he took her hand in his. “Duchess, may I present my cousin and heir, Mr. Aubrey Gilbert, and his wife, Lady Lavinia Gilbert?”

Isolde dipped her head the precisely proper amount for greeting a social inferior,

proving her impeccable manners. “Mr. Gilbert. Lady Lavinia.”

“Duchess,” they both echoed, bowing and curtsying as appropriate, though Tristan did not miss the faint sneering curl of Lady Lavinia’s lips illuminated by her candle. Ferret scurried through his brain.

Lady Lavinia’s rancor likely stemmed from the fact that Tristan had spurned her advances years ago. Well, spurned might be too strong a word. Ignored, more like. She had thrown herself at him over and over—at balls, at dinners, at soirées—and he simply had pretended to not notice. Hell hath no fury and all that.

But that certainly did not excuse either Aubrey or Lady Lavinia’s current appalling behavior.

Cold rage continued to band Tristan’s chest.

“Lady Lavinia,” Tristan said, “I have been attempting to understand why my secretary’s description of my health and wholeness was unable to penetrate my cousin’s thick skull. Perhaps you could enlighten me?”

Lady Lavinia smiled—the strained sort of expression one makes when scrambling for a believable fib—and turned to her husband.

“Secretary?” she asked with a feather-headed laugh.

“Mr. Adam Ledger,” Tristan supplied blandly. “Tall fellow, brown hair, brown eyes, spectacles. He has a room beside the butler’s in the servants’ quarters.”

Given how Aubrey blanched once more, they knew to whom Tristan referred. They had to have heard Ledger’s account of meeting with Tristan in Oban from the man himself. So . . . why had they assumed Tristan to be dead?

Lady Lavinia rallied. “I believe, Your Grace, there were concerns over the veracity of Mr. Ledger’s statements. It seemed odd that you yourself hadn’t returned to London.”

“Why should I have needed to return to London in order for firsthand accounts of my health and continued breathing on this earth to be believed? If you readily accepted hearsay of my death, why not also believe verified reports of my survival? Truly, such logic is deeply flawed.”

Aubrey stood tall. “There were rumors that you had suffered a terrible blow to the head, Your Grace, and were no longer of compos mentis .”

“Do I appear injured, Cousin?” Tristan spread his arms. “Or of a diminished mental capacity?”

“Of c-course not,” Aubrey stammered.

Before Tristan could continue his questioning, the door to the servants’ quarters at the back of the entrance hall clacked open.

A flustered Fredericks burst through, a dressing gown hastily tied around his waist. Two footmen in shirtsleeves and the hallboy followed at his heels.

“Your Grace!” the butler all but crowed.

“Ah, Fredericks.”

“Your Grace!” Fredericks bowed, eyes shimmering with emotion and, if Tristan was reading the man’s expression correctly, no small amount of relief. “We are all deeply grateful to find you and Her Grace alive and well.”

Fredericks motioned for a footman to begin lighting the gas lamps before stepping

forward and sliding Tristan's damp overcoat off his shoulders. The other footman followed suit, assisting Isolde with her pelerine.

"Thank you, Fredericks. We are pleased to be home, despite the current circumstances." Here, Tristan spared a scathing glance for Aubrey before looking back at the butler. "Would you please have the ducal bedchambers readied? Also, Lady Allegra and Mr. Penn-Leith are not far behind us, so please see to their rooms, as well."

Tristan did not miss the panicked look Fredericks sent to Lady Lavinia.

"Is there a problem, Fredericks?"

"Of course not, Your Grace."

But Tristan knew his butler well enough to understand the man was flustered.

It didn't take a genius to understand what had occurred. And just when Tristan had supposed his temper could not be stoked any higher.

"Let me guess." Tristan turned to Aubrey. "You and your wife have not only usurped my household—uninvited—but you have made yourself at home in my own, private chambers." His voice rose with each word, ending with the crack of a whip.

The thought of Aubrey pawing through his personal possessions set Tristan's blood to boiling. His bedchamber and personal study were his sanctum. No one was admitted there without his express permission.

"Cousin . . ." Aubrey began, extending a consoling hand.

"Your. Grace!"

Aubrey flinched. “Your G-Grace, we had presumed that—”

“You presume nothing!” Tristan snarled, taking a step toward the man.

Aubrey staggered back like the coward he was, clutching Lady Lavinia’s arm.

“How. Dare. You.” Tristan enunciated each word with the precision of a pistol shot. He loomed over his cousin. “You took the flimsiest of opportunities and grabbed it with both hands. I will be taking a thorough inventory of my possessions. If I find even so much as a silver button misplaced, I will be calling the constabulary.”

Aubrey’s face drained of blood.

“Surely, you do not wish such a scandal, Your Grace,” Lady Lavinia said, voice dulcet and coaxing. “Why, the dukedom would become the talk of the ton .”

Tristan whirled on her. “No, Lady Lavinia. My cousin’s reprehensible behavior and attempt to steal my possessions and my title would be the subject of gossip. I anticipate the duchy itself would weather the scandal with outraged dignity.”

“Gracious, certainly matters do not need to come to that.” Lady Lavinia’s nose twitched, enhancing her weaselly appearance.

Tristan smiled tightly. The chilling sort he had learned at his father’s knee. The smile he knew made others’ blood run cold.

Lady Lavinia faltered.

Tristan turned his attention back to Aubrey. “Though I am sorely tempted, you should be grateful I am a decent human being, and therefore, will not hurl you into the street this instant. However, you are no longer welcome here, Cousin. I will not tolerate

such upstart behavior under my own roof.” He pivoted to Fredericks. “My duchess and I will retire to the library. Please have a light repast sent in while Mrs. Wilson and the maids prepare the rooms I require. Deal with their effects —” He shot another basilisk look at Lady Lavinia. “—as you will. Mr. Gilbert and Lady Lavinia will be departing at first light.”

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 7:03 am

4

I solde trailed Tristan into the library.

A footman followed, lighting the sconces and touching a Lucifer match to the kindling laid in the cold hearth.

She had only been in the library twice before, both times as Allie's guest and particular friend. There had also been that day, scarcely three months past now, when she had lounged in Tristan's chair before the fire and taunted him.

Gracious, how much could change in such a short time? Now, she and Tristan were married, making this her library, as well.

Similar to aristocratic libraries everywhere, mahogany bookshelves lined each wall and the center of the room featured a large map table. A fireplace and two armchairs sat to the right, while a pair of tall windows stood to the left.

Tristan crossed to a panel of books opposite the doorway. He tugged on a volume and the door of a small hidden cabinet swung open, revealing bottles of liquor.

Interesting. Isolde would have loved to know about that hidden bookcase before now. She could have wreaked mayhem when they were still quarreling.

Now, however . . .

Without a word, Tristan proceeded to pour himself a tumbler of what appeared to be

brandy. He tossed the whole back in one gulp and, reaching for the bottle, tipped another two fingers into his glass without offering any to her.

As if she were forgotten.

Isolde nodded as the footman bowed and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Arms folded, she sat in one of two armchairs before the fire, staring at Tristan's back as he sipped his second glass of brandy. His lungs expanded in and out as if he had run up a hill or, more likely, was attempting to reign in his temper.

The events of the past hour would try anyone's patience—heaven knew Isolde wanted to rage at Aubrey and Lady Lavinia, as well—but it was troubling how quickly Tristan retreated into his icy Duke of Kendall persona and remained there, even when the source of his anger was no longer in the room.

Her heart thundered, galloping hooves beneath her breastbone. How was she to manage this? How were they to manage this? Maybe she should wreak mayhem with his liquor simply to get his attention.

Don't let him retreat from ye.

“Would ye be willing to share some brandy with myself?” she asked into the quiet.

Tristan flinched, no doubt surprised she was still there.

“Pardon?” He turned around.

His dark eyes glittered in the low light, steely and impassive. As if her presence mattered not at all.

Pure Kendall, in other words.

A month ago, that look might have given her pause. Now, she saw it as the defensive reaction it was—shielding his soft Tristan core from harm.

Och , she was having none of it.

If theirs was to continue being a true marriage, then they needed to reach for one another, even when circumstances were difficult. Or, perhaps, particularly when circumstances were difficult.

Inhaling deep for courage, Isolde stood and crossed to him. He watched her come, taking another slow sip from his tumbler, Adam's apple bobbing.

She walked right into his space, leaving just a hair's breadth between them. Eyes locked with his, she tilted the glass in his hand and took a healthy swallow of his drink. The brandy burned its way down her throat.

Then, pressing to tiptoe, she grabbed the back of his head and kissed him.

It was a lewd sort of kiss—debauched, hungry, and tasting of exploring hands and silken sheets. The kind of kiss a woman gave to her paramour. Or Isolde the Duchess gave to her ducal husband to bring him out of his autocratic self.

Tristan responded as she had hoped.

His free hand snaked around her waist—his other hand lifting his brandy aloft—and he pulled her hard against him. Isolde speared her fingers into his hair, nails skimming his scalp, and he grunted in approval. They kissed with wild abandon for a long moment, teeth grazing and bodies tightly pressed.

“I greatly dislike my cousin,” Tristan growled against her mouth. “I dislike his wife even more.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Isolde said, voice dry.

He nipped her bottom lip.

“They do seem rather unpleasant.”

“Ghastly, more like.”

Isolde spread her hands under Tristan’s waistcoat, a finger sliding between the buttons of his shirt to stroke his skin. He inhaled on a low hiss.

“I remember Lady Lavinia from my first two Seasons in London. She was a bit of a harridan.”

Harridan might be too kind of a word to describe Lady Lavinia. Bully was more apt, but Isolde held her peace. Her goal was to cool Tristan’s justifiable anger, not stoke it.

She and Tristan would be gone soon enough, and the Lady Lavinias of this world could go hang for all she cared.

Tristan growled again and dipped his head to kiss the place below Isolde’s right ear where a circle of freckles resided. A fairy ring of freckles, he had whispered to her a few weeks ago in their marital bed. Proof that you are indeed an enchantress. She had rewarded him handsomely for the compliment.

Now, she tilted her chin to permit better access.

“Damn my cousin for taking over our bedchambers.” Tristan trailed his lips down the side of her throat. His hand skimmed up her spine and lifted her chest into his. “I could flog him for that alone. We could be half undressed by now and enjoying a late supper in the quiet of our own bed.”

Isolde knew Tristan well enough to understand his words were not the true reason for his anger. Or rather, not the whole of it. Given his violent, tyrannical father, her husband deeply valued his privacy. Aubrey, by trespassing on Tristan’s most intimate space, had violated that privacy at a primal level.

“We will see it sorted, my love.” She stroked the gray hair at his temple. “All will be well.”

Bit by bit, he relaxed under her hands. His kisses quieted, and his head lifted. Pressing his lips to her forehead, Tristan held her for a long moment.

“I still intend for us to leave London the day after tomorrow.” His voice was Tristan’s once more, soft and yielding. “I will speak with Ledger at length in the morning and undo whatever havoc Cousin Aubrey has caused. We will attend Penn-Leith’s reading at Buckingham Palace and promptly leave for Hawthorn the next morning.”

“I approve of your plan.” Isolde stepped back. “Now, will ye share some of the excellent Glenturret whisky I see there?” She tilted her chin, indicating the bottles peaking out from their hiding place in the bookcase.

A noise sounded from the entry hall.

Isolde recognized Allie’s voice, and a moment later, Allie and Ethan swept into the library.

“Whatever is going on? First, no carriage waiting at the wharf, and then we arrive to

discover the house in uproar. I'm famished, exhausted beyond reason, and ready to topple into bed. The baby, as well." Allie pressed a hand to her abdomen. Tristan and Isolde were some of the few people who knew that Allie was in a family way. "Instead of finding those comforts waiting, I discover staff scurrying back and forth. I think Fredericks actually stammered just now. For a ducal butler, that is practically apoplectic."

Allie sank wearily into one of the armchairs before the fire, a hand cradling the soft swell of her stomach. Ethan leaned against the arm of the chair.

"Perhaps Frederick's reaction was in response to myself." Ethan ran a hand down his waistcoat. "He has always been something of a fanatic of my works, and I do have that effect on some."

Allie shot him a bemused look.

Tristan gave a faint snort. "You are flattering yourself again, Penn-Leith. It appears Cousin Aubrey and Lady Lavinia took the reports of my demise to heart. They have commandeered not only my townhouse but my private apartments, as well." Tristan handed a tumbler of whisky to Isolde. "Hence the uproar, as I demanded my abode be set to rights."

"The ferret is here?" Allie's eyes flew wide. "I don't know if I should laugh at the audacity or shudder in revulsion."

"Both?" Tristan suggested.

"Ferret?" Isolde asked on a giggle.

"It's what my twin calls Lady Lavinia," Tristan murmured.

“How horrid of you, Allie.” Isolde tried to stem a cackling laugh but met with only middling success.

Allie tossed her head, looking every bit as disdainful and Italian as her brother. “If Lady Lavinia does not wish to be compared to un furetto , then she shouldn’t cultivate sneaky, underhanded behavior so studiously. The woman is absolutely horrid.” She pointed a finger at her brother. “Please tell me you cast them both out on their ears, dead of night or no.”

“So blood-thirsty, Wife.” Ethan slid to sitting on the arm of Allie’s chair in order to press a kiss to the top of her head.

Sighing, Tristan crossed to sit opposite his sister. “Unfortunately, no. I had a momentary surge of rationality and gave them until tomorrow morning.”

“Pity.”

Ethan chuckled and, lifting his wife’s chin with two fingers, bent to press a soft kiss to her lips.

“Not particularly,” Tristan said. “I merely remembered at the last moment that Lady Lavinia’s mother, the Duchess of Andover, is a Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Victoria. It seemed bad form to toss a lady with familial connections to the Queen’s inner circle into the street the day before meeting with Her Majesty.”

The door snicked open and Fredericks entered, followed by three footmen bearing linens, cutlery, dishes, and an assortment of cold meats, bread, and cheese. The welcome sight set Isolde’s stomach to rumbling.

“A repast, Your Grace. I apologize that it is not warm.” Fredericks bowed, motioning for the footmen to set up dinner on a small games table in one corner. “But may I say

once more, on behalf of all the staff, how relieved and delighted we are that Your Grace and the duchess have returned to us healthy and hale.”

“Your words are appreciated, Fredericks. Will you please inform Mr. Ledger that I will wish to speak with him first thing in the morning?”

Fredericks paused, eyes darting to the side. He stood in silence.

“Fredericks?” Tristan prompted.

The butler straightened his spine. “I must confess, Your Grace, I am uncertain as to Mr. Ledger’s whereabouts.”

Tristan frowned. “What do you mean?”

Isolde froze. Aye. What did that mean?

“Mr. Gilbert and Lady Lavinia arrived right as Mr. Ledger returned from his visit with Your Grace in Oban,” Fredericks said. “It is my understanding that your cousin and his wife did not believe the news of your survival. Mr. Ledger continued to work for another two weeks or so after returning, completing the tasks Your Grace had assigned him. However, Mr. Gilbert became more agitated the longer Ledger continued to act on your behalf. He accused Ledger of spreading falsehoods and attempting to defraud the duchy.”

“How in heaven’s name was Ledger defrauding the dukedom by asserting my survival and tending to tasks given him? The man has nothing to do with the duchy’s purse or financial accounting.”

“I had wondered the same, Your Grace,” Fredericks said, his dry tone indicating his low opinion of Cousin Aubrey’s intellectual abilities.

Allie snorted, folding her arms. “So what became of Ledger then?”

“He was dismissed immediately. Lady Lavinia said he needed to be made an example of.”

Tristan’s brows drew down into a thundercloud. “She. Said. What?” He enunciated each word with biting fury.

Isolde placed a hand on his arm.

I’m here , she wanted him to understand. We will conquer this together.

Tristan’s muscles relaxed under her palm, though his eyebrows remained narrowed.

“I was rather alarmed, as well, Your Grace,” Fredericks said. “Mr. Gilbert sacked Mr. Ledger immediately without a recommendation.”

Tristan pinched the bridge of his nose. Isolde thought she heard him mutter, “Bloody cretin,” but she wasn’t sure.

“Disgraceful,” Tristan said. “Why was I not notified immediately of all of this?”

Fredericks floundered. “As staff, we were uncertain as to your location, Your Grace. And Mr. Gilbert approves all post, so . . .” The butler drifted off.

“And Ledger? Why didn’t he send word?”

“I cannot say, Your Grace.”

Isolde slipped her palm down Tristan’s arm, lacing her fingers with his. He gripped her hand with reassuring warmth.

“Find Ledger. He can’t have gone too far,” Tristan ordered. “Assure him that his dismissal was not warranted and that he will be reinstated immediately. Hopefully, the man will provide us all with answers.”

“I shall see it done at once, Your Grace.” Fredericks bowed and motioned the footmen to leave. “We shall have your rooms readied within the hour.”

“Excellent. That will be all, Fredericks.”

“Your Grace.” Fredericks bowed and closed the door behind himself.

Silence hummed in the wake of the butler’s departure.

Isolde looked from Ethan and Allie to her husband.

“Come,” she said. “Let us eat and get some rest. I daresay this will all seem more manageable come morning.”

5

As much as Tristan trusted and valued his wife, the problems plaguing his household and staff did not seem more manageable come morning.

No.

Rather, they were multiplying.

Tristan rose with the sun, unable to sleep any later despite his long journey the day before and equally late night waiting for his chambers to be readied.

He pressed a kiss to Isolde's bare shoulder—grateful she had chosen to remain with him rather than retire to the duchess's bedchamber next door. He was even more grateful for her level-headed calm.

Moving quietly, he pulled on a banyan and crept from the room, leaving Isolde asleep in their bed, her red hair splayed across the pillows.

His plans for the day were simple:

One, ensure Cousin Aubrey and Lady Lavinia made a hasty departure. Gilbert House was large enough to house them, but given Tristan's lingering rage over their brazen audacity, he couldn't imagine his cousin wishing to remain. They could easily find lodging with Lady Lavinia's parents in Belgravia.

Two, re-hire Ledger as soon as the man appeared and include a generous bonus for

the difficulties Aubrey had caused. From there, Tristan would have Ledger work with Fredericks and Mrs. Wilson to catalog all items in the house, no matter how small, and ensure everything was accounted for. Tristan would not put it past Lady Lavinia to have “accidentally” filched something.

Three, accompany Isolde to Buckingham Palace this evening, smile at the Queen, listen to Penn-Leith, and avoid conversation with vipers such as Lady Lavinia’s mother, the Duchess of Andover.

Four, retire to bed in preparation for an early departure for Hawthorn tomorrow morning.

The plan seemed sound.

Unfortunately, Fate had other ideas.

It began when he surveyed the hasty arrangement of items in his private study, a small room between his bedchamber and dressing room. The study was Tristan’s inner sanctum—two chairs before the hearth, a small desk, and a liquor cabinet. Not even his valet was permitted to touch items in his room. Just the thought of Cousin Aubrey or Lady Lavinia pawing through his most personal effects set Tristan’s skin to crawling. Neither Ledger nor Fredericks would be able to catalog the contents of the room to ensure his cousin hadn’t pocketed something.

No, that would be Tristan’s task alone.

Frowning, he crossed and pulled open the top drawer of the desk. Instead of his own tidy bundles of correspondence and stacked papers, he found the contents scattered haphazardly.

Tristan’s ire flared, anger tasting acrid in his mouth. Bloody hell but he wanted to

pummel his cousin. To lash out, beat him bloody, and let the man feel the sharp edge of the Duke of Kendall's wrath.

Tristan's father, abominable man that he was, would have disowned Aubrey for such malfeasance and then set about making the man's existence a living hell. Granted, as Aubrey had once literally pissed himself out of fear in Old Kendall's presence, Tristan doubted his cousin would have dared touch anything before ensuring Old Kendall's corpse was cold and locked away in the family crypt in Hawthorn.

That was the problem with reforming one's character, Tristan supposed. Upstart mushrooms were no longer as terrified as they should be.

Regardless, it would take Tristan the better part of the afternoon to catalog the room and determine what, if anything, Aubrey had taken.

Sighing, Tristan dressed and made his way downstairs to his public study to see what havoc Aubrey had wreaked there.

In the past, Tristan had used this room to discuss matters with his secretaries and man of business. Just two months ago, he had employed three secretaries to help him manage his political aspirations and busy social calendar.

His marriage to the delightful but unorthodox Lady Isolde had altered that.

Mr. Cartwright, his political secretary, had been let go with excellent references, as Tristan's choice of bride voided his political aspirations.

Mr. Marshall, his social secretary in London, had also not been needed, as Tristan did not intend to spend much time in Town going forward. Fortunately, the man also had excellent mathematical skills. Therefore, he had been reassigned to assist Tristan's man-of-business, Mr. Eliason. The two men were currently touring and assessing all

of the enterprises and properties held by the dukedom—meeting with Tristan’s numerous estate stewards and managers. It was no small task and would take about three months to complete. But as Tristan had anticipated being on his honeymoon and then rustivating at Hawthorn, the timing had seemed apt.

Tristan had only planned on keeping Ledger to assist him with his personal correspondence. But now he, too, was gone.

Tristan seated himself at his desk and began opening correspondence that Cousin Aubrey had thankfully ignored. Blast but he needed Ledger back. Preferably before luncheon.

A soft knock sounded.

Tristan looked up to see Lady Lavinia standing outside the open door.

“Lady Lavinia.” He stood, as he was a gentleman no matter his dislike of the lady before him.

“Your Grace.” She bobbed a shallow curtsy that was scarcely a millimeter away from being offensive, attempting to score a point, as ever.

“I assume you are here to take leave.” Tristan clasped his hands behind his back. “I wish you well on your journey.”

Deliberately, he looked down at his desk and the letters there—a clear signal that there would be no more conversation.

“In regards to that, Your Grace . . .”

Tristan’s nostrils flared as he raised his head and met Lady Lavinia’s gaze.

He said nothing.

Silence, he had long ago learned, was as powerful a deterrent as shouting and less strain on the vocal cords.

He stared at Lady Lavinia, finally noticing that she was wearing a morning gown, not a traveling dress.

“I do have a few words to say,” she continued, stepping fully into the room and making to shut the study door.

“You will leave the door to my study open,” he said, his tone taking on a sharp bite. Tristan could only imagine the wagging tongues if he were discovered closeted alone with Lady Lavinia—gossip that the lady herself would likely start.

He would never put Isolde in a situation where she had to hear rumors about his supposed indiscreet behavior.

Lady Lavinia paused, her thin lips pursing. “I do not wish others to overhear my personal business, Your Grace.”

“By others , I assume you mean my staff, Lady Lavinia. I am not sure what appalls me more. The insinuation that my servants are disloyal, poorly trained, and will therefore gossip if given the chance. Or your belief that I wish to be privy to anything of a personal nature from you. To be clear, I do not.”

This woman was definitely attempting to manage him in some way.

He would have none of it.

Unfortunately, Lady Lavinia was not the sort to be so easily dissuaded or intimidated.

She took another step into the room, her full skirts brushing against the armchair facing his desk.

“I sense that Your Grace is perhaps a bit overset with my husband and me.” She pitched her voice low and soothing as if crooning to a difficult stallion.

Tristan narrowed his eyes. Such cajoling might work in a stable, but not on him. “You sense correctly.”

“By coming as we did, we merely wished to ensure that Gilbert House and the affairs of the dukedom were managed properly in the wake of your supposed demise. Yes, there were rumors of your survival—”

“They were hardly rumors. Ledger informed you as much.”

“—but until we knew of a surety that Your Grace was recovered and of compos mentis, well, it seemed best to remain here.” Lady Lavinia spread her hands wide with a helpless flutter as if her behavior were so reasonable, it baffled the mind why Tristan would take issue.

He snorted. “Usurping my private spaces and pawing through my effects, you mean. Thieves on a battlefield show more restraint and decorum.”

Lady Lavinia blushed, likely the last gasp of propriety exiting her bones.

“We truly thought you dead, Your Grace.”

“I am not, as you see, and again, you were confidently informed of the fact. Your attempts to justify your mercenary behavior are ludicrous, at best. Good day, Lady Lavinia.”

Once more, Tristan looked down at his correspondence. Manners dictated he could not sit until she left. He could feel the dratted woman's eyes boring into him.

Honestly, the sheer audacity of her to refuse his clear dismissal.

She cleared her throat.

He lifted his head, channeling every last ounce of his dead father's autocratic personality into his gaze.

Silence.

The weight of Lady Lavinia's rudeness and impropriety settled between them without Tristan needing to say a word.

"The thing is, Your Grace," she began slowly, a finger tracing the leather on the armchair at her side, "we—Aubrey and I, that is—should like to stay in residence at Gilbert House."

Still, Tristan said nothing, but he did roll his hand— get to the point .

Lady Lavinia rested her palm on the top of the chair. "My parents' home in Belgravia is currently undergoing refurbishment. However, my mother, the Duchess, must attend to Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace as she is a Lady of the Bedchamber and Her Majesty's particular favorite. Her Majesty has kindly condescended to allow my parents to reside at the palace until the refurbishment is complete. Given that Aubrey is your heir, my parents would consider it a kindness if he and I were permitted to remain here until we all quit London for the country."

And there it was.

Lady Lavinia smiled sweetly. The edge of a samurai's sword would not have been sharper.

The subtle implication of her request was clear: My mother has the ear of the Queen, and you know your duty as head of the family. Let us stay here or there will be hell to pay.

Tristan very much disliked being maneuvered and threatened.

He deliberated what to do, the mantel clock ticking by the seconds.

If Tristan tossed Aubrey out, he would look petty and ungentlemanly, further alienating the portion of Polite Society that disliked Isolde.

If Tristan acquiesced to Lady Lavinia's demands, his servants would have to tolerate these vipers for a few more weeks, not to mention Aubrey's snooping through Tristan's personal effects.

As paterfamilias , it was his duty to provide for family members. Even if Tristan hadn't wished to, his father's will had stipulated that the heir to the dukedom—imbecilic Cousin Aubrey at the moment—receive an allowance from the family coffers. For Old Kendall, appearances must be maintained, even after his death. Once Tristan had an heir of his body, he could remove Aubrey from his payroll, but until then . . .

Jaw clenched, he reached a decision.

He and Isolde were leaving, so Aubrey and Lady Lavinia's presence here mattered little to their own comfort.

Tristan would instruct Mrs. Wilson to lock all cabinets and rooms where Cousin

Aubrey and Lady Lavinia were not allowed. Further, he would promise every servant, from Fredericks to the lowliest scullery maid, bonuses for dealing with the ridiculous demands of their unwanted guests.

“As you wish, Lady Lavinia.”

She smiled in triumph.

“Though, in the future, I would prefer to discuss such matters with my cousin directly. I shall have a word with him.” Tristan stared down Lady Lavinia. “It is most shameful that he sent you to do his bidding. I am appalled that my cousin could not rouse himself to ensure a roof over his wife’s head.”

They both knew that Lady Lavinia was the architect of this scheme. But castigating Aubrey made Lady Lavinia appear as if she were married to a coward and an imbecile, which for the record, Aubrey absolutely was. Or, if she protested her husband’s innocence and insisted she had come of her own will, she became a domineering shrew.

Neither was flattering.

Given how Lady Lavinia stiffened, Tristan’s barb had found its mark.

“Of course, Your Grace.” She curtsied again. “I shall leave you to your correspondence.”

Tristan sat and did not look up as she exited the room.

Yes, he and Isolde could not quit London soon enough.

How unexpected that I should be here, Isolde thought as she ascended the gilt staircase of Buckingham Palace, her hand snugged into Tristan's elbow.

After all, she had never planned to marry. She most certainly hadn't made husband-hunting her life's goal as did other women of the ton. Her attitude had been singular for an aristocratic lady—if she met a gentleman and fell in love, then she would marry.

Mostly, Isolde had supposed she would use her university education to further the cause of women—education, suffrage, and equal treatment under the law—content to spend her days on the fringes of Polite Society.

Instead, she had married and fallen in love with a powerful duke. Or rather, she had married and fallen in love with a remarkable man who made her laugh and met her as an equal. The dukedom was merely an unfortunate side effect.

So it therefore followed that Isolde hadn't particularly pondered what being a duchess would entail. Of course, if she had thought about it, she would have surmised that being the Duchess of Kendall would involve duties similar to her mother's position as Countess of Hadley—overseeing the household, hosting guests, making and receiving morning calls, and so forth.

But given the number of people who currently bowed, curtsied, and murmured greetings as she and Tristan climbed the stairs, Isolde had failed to envision the sheer scope of the role of Duchess of Kendall.

Once, she had inhabited the edges of Polite Society. Now, it appeared, she had moved to its very epicenter.

A sickening sort of nervousness coiled in her belly, like snakes writhing and spitting acidic venom into her throat. Would she be given the cut direct tonight? Or would she simply find her every word and gesture meticulously criticized in a gossip rag come morning?

She took a deep breath as she and Tristan reached the top of the staircase.

“You are magnificent, Duchess,” he murmured to her in a clipped tone completely at odds with the ardor of his words. “Magnificent and beautiful. Everyone here should grovel before you.”

Isolde shot him a thankful look. Trust her husband to be so absurd . . . and kind. Buoyed, she lifted her chin as they crossed the wide hallway to the main ballroom where Ethan would give his recital.

If either of them looked magnificent, it was Tristan. The close cut of his dark superfine coat showcased the power in his shoulders, and the white line of his collar accented the sharp angle of his jaw and the Mediterranean bronze of his skin. He appeared a tiger on a leash, civilized at the moment but ready to draw blood at the slightest provocation.

Tonight, his expression was pure Kendall—icy, contained, and impassive. Not a trace of her Tristan to be seen. Unlike his lashing anger over his cousin’s behavior, her husband’s mask was a deliberate ruse this evening.

“I know I need to adapt,” he had murmured to her in the carriage, “but I do not know how to be different in these sorts of situations. Not yet. Such change will take time. For tonight, I shall be the Duke of Kendall, but know that I am still your Tristan.”

She had nodded in understanding, and thus far, he had been true to his words—cool, haughty Kendall in tone and manner, but when he spoke to her, his words were pure Tristan.

It had been an unusual day. Fredericks had been unable, as of yet, to locate Mr. Ledger. Hopefully, the man would turn up soon . . . preferably by morning. Isolde knew Tristan found the silence from his former secretary somewhat concerning.

In the meantime, Tristan had enlisted Isolde to help him reply to correspondence. They had sat, side by side, in his study, pens scritchng as they wrote. That part of the day had been pleasant.

But Lady Lavinia's shrill voice making constant demands of the staff and Tristan's obvious frustration over Ledger's continued absence had dragged on Isolde's mood. Not to mention her own annoyance at realizing that Aubrey and Lady Lavinia would be in attendance tonight as well, courtesy of the Duchess of Andover. Tristan had sent them ahead in the town coach with Ethan and Allie, much to Isolde's relief. Lady Lavinia's caustic tongue and spiteful barbs were every whit as awful as Isolde remembered.

In short, Isolde could not wait to quit London before luncheon tomorrow, and God willing, go years before seeing Lady Lavinia again.

Tristan stopped just inside the ballroom door, rightfully intuiting that Isolde needed a moment to collect her bearings. For easily the hundredth time today, she felt a surge of affection for her husband.

She took in another slow, steadying breath . . . anything, really, to quell the snakes.

Ye can do this.

A crowd gathered around Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at one end of the room, the tiny queen's dark head scarcely visible over the hoop skirts of the other ladies. Chairs stood in neat rows facing an impromptu low stage, but guests roamed the room, talking and laughing. The queen stood and, therefore, so would her guests until Her Majesty stated otherwise.

Isolde spotted Allie and Ethan across the room, speaking with Lord Aberdeen, a distant cousin of Ethan's. Aubrey and Lady Lavinia were chatting with Lord and Lady Melbourne close by.

Isolde was about to suggest that she and Tristan find a quiet spot against one wall when a footman bowed before them.

"Your Graces," the man said. "Her Majesty wishes to speak with you both."

Isolde managed to hold back a sigh. Tristan merely nodded his head with terse, Kendall-like precision.

Dutifully, they both followed the man to where Her Majesty held court. Victoria appeared almost comically small beside Prince Albert and the other men hovering around her. Though scarcely five feet tall, she still radiated authority and control. The queen turned her blue eyes their way as they approached. Isolde felt every inch of her own towering height as she looked down at the queen. Did the top of Her Majesty's head even reach Isolde's shoulder?

"Kendall." Her Majesty inclined her head regally, truly the barest hint of a nod.

"Your Majesty." Tristan bowed and Isolde dropped into a deep curtsy.

Isolde had been presented at Court during her first season, right after Victoria ascended the throne, so she had met the queen once before.

Isolde couldn't reconcile that she and Victoria were nearly identical in age, both born in 1819. But whereas Victoria ruled an empire and had already borne five children, Isolde had attended university and was scarcely more than a month married, much less in a family way.

Their life experiences were vastly different.

"You are well, Kendall?" Her Majesty studied Tristan's face, a wee dent between her brows. "We had heard a rumor that you had suffered a deleterious head injury."

"I am as well as ever, Your Majesty. I suffered no injury." A muscle ticked in his jaw, the only evidence Isolde could see of his agitation. "I fear that rumor might have its origin with those who harbor ill intent. Many stand to gain from the dukedom if I am declared incapacitated."

Victoria merely stared at Tristan, expression impassive. "As you say. You do appear hearty enough, I suppose."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I would be more than happy to recite Latin declensions or perform mathematical calculations, if that would help put Your Majesty's mind at ease as to my intellectual fitness."

Tristan delivered the jest in such dry tones that it took Isolde a moment to register the humor. She bit her lip, barely stopping a startled, nervous giggle from escaping.

"We do not find your cheek amusing, Kendall," Victoria snapped.

"My apologies, Your Majesty."

"You would do well to behave impeccably for the next while, Kendall, as we assure ourselves that you are truly recovered. This is your new bride, I presume?" Victoria

surveyed Isolde with a censorious up-down glance that exuded acres of judgment about Isolde's choice of dress, exuberantly-colored hair, and excessive height. "We do not approve of your method of gaining a wife, Duke. We were seriously displeased when we heard of the mishap at Kew Gardens. 'Twas another mark against you. It is fortunate that you married post-haste."

Tristan tucked Isolde's hand closer to his body. "Despite our unorthodox beginning, Your Majesty, I consider myself the most blessed of men." Though he said the words in his expressionless Kendall voice, Isolde still felt heat flood her cheeks.

Victoria harrumphed, keeping her critical eye on Isolde. "We understand you are the eldest of Lord Hadley's daughters, Duchess."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"The daughter who attended university in Boston?"

"The very same, Your Majesty."

"Dreadful business, that." The queen fanned herself. "Women are not meant for such educational endeavors. I cannot imagine what your parents were thinking, permitting you to sail halfway around the world to sit amongst men while listening to more men lecture on topics that women have no reason knowing. The scandal."

Isolde's mouth flapped open for a second before she could rally her voice. "I cannot speak to other universities, Your Majesty, but Broadhurst College is a female-only institution. Yes, we did have the occasional male professor, but as ladies, we were always heavily chaperoned."

"Is that so?"

Isolde nodded, swallowing her tongue against offering to recite Latin declensions herself.

“Which subject was the focus of your studies?” Victoria asked.

“Engineering, Your Majesty.”

“Engineering? Such as building bridges or a steam railway, as if you were a man intent on employment?”

“The very same.”

“How preposterous!” Victoria’s fan picked up speed as if she might need smelling salts to accommodate the idea of a woman learning about Milton’s Laws of Motion or the physics of Mr. Watt’s steam engine. “Have you since repented of your decision?”

“Pardon, Your Majesty?”

“Have you repented of your decision to seek a university degree?”

Isolde froze, the air sucking from her lungs. Repent? Whyever would she repent of gaining an education? How could she reply without offending the queen, and by extension, Tristan and their potential future children?

“I c-cannot say I have given it much thought, Your Majesty,” she managed to stammer.

Victoria harrumphed again and then looked past Isolde, her eyes lighting up.

“Duchess,” the queen said, voice warm and welcoming to whomever she saw beyond Isolde’s shoulder. “I was merely telling Isolde, Duchess of Kendall, that she should

renounce her educational leanings immediately. They are hardly seeming for a woman of her station. A Duchess of the Realm must be of singular reputation.”

Isolde turned to see the Duchess of Andover, Lady Lavinia’s mother, standing behind her. Like her daughter, the Duchess had rather pinched features—a long, narrow face and an equally long nose that she now peered down to study Isolde, as if the woman were pinning Isolde like a moth to a board and examining her with a quizzing glass.

“Your Grace.” The Duchess of Andover tilted her head in Isolde’s direction.

“Your Grace,” Isolde said in return.

“I must agree, Your Majesty. The wrong education can indeed be perilously inappropriate for a woman,” the duchess said. “Dangerous even.”

How so? Isolde longed to ask. Is it the broadening of the mind? The cultivation of thoughts and ideas? But due to her expansive education, she recognized—with no small amount of irony—the strategic wisdom in holding her tongue.

“Well said, Duchess.” Victoria nodded in approval. “As usual, your wisdom and perspicacity are a boon to us all.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” The Duchess of Andover continued to stare at Isolde. “I have spent my days ensuring my own daughters do not harbor unseemly ambitions for such mannish pursuits. I am sure as Her Grace settles into her new role as duchess, she will heed the wisdom in Your Majesty’s words and forsake her more prurient endeavors.”

A terrible ringing started in Isolde’s ears. Was this true? Would her new station force her to abandon scientific interests? Why should anyone care what she did in her spare time?

Tristan cleared his throat at Isolde's side, pulling her hand tighter to his side. "We shall ensure that my new duchess is given ample time to settle into her role, Your Majesty."

Victoria shot Isolde what could only be described as a disappointed look. "We certainly hope so."

Forty minutes later, Isolde was still fuming—panicking? worrying?—over the Duchess of Andover's comments.

Never once had Isolde supposed that becoming the Duchess of Kendall would force her to cease scientific studies. The very idea was absurd. As long as she behaved with decorum, who should care if she attended the occasional lecture on current advancements in steam locomotion? Surely, the eyes of the ton would not always be watching. Or would her choices forever be grounds for debate?

What was she to do?

She and Tristan were now seated with the rest of the guests, listening as Ethan spoke from the dais at one end of the room. Allie sat on Tristan's opposite side, eyes staring raptly at her husband on the stage.

Tristan remained stoic and entirely Kendall-like—spine rigid and unbending. However, a trace of Tristan showed when he reached for Isolde's hand where it rested in her lap and gently pried open her clenched fist. Relax, his touch said. Isolde glanced up at him, and he rewarded her with a soft look, the sort that curled her toes in her silk stockings. She nearly sighed and sank her head against his shoulder in gratitude before remembering that noblemen and their ladies did not indulge in displays of affection in public.

Her name on Ethan's lips jerked her attention back to the poet.

“ . . . Iseult of legend. The poem, in the form of a dramatic monologue, details the final chapter of Iseult’s relationship with Sir Tristan,” Ethan was saying in his magnetic Scottish brogue. “As ye likely already know, the legend of Sir Tristan and Princess Iseult has echoes of King Arthur, Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot. But for the few who may not know the tale, I’ll give a wee summary. The story begins with Sir Tristan fetching the fair Princess Iseult of Ireland who is betrothed to his uncle and mentor, King Mark of Cornwall. However, on the long journey back to Cornwall, Sir Tristan and Princess Iseult accidentally ingest a love potion that compels them to fall in love with each other. They know their affections to be false, but unable to resist the pull of their attachment, they succumb to their baser impulses.”

Tristan’s fingers squeezed around her own. Isolde knew that he viewed his initial attraction to her as a form of madness—unable to stem the relentless pull to adore her.

She would be forever grateful that he came to his senses and stopped resisting.

Ethan continued, “As ye can imagine, chaos ensues. King Mark is incensed, and Sir Tristan and Princess Iseult are vilified for their scandalous behavior. Eventually, the love potion wears off and the lovers are set free. They each marry another and find some semblance of happiness. But years on, Sir Tristan is gravely wounded. As often happens in these tales, only Iseult’s presence and her link to the magical love potion can save him. My poem begins at the moment that Iseult receives word of Tristan’s injuries—her dramatic monologue is in response to the messenger’s summons. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Iseult of Ireland .”

Applause burst through the room.

Ethan grinned and held up a silencing hand. Clearing his throat, he clasped his hands behind his back and began reciting:

“Must I once more venture into madness?

You cry, ‘He is dying!’ and ‘Come in haste!’

But has it not been sufficient? The scope

Of my suff’ring? The folly of my heart?

Here, I am at peace with husband and child

And redemption beside me, my heart devoted

to another now. What care I if my

potion-magicked lover perish?”

Ethan continued. As usual, the poem shone with the brilliant luster of his wit and sharp insights.

Isolde saw much of her own current dilemma reflected in her namesake’s words on Ethan’s lips. She, too, had been at peace with her place in the world. Years ago, she had turned her back on Polite Society and created a life outside of it—one not dictated by tradition or custom, but of her own choosing.

But now, she was called to re-enter the world of her birth. How was she to manage it? How could she fit her square personality and interests into the round hole the ton demanded she be?

Isolde had adored her time at Broadhurst—interacting with other scientific-minded women, studying engineering and maths, consistently broadening her thoughts and abilities. It had been the definition of a dream realized.

Well, that was until Mr. Stephen Jarvis appeared on the scene. The youngest son of Lord Jarvis, he had relentlessly pursued her. Taken with his good looks and charm, Isolde had been flattered and more than willing to permit him to dance and flirt and, on more than one occasion, kiss her. She had even pestered her father into investing with Jarvis.

Unfortunately, the affair had detonated in spectacular fashion. First, she had discovered that Jarvis, the blackguard, was already married, his doting wife rustivating at home in Bristol. Then, Isolde learned that Jarvis was a fraudster and was using her father's reputation to swindle investors. Thankfully, Jarvis had been arrested, brought to trial, and convicted of his wrongdoings—receiving transportation for his behavior.

Miraculously, her indiscretions with Jarvis had never come to light. Isolde had demanded he return her letters and then burned their correspondence, reducing the information they contained to smoke and ash. No one outside of Jarvis himself and her parents knew the depth of her indiscretion. Well . . . and Tristan. He had unfortunately read the letters before she had burned them. But that chapter was behind her now.

Like Iseult of Legend, Isolde had experienced a sort of love-stricken madness with Jarvis. But she had thankfully come to her senses and broken off with the man.

Ethan's words cut through her thoughts:

“My calm rests, weary-winged, atop my breast.

I shan't disturb it. Forsooth—I will not!

What man merits the flight of tranquility?

None, I say!”

Hear, hear, Isolde thought, lifting an imaginary flute of champagne in Ethan’s direction.

She wrapped her fingers around Tristan’s hand still in her lap.

Who cared if Queen Victoria and all of Polite Society judged her? Isolde knew that the barbs about her unorthodox ways would not cease.

Fortunately, she and Tristan would be leaving for Hawthorn in the morning. Once there, they could ignore everyone else, discuss science or argue philosophy—or, even better, giggle at naughty limericks—and bury themselves in the joy of their newfound love.

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I solde clutched that promise right through to the next morning, holding it in her thoughts like a child's fist around a peppermint stick.

She awoke to gray sunlight glinting around cracks in the shutters and the faint sense that some noise had disturbed her sleep.

Frowning, she stared into the silent room, hearing nothing more than Tristan's soft breathing at her side.

Nonsense.

She wasn't ready to arise quite yet.

Sighing, she burrowed deeper into Tristan's arms.

A knock rang on their bedchamber door.

Gracious. Was that the sound that had awakened her? And who would disturb them at this hour? Tristan had given strict orders last night that they were not to be roused. They intended to have a long lie-in and then leave around luncheon for the countryside and Hawthorn.

The knock sounded again, more urgent this time.

Tristan groaned, eyes still closed.

Gently, Isolde pulled back from his arms.

“No,” he breathed, holding her fast. “Stay.”

She kissed his cheek before wiggling out of his embrace. “Let me at least send whoever it is away.”

He acquiesced with a frowning pout, his closed eyelashes fanning his upper cheek. Unable to resist, she pressed her lips to each of his eyelids in turn before sliding out of their bed.

Drawing on Tristan’s silk banyan, Isolde crossed to the door and opened it a crack.

“Yes?”

Fredericks stood on the other side. “I am terribly sorry for the disturbance, Your Grace, but your presence is needed immediately downstairs.”

Alarm zinged down Isolde’s spine. “Whatever is the matter?”

“I cannot say. But Lord and Lady Hadley are in the library and have requested to speak with Your Grace immediately.”

Isolde stared down at the copy of *The London Tattler* in her father’s hands.

“It scarcely makes sense.” She pressed fingertips to her forehead.

“Unfortunately, these things don’t have to make sense.” Lady Hadley wrapped an arm around Isolde’s shoulders.

“Eejits, the lot of them,” Hadley grunted, snapping the newspaper and tossing it atop

the map table.

Isolde pressed a hand to her stomach and the wretched nervousness gathered there. First, the Queen's barbs from last night—the veiled threat to Tristan, the demand that Isolde needed to alter fundamental parts of herself in order to fit in with the ton . And now this? What were they to do? How could Tristan—

Snick.

The library door opened and Tristan strode in. Unlike Isolde, who still wore his dressing gown, he had at least taken the time to comb his gray hair and pull on a pair of trousers and a white shirt with a silk banyan overtop.

His eyes met hers. “Whatever has happened?”

The anxiety in her gut clenched, and Isolde feared she would be sick. Poor Tristan. He didn't deserve this. He had known what marrying a scandalous woman like herself might bring, but to experience—

“Isolde?” Tristan crossed and pulled her trembling body into his arms. She melted into his chest, her elbows tucking in at her sides, her hands trapped between them. The warm smell of him engulfed her—soap, sandalwood, and male skin. He ran a soothing palm down her spine, and her eyes drifted closed. Anything to shut out the world and tamp down the frustrationembarrassmentanger currently racing through her veins.

“This is what happened,” Hadley said from behind her, followed by the sound of a finger tapping on paper.

Isolde knew the moment Tristan registered what the newspaper depicted. She could feel it in his sharp inhalation and the sudden tensing of his muscles.

The newspaper drawing burned in her mind, projecting onto the back of her eyelids.

The damaging image was a scathing political cartoon printed large on the second page of *The Tattler*. A lampoon of Ethan's poem of Princess Iseult, captioned "When Legends Go Awry" in scrolling letters.

The paper showed a drawing of Isolde, Duchess of Kendall—her red hair, freckles, and ridiculous height easily identifiable—a book titled *The Science of Infidelity* peeking out from the pocket of her dress. She was drawn in an amorous embrace with a smarmy, villainous-looking Stephen Jarvis with the label "Tristan" scrawled above his head. On the other side of the drawing stood the real Tristan—the Duke of Kendall complete with sharp jawline, gray hair, and an exaggerated nose—looking off into the distance like a prize idiot, oblivious to his wife's perfidious ways. The crown on his head read "King Mark." The text underneath stated, "Methinks, the man of power does not know what occurs under his own nose."

Merely the thought of all the cartoon implied sent bile climbing Isolde's throat once more. Even a rumor of such indiscretion would destroy a lady.

In short, it was a disaster.

Stephen Jarvis had been convicted of fraud not even two months ago in a high-profile trial. As his father was a member of the peerage, the case had received an inordinate amount of attention. Everyone would recognize Isolde's supposed lover in the drawing.

That Jarvis had known close ties to Lord Hadley and had spent time in Boston added credence to the story. How someone had uncovered Isolde's foolish behavior with Jarvis . . . she would likely never know. It was entirely possible—almost likely, in fact—that some associate of Jarvis's had leaked the information in a childish retaliation for his conviction.

Naturally, no one seemed to care that Jarvis was already on a boat to Australia and was nowhere near London or Isolde. Such pragmatic details were superfluous when there was salacious gossip to be had.

In the end, Isolde supposed the truth was rather irrelevant. The damage had been done, regardless.

Tristan's body had gone intensely still around her. Abruptly, she was glad she couldn't see his face—to witness his expression move from curiosity to outrage to dismay to, possibly, regret. Or worse, to watch him retreat deep within his Kendall self as if his soft Tristan soul needed to be protected from her notoriety.

Isolde's reputation had already been teetering on the edge of disaster. This would see it shattered entirely. Would she even be received anymore? For herself, she wasn't concerned. But for Tristan and their children's sake, she cared immensely.

“Those bastards,” Tristan hissed, the words rumbling through Isolde's body. “Who furnished them with this malevolent tripe? Can we sue The Tattler for libel?”

Tears stung her eyes. This dear man. She did not deserve him. Not his instant defense of her nor his loving heart. How she hated being yet one more problem for him to fix as if the weight of the dukedom and its thousands were not already sufficient alone.

“Unlikely,” her father said with a sigh. “If the allegations were entirely without merit, then possibly. But as we all know there to be a thread of truth to the claim . . .”

Isolde flinched.

“Andrew,” Lady Hadley said softly, “Isolde didn't know Jarvis was married when she met him in Boston.”

“Of course, Izzy didn’t,” Lord Hadley agreed. “But try convincing the nosy nebbies of the ton about it. They’ll be blethering on about this until next Spring at the least. It’s a disaster.”

Her mother sighed.

Tristan remained rock still. Blood pulsed in Isolde’s ears. Would the repercussions of her youthful stupidity ever end?

Silence hung in the room.

Isolde stirred in Tristan’s arms, thinking to step back, but he held her fast, refusing to let her go. She felt his lips brush her hair.

“Well,” her mother said, “though I know you both wished to leave for Hawthorn today, unfortunately, I think we will all need to remain in Town for a while yet.”

Isolde’s spirits plummeted. Stay here? With Aubrey and Lady Lavinia in residence?

“Though it pains me, I agree,” Tristan said on an exhaled breath. “If we leave now, it will appear we are running from the scandal. That we feel the rumor has merit.”

“Precisely,” Lady Hadley said. “The best antidote is to be seen and pretend like the cartoon is merely a ridiculous bit of nonsense. To that end, Isolde and I will leave calling cards, informing acquaintances of our intention to remain in Town, and begin morning visits.”

Her mother’s words sent Isolde’s spirits even lower. She detested morning visits—small talk and taking tea with ladies who said cruel things in elegant tones. It was torture, pure and simple.

But as Isolde's reckless behavior had led them to this moment, suffering through a handful of awkward visits was a suitable penance. She would keep a stiff upper lip and endure it like the foul-tasting physic it was.

"I'll stop by the printer's office and let them know of my displeasure," Hadley said. "Whoever provided the newspaper with this information will feel the edge of my wrath."

"I should very much like to join you in that, Hadley," Tristan said.

Isolde turned her head in Tristan's embrace, resting her cheek against his breastbone. "How long will we need to stay?"

"At least a month, I would think," her mother replied.

A month? At what point would Isolde's heart simply sink through the floor and into the earth below?

"And I wonder . . ." Lady Hadley's voice drifted off.

"What are you pondering, my love?" her father asked.

Her mother sighed. "I think we should consider a ball."

"Us?"

"No . . . Isolde and Tristan. Their first ball together as husband and wife. If we host the ball for them, then it's not a powerful statement. But if the Duke and Duchess of Kendall hold a ball . . . well, then it becomes an event. A bold stance, if you will. A direct challenge to any who would disparage our Isolde."

“A b-ball?” Isolde hated the tremor in her voice. Just pondering all the work hosting a ball would entail sent her thoughts reeling—the invitations, the decorations, the food, the extra staff to be hired. Not to mention the potential tinderbox of herself as a hostess. And what if, after all that, no one came?

“Yes, darling,” her mother said. “But I shall be here to assist you, as will Lady Allegra, I am sure. You will not be alone in this endeavor. We will ensure it is a raging success. I don’t think the dukedom has hosted a ball in at least two decades.”

“You are likely correct, Lady Hadley,” Tristan said. “Such entertainments were beneath my father’s dignity. Holding one now is a brilliant suggestion, as much as I personally dislike the thought. Of course, Isolde will shine.” He said the words boldly enough, but Isolde could hear the forced cheer in his voice.

“There you are,” Lady Hadley said. “A magnificent ball at Gilbert House, the first in over a generation. No one will be able to resist. And one cannot shun a lady and attend her ball at the same time. It will force the ton to choose a side. And I suspect everyone will side with attending. If nothing else, it will nearly guarantee that no one cuts our Isolde directly.”

Morning visits and now a ball?

It didn’t matter. Isolde would see her way through them. She had to. It was the least she owed Tristan for making such a muck of everything.

She ordered her tense stomach to settle.

Tristan hugged her tighter.

“All will be well, my love,” he whispered in her ear. “I shall see to it.”

At his words, alarm bells sounded in Isolde's mind.

No!

This was not Tristan's problem to solve. She was not his problem to solve. As Her Majesty's chiding words had proved last night, Isolde's tattered reputation was already a burden enough for him. Forcing others to accept her would solve nothing.

Isolde needed to rehabilitate her reputation herself.

Though he diligently tried to appear the unwavering ally, Isolde suspected that the real trick in all of this would be convincing Tristan himself that, despite her spectacular failures in the past, she could and would conquer this one on her own.

Tristan knew Isolde was upset. Given the events since their arrival in London, she had to be.

But his resilient wife refused to buckle. Though her pale cheeks and red-rimmed blue eyes spoke to turmoil within, her determination held firm.

Moreover, he knew that his lovely wife blamed herself for their current predicament.

“This is not your fault,” he told her after they retreated to their rooms to dress for the day. Still in shirtsleeves and trousers, he walked into his private study. Isolde paused in the doorway, his banyan engulfing her thin frame.

“Of course, it is my fault.” She shot him a look of pure disbelief. “I am the one who cavorted with a married man.”

“As your mother said, you didn’t know he was married. You certainly would have behaved differently had you known.”

“That hardly matters, as well you know.”

Anger surged through Tristan’s veins. He wanted to track down the blasted artist who drew that bloody cartoon and beat him senseless. He wanted to swaddle Isolde tightly, take her to Hawthorn, and spend the next year ignoring the outside world.

Isolde sighed and, pushing off of the door frame, walked into his study and slumped

into an armchair. She propped her head in one palm, causing his dressing gown to slip low on the opposite shoulder and uncover an expanse of her creamy skin. His lips tingled to kiss it. “That truth is unfortunately irrelevant. Gossiping tongues will not trouble themselves with details as mundane as facts.”

“Perhaps, but I refuse to let you carry the blame for this.”

“Ye be kind, my love, but it scarcely matters. Ye cannot force the ton to accept me.”

“Can I not?” He rather liked the thought of storming through the drawing rooms of Mayfair, demanding one and all treat his wife with respect.

“We both know my behavior is the only thing that will see this righted. I must be unimpeachable in my ladylike manner and address.”

“Isolde—”

She held up a hand to silence him and rose to her feet. Crossing, she slipped her arms underneath his banyan and wrapped them around his waist. Tristan pulled her against him.

Isolde pressed a kiss to his throat, her hands working to pull his shirttails from his trousers. “I know your magnificent heart wants to protect me, keep me wrapped in wool batting and—”

“Cotton,” Tristan grumbled.

“Pardon?”

“Cotton batting. I wish to keep you in cotton batting, not wool.” He slipped the dressing gown off her shoulder entirely, exposing her clavicle and more of her lovely

bare skin. “Less itchy.”

As he intended, Isolde laughed. “Cotton then, if you insist.”

He dragged a thumb across her collarbone. “I can’t bear the thought of anything marring your skin.”

She showered kisses on his jaw as a thank you for the compliment. “I know it will be difficult for yourself, but ye need to let me mend this situation on my own.”

“Isolde—”

“Tristan, I am asking ye to trust me.”

He greatly disliked where this conversation was heading. “Of course, I trust you.”

“Ye ken that’s not precisely what I mean—the general promise of my trust. I want your word that ye will let me rehabilitate my reputation in my own fashion. No bloodying newspaper editors or throwing verbal daggers at gossiping matrons.”

“Now you are spoiling my favorite pastimes.”

His beautiful wife laughed again, sliding her hands under his shirt and up his bare back. The heat of her palms singed his nerves. “For your own sake, ye may look imposing and autocratic. I will also say nothing if ye decide to toss Cousin Aubrey and Lady Lavinia into the street.”

Tristan raised his eyebrows. “Don’t tempt me. It’s bad enough to be stuck in Town, but to be forced to endure my odious cousin and his wife . . . I should have kicked them to the curb when I had the chance. If I do so now, it will look unforgivably petty and add to the furor surrounding us.”

“Aye, having them in our home will be trying while attempting to heal my reputation. Again, I am asking ye to let me fight this battle in my own way.”

Tristan sighed. Yes, this was what he feared. “I don’t like that idea.”

“I know ye don’t, but I’m asking ye anyway.” Her clear blue eyes held his. “Promise me?”

He stared at her, at the love and pleading shining in her gaze.

Curse her. He could not deny her this. “Very well. I promise.”

She grinned in triumph.

“But know that it is under duress,” he continued, “and if at any point you feel overwhelmed, you will tell me.”

“I will. But my mother has the right of it, and her ideas are sound. She and I will make calls, send out invitations, and prepare everything for us to host our first ball. As ye said earlier, all will be well, my love. Trust that I shall see to it.”

Tristan frowned, a host of objections marshaled atop his tongue.

But then his diabolical wife slid her hands up his spine and pressed her lush mouth to his and all coherent thoughts fled.

Tristan suspected he would see little of Isolde during daylight hours for the next few weeks. After dressing, Isolde had left with Lady Hadley and Allie to begin their “war room” planning, as his twin put it.

The thought frustrated him. He itched to help, too. He wanted to be part of the ladies’

fight. But that wasn't how their world functioned. Not in this, at least.

Within Polite Society, lords and ladies inhabited different spheres and, consequently, led essentially separate lives. Basically, the higher the rank, the greater the wealth, the less time one spent with one's spouse. To London's elites, husbands and wives should focus on their own domains and, consequently, interact as little as possible. Doting upon one's wife was viewed as emasculating and weak.

Who the bloody hell had decided that? They clearly had not had a wife as enchanting and clever as Isolde.

So in order to change opinions of her behavior, Isolde needed to be seen about Town with Lady Hadley and Allie, calling upon friends, attending visiting hours, and behaving exactly as a typical lady of her station should behave . . . no Tristan in sight.

The very notion was ludicrous. Tristan wanted to escort Isolde through London drawing rooms himself and scowl threateningly at anyone who said anything even faintly rude. And then return home and spend the rest of the day closeted together—reading alongside one another, debating a scientific article, perhaps raiding the kitchen larder for biscuits in the wee hours of the morning.

That said, the political side of his brain understood the wisdom in Isolde's reasoning and the strategic logic in adhering to societal norms. So, though trying for himself, Tristan would respect her request.

However, there remained little for Tristan to do in London.

Mr. Eliason and Mr. Cartwright were busy tending to the duchy's properties, and they certainly didn't need, nor even want, their employer's interference. And Adam Ledger had yet to surface.

So how was Tristan to organize his days? Dine at White's, his gentleman's club, and try to resurrect the few acquaintanceships he had managed before his marriage to Isolde? Visit Tattersalls and contemplate new horses for his stables? Or do as most gentlemen of his set, frequent gaming hells in Covent Garden and develop a gambling addiction?

None of those options sounded particularly appealing. He needed to discover how to spend his time now that his political ambitions had evaporated. A way to merge his Kendall and Tristan selves into something useful and admirable without Isolde on his arm.

Establishing a purpose for his days would be simpler if he had a secretary. There was always correspondence to assess and letters to be written. Therefore, the issue of Mr. Adam Ledger's whereabouts remained problematic.

Naturally, Tristan could simply hire another secretary.

But . . . the thought filled him with repugnance, though he could scarcely say why.

Ledger had been dismissed without a letter of recommendation—Aubrey and his disgraceful behavior be cursed. Such an act was calamitous for an employee, as Tristan's cousin well knew. All hiring of staff was based upon provided references. Without them, a man or woman would find themselves unemployable. Tristan was furious that Ledger had been discharged in such a fashion.

Perhaps that was why, after everything, he felt some loyalty to Ledger and a need to make amends. Tristan had been raised a duke, after all. His entire existence hinged on his ability to assist those within his care.

Initially, Tristan had assumed that locating Ledger would be a simple task, but it had been over a day and no one had uncovered his whereabouts. That, in and of itself,

wasn't quite cause for alarm. But it did underscore that Ledger hadn't been waiting around for Tristan to return, nor had he attempted to send word to Tristan directly. So where had the man gone?

Unfortunately, despite Ledger having been his secretary for several years, Tristan knew little beyond Ledger's behavior as his employee—dependable, competent, quick to enact verbal instruction, and patient with his brisk, occasionally volatile ducal employer.

But Tristan understood next to nothing of the man's history or background, and what he did know was sparse. Ledger was around Tristan's own age and unmarried—hence his lodging under the roof of Gilbert House. He was tall, brown-eyed, and brown-haired, with pallid skin from his time spent indoors.

That was rather the sum total of Tristan's knowledge.

How odd, he thought. To know intimately the shape and weight of Ledger's handwriting—the unique turn of his phrasing, the deep timbre of his voice—but almost nothing else.

"I cannot say I know much more than Fredericks, Your Grace," Mrs. Wilson said when he asked her about Ledger. They were seated in his large study. Rain pattered against the window at Tristan's back and cast the room in gloomy blue light. "Mr. Ledger generally kept to himself, as befitting one of his station. Like a governess or lady's companion, Mr. Ledger is a gentleman and behaved like one at all times. I am sure that is why he became so agitated over Mr. Gilbert's behavior."

"Mr. Gilbert's behavior?" Tristan's eyebrows lifted. "What do you mean? My cousin's dismissal of Ledger?"

"No . . ." Mrs. Wilson paused, chin lifting. "Did Fredericks not mention the

incident?”

“Incident?” Tristan sat up straighter. “What incident?”

The housekeeper bit her lip.

“Out with it, if you please, Mrs. Wilson,” he beckoned.

The woman practically wrung her hands. “You must understand, Your Grace, that I do not have a habit of listening at keyholes.”

“Of course not, Mrs. Wilson.”

“But the presence of Mr. Gilbert and Lady Lavinia has been trying.”

“Naturally. My cousin and his wife would try the patience of the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, so that is understandable. Please tell me what occurred.”

Mrs. Wilson swallowed. “Very well. On the day Mr. Ledger was let go, I did chance to overhear an argument between Mr. Ledger and Mr. Gilbert. I gathered that Mr. Ledger had discovered Lady Lavinia and Mr. Gilbert rifling through papers in Your Grace’s private study.”

Tristan stilled. He had suspected as much, but now it was confirmed. “I had noticed items had been disturbed there.”

A sick queasiness rippled through his gut. The pair had surely returned to ransack his private domain more than once. What had they discovered? Heaven knew he had all sorts of damning papers in his private study, including his notes on Hadley’s interactions with Jarvis and Isolde’s indiscretion. A vision of the satirical cartoon danced before Tristan’s eyes. Had Aubrey and Lady Lavinia provided the information

to The Tattler , as well?

Tristan breathed slowly through a surge of white-hot anger.

“Yes, well, Mr. Ledger took Mr. Gilbert to task, repeating that Your Grace was indeed alive and would not look kindly on Mr. Gilbert or his wife disturbing Your Grace’s possessions. Mr. Gilbert replied that he didn’t believe Your Grace to be living. He insisted that Your Grace would have returned to London if you were indeed well and whole. Ledger called that balderdash.”

Astute man. Yet another reason to like Mr. Ledger.

“The altercation led to Mr. Ledger’s dismissal on the spot,” Mrs. Wilson finished.

“I see.” Poor Ledger. He had merely been doing his job. The man deserved a commendation and a raise in pay, not the abysmal treatment Aubrey had delivered. “And you have no inkling of where Ledger may have hied off to? A relative, perhaps?”

The housekeeper pursed her lips. “He does have a sister who lives here in London. Somewhere near St. Paul’s Cathedral, I think. Mr. Ledger would visit her every Sunday afternoon for dinner.”

The fact of a sister was more than Tristan knew.

“Do you know the address or any other helpful thing about the sister?”

“I can’t say that I do, Your Grace. However, Mr. Ledger was let go so quickly, he did not have time to arrange other accommodations first. Instead, he packed his trunk and asked if he could leave it with me until such a time as he could send for it.”

“Ledger left his trunk?” This was the first Tristan had heard of it. “And has Ledger sent for it?”

“Not as of yet, Your Grace.”

“Hasn’t it been over three weeks since his dismissal? I find that odd in the extreme.”

“As do I, Your Grace.”

Damn and blast! Where had the man gone? Worry set its claws into Tristan’s shoulders. It beggared belief that the capable, organized Ledger would have waited weeks to collect his trunk were he in Town. But perhaps he had returned home, wherever that might be?

Tristan was unsure what to do. Ledger’s trunk could be a potential treasure trove of information about the man, and Tristan hated the thought of waiting for Ledger to reappear. But rifling through Ledger’s personal effects in search of clues felt like the height of betrayal, particularly if the man had merely washed his hands of the dukedom. Tristan would only stoop to opening the trunk if absolutely necessary.

The information that Ledger had a sister in Town was helpful. “Mrs. Wilson, could you inquire of the staff if anyone knows where Ledger’s sister resides? I wish to locate him and right this wrong. Perhaps he is lodging with her.”

“Of course, Your Grace. I shall do so immediately.” Mrs. Wilson bobbed a curtsy and took her leave.

Tristan stared at the closed door of his study, fingers drumming on his desk. His first impulse was to hire an investigator to look into Ledger’s disappearance, but even he knew that such an action was premature.

And yet . . . why did he feel such urgency with this issue? It was odd. Surely, Ledger was merely staying with some relative, licking his wounds and searching for new employment, content to leave his trunk here until he had a new home for it.

Regardless, Tristan would locate his former secretary and make what restitution he could. His conscience demanded no less.

The next day, Tristan found himself desperate to escape his house.

Escape! His own house!

When he arrived in the breakfast room, he discovered Cousin Aubrey already seated at the table—looking and acting as if he were the lord of the manor—one hand tipping a teacup for a loud slurp and the other holding Tristan’s copy of *The Times* that Fredericks religiously ironed every morning.

“Dreadful business with that cartoon yesterday, Your Grace,” Aubrey said with oblivious cheer. “Terribly shocking to see the duchess being accused of such a scandal.”

Truly, the man was a prize idiot.

Tristan merely stared him down with the piercingly cold look his ducal father had modeled. How was he to merge his Kendall and Tristan selves with imbeciles like his cousin breathing down his neck? Being haughty Kendall was the only way to deal with the Aubreys of the world.

After a moment, Aubrey’s bravado faltered. He looked away and set his teacup down with a clink. Tristan crossed and removed the newspaper from his cousin’s grasp with a sharp tug.

“As I will be in residence for several more weeks and I wish to enjoy a modicum of

privacy and respect in my own home,” Tristan said in unnervingly quiet tones, “I request that you refrain from making even obliquely disparaging remarks about my duchess. They will not be tolerated under my own roof.”

Aubrey swallowed.

“Furthermore, if you wish a copy of The Times , you may purchase one from the seller on the corner or wait until my duchess and I are done with our copy. Am I clear?”

Aubrey swallowed. “Y-yes, Your Grace.”

“Goodness, such a stern demeanor so early, Your Grace,” a feminine voice said from the doorway.

Tristan turned and watched Lady Lavinia all but flounce across the room to sit beside her husband. A footman along the wall instantly moved to fill her teacup.

Gritting his teeth, Tristan sat at the head of the table, motioning for the footman to fill his cup with tea as well. He resisted the urge to request a finger of brandy to accompany it.

“Did Aubrey mention that dreadful cartoon we saw yesterday in The Tattler ?” The glee in Lady Lavinia’s voice utterly contradicted the seriousness of her words.

Tristan merely let the absurdity of her tone echo around the room as he speared her with the same look he had leveled at her husband.

Unfortunately, Lady Lavinia was made of sterner stuff and was therefore undeterred. “Mamma was horrified, as was Her Majesty. Truly, Your Grace, you have scarcely been in London for two days, and already the duchess has shocked London with—”

“Lady Lavinia,” Tristan cut her off with venomous bite, “before you say anything further, permit me to repeat what I just said to your husband—anyone who wishes to reside under my roof will refrain from making disparaging remarks about my duchess. Is that understood?”

The woman’s back straightened, her lips drawing down into a thin line. Of a surety, her meddling mother would hear of his sharp words and would use them to justify spitting more vitriol.

Tristan turned his gaze to Aubrey. “Additionally, I know you ransacked my personal papers—the ones housed in my private study—on more than one occasion. If I find that either of you—” Here he darted his gaze between Aubrey and Lady Lavinia. “—have been complicit in besmirching the character of my duchess, well . . .” He let his threat dangle off ellipses.

Silence crackled in the room.

Lady Lavinia wet her lips. “Well, what . . . Your Grace?”

A terrible astonished silence met her words, as if even the footmen standing at attention against the walls held their breath to see how Tristan would respond.

Damn, this woman was an abomination. Her cheek knew no bounds.

“Well,” Tristan continued in his silkiest ducal voice. The menacing one that had sent chills down his spine to hear on Old Kendall’s lips. “You shall both understand how thoroughly I learned lessons at my father’s knee.”

Old Kendall’s cruelty was well-known, particularly among their family.

Given Lady Lavinia’s inhalation, she was not immune to Tristan’s threats, thank

goodness. Of a surety, every word he spoke would be reported back to her mother and on to the queen. For a man who wished to ensure Her Majesty believed him to be of sound mind, his behavior likely needed to be more temperate. That knowledge was the only thing stopping him from evicting Aubrey and Lavinia on the spot.

Tristan could feel a headache forming between his eyes. He and Isolde should have ignored the Queen's summons, retreated to Canna, and spent their days blessedly oblivious to the machinations of the wider world.

"Good morning," Isolde said from the doorway.

Standing, Tristan turned to his wife. As usual, his duchess was unbearably lovely in a lace-trimmed walking dress that accentuated her lithe height and small waist. Against the cream of her skin and the burnished copper of her hair, she stole his breath as surely as a Highland breeze.

Isolde appeared every whit the wealthy duchess she was, which was fortunate as she and Lady Hadley were to leave calling cards today.

However, one look at the expressions of everyone in the room, and Isolde faltered. Oh, Tristan doubted that Lady Lavinia or Cousin Aubrey noticed, but he knew his love. He could see the dismay flicker behind her eyes and the quick intuitive understanding that scurrilous words had recently been said about her. Moreover, the faint purple smudges under her eyes spoke to her own restless night. She claimed it was nothing, but Tristan feared the tumult of the past twenty-four hours was already taxing her fortitude.

"Good morning." Tristan pulled out the chair next to his and, pressing a hand to the small of Isolde's back, guided her to sit. "Permit me to fetch a plate for you, my dear."

He crossed to the series of dishes sitting on the sideboard, but not before hearing Lady Lavinia's faint snort of derision.

Bloody hell, the next month was going to prove long.

Lady Hadley arrived shortly after breakfast. And though Tristan could scarcely believe his own thoughts, he was eternally grateful that Lord Hadley accompanied her. It was a comfort to see a familiar male ally.

The ladies quickly gathered their things and drove away in the gleaming ducal carriage. Watching the coach melt into the traffic of Grosvenor Square, Tristan bemoaned, yet again, that accompanying Isolde would be frowned upon. No wonder aristocratic marriages were generally business-like, chilly affairs.

"Care to join me today, Kendall?" Hadley asked from behind him. Tristan looked back at his father-in-law standing in the main entrance hall, hat in hand.

"I would be delighted, Hadley." Though the men had moved on to a first-name basis with one another, they continued to use their titles in company.

Hadley grinned. "I haven't mentioned where I might be going."

"It hardly matters," Tristan muttered, his eyes sliding toward the breakfast room where Lady Lavinia's strident voice could still be heard. He motioned for Fredericks to fetch his coat, hat, and gloves. "Wherever you are going, Hadley, it's not here, and that makes it perfect."

"Let's see what ye have to say about it in a few hours' time," Hadley chuckled.

Minutes later, Tristan happily climbed into Hadley's town carriage, sitting beside his father-in-law.

Their first stop? The offices of The London Tattler .

“Bless you,” Tristan murmured as he stepped from the carriage. “How did you know I needed to release a head of steam?”

Chuckling, Hadley patted his back. “Consider it a belated wedding gift.”

Tristan donned his haughtiest look and demanded to speak with the editor. The man emerged from a back room, unconcerned and arrogant.

After ten minutes of Tristan’s blistering set-down and threats of legal action, the man was reduced to white-faced, stammering apologies. He admitted that the information had been sent anonymously to the newspaper. Recalling Lady Lavinia’s smug expression earlier, Tristan suspected he knew the source.

Needless to say, the editor would think thrice before publishing anything so incendiary about the Duchess of Kendall again.

“I must say, witnessing all that Kendall vitriol wielded on behalf of my daughter rather warms my heart,” Hadley said as they settled back into the carriage. “We should have brought yourself over to our side years ago.”

“Do not push your luck, Hadley,” Tristan snorted. “Your fair daughter possesses many fine qualities that you yourself lack. Where are we off to next?”

“Ye shall see.”

It became something of a lark after that, trying to decipher beforehand where they might go.

Hadley took Tristan to visit his haberdasher, purchasing a new top hat while Tristan

browsed kid leather riding gloves.

Then, they consulted with Barkers, the foremost carriage-maker in Town, on the building of a new coach. Tristan offered opinions as Hadley selected an elegant style of brass fittings for the black lacquered doors.

After, they took a leisurely lunch at an inn near Whitehall, supping on roasted lamb and potatoes.

All in all, Tristan was having an agreeable day.

“One more stop for the day,” Hadley announced as they ducked into the carriage after lunch.

Half an hour later, the coach rocked to a halt. Tristan peered out the window.

“Brooks?” He spat the word like an epithet.

Hadley laughed. “It’s not as bad as all that. Come. I ken ye will find Brooks a welcoming place.”

Brooks was the gentlemen’s club of choice for the more liberal Whig segment of the House of Lords. White’s was the preferred club for Tory conservatives.

Generations of Kendalls had passed through the door of White’s. However, Tristan suspected today would mark the first time a Duke of Kendall had darkened the halls of Brooks.

It was . . .

Well, Tristan was unsure how to feel.

His father was likely raging in Hell at the blasphemy, so Tristan counted that as a positive. And his marriage to Isolde had dashed his political prospects, so attending Brooks would have no repercussions there. Not to mention, being seen in Hadley's company would bolster their claims of familial harmony.

But would Tristan himself enjoy it?

Perhaps Hadley was right. This could be a new place to belong. As he handed his hat to the doorman, he realized he was about to find out.

On the whole, Brooks appeared similar to White's—acres of rich wood paneling, thick carpets, overstuffed armchairs, and the lingering smell of pipe smoke.

But the atmosphere . . .

White's was a quiet, staid affair. Murmured conversations, the rustle of newspaper, the occasional snore from an elderly member napping in a chair.

By contrast, Brooks was laughter, back-slapping, and hollered greetings. No one could nap in this place.

“Hadley!” A liberal lord at the back of the main sitting area called, shouting the earl's name with the same fervor as that of a returning hero.

Heads turned their way.

“Hadley!” another called. “At last! You've returned to Town!”

Another gentleman immediately crossed to greet him.

“Terrible business with that impeachment, Hadley. So glad that is behind you! That

damned Kendall can go rot in—” The man paused, abruptly realizing who stood at Hadley’s shoulder.

“Ah, yes.” Hadley turned to Tristan. “As ye know, I had the good fortune to acquire Kendall as a son.”

The man’s horrified expression said louder than words his opinion on the matter.

The next twenty minutes did not improve—not in Tristan’s reception nor his own rapidly lowering mood.

Hadley continued his celebratory procession—hand shaking, shoulder gripping. And every time, Hadley turned to introduce Tristan to another acquaintance, the same scenario occurred.

The gentleman in question would freeze, his expression going rigid and his entire demeanor stiffening. As if Tristan were a foul-smelling breeze and the gentleman was unsure if he should press a handkerchief to his nose and suffer through or beat a hasty retreat.

Tristan could feel his Kendall mask hardening with every passing moment.

Clearly, this was no place for him.

He simply didn’t know how to be an open book like Hadley. Even the thought of attempting it felt too vulnerable, too exposed, particularly as gentleman after gentleman appeared uneasy in his presence.

In years past, Tristan had firmly believed himself to be unlikeable. Allie and Isolde—along with his half-brother, Sir Rafe Gordon—had disabused Tristan of that notion, and he now recognized the real harm his father’s abuses had incurred. But a

lifetime of belief was difficult to erase entirely. And the response of gentlemen whom he had long viewed as adversaries rather confirmed his beliefs. That, for certain people, Tristan truly was repellent.

In short, despite the enormous adjustments he had made and how changed he felt as a result, he was still intrinsically unlikeable. He had simply managed to dupe Isolde and Sir Rafe into liking him. And, perhaps, Hadley and Penn-Leith. But then, Hadley and Ethan generally liked everyone, so that was hardly an achievement.

Perhaps there truly would be no place for him, no purpose outside of his ducal responsibilities to land and tenants. And given that he had promised not to interfere as Isolde faced the combined disdain of the ladies of the ton . . .

Jittery tension tightened his arm muscles and set his heart to pounding.

Ah.

He had forgotten this feeling. This unsettling energy that scoured his veins and urged him to lash out. To attack others before they attacked him. Since his marriage, the emotion had largely retreated.

But now . . .

Tristan swallowed.

Normally, Ledger would have arranged a bout with a fencing master for him. A gentlemanly way to release the frustration, the agitation, leaching into Tristan's veins.

But Ledger had taken that knowledge with him, adding one more layer to Tristan's unrest. Likely, Ledger didn't wish to be found. After all, even before Aubrey's arrival, Tristan had not been the easiest employer. The thought that Ledger was

deliberately avoiding his company merely amplified the restlessness scouring his limbs. One more person who did not wish to be in Tristan's orbit and had eagerly seized upon the opportunity to escape it.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity—though the mantel clock chimed barely an hour—Hadley noticed Tristan's rigid shoulders and monosyllabic responses.

“Had enough, Kendall?” he murmured.

“More than enough.” Tristan gave a white-lipped smile.

Neither man said a word as the carriage made its slow way back to Grosvenor Square, fighting the tide of London traffic. Tristan pushed back his increasingly morose thoughts.

Isolde loved him and that was sufficient.

Upon arriving home, he would task Fredericks with acquiring some wood to chop in the mews. Anything to vent this anxious energy.

What was the use of being a duke if one could not embrace an occasional act of eccentricity?

Mayhap that should be his motto.

Isolde was exhausted and the day was scarcely half over. Her nerves skittered and hummed, and her stomach tightened as though seized by a swarm of insects. Worse, her eyelids felt laden with sand, and her head kept drooping in sleep. She would need to retire earlier this evening and ensure she got sufficient rest.

She and her mother had left calling cards at the homes of every family member and acquaintance currently in Town. Ostensibly, the cards served the purpose of letting people know that the Duchess of Kendall and her mother, the Countess of Hadley, were in residence and willing to receive callers.

However, everyone would see their calling cards for what they truly were—the new Duchess of Kendall and her allies returning fire after a debilitating enemy attack. Facing the combined righteous condemnation of the ton had not been part of Isolde’s planning—for the day, the week, or quite frankly, ever.

Never before had she so thoroughly appreciated her mother’s strategic understanding of the social mores of their world.

“We must begin organizing the ball,” her mother said as they handed their hats and gloves to Fredericks after returning home from their calling card mission. “Let us summon Mrs. Wilson, as we will certainly require the combined efforts of your household staff, and begin discussing preparations.”

Must we? Isolde longed to say.

Instead, she nodded to her mother before turning to Fredericks. “Has His Grace returned home?”

Maybe Tristan could join them in their planning. Unorthodox, of course, but as the meeting would be behind closed doors . . . who would know? She could rest her head on his shoulder and soak in his strength as they discussed menus and invitation paper.

“His Grace has not yet returned with Lord Hadley, Your Grace.”

“Oh.” That was all Isolde could manage to say, as if the simple syllable could capture the ache in her chest.

It had scarcely been half a day, and she already missed Tristan with a vicious pang. This was the problem with loving her husband with her whole soul, she was coming to realize—when he was away, he took a portion of her with him, and she pined until that portion was returned.

Numbly, Isolde turned and followed her mother into the small drawing room, limbs heavy with fatigue. Fantasies played through her mind—seeking her bed, sleeping the afternoon away, cuddling Tristan when he returned, and filling her lungs with the scent of his sandalwood cologne.

Did she simply need more sleep? Or was she perhaps feeling a tinge of melancholy? Isolde had never been the sort to suffer from a depression of spirit, but so much had happened in recent weeks that a wee stumble would not be surprising.

Most likely, she simply needed a jolt of coffee and food in her belly.

The housekeeper was duly summoned, a pot of coffee and sandwiches delivered, and two hours later, they had composed a comprehensive list of everything that needed to happen.

Tristan still had yet to return. Isolde knew because she cocked an ear toward the entrance hall every time someone opened the front door. But she hadn't heard the comforting sound of his deep voice.

Exhaustion had Isolde stifling yawns.

"Mrs. Wilson will see to the food and decorations, as well as the hiring of additional staff," Lady Hadley said after the housekeeper departed, shuffling their foolscap lists on the table where they sat. "You are most fortunate to be inheriting such a competent woman."

"Aye," Isolde agreed, her cheek resting on her palm. The coffee had helped somewhat, but her eyelids still sagged as if weighted with lead.

"I will have the haberdasher send over some ribbon samples so we may decide on trim colors for the flowers and chairs. The real challenge will be writing out the invitations."

"Aye." That was true. Ideally, all invitations should be hand-addressed by the hostess herself. Which, of course, Isolde would do. But as they wished the ball to be a crush, that meant a significant number to be written.

Maybe after a good night's rest, Isolde would feel up to—

Snick.

The door opened. Isolde jerked upright as Lady Lavinia swished into the room.

"Oh," she paused in mock surprise, hand pressed to her bosom, "I apologize for the intrusion. I didn't realize this room was occupied."

Truly, the woman should be a better actress if she wished to feign innocence. She knew perfectly well she was interrupting.

“May we help ye, Lady Lavinia?” Isolde asked.

Lady Lavinia looked around the room as if searching for a convincing lie to account for her intrusion, but then, with a small shrug, gave up the pretense entirely.

“Mrs. Wilson mentioned that there is to be a ball? Here? At Gilbert House?”

Ah. There it was. Lady Lavinia’s nosiness laid bare.

“There is. In just over three weeks’ time.” Lady Hadley clasped her hands on the table, the white press of her knuckles reflecting Isolde’s own frustration with this woman.

Lady Lavinia’s nose wrinkled. “Three weeks? Isn’t that a bit . . . ambitious, all things considered?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Lady Hadley stared at Lady Lavinia, her face politely bland. Unlike her foe, Isolde’s mother was an excellent actress.

The question put Lady Lavinia on her back foot, her expression faltering.

A smile tugged at Isolde’s lips. Her mother rarely entered the ring swinging as it were, but if anyone could bring out the haughty side of Lady Hadley, it would be Lady Lavinia. In Isolde’s experience, Lady Hadley could be terrifying when provoked.

Bless her mother for knowing exquisitely well how to play these social games.

Lady Lavinia rallied. “I have been hearing such . . . things about Town.” Her gaze deliberately flickered to Isolde, leaving no doubt as to the nature of said things . “I am merely surprised, is all. I would be devastated for you both if no one attended.”

Isolde sincerely doubted Lady Lavinia would feel anything other than glee if Isolde’s first ball as duchess were a disaster.

“I still struggle to understand your meaning, Lady Lavinia,” Lady Hadley repeated. “Please enlighten us as to the people and things that are being said.”

Ah.

Isolde wanted to applaud. Trust her mother to corner Lady Lavinia so effectively. Now, the lady either had to back down or repeat mean gossip to Isolde’s face.

“Oh, I wouldn’t repeat anything,” Lady Lavinia said with saccharine sweetness. “It’s merely, as the daughter of a duke, I understand how these things are arranged perhaps a bit better than others.” Again, her eyes darted to Isolde.

Isolde nearly laughed at her audacity.

Lady Hadley’s expression did not change, but Isolde could feel her mother’s rage rising.

“Is that so?” Lady Hadley said. “As the daughter of a Duke of Montacute myself, I understand your point, Lady Lavinia . . . specifically how gauche it would be, for example, to correct my social superiors.”

Lady Hadley’s words landed with the precision of a sharp fist to the jaw. And given how Lady Lavinia’s expression contracted and her head snapped back, she felt the jolting impact.

She lifted her chin higher. “Of course. I shall leave you ladies to your planning then.”
She curtsied and shut the door behind her with a clack.

Isolde and her mother exchanged a long look.

“And there is no way to send them packing?” Lady Hadley asked on a sigh.

Isolde shook her head. “Unfortunately, no. Not without dealing another harsh blow to my reputation.”

“That woman is wretched.”

“Agreed. Allie refers to her as ‘the ferret’.”

Lady Hadley cracked a weary smile. “I do dearly love Lady Allegra. Lavinia does indeed resemble a weasel, now that I think upon it. That is a delicious image.”

“I find it soothing when Lady Lavinia is at her most fractious.”

“You and Tristan may come stay with us, you know.”

Isolde pressed her fingertips to her brow. “Thank you, Mamma, but Tristan will not cede the house to his upstart relatives. Besides, Allie and Ethan are still in residence, and we can hardly abandon them.”

Her mother’s lips pursed. “Don’t hesitate to tell me, your father, or Tristan if matters become too heavy.”

“I won’t,” Isolde said.

But even that felt like a lie. The entire affair already felt too heavy.

What she wanted was quiet and a modicum of peace. To return to Canna and be lulled to sleep by the sound of the ocean and Tristan's breathing at her back and forget that London and its societal stratagems existed.

However, as Isolde had created this mess, she needed to be the one to see it cleaned.

And clean it, she would.

Tristan's week did not improve.

None of the servants had any knowledge of Ledger's sister or her whereabouts. Ledger himself certainly hadn't appeared. Worry tugged at Tristan's mind. What had happened to the man?

A part of Tristan's heart—the tenderest portion, the one that still housed a lonely, friendless boy—couldn't shake the fear that Ledger was simply avoiding him. That Ledger had fled and said good riddance to Tristan and the duchy altogether.

When studied in the light of day, however, Tristan recognized the thought for the self-pitying refrain that it was. But as he was learning, oftentimes the heart didn't deal in rationality.

Adding to his woes, Tristan saw little of Isolde during daylight hours. He missed passing the hours with her, exchanging ideas and talking endlessly about everything from Descartes to gardening.

Having never loved like this before, he hadn't known Isolde's absence could make his ribs ache. It felt akin to nails scraping his chest from within—a constant irritation that only her presence could soothe.

Isolde herself appeared in good spirits. Like her father, her good humor rarely

flagged.

But Tristan couldn't help but notice that she wasn't sleeping well. Each night, she retired early only to spend hours tossing and turning in his arms, as if her mind wrestled with difficulties that her muscles tried to sort out.

However, when Tristan asked her about it, she brushed off his concerns.

"I assure ye, I am well, Husband," she said, as she drew a Kashmiri shawl around her shoulders, preparing to pay a round of morning visits with her mother. "It's merely a wee bout of insomnia. It will pass."

"I'm not sure I believe you." Tristan folded his arms. The morning light from the single window of her dressing room caught the golden highlights in her hair and made him yearn to see it tumbled down her back.

But then, he wished to spend every waking moment with his lovely bride. This forced separation was torturous.

Isolde paused, the shawl gathered in her hands at her bosom. Her gaze snapped to his and then . . . lingered, as if his expression gave her pause.

Her head tilted to the side.

"Are ye . . . are ye pouting, my love?" The delight in her tone and the wide stretch of her smile indicated that she didn't consider this a negative thing.

"Pouting?" Tristan straightened his shoulders. "I assure you, Wife, a Duke of Kendall never pouts."

Isolde laughed. The magical sound made Tristan's palms itch to drag her to their

bedchamber and force her to spend the day letting him fulfill her every whim.

“Ye are pouting, my love.” She crossed to him and placed a palm to his cheek. “Oh, Tristan. I am so sorry ye cannot help me in this. Ye ken I have to make these visits myself. This is women’s business.”

Frowning—it was not a pout, no matter what his wife said—Tristan wrapped his arm around her waist. “So you say, but I am a duke. I am permitted to be eccentric. Let me accompany you today. I will merely sit in the carriage as you make your calls.”

“Tristan—”

“Quiet as a mouse. I’ll bring a book.”

Isolde sighed. It was not a good sigh—the sort that foreshadowed delightful activities. Instead, it was the heavy-footed sigh that preceded a refusal.

“My love, aye, ye are permitted to be eccentric, but our purpose here in London is to prove our normalcy—our ability to live by the rules of Polite Society. If ye are seen lurking in my carriage and doubting my ability to navigate the treacherous shoals of the ton . . . well, all our efforts here will be in vain. I am a powerful swimmer, Tristan Gilbert. Ye would be wise to remember that.”

He knew she was right; he simply didn’t like it.

With another frown—again, not a pout—Tristan relinquished his desires. But he did insist on handing her into his carriage himself, pressing a lingering kiss to the back of her hand and savoring her reciprocal squeeze of affection in return.

As for himself, there was little to do in London now. Before his marriage, he passed his days immersed in the business of running Her Majesty’s kingdom. He met with

other Peers in Lords and drafted legislation. He attended important dinners where he rallied support and negotiated compromises.

But now . . .

The hours stretched blank and empty before him.

Needless to say, Tristan feared he was somewhat bored.

And boredom did not suit him.

He would not be returning to Brooks.

White's was still an option, of course.

Tristan attempted a trial visit, but matters there were equally uncomfortable for opposite reasons. As with Brooks, the members of White's generally ignored him. The stodgy club members had made it clear that they disapproved of Tristan's marriage to Hadley's unconventional daughter and, therefore, had no use for him.

Alas, he wouldn't be returning to White's, either.

In order to pass the time, he ordered new clothing from his tailor and took bruising rides through Hyde Park. Occasionally, Hadley or Penn-Leith joined him. But none of the activities alleviated the edge of his agitated unease.

Most days, the only place Tristan felt he truly belonged was in Isolde's arms, but he could hardly spend every minute there.

"You're being a morose lump," Allie accused him one morning as he sat reading in the library.

“Pardon?”

“You!” She poked his shoulder. “You mope about this house and only perk up when Isolde returns from calls with Lady Hadley.”

Tristan set down his book, a mind-numbing tome on the mechanics of modern farm management. “I would spend every moment with my wife, if possible. That is nothing new.”

Just that morning, he had grasped Isolde’s hand under the breakfast table and threaded their fingers together, holding her tight. Aubrey and Lady Lavinia had nattered on about some soirée they had attended the night before to which Tristan and Isolde had not been invited. Tristan was sure his cousin meant it as a slight—a reminder of Tristan and Isolde’s precarious social position. But Tristan was so focused on the warm clutch of Isolde’s fingers around his—the slide of her thumb across the back of his hand—that he had scarcely heard a word of what was said.

“Yes, but you don’t need to be so . . . pouty about it,” Allie said.

Pouty? Again?

He glared. “Your point, Sister?”

Allie bent and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “I’m concerned about you. Shouldn’t you be bonding with Hadley?”

Tristan heaved a long sigh. “As delightful as my father-in-law can be, you of all people would understand how his relentless high spirits can feel suffocating after prolonged exposure. The amount of time I currently spend with the man is more than sufficient.”

“Mmm.” Allie tapped her lips with a forefinger. “Well, don’t you have scathing letters to write to recalcitrant managers or neglectful stewards to chastise?”

“Those would be matters for Mr. Eliason, my man-of-business.”

Allie moved to stand before the fire, warming her hands. An autumnal chill had gripped the London air. “What about correspondence with the fancy scientific journals you subscribe to?”

Tristan sighed. “I don’t think I enjoy writing as much as you assume I do.”

“Well, get one of your scores of secretaries to help you, then.”

Truly, he loved his twin, but she could be decidedly vexing. “I have no secretary, at the moment. Ledger has vanished, remember?”

“He still hasn’t surfaced?”

“No.”

“Where did he go?”

“I don’t know. Would I be here in this library, reading and . . .”—he waved a hand—“. . . whatever if Ledger were here?”

“Bored, you mean. When you say whatever , you mean bored. You’re bored.”

He pressed a hand to his chest in mock astonishment. “You don’t say? Did your twin sense tell you that?”

“Ha, ha,” Allie said without inflection. “No, I have eyes in my head. I don’t

remember you suffering boredom a day in your life.”

“Yes, well, that was before my political ambitions imploded.”

Allie’s chin rose, understanding lighting in her eyes. “Ah. You have lost your hobby.”

He stared at her. “I do believe that any gentleman in Her Majesty’s government would be appalled to hear their efforts to govern and guide this realm described as a hobby.”

His twin shrugged. “But in a sense, it is. Gentlemen don’t sully their hands with the task of earning money. They oversee their lands from a distance and therefore have nothing to occupy their days. What is a hobby if not a pleasant way to pass one’s spare time? Some turn to gambling and hedonism. Some to study or philanthropy. But most find respite in politics. You need a new hobby.”

Heaven spare him from his sister’s meddling. “I am well aware that my life has no real focus anymore.”

For once, his sister pondered his comment instead of immediately jumping in to reply.

“I see your point.” She tapped her lips thoughtfully. “Though, might I say, you are the Duke of Kendall. I suppose you could forge any path you wish and a certain portion of the ton would follow your example.”

“The impertinent, social-climbing portion, you mean.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers and all that.”

“Allie,” Tristan groaned, tilting his head to rest on the back of his chair.

“I trust you will think of something to occupy your time.” She turned from the fire and, stepping over to him, kissed his cheek again. “Otherwise, I fear you will drive us all insane.”

11

Allie's words wouldn't let Tristan be, though they elucidated facts he already knew.

He was bored. He did need a hobby.

Where had Ledger gone?

It was simply . . .

There had been no sign of Ledger. His trunk remained neatly packed and unclaimed in Mrs. Wilson's bedchamber. The man himself had vanished into the ether as if the dense fog that plagued London had swallowed him whole.

The longer Ledger remained absent, the larger the mystery grew. Worry and concern hung about the edges of Tristan's days. There were simply too few clues as to where Ledger had gone. Hiring an investigator to run the man to ground felt a bit melodramatic, but inaction didn't suit Tristan's temperament.

Adam Ledger was merely a servant. And yet . . . if Tristan pondered darker reasons for Ledger's silence—a treacherous accident, an attack by thieves—he felt . . .

He felt like weeping.

How bizarre was that?

He even went so far as to mention the sentiment to Isolde one evening as they stole a

moment in front of the fire before bed.

“Of course the thought of Ledger coming to harm upsets you, darling.” She grasped his hand. “Ye feel emotion because your enormous heart has a great capacity for love. Ye care about the welfare of others. Ledger might be an employee, but I think ye had begun to forge a true friendship with him.”

Tristan frowned. Had he?

He was unsure. Dukes didn’t make friends with clerks. The distance between their stations in life was cavernous—a gaping chasm of expectation and privilege.

And even if Tristan wished to claim Ledger as a friend, he was unsure if Ledger would feel the same desire in return. After all, Tristan’s lack of likability hung from his neck like a millstone, and Ledger’s continued absence put paid to the notion.

Regardless, Tristan acknowledged that he himself felt a deep sense of loyalty to the man. Perhaps Isolde was correct. Maybe this was what friendship entailed. Having never had a male friend, he couldn’t say.

All of these thoughts led Tristan to a decision: He would undertake the one activity his gentlemanly self viewed as rather beyond the pale—

He would investigate the contents of Ledger’s trunk.

Tristan didn’t wish to invade his former secretary’s privacy, but there was no help for it. If he wished to find Adam Ledger, Tristan needed all the information he could gather. And if, heaven forbid, some harm had come to the man, then he wished to uncover that, too, and ensure that Ledger was mourned properly.

Mrs. Wilson’s expression scarcely twitched when he asked to inspect the trunk.

“It’s still in my sitting room, Your Grace,” the housekeeper said. “Would you like me to have it brought up to your private study?”

“Please,” he replied.

Which is how, fifteen minutes later, Tristan found himself staring at Ledger’s battered trunk. Utilitarian and nondescript, it featured a pine body with metal-bracketed corners, all in the style of the previous century. Deep scratches in its side and the worn patina of its wood further testified to its age. Tristan imagined Ledger’s father or grandfather had been the first to see the trunk new. It had passed through many a life since then. The homeliness of the item sent a pang arching through Tristan’s ribcage.

The trunk was locked, of course, but a sharp blow across the metal lock from the brass head of a walking stick solved that problem. In for a penny, in for a pound, and all that.

With a deep breath, Tristan lifted the lid.

At first glance, the contents of the trunk appeared too ordinary to be of any use—books, clothing, stacks of letters wrapped in string. What here could possibly point to Ledger’s whereabouts?

Tristan merely needed the name of an acquaintance or an address. Any clue really that would set him on the scent of the trail.

To that end, he began lifting items out of the trunk. The letters went to one side. Even Tristan balked at the thought of reading Ledger’s private correspondence. Also, why didn’t the Royal Mail require senders to list their address, as well? Unusual, to be sure, but certainly helpful in a situation like this. As it was, Tristan doubted the letters would hold the specific information he sought, so why further violate Ledger’s

privacy?

The clothing was next—simple but well-tailored items made from excellent cloth. Ledger didn't have many coats or waistcoats, but the ones he did have were high quality and well-cared for.

Meticulous, Tristan thought, like Ledger's conduct and work—all befitting an employee of the Duke of Kendall.

Ledger's collection of books was even more impressive. Tristan removed title after title. Dickens and Shakespeare. Aristotle and Thackeray. William Whewell and Milton. Tristan felt as if he were looking through his own library, books he himself would choose to take on a journey.

The bottom of the trunk yielded a well-worn chess set of carved ivory and a journal filled with detailed notes on steamships and on Tristan's own ship, the SS Statesman , in particular.

And with each possession Tristan touched, he wondered. We appear so similar. How could I not have known?

An intense feeling of kinship bloomed beneath his breastbone. Emotions constricted the muscles in his throat; he labeled them, one by one—affection, sympathy, worry, urgency.

As usual, Isolde had been correct. Ledger was a friend. Or, perhaps more accurately, Tristan wished to claim him as one. He resolved then and there to believe with the fervor of an acolyte everything his beautiful wife told him. She usually had the right of things.

Unfortunately, nothing in the trunk hinted at Ledger's current location.

Carefully, Tristan repacked the items, his hand lingering on the stack of correspondence. Reading the letters would be an inexcusable invasion of Ledger's privacy. But . . . worry knitted Tristan's brow. What if something had happened? What if Ledger needed his assistance? Tristan might be new to friendship, but he understood that true friends rushed to aid one another.

Besides, what if the letters provided more information about Cousin Aubrey's troubling behavior?

Tristan paused for approximately two seconds before taking the bundle in his fingers. Leaning against the leg of an armchair, he carefully untied the ribbon holding the correspondence and opened the first letter.

It was a missive from his sister dated two years past, shortly after Ledger began his position with Tristan. She gave the normal pleasantries and then wrote:

. . . How lovely to hear that His Grace is an exacting but fair employer. I know you were most nervous to make a good first impression, but given how His Grace has entrusted you so quickly, I think you have nothing to worry about on that score . . .

Tristan frowned.

How jarring to read about himself through the eyes of Ledger's sister. Or rather . . . Agatha, as that was how she signed her name, Your loving sister, Agatha . At least, her words about Tristan were kind ones. If the letters turned caustic, it would perhaps serve him right. How did the saying go . . . eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves?

Well, he would rather know the truth of Ledger's opinion of him before making a cake of himself and assuming more connection between them than actually existed.

Tristan flipped to the next letter. Again, from Agatha. This one was dated only seven months ago. She wrote at length about some contretemps with a neighbor and then added:

I am glad you are so delighted with your employment. I saw the Duke of Kendall from a distance in Hyde Park last week, and I must say, he appeared handsome but fierce. I think I should quake in my boots should I ever converse with him directly. But you speak so highly of his perspicacity and good sense, I know you admire him greatly . . .

Something hopeful ignited in Tristan's veins. Was this true? Ledger admired him? Perhaps . . . he would be amenable to a friendship with Tristan, as unorthodox as it might seem.

Tristan continued, reading letter after letter. He learned of Agatha's adoration of her husband, Matthew, and their two children, as well as the workings of their household—apparently the maid-of-all-work, Matilda, had pinched sugar for several months last summer. Agatha and Ledger's parents lived somewhere near Birmingham, Tristan gathered. His mother wrote the occasional letter, as well as a friend named John.

But, as he had suspected, nothing hinted at a specific location or even divulged Agatha's last name.

However, a particular letter from Agatha cinched Tristan's resolve to find Adam Ledger. This one was dated over five weeks past and appeared to be the most recent letter received:

Oh, Adam! I am still devastated for your loss. Your sobs yesterday rang in my ears for hours after your departure. I am so sorry that your kind duke is no more. I wish you Godspeed on your journey north to Oban to retrieve his body. Your devotion to

your employer is a credit to us all . . .

Ledger had wept when he heard of Tristan's supposed death? His secretary had appeared so contained when he arrived in Oban, acting as if retrieving Tristan's body were merely another task to complete, of no more note than transcribing a letter or discussing his appointment diary.

Now, sitting on the floor beside Ledger's trunk, Tristan swallowed back the stinging ball of emotion in his own throat.

Blinking through eyes gone blurry, he made a vow: I will find you, my friend. Even if the worst has happened, I will ensure that those you loved are cared for .

Somehow. Someway. Tristan would see it through.

He read through the remainder of the letters without finding even a breadcrumb of a clue.

Disappointment sat heavy on his shoulders.

Retying the letter bundle, he lifted a hand to set it back in the trunk when he noticed a final letter resting against the right flank of the trunk.

Frowning, he picked it up. It appeared to have not been secured with its brethren and had likely dropped unnoticed when he lifted the other letters.

It was yet another missive from Agatha, this one dated scarcely three weeks ago, just before Ledger's dismissal.

. . . I cannot tell you my relief to hear that your duke was found safely. I wept great tears of joy, as I am sure you did. I cannot wait to hear the story in its entirety when

next you call upon us here in Gresham Street . . .

Tristan stared at the words— Gresham Street .

At long last! A clue!

Though . . . he supposed it wasn't much of a clue.

Regardless, he straightened his spine. It gave him a place to start looking. Maybe if he located this Gresham Street, he could find a woman named Agatha.

At the very least, it was worth a go. And heaven knew, he preferred pursuit of clues over rustivating in his library.

Standing, Tristan rang for his valet and coach.

Fortunately, Tristan's coachman was familiar with Gresham Street, a quiet lane of small but smart row houses near St. Paul's Cathedral.

Locating Agatha proved easier than Tristan had hoped. His footman merely had to inquire at two doors in order to discover that Mrs. Agatha Tolman, wife of Matthew Tolman, lived at number thirty-seven.

The Tolman's townhouse matched the well-kept appearance of its neighbors with a glossy black door, swept stoop, and well-shined brass knocker.

Tristan went to the door himself, rapping with the head of his walking stick. Two doors down, a woman entering her home stared at him in open wonder, surely pondering the bizarre nature of a high-ranking nobleman standing on a stoop in this neighborhood—a gilded carriage complete with matching chestnut bays, a coachman, and two footmen waiting at the curb. Usually, a footman would come to the door

while the aristocrat sat securely in his coach.

But as Allie had said, Tristan needed a hobby . . .

A maidservant in a white-starched cap answered the door, the sugar-pinching Matilda herself, he presumed. Her eyes flared wide as she took in his expensively dressed person and the gilt Kendall coat of arms blazoned on the carriage door parked on the street.

Tristan presented the girl with his card. “The Duke of Kendall wishes to speak with Mrs. Tolman if she is in residence.”

The girl blanched. “O’ c-course, Your Eminence . . . ehr . . . my lord, I m-mean, Your Grace.”

Blushing a rather alarming shade of violet, the girl immediately ushered him into a small parlor to the left of the door and bobbed at least five curtsies before scurrying off to fetch her mistress.

Tristan removed his hat. In her haste, the poor girl had neglected to take it. Turning in a circle, he surveyed the parlor. It appeared lived in . . . not raggedy, but homey. Two chairs and a sofa flanked the fireplace. An embroidery frame sat before an armchair with thread and scissors on its seat. An upright piano with sheets of music strewn across the bench rested against the back wall. Toy blocks and tin soldiers tumbled from a wicker basket to the right of the hearth.

In short, it was a comfortable room. Tristan could see himself and Isolde in such a space, sitting before the fire of an evening, discussing philosophy while playing chess, their children asleep upstairs.

How odd that he could envision himself in this room, in this life. Leaving a simple

row house to labor as a secretary to some lord or work as a clerk in a solicitor's office. It scarcely mattered what he did. He would work and then return home to Isolde, catching her to his chest and insisting on holding her in his arms as she cataloged her day. Their children would dash about their knees, making a merry mayhem and vying to show him the sticks they had collected at St. James Park or describe the kittens their cat had birthed in the kitchen.

Tristan would adore a life where all he had to do was care for his wife and children. A middle-class life, some would call it. Why was morality between the classes so different? Men like Ledger were praised by their peers if they doted upon their wives. But dukes were looked down upon for doing the same.

It made no sense.

With each passing day, a quiet yearning increased in his bones, an arthritic pang for domesticity and togetherness. A life like the one Ledger's sister and brother-in-law led.

The door to the parlor opened, breaking his reverie.

A woman entered, eyes wide and apprehensive. Her resemblance to Ledger was immediately apparent—brown hair and eyes, broad forehead, wide cheekbones.

“Your Grace.” She dipped into a low curtsy. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

“Mrs. Tolman.” He nodded his head. “I believe you are sister to my former secretary, Mr. Adam Ledger?”

The woman straightened, a hand pressing to her waist. “Indeed, I am, Your Grace. But . . .” She paused before continuing. “. . . former secretary? Has something

occurred to sever Adam's employment?"

Tristan froze.

Damn and blast!

He had assumed that Ledger would have informed his own sister of his dismissal. Why hadn't he? Embarrassment? Or was it something more sinister?

"Yes, former , unfortunately. Mr. Ledger was dismissed from my employ, though not at my behest." Tristan twisted his hat in his hand. "In the confusion surrounding my supposed demise, my cousin wrongfully terminated Mr. Ledger's employment."

"Oh! Gracious!" Mrs. Tolman covered her mouth with a palm.

"Indeed. I did not sanction Mr. Ledger's dismissal, and I found the manner of it distressing. Consequently, I am searching for his whereabouts to make amends. At the very least, I wish to offer an apology, any back wages, and provide Ledger with a letter of commendation. Or, if he is amenable, to offer him a post again."

Mrs. Tolman stood still for a moment as if struggling to accommodate his words. "It is very kind of you to come in person to inquire after my brother, Your Grace. Will you please be seated?" She motioned toward the sofa. "May I offer you tea?"

Mrs. Tolman sat in one of the armchairs.

"I am well, thank you." Tristan took a seat on the sofa, placing his hat on the cushion beside him. "I simply require any information you can provide as to Ledger's whereabouts. I take it he is not here with you?"

"No, Your Grace. Adam joined us for dinner some three weeks ago, as is his wont.

He is a favorite with my two young sons, you see. Adam described his return journey from Scotland and his relief in finding Your Grace alive.” She bit her bottom lip. “Though he asked if he could spend the night with us, which is not entirely unheard of, but somewhat unusual. He mentioned that Your Grace had tasked him with touring several of the ducal estates, and that he would therefore be an irregular correspondent. Adam anticipated being gone for a month or two. He wished to spend more time with us before he left.”

Ah. So Ledger had hidden the news from his sister. But where had he gone after leaving his sister’s home?

“I suppose Adam’s trip was a fabrication,” Mrs. Tolman continued.

“Yes,” Tristan said as gently as he could. “Ledger’s visit with you would have been right around the time that he was wrongfully terminated from my employ.”

Mrs. Tolman nodded, her brown eyes filling with tears. “Poor Adam. He took such pride in his work as Your Grace’s secretary. He must have been devastated and at loose ends to lose his post, too embarrassed to tell us of his failure.”

“Hardly his failure, Mrs. Tolman. I have always been more than satisfied with Mr. Ledger’s efforts. Hence my presence here.” Tristan tapped a finger against his thigh. “Has he written you letters since then? I gather you correspond regularly with your brother.”

Mrs. Tolman’s brow furrowed. “How odd that you should mention it, Your Grace. I was pondering just this morning that I hadn’t heard from Adam in a while. But again, I didn’t countenance it, as he did say he might be a poor correspondent. Though knowing the whole story now . . .” Her voice drifted off.

Ledger had ceased speaking with his sister? Tristan’s fingers curled into a fist.

“Could he possibly have returned to your family home? It is somewhere near Birmingham, is it not?”

Mrs. Tolman beamed in surprise. “Indeed it is, Your Grace. The village of Alvechurch, to be precise. I do not think he has returned there. I heard from my mother just yesterday, and she would have said something if Adam were staying with them in the vicarage. Of a surety, he would have told me about his dismissal before our parents. He would want to prevent that knowledge from reaching our village, if possible.”

“Is that so?”

She gave an emphatic nod. “Adam has always been our parents’ pride and joy. He was a King’s Scholar, attending Eton and then Cambridge.”

The information caused a hitch in Tristan’s breathing. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, he had known that Ledger attended Cambridge, but he had known nothing of the financial arrangement of it.

King’s Scholars were charity students—bright, ambitious boys plucked from the masses to be educated alongside their aristocratic peers. It was a deep honor to be chosen and, from what Tristan had heard, incredibly challenging as charity students were ruthlessly teased and tormented. Tristan wouldn’t know, since his father hadn’t permitted him to attend Eton for fear that Tristan might make friends, and therefore have a system of support outside Old Kendall himself. That Ledger had successfully navigated the treacherous waters of Eton spoke volumes as to the man’s fortitude and intelligence.

“I was unaware of this,” Tristan said.

“Adam worked hard to be capable and meticulous in his employment. He would view

his dismissal as an abject failure, something he would keep from our parents for as long as possible. The humiliation for them all within the parish would be excruciating.”

Tristan sat with this information for a long moment. Why had he known none of these things about Ledger before now? Well, he supposed because he had never asked. And Ledger certainly knew it was not his place to volunteer such personal information.

Tristan’s picture of Adam Ledger was rapidly gathering details. Not only was the man a capable secretary, but he had a sister and nephews who loved him. He had proud parents and a village that cheered on his successes.

“I see,” Tristan said. “Given all this, do you have any idea where he might have gone? I feel compelled to make amends for the unintentional harm that has been done.”

Mrs. Tolman swallowed, her hands clasped in her lap. “I cannot say with any surety. Adam does have a good friend, Mr. John Rutland, who is employed at a bank in the city. If anyone would know, I suspect it would be him.”

“Excellent. Could you provide this Mr. Rutland’s direction?”

Mrs. Tolman twisted her fingers in her skirt. “Unfortunately, no. But I can inquire of my husband when he returns from work this evening. He will likely know.”

“I would be in your debt, Mrs. Tolman. Please send any information to Gilbert House immediately. I am most anxious to see this grievous treatment of Ledger corrected and, if he is amenable, reinstate him as my secretary.”

“You are kindness itself, Your Grace. I can see why Adam so valued his employment in your household.”

Ridiculous, but Tristan felt himself preen at the tiny bit of praise, at the confirmation that Ledger had indeed liked him.

“With your help, Mrs. Tolman, hopefully we can run Ledger to ground and assure him that all will be well.”

The next morning, Isolde found herself sitting in the library, writing out invitations to the ball. Doing some rudimentary math, she figured if she wrote out twelve a day, she would be finished by the end of the week.

Granted, she had laid abed long after Tristan departed for a ride in Hyde Park. Part of her had wanted to ask him to stay. To insist that they remain in their chambers all day. In fact, she had begun kissing him with precisely that intent, but before she could form the words, he had so thoroughly distracted her with his hungry lovemaking, she could scarcely remember her own name, much less her hopes for the day.

By the time she woke again, he was gone and her request remained unspoken. She knew he was anxious, hoping to receive news today from Mrs. Tolman about Ledger's banking friend. Tristan's early ride was merely a way to pass the hours and work off his nervous energy.

Still, she had shuffled across to his cold side of the bed and wrapped her arms around his pillow. Pressing her nose into the goose down, she breathed in the lingering scent of him. Anything to feel closer to her husband.

After a leisurely breakfast in bed, Isolde had pulled on a voluminous dressing gown and made her way downstairs to the library to finish her allotted twelve invitations. She had just completed number seven when Lady Lavinia strode into the room.

"Oh!" She paused just inside the doorway. "I did not realize you were in here. I wished to consult a book on . . ." A long pause ensued as Lady Lavinia scrambled for

a potential topic. “. . . voyaging.”

Isolde barely suppressed an eye roll. Truly, Lady Lavinia needed to prepare more convincing lies in advance.

Though she knew she shouldn't, Isolde couldn't help but ask, “Voyaging?”

“Of course. The art of travel, if you will. Did your university education not cover that, Your Grace?”

Honestly.

Isolde bit back a sigh.

Matters with Lady Lavinia were not improving. It seemed the more Tristan, Isolde, or Lady Hadley laid down the law, the more Lady Lavinia pushed against it. She brought up her mother's close relationship with Queen Victoria at every opportunity and regularly implied that her mother was noble and oh-so-kind not to eviscerate Isolde's reputation at Court.

“No,” Isolde said. “I daresay my professors preferred weightier topics, like how to calculate the velocity of a ship amid a long voyage and then use that speed to determine the time to port.”

Lady Lavinia pursed her lips into a judgmental moue.

Isolde pulled her dressing gown tightly around her shoulders with one hand. “Are ye planning a journey then, Lady Lavinia?”

The sooner, the better, in Isolde's opinion.

“Perhaps.” Lady Lavinia folded her hands primly at her waist.

“Aye, well, our library here has a great many books on travels.” Isolde gestured toward the shelves. “I am sure ye will find something to your liking in no time at all.” And, God willing, it will inspire ye to relocate to California , she thought.

Lady Lavinia crossed to the books and pulled a tome off of a shelf, inspecting the title page and then returning it. Isolde went back to her writing, though she could feel Lady Lavinia’s eyes on her from time to time.

“Writing out invitations, I see,” Lady Lavinia said, abruptly appearing at Isolde’s elbow.

Only a lifetime of dealing with sneaky younger brothers prevented Isolde from startling and blotting her paper with ink.

“Aye,” she replied without looking up.

A pause.

Lady Lavinia remained at Isolde’s side, peering over her shoulder.

Isolde set down her pen and looked up. “May I help ye, Lady Lavinia?”

“I find your Scottish accent so very endearing,” she said with the feigned nonchalance of a spider spinning a web and laying in wait for its prey.

Isolde recognized the words for the lie they were.

“Thank ye,” she replied with equal insincerity.

“Oh, and I found a book to my liking.” Lady Lavinia lifted the book in question, but her smile did not reach her eyes.

“Lovely.” Isolde looked back to the invitation.

“I decided against a book on travel.”

“Indeed.”

“I chose La Mort D’Arthur , instead. I hear it’s a fascinating read.”

Isolde forced herself to not react. Damn this woman. She had deliberately chosen a tome on the legend of Tristan and Isolde. Mischief certainly was her game.

“I wish ye happy reading of it,” Isolde said.

Lady Lavinia rounded the small desk where Isolde worked, effectively blocking the sunlight from the large window and dimming the room. Isolde looked up, forcing her face to reflect nothing but bland interest. She knew that the Lady Lavinias of the world thrived on attention and reaction.

She would give the woman neither.

Lady Lavinia ran a finger over the leather-bound cover. “I wished to refresh my memory of the Arthurian tales and satisfy my curiosity.”

Isolde raised an eyebrow.

“In the legend,” Lady Lavinia continued, “Sir Tristan is forced to fall in love with Princess Iseult, but as soon as the love potion wanes, he disavows her again. I don’t think Iseult was ever actually wanted, poor thing. Sir Tristan’s affections vanish as

quickly as they began.” She flipped through the pages of the book nonchalantly.

Bloody hell but this woman was horrid.

Had Isolde doubted Tristan’s affections in the slightest, Lady Lavinia’s pathetic attempt to sow discord might have worked. As it was . . .

“Indeed. How interesting,” she said with an uncaring shrug. And then, in a flash of inspired brilliance—or perhaps stupidity . . . time would tell—Isolde deliberately adjusted the collar of her dressing gown, causing the neckline to sag dangerously low for a fraction of a second.

Just long enough for Lady Lavinia to see the red love mark Tristan had left there earlier in the day.

The woman stiffened.

Isolde tugged her gown tight once more, but try as she might, she couldn’t keep a smug look from her face.

Lady Lavinia swallowed, eyes shooting daggers. “I shall leave you to your writing, Your Grace.”

Isolde watched as the woman all but stomped out the door, skirts swishing.

Mmm.

That might not have been her finest hour.

What would Lady Lavinia do in retaliation?

Because if Isolde knew anything, she and Lady Lavinia were at war.

Isolde didn't have to wait long for Lady Lavinia's next attack.

A few hours later, Isolde sat in the large drawing room on the second floor of Gilbert House. An opulent space, it featured not one, but two marble fireplaces. The walls sported gilded mirrors and sconces, silk wallpaper, and priceless artwork by Rembrandt and Caravaggio.

In short, it was a room fit for a powerful duke and his duchess.

It did little to quell the anxiety roiling Isolde's stomach and threatening to upend her breakfast. She was unsure which she disliked more—making morning calls with her mother or receiving them.

At the moment, they were to be on the receiving end. Isolde, her mother, Allie, and Lady Lavinia all attentively waited for guests to arrive. If they arrived, that was.

The prim smugness on Lady Lavinia's face loudly proclaimed her wishes for how the day would go.

Isolde took a deep breath and smoothed her skirts.

The knocker sounded from the entrance hallway below.

Hallelujah.

A few moments later, Fredericks ushered in Lady Lockheade and her youngest daughter, Lady Alexandra Whitaker. Both petite and blonde, the ladies were old family friends of the Hadleys. Lord Hadley and Lord Lockheade had known each other for decades and had even voyaged to the South Pacific together.

Isolde rushed to greet them, arms spread wide in welcome.

“Lady Lockheade,” she said, pressing a kiss to the older woman’s cheek and remembering at the last moment to not call her Aunt Lottie . They were not related, but Lord and Lady Lockheade had always felt like family.

“Lady Alexandra,” Isolde said.

Lady Alexandra showed no such restraint. She hugged Isolde boldly. “I am so thrilled for your marriage, Duchess.”

“As am I,” Isolde smiled. Perhaps morning hours wouldn’t be a complete disaster after all. “Won’t you please be seated?”

Fifteen minutes later, the room was buzzing with ladies. Most were close friends or relatives—kudos to Lady Hadley for convincing her niece, the current Duchess of Montacute, to attend—but many were mere acquaintances keen to see how the new Duchess of Kendall was faring in her august role.

The tea cart was brought in, and Isolde set about pouring. It was one of the first rituals a lady learned to perform, and she refused to be found remiss in her execution of it.

Carefully, she tipped the teapot at the precisely correct angle, inquired how the Duchess of Montacute took her tea, and added the required spoon of sugar. The cup was dutifully passed to Her Grace, and Isolde moved on to Lady Lockheade, the next lady in order of precedence.

She had just handed Lady Lockheade her teacup when the Duchess of Montacute began coughing uncontrollably.

Isolde and Lady Hadley turned to Her Grace.

“Is ought amiss, Duchess?” Isolde asked.

Red-cheeked and still coughing, the Duchess waved a hand in front of her face.

“You have”—cough—“put salt, not sugar”—cough—“into my tea.”

Mortification swamped Isolde. The crystals in the sugar dish certainly appeared less lumpish and brown than normal. Hesitantly, she tested a tiny amount.

Salt.

Bollocks.

“Surely, Your Grace,” the duchess continued, her coughing mostly passed, though she kept a hand pressed to her bosom, “your housekeeper and cook are more competent than this?”

The implication, of course, was that Isolde herself was incompetent in her management of the household staff.

“I shall speak with them immediately, Your Grace. I am terribly sorry for this mishap.”

Standing, Isolde crossed to the door.

Unable to help herself, her eyes flickered to Lady Lavinia.

The woman’s tiny smirk of triumph and the twitch of her ferrety nose needed no interpretation.

After the tea debacle, Isolde struggled to calm herself.

The ton had already shown they had no tolerance for her eccentricities. An inability to properly manage her household merely added more fuel to the fire. She fully expected to hear snide comments along the lines of, “What is the point in gaining a university education if the duchess cannot oversee simple household matters?”

Mrs. Wilson had been beside herself over the sugar mishap. Isolde assured the woman she was not to blame. Lady Lavinia had clearly meddled in the kitchen. To avoid future mishaps, Isolde left instructions that she be informed anytime Lady Lavinia descended to the servant’s domain in the basement of the house.

Her mother was apoplectic when she learned of Lady Lavinia’s role in the salt debacle.

“You should have Kendall toss her out immediately,” Lady Hadley fumed. “Such meddling is beyond the pale.”

“I cannot prove that Lady Lavinia actually replaced the sugar with salt, Mamma. It is merely my supposition.”

“We both know that Kendall will believe your word.”

“Aye, he will. But if I am to be a proper duchess, I cannot run to him every time I encounter a difficulty. I need to fight my own battles. No one will respect me otherwise.”

Her mother sighed. “I fear I have taught you too well, my dear.”

Isolde managed a wan smile. “Ye have indeed, Mamma, and I love ye dearly for it. I couldn’t survive this hellish month without yourself at my side.”

Lady Hadley wrapped an arm around Isolde's waist, holding her close. "Your present circumstances would try a saint."

"I have been burnishing my halo, I assure ye."

"Perhaps one day, we will laugh at all this."

"Perhaps," Isolde agreed, "but not yet. Now, if ye don't mind, I think I have earned myself a nap."

Lady Hadley shook her head, kissed Isolde's cheek, and as she had since Isolde's earliest memory, wished her sweet dreams.

The jittery agitation would not let Tristan be. It had a hold on him, tensing his breathing and setting his muscles to bouncing as the energy searched for an outlet.

It was now afternoon, and he still hadn't heard word from Mrs. Tolman. Should he give it one more day before hiring an investigator? Or post a notice in *The Times* ? Both?

Regardless, the minutes dragged forward.

Worry over Isolde and Ledger mixed with that same boredom. The emotions nipped at his heels as restlessly as an irritated hound.

Isolde had her first at-home hours today, and so Tristan had made himself scarce—visiting first his cobbler and then inspecting the SS Statesman still docked in St. Katherine's Wharf.

When he returned home, Fredericks reported that Isolde's at home had been well attended. But Isolde herself remained closeted with Lady Hadley in the small drawing

room. He stood outside the door—fingers tapping against his thigh—listening to the murmur of their voices, wanting to knock but knowing he should respect Isolde's wishes and wait.

Tristan detested this idleness.

Finally, he broke. He ordered Fredericks to prepare a stack of logs and an axe in the small courtyard in the mews to the back of the house and requested the servants make themselves scarce.

Tristan didn't wish for an audience.

Dressed in trousers, braces, and shirtsleeves, he carefully sharpened the axe before rolling a thick log into the center of the courtyard.

The axe sank into the wood with a satisfying thunk.

Five minutes later, he had established a steady rhythm.

Damn, this felt good. He was going to produce enough firewood to fuel all of Mayfair before he was done.

Chopping and splitting wood was not something a duke generally learned to do. But some of Tristan's happiest childhood memories had happened with the gamekeeper, Auld Graeme, in the forests of Hawthorn. There, the brusque Scot taught Tristan to tend to wounded animals and chop wood for his keep. The repetitive motion of swinging an axe, the bite of steel into wood, had soothed his battered soul. It was a useful occupation—trees turning from trunks to rounds to splintered quarters ready for the fire.

Tristan had nearly forgotten about those long days with Auld Graeme. That was until

Tristan and Isolde had washed ashore on the Isle of Canna, and their week on the isolated island resurrected his childhood pastimes. On the island, chopping wood had been a way to care for his wife, to ensure she was warm and had a fire for cooking.

The man Tristan had been three months ago would choke in shame over his current behavior. Now, he simply didn't care. He liked chopping wood. He liked caring for his wife. Tristan truly began to wonder if he hadn't been born into the wrong station in life. He and Isolde should be living in a country cottage, him chopping wood for the bread oven as she kneaded dough.

After fifteen minutes, he took a small break to drink water and pull off his shirt.

A cool breeze wound down the stone-fenced streets and into the mews, cooling his skin.

Time slowed to a blur, his world descending to the sound of the axe and the satisfaction of watching the pile of split logs grow.

He had just tossed several splintered bits into a pile for kindling when he felt eyes on him.

Turning, he noticed Isolde standing just inside the courtyard door, her arms crossed, gaze appreciative. Like on Canna, she was dressed simply in a well-worn gown that spoke more of comfort than fashion.

"Duchess." He inclined his head.

"Duke." Closing the door, she walked toward him with hips swaying and a smile curving her lips.

Gratitude swelled his lungs. How many times had he longed to see just such an

expression on her face—welcoming and joyful? To know, with a bone-deep surety, that she loved him?

And now . . .

Tristan watched her approach, heat firing in his veins. Bloody hell but she was delectable—the graceful arch of her long neck, the coppery glint of her hair against her fair skin, the stubborn point of her chin that he longed to kiss.

Maybe he would kidnap her and whisk her away to that very island cottage.

She stopped two feet short of touching him. “I heard the tell-tale sound of your axe from our bedchamber and couldn’t resist changing into more homely attire and coming down for a peek.”

“Ah.” Tristan rested the butt of the axe on the ground, putting his weight into the top. “And has that peek been sufficient?”

“Not particularly.” She dragged her eyes up and down his body, lingering appreciatively on his bare chest. “I think I should like to see more of the show if ye don’t mind.”

Chuckling, he dropped his hold on the axe and snatched her around the waist, pulling her body tight against his.

“I didn’t mean this show,” she laughed. “Ye be sweaty.”

“Hush, love. You adore me like this. Don’t deny it.”

She looped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his ear. “Guilty.”

Tristan buried his face in her neck, his lips hungrily nipping at her throat.

And though she melted into him, something wasn't quite right. There was a tension in her spine. Or a hesitance in her capitulation. Something.

He pulled back. "What is wrong? Fredericks said your at home was well attended. Did something go amiss?"

Part of him expected her to deny it. To insist that all was well, as she had been saying for days now.

But not this time. Instead, she looked upwards on a sigh.

His pulse sped up. "Isolde?"

Finally, she dropped her gaze back to his, fingers skimming over his chest. "I would prefer not to say, but as ye will hear soon enough, there's no help for it. Yes, my first at home was well attended. However, someone swapped sugar for salt in the sugar bowl. The Duchess of Montacute took a sip of her sea-water tea and nearly coughed up her intestines."

Tristan swore.

"I have no proof," Isolde continued, "but I am sure it was Lady Lavinia who made the switch. She visited the kitchens both last night and earlier today."

Rage momentarily fogged Tristan's vision. "How dare that harpy!" He dropped his arms and moved to walk around his wife. "She and my idiot of a cousin will be gone by morning, I promise you!"

Isolde wrapped both hands around his elbow and dug in with her heels, forcing him

back to her. “Tristan, ye can’t toss them out.”

“I can and I will.”

“My love, ye promised that ye would let me handle this.” She pulled him back into her arms. “If I’m seen as unable to manage my own problems, they will only multiply. I need to stand on my own two feet.”

No!

All of Tristan rebelled at the thought.

Get a hobby , Allie said. Direct your focus.

But all he wanted was this—Isolde in his arms and their life together. Not this unfulfilling half-life where she fought off sniping harpy attacks, and Tristan watched helplessly from the sidelines.

He hated this . . . this feeling of impotency.

He was a duke, for heaven’s sake! Dukes were not made for inaction.

At least, this duke wasn’t.

“You cannot tell me of such nefarious behavior and expect that I won’t do something about it, Isolde.”

Perhaps Tristan would invite Aubrey to go a round or two at a boxing gym. Bloodying the man for sport would be delightful. Or, perhaps just as satisfying, reduce Aubrey’s allowance simply out of spite.

She ran her fingers through Tristan's hair, nails scraping deliciously across his scalp and pebbling gooseflesh on his shoulders.

"I tell you because I see us as one unified soul," she whispered. "I tell you to feel your arms around me, to know of your comfort and care. You can't fix what has happened, but you can love me in its aftermath."

Tristan grunted, hating the perceptive truth in her words.

Closing his eyes, he went back to nuzzling her throat. Skimming his nose up her neck, Tristan breathed in the delicious scent of her skin—lemons and a hint of soap.

"I confess I am already endlessly tired of our separate lives," he murmured.

"Me, too."

"It is cruel that we cannot meet these challenges together, side by side."

"Aye! We should start a new fashion—husbands attending morning calls alongside their wives, or wives traipsing with their husbands through Tattersalls."

He smiled. "I would adore that. As is, I cannot wait to dance with you at our ball. To show all of London this glorious siren I have claimed as my own."

Isolde stiffened in his arms.

Not quite the reaction he expected. Tristan pulled back, a question in his eyes.

She bit her lip.

"Isolde?" he prompted. "Are you not anticipating the same? I intend to spend the

entire evening at your side.”

“I am eager for that, too, love.”

Silence.

“But . . . ?” he prompted.

Her gaze darted to the side.

“Isolde?”

“I cannot dance,” she said in a rush.

“Pardon?”

She sent her eyes skyward and then sighed. “I cannot dance.”

He frowned. “Whatever do you mean? Surely, the daughter of an earl would have been taught how to dance.”

“I suppose I should have said I don’t dance well. I do technically know how to dance.”

He blinked. Before their marriage, he had noted that Isolde never danced. He had assumed it was due to her scandalous reputation—men didn’t ask her to dance because they didn’t wish to be seen in her company. But the truth panged his heart—Isolde had been politely declining to dance when asked because she felt her ballroom skills to be inferior . . .

“How is that possible?” he asked. “You are athletic and coordinated. I seem to

remember you plucking me from a watery grave with your aquatic prowess.”

“Aquatic prowess,” she giggled, the sound bubbling like champagne in Tristan’s veins.

“You know what I mean.”

She laughed harder, forehead pressing against his bare chest. He grinned in return. How he loved her! That she could still find humor and joy after the day she had experienced.

“And now you’re avoiding my question,” he continued with a low chuckle.

“My apologies,” she grinned. “My lack of dancing talent has perplexed my poor mother for many years. It is rooted in my brain’s inability to count bars of music, and my feet’s insistence on attempting to count anyway.”

“I feel derelict in my duties as your husband that I didn’t know this.”

Her grin turned wicked. “Ye have hardly been derelict in your duties as husband.”

Tristan kissed the grin off her lips.

One kiss quickly turned to twenty, and he began to think seriously about dragging her toward their bedchamber.

But first . . .

“Well, I am glad to have learned where I can improve,” he murmured. “And fortunately for you, Duchess, I am a spectacular dancer.”

“Is that so?”

He smiled. “I cannot wait to give you a demonstration.”

And maybe, in the process, he could carve out more time together.

Perhaps Tristan could spend his days with his wife.

He simply needed to be creative.

13

Despite his wood chopping and a delightful evening spent holding Isolde in his arms, the same nervous tension still tightened Tristan's muscles the next morning.

He knew it partially stemmed from his lingering concerns over Lady Lavinia's behavior and Isolde's insistence on managing the harpy in her own fashion. Inaction did not suit his nature, particularly when his wife suffered.

However, Ledger's continued absence dragged at Tristan's heels like a leaded weight. He kept expecting Ledger to stroll through the doorway, spectacles on his nose and notebook in hand, ready to meet the day.

Fortunately, just as Tristan finished breakfast, a brief note from Mrs. Tolman arrived with the direction of a bank near Westminster where Mr. John Rutland was employed as a clerk.

Hallelujah.

Tristan couldn't summon his carriage quickly enough.

He encountered Allie and Isolde in the entryway, preparing to leave for morning visits.

Isolde grinned when he told her the news.

"I hope you uncover good news about Ledger." She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I

will be cheering you on in spirit, my love.”

He carried that promise in his heart all the way to Westminster.

The bank manager nearly fainted when the Duke of Kendall was shown into his office.

“Y-your Grace,” the man stammered, rising from his seat, his walrus-like mustache quivering. “Mr. Augustus Fitzsimmons, at your service. How may our humble branch serve the vast financial interests of the mighty Dukedom of Kendall?”

Mr. Fitzsimmons punctuated his florid speech with a bow that could only be described as obsequious. He bent over so far, his mustache nearly grazed the ground, and he had to take a step forward to bring himself upright without toppling onto his head.

Tristan stared at the man. Such fawning did happen on occasion as a duke, and it was always jarring to encounter.

As if feeling the weight of Tristan’s gaze, Mr. Fitzsimmons produced a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the perspiration gathering on his forehead.

Tristan tapped his hat in his hands. “I am here on a personal matter, not a financial one, Mr. Fitzsimmons. I understand a Mr. John Rutland is in your employ?”

Poor Fitzsimmons froze. “John R-Rutland?” he squeaked. “N-nothing of a financial nature? Merely . . . John?”

Tristan could practically read the man’s thoughts. Was the Duke of Kendall asking about his employee a good thing? Or . . . not?

“I merely wish to speak with Mr. Rutland.”

Fitzsimmons stroked his mustache, fingers trembling, and then straightened his coat.

“I p-pray Mr. Rutland has done nothing to earn your displeasure, Your Grace. He has always been an excellent employee here.”

“Again, my inquiry is of a personal nature, Mr. Fitzsimmons. I readily believe Mr. Rutland is an exemplary employee. I merely require information that he can perhaps provide. Nothing more.”

Another fraught silence ensued.

“Of c-course. I shall summon Mr. Rutland immediately. Shall I fetch a spot of tea, as well, Your Grace?”

“Tea?”

“Y-yes . . . it is an excellent dark blend? With shortbread?”

Why the statements came out as questions, Tristan was at a loss to say. Overall, he found himself nonplussed. He had never been asked to sit down to tea with a bank manager before, and he hadn’t a clue how to reply. His past had only taught him to stare threateningly at people like Fitzsimmons until they stopped talking and minded their own business.

The Kendall he had been a few months ago would have snapped in irritation.

The Tristan he was now—the man who loved Isolde with his whole soul—recognized that a modicum of kindness in this situation would cost him nothing. Augustus Fitzsimmons was flustered and out of his depth, not a caricature to be mocked.

Tristan needed no further proof as to how much he had changed. His measured reaction to this situation said it all.

“I appreciate the offer, Mr. Fitzsimmons, but tea is unnecessary. I merely wish to speak with Mr. Rutland.”

Mr. Fitzsimmons nodded. “Right, right. Of course. I’ll just . . .” He motioned toward the door, mustache wafting in the faint breeze.

The manager bustled out, and a younger man entered approximately two minutes later.

Unlike his employer, this man appeared more wary than ingratiating.

“Your Grace,” he bowed. “Mr. John Rutland, at your service. How may I be of assistance?”

So this was Ledger’s friend? Tristan assessed the man. Average in height and painfully thin, Rutland pushed his glasses up his nose once every ten seconds. His clothing, neither expensive nor poor, appeared well-groomed. But he held his shoulders stiffly as if waiting for a blow.

What worried Rutland?

“I am seeking Mr. Adam Ledger, my former secretary,” Tristan said. “I was told you might have information as to his location.”

Mr. Rutland swallowed, expression turning cagey. “Adam? You are searching for Adam? Even after his dismissal from your household?”

Tristan’s chin lifted. “Ah. He confided that to you, did he?”

“Yes, he did mention—”

Snick.

The office door opened and Mr. Fitzsimmons entered again, carrying a tray with teacups, a teapot, and a plate of shortbread. The crockery clinked as he set the tray on a small side table.

Both Tristan and Rutland stared at Fitzsimmons.

“The water is heating over the fire in the reception downstairs.” Fitzsimmons dabbed at the perspiration gathering on his forehead. “J-just in case Your Grace changes your mind about the tea.”

“I see,” Tristan replied, gravely. “An excellent dark blend, you said.” He glanced at the tea tray. “With shortbread.”

“Yes!” Fitzsimmons perked up. Even his mustache appeared to curl upward at the edges. “My wife makes a cracking shortbread. Best you’ve ever eaten. Melts on the tongue, it does.”

Tristan had a feeling that Fitzsimmons was biting his tongue to keep from sticking it out and showing them where the shortbread would melt.

Silence.

Truthfully, Tristan had never found himself in a situation like this before his marriage to Isolde—mostly because he would have considered such a visit beneath his purview—and therefore was unsure how to respond. Fitzsimmons’s intentions were kindly enough, though decidedly presumptuous.

He turned back to John Rutland.

“So . . . Mr. Ledger confided in you about his dismissal, Mr. Rutland?”

The younger man swallowed, glancing at his employer before continuing. “Just that he had been let go of his post due to Your Grace’s recent marriage.”

Fitzsimmons stood before his tea tray, making no motion to leave the room.

It seemed Tristan was to have an audience for this interrogation.

Lovely.

Suppressing a sigh, he focused on Rutland. “Mr. Ledger was dismissed in error. It was most certainly not my wish to terminate his employment. I am seeking him in an effort to make amends and offer Ledger his former post. Or if he wishes to move on, I will provide a favorable letter of recommendation.”

“Oh.” Rutland’s shoulders relaxed, and he pushed his glasses up his nose.

Fitzsimmons leaned forward. “That is so very gracious of you, Your Grace. I always say that a modicum of generosity never goes amiss when . . .”

The manager drifted off as both Tristan and Rutland stared, unblinking, at him.

“Pardon the interruption.” Fitzsimmons turned to the tea tray and began moving cutlery around.

“That is kind of you, Your Grace,” Rutland said, a flush rising up his cheeks, no doubt tied to his employer’s somewhat embarrassing behavior.

“It is the least I can do. Ledger has been a valuable, loyal employee, and it pains me to know that his loyalty was rewarded so poorly. Do you happen to know where I might find Mr. Ledger?”

Fitzsimmons moved two teacups, causing them to clink. Loudly.

Mr. Rutland winced. “I wish I could tell you of Adam’s whereabouts, but I haven’t the foggiest notion where he has gone. He came to me a few weeks back, saying he had just been dismissed and hadn’t the courage to tell his parents. They dote on him and will be sore disappointed when they learn of his dismissal. Adam asked to borrow a few coins and promised he would repay me once he found a new position. But he didn’t say anything further, and the money I lent was hardly enough to take him far. I assumed he would be staying with his sister and merely needed a few coins for hackney cabs as he searched for a new position.”

Dread settled in the bottom of Tristan’s lungs. “Ledger has not been to visit his sister or his parents. Mrs. Tolman was unaware he had been let go, much less where he had gone.”

“Blast!” Fitzsimmons interrupted.

Both Tristan and Rutland turned to look at him.

“God be thanked that this Mr. Ledger’s sister could point you to our humble offices, Your Grace,” Fitzsimmons continued.

“Yes,” Tristan intoned.

Rutland cleared his throat. “Now, I am well and truly concerned. I cannot imagine where Adam has got to. It’s unlike him to disappear without a word.”

“Agreed, though your information has been helpful. At least, I now know that Ledger has vanished in truth. If you do happen to hear from him, please pass along my apologies and ask him to call upon—”

A knock sounded on the door.

“The water!” Fitzsimmons beamed. “Come!”

A sweating clerk entered, carrying a steaming kettle.

Fitzsimmons clapped his hands with a crack. “Let us have tea, gentlemen.”

It took Tristan a solid thirty minutes to extract himself from Mr. Fitzsimmons’s exuberance and—here, he had to admit the truth—an excellent cup of black tea. The shortbread was also quite lovely. Predictably, Fitzsimmons pressed three pieces into Tristan’s handkerchief to “share with Her Grace.” The man had beamed so proudly, and waxed so poetic about his own wife’s cooking, Tristan hadn’t the heart to refuse him.

Mr. Rutland, in parting, promised to let Tristan know immediately if Ledger surfaced again.

And that was that.

Stepping out into the bustle of London traffic, shortbread in hand, Tristan frowned.

Damn and blast!

That had not gone as he had hoped.

The bank visit had merely solidified Tristan’s worry over Ledger.

Where the devil had his secretary gone?

Tristan climbed into his waiting carriage and directed the coachman to take him to the office of the London Times . It was time to employ more direct tactics to find Adam Ledger.

The notice he penned was short and to the point:

If any party has information as to the location of Mr. Adam Ledger, former secretary to the Duke of Kendall, please send word to Gilbert House, Grosvenor Square. Intelligence that results in locating Mr. Ledger will be handsomely rewarded.

He handed the notice to the print boy and set off for home, where he planned to corner Isolde, share the excellent shortbread in his pocket, and recount all events related to Augustus Fitzsimmons.

Lady Lavinia was either a rabble-rouser or a madwoman fit for Bedlam.

Isolde formed this theory over the following days in an attempt to explain the woman's vindictive behavior. Or perhaps Lady Lavinia truly was part ferret and reveled in chaos.

Regardless, Isolde couldn't find a single logical reason for Lady Lavinia's continued unprovoked attacks. What did the woman hope to gain?

Isolde was already married to Tristan. No amount of outside torment or chicanery could change that fact. Furthermore, Isolde had already been branded as eccentric and scandalous by the ton. What further damage did Lady Lavinia hope to accomplish? Or was it as Isolde suspected—Lady Lavinia simply relished cruelty?

Evidence of the lady's malice grew daily.

For example, Isolde's beloved, dog-eared copy of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* was found waterlogged on the terrace in the back garden.

The pin of her favorite brooch was bent in half where it lay on her dressing table.

Her calling card case was emptied of its contents, resulting in Isolde appearing an idiot when she went to leave a card for Lady Grosvenor and had to stammer a reason as to why she had no card to give.

An itching powder found its way into Isolde's favorite pair of gloves. But when Tristan asked Isolde why her hands had become red and swollen with hives, she told him a half-truth about spilling the powder herself.

What was she to do? Isolde was at war with a hostile force. She knew she could easily call in Tristan's heavy artillery to win the battle for her. But if Isolde was to be a successful duchess, she needed to fight her own battles.

Of a surety, she had dealt with jealous and vengeful female rivals in the past. Her first year at Broadhurst College had been particularly fraught. As the only member of the British aristocracy at the school, Isolde found herself ostracized, teased, and bullied at times for her differences. For example, she spent her entire freshman year being called Ginger Biscuit because fellow students found the quirkiness of her vocabulary amusing, particularly when it came to gingersnaps. One particularly unpleasant student had even crushed a handful of the cookies, as Americans called them, atop her sheets.

The problem now, of course, was that the enemy lived under Isolde's own roof and was considered a member of the family.

Regardless, Isolde took countermeasures.

She ensured that all her staff knew to monitor Lady Lavinia's whereabouts and actions every time the woman left her room. Furthermore, all occupied bed chambers were locked, and the keys were kept in the bedroom owners' pockets and Mrs. Wilson's chatelaine.

Most helpfully, Isolde had an important ally in her sister-in-law. Isolde wouldn't enlist Tristan's help, but his twin was another matter.

From her bedroom two stories up, Allie had witnessed Lady Lavinia deliberately drop

Persuasion into a puddle on the terrace flagstones and had raced to tell Isolde about it.

“Lady Lavinia is horrid,” Allie declared, looping her arm through Isolde’s. “She will rue the day she declared war on us. Rue! I declare. She hasn’t the slightest understanding of her enemy. We Gilberts do not take a brazen attack lightly.”

Isolde had hugged Allie, grateful to have a capable comrade-in-arms beside her in battle.

Allie had spent years as a revolutionary in Italy—performing clandestine operations, robbing wealthy nobles, and gathering intelligence through underhanded means. To say Tristan’s twin was cunning would be a gross understatement. She was a mistress of chaos—harboring nerves of steel, a penchant for mayhem, and a rather loose relationship with legality.

Consequently, not one but three frogs found their way into the pockets of Lady Lavinia’s favorite gowns. One made an appearance while Lady Lavinia was riding to visit her modiste. The coachman reported that her screeches could be heard for blocks, and a wee crowd gathered in alarm only to break into laughter when a warty toad leaped from Lady Lavinia’s pocket in a desperate bid for freedom.

Somehow, Allie ensured a tiny amount of tartar emetic was deposited in Lady Lavinia’s wine glass during a dinner with Lord and Lady Lockheade and Lord and Lady Hadley. In the middle of the dessert course, Lady Lavinia lurched from her seat and raced from the room, only for the entire party to hear the terrible sound of retching echoing beyond the dining room.

One day, as Cousin Aubrey and Lady Lavinia strolled the shops along Oxford Circus, a street performer followed them around for nearly an hour, making flatulent noises and gagging sounds, much to the delight of onlookers.

But Lady Lavinia proved a formidable opponent.

Slandorous rumors began to spread through the ton , enlarging on the scant details of Jarvis and Isolde's romance and even hinting that Isolde had borne an out-of-wedlock child. All false, of course, but Isolde had to tolerate hissing whispers during visiting hours and the occasional dinner party.

Allie had been so incensed on Isolde's behalf that Lady Lavinia had found her favorite perfume bottle full of cat urine when next she applied the scent.

Isolde wasn't sure she could bear more escalation in this wee war. The strain of constantly looking over her shoulder wore on her soul. Her stomach churned, and exhaustion rested heavily on her shoulders. Just the thought of having to attend the same event as Lady Lavinia left Isolde nervous and swallowing back tears.

"Stiff upper lip," Allie said repeatedly. "Lady Lavinia intends to unpin the very fabric of your existence—to send you scurrying from public life entirely. That is her ultimate goal. She must not see even the slightest muscle twitch in your face."

Isolde had nodded numbly in agreement, but truthfully, every muscle in her body twitched, not just those in her face.

Tristan continued his hunt for Ledger. His notice in the London Times had resulted in dozens of messages, sending him chasing across the city most days. But so far, every clue had been fraudulent. His secretary had vanished into thin air.

However, Isolde knew he sympathized with her trials. A taxidermied ferret appeared one morning on the mantel in the breakfast room. Tristan had glanced at it knowingly, a mischievous smile in his eyes, as he pulled a chair out for her to sit. The next afternoon, Isolde discovered the ferret had moved to the library mantel. Each day, she would find the ferret in a different post. The wee private joke between

herself and Tristan lifted her spirits and gave her strength to stay the course.

The ball was now only two and a half weeks away, and Isolde was counting down the days. The date glowed in her mind, an enchanted door beyond which lay freedom.

She had finished addressing all the invitations and ensured they had been hand-delivered by trusted footmen. Thankfully, she could say that Lady Lavinia had not interfered with the invitations.

But what about the ball itself? With each passing day and every hour spent in preparations, Isolde fretted. Fredericks and Mrs. Wilson were on high alert, even going so far as to station a footman at the kitchen door to ensure that no one meddled in the preparation of foodstuffs.

At least Isolde's performance on the ballroom floor would be better than she had anticipated, thanks to Tristan's tutelage.

"We shall practice every morning after breakfast," he had declared two days after the wood-chopping incident as they spent a welcome few minutes together in his private study.

"So often?" Isolde frowned. "Do you truly consider my dancing skills to be so lacking?"

"I cannot say, as you and I have never danced." He leaned in on a chuckle. "But I am shameless in seizing any excuse to spend more time in your company."

Isolde had smiled and kissed him thoroughly as a reward.

Fortunately, Tristan hadn't lied about his dancing prowess. As requested, they began practicing in the ballroom, Mrs. Wilson accompanying them on the pianoforte.

Dancing was significantly easier under Tristan's instruction. Isolde was starting to think that perhaps she hadn't been properly motivated in the past. Suffering through lessons with Mac or James was a far cry from twirling in her husband's strong arms. Granted, she still had to concentrate intently, counting the beat as sure as an orchestra conductor, but her feet and brain were slowly learning to cooperate with each other.

"You glide like an angel," Tristan said, pulling her into a tight spin as they waltzed one morning only seventeen days before the ball.

The extravagance of Tristan's words caused her to stumble and miss the beat.

"Tristan!" she laughed. "What have I said about flowery praise? I can't keep count when ye say such things."

"I am unrepentant, Wife. You must learn to endure outrageous compliments as you dance, as I am sure you will receive many during our ball."

Och , this dear man.

He spun her again, and this time, Isolde managed to follow his lead. Mrs. Wilson continued to play, though her knowing smile said she had overheard their flirtatious conversation.

"You have mastered the waltz, I think," he continued. "Shall we move on to the mazurka next?"

"Do ye think I'm ready?"

"Of course. I suggest we start with—"

Bang.

The ballroom door opened with force.

Both Isolde and Tristan jumped at the sound. Mrs. Wilson's playing stumbled to a halt.

Lady Lavinia stomped into the ballroom. A lock of her hair stood out jet black against the brown of its neighbors—a discoloration courtesy of Allie secreting ink black onto Lady Lavinia's hair brush earlier this morning.

Lavinia shot daggers at Isolde, before aiming her gaze at Tristan.

“Your Grace,” she said shortly, “might I have a word?”

Given how Tristan's arm tensed where it encircled Isolde's waist, he clearly found the lady's intrusion as offensive as Isolde did.

“If you wish,” he replied, his expression and voice instantly becoming that of the toneless Duke of Kendall.

Lady Lavinia's eyes drifted to Mrs. Wilson at the pianoforte in the corner, and then back to Isolde tucked against Tristan's side, before raising her eyes to his once more.

“Alone, if I could, Your Grace,” Lady Lavinia said.

“As I have repeatedly stated, Lady Lavinia, anything you have to say can be said in the presence of my wife and staff.”

Lady Lavinia clenched her jaw. “It is a private matter.”

“If the matter is so private that it cannot be said in front of my wife, then I daresay it is not something I should be privy to regardless.”

Lady Lavinia's gaze flickered to Isolde and then back again. The lady clearly wished to complain about Isolde herself. She nearly snorted at the woman's effrontery. As if Tristan would side with Lady Lavinia on anything.

"I merely thought . . ." Lady Lavinia took in a deep breath. "I merely thought Your Grace should be apprised of what is being said."

"Being . . . said?" Tristan repeated slowly.

"Yes." Lady Lavinia's eyes darted meaningfully toward Isolde.

Tristan went terrifyingly still at Isolde's side. "I dislike your undertone, Lady Lavinia. Are you implying that I should give heed to scurrilous gossip regarding my duchess?"

"Not all gossip is scurrilous, Your Grace."

Isolde started to doubt Lady Lavinia's intellect and sanity. Was she a madwoman? How could she still think that Tristan's loyalty could be swayed? Heaven knew Isolde had said plenty of terrible things about the Duke of Kendall over the years—and he about her in return—but since those days on the Isle of Canna, Isolde had never once doubted his adoration of her. He would always take her side. Over anyone and everyone else.

"Lady Lavinia," Tristan's tone crackled with the hauteur of the generations of arrogant dukes who had come before him, "I fear you are not quite understanding the lay of the land here. All vulgar gossip is libelous if it involves my wife. I do not care what is being said. They are lies spread by jealous, spiteful tongues. And anyone who wishes to remain under my roof would be wise to repudiate such falsehoods if and when they are heard."

“Your Grace, truly—”

“Am I clear, Lady Lavinia?” Tristan held the woman’s gaze with his steely one. Isolde knew precisely how unnerving that look could be.

Lady Lavinia’s chest heaved, and she shot another daggered look at Isolde.

“You may go.” Tristan dismissed his cousin’s wife with a final withering glance and then turned his back on her.

“Thank you, Mrs. Wilson, for your accompaniment,” he said to the housekeeper. “We shall let you return to your tasks.”

Mrs. Wilson stood, curtsied, and quietly slipped from the room.

Lady Lavinia, however, remained rooted in place, nostrils flaring.

Utterly ignoring her, Tristan turned to Isolde, gazing into her eyes. She saw the outrage and mischief lingering there. Never let it be said that Allie was the twin with the greatest penchant for mayhem. As if to emphasize the point, Tristan pulled Isolde tightly against his chest, cupped the back of her neck, and kissed her. A hungry, fervent sort of kiss that Isolde knew was meant to taunt Lady Lavinia with what she would never have.

Isolde heard a rustle of silk skirts, followed by the ballroom door shutting with a loud thunk.

She burst into giggles, pressing her forehead to Tristan’s chin.

“I can’t say that is the response I had hoped for my kiss,” Tristan murmured. “I should probably try harder.”

“You are terrible, Tristan.”

“I truly am.” He placed a mock hand over his chest. “Some enterprising lady should reform me.”

“Not Lady Lavinia, I hope.”

“Never.” He shuddered. “I had a significantly more beautiful lady in mind.”

“Did ye now?”

“Absolutely. Besides, what is the point of being a duke if I can’t clear a room in order to ravish my wife?”

Isolde grinned. “No point at all.”

Tristan kissed her again, and Isolde tried to ignore her niggling worry. Lady Lavinia had been left seething and humiliated.

What dreadful retribution would she conjure next?

With every passing day, Tristan loathed London more.

Isolde suffered. Oh, she hid it well and refused to let him see how Lady Lavinia’s presence wore on her, but Tristan understood regardless. The smudges under his wife’s eyes continued to grow and her appetite seemed off.

Stubborn woman.

Perhaps he should kidnap her away regardless. To hell with London and the Lady Lavinias of the ton.

But he had given Isolde his word that he would permit her to fight this battle, and he would honor his vow, no matter how taxing.

Consequently, he focused on spending as much time as possible with his wife, trying to fill her hours with non-Lavinia activities whenever he could. They danced for an hour each morning. And in the afternoons and evenings, if matters permitted, he took Isolde driving in Hyde Park and escorted her to soirées and dinners.

When he was not with her, he spent the occasional afternoon with Hadley or Penn-Leith. But mostly, Tristan chopped wood and chased information about Ledger as it arrived. He was slowly losing faith that the situation with his former secretary would resolve happily. Surely, Ledger had suffered some calamity or become a victim of violence.

Or, perhaps, he led a secret life—one that his friends and family weren't privy to. He wouldn't be the first man to do so. But surely the contents of his personal trunk would have hinted at such a thing. The more Tristan examined Ledger's disappearance, it was as if the man had simply stepped out of the door of Gilbert House and vanished into the ether.

Yes, Tristan's notice in the newspaper had elicited messages and suggestions, but nothing had come of it so far. Most who responded were fraudsters attempting to earn a coin through lies. Yet, tracking each snippet of information down gave Tristan a sense of purpose, a rhythm to his days.

Something had to come of it. Tristan refused to give up hope.

I solde awoke to the sound of church bells ringing.

Given the bright exuberance of the clanging, a couple must be marrying at St. George's Church this morning.

Sighing, she pulled a pillow over her head, but it was of no use. The noise abraded her nerves. Pushing upright, she noted Tristan's cold, rumpled side of the bed. She had a vague memory of him kissing her and mentioning a ride in the park. After that, she assumed her husband would continue to investigate the messages from people with supposed knowledge about Ledger.

Well, she certainly wasn't going to breakfast downstairs this morning. There were still two weeks and counting before the ball, and Isolde intended to spend them avoiding Lady Lavinia as much as possible.

Ringling the bell, she summoned a maid and requested breakfast before relaxing back against her pillows, her eyes closing again.

Isolde roused again at the sharp clack of the shutters opening and the clink of china on a tray. Two maids bustled about the room, pouring hot water into the washstand pitcher and placing a breakfast tray on the bed. The pair bobbed curtsies and left as efficiently as they had arrived.

Shaking her head, Isolde struggled to understand how she could still be so tired. It was as if manacles encircled her wrists and chains anchored her legs.

Strong coffee and a hearty breakfast should help.

Sitting upright, she lifted the silver dome off her breakfast plate. The smell of scrambled eggs and fried sausage filled the air, assaulting her senses and setting her to gagging.

Isolde barely made it to the chamberpot in the corner before purging the meager contents of her stomach.

Swallowing convulsively, she sat on the floor, waiting for the spasms to pass.

Bloody hell.

She didn't feel ill, per se. No fever or dizziness. Just a queasy stomach that would not settle.

Had Lady Lavinia poisoned her?

Or . . .

In a brilliant flash, all the signs coalesced into a stark, simple possibility.

Her fatigue and nausea. Tristan's ardent affections since their marriage. And—here she did some quick maths—the glaring fact that her courses should have started over two weeks ago.

She couldn't be . . .

And so soon . . .

Could she?

Hours later, Isolde accepted a footman's hand as she stepped from the carriage in front of Gilbert House.

A visit to a physician had confirmed what she already suspected—Isolde, Duchess of Kendall, was in a family way.

Now that she had confirmed the news, Isolde felt like a prize idiot. She was a woman of science. Her physical symptoms over the past week had overwhelmingly pointed to one conclusion. How could she have been such a blind eejit ?

Tristan, she hoped, would be thrilled. After all, he needed a son as soon as possible, if only to demote Cousin Aubrey from his throne of heir apparent.

But worry churned in her stomach. Or rather, her stomach churned, and she feared it was partly from her nervous anxiety—anxiety for the vast unknown she now faced.

She likely should have had the carriage take her straight to the Hadleys' townhouse. But she couldn't bear the thought of telling her mother about the pregnancy before her husband. As the babe's father, Tristan should hear the news first.

Isolde had one foot on the stoop of Gilbert House when the front door opened and an entourage emerged—Cousin Aubrey and Lady Lavinia, the Duchess of Andover, and Allie and Ethan.

All were dressed for walking.

Allie's eyes lit up when she saw Isolde.

“Duchess!” Her sister-in-law was always careful to refer to Isolde by her title when in public. “You have returned at the perfect moment. Please join us on a stroll through Hyde Park. Cousin Aubrey wishes to explain the engineering marvels of the

Serpentine.”

The pleading in Allie’s silver eyes was nearly comical. You cannot leave Ethan and me to fend for ourselves with these idioti !

“Is Kendall not at home?” Isolde asked. Tristan was her first priority.

Allie shook her head. “I’m not sure where my brother went, but he is not here.” Come with us , her eyes continued to shout. “Cousin Aubrey’s treatise promises to be fascinating.”

Isolde doubted that his discussion of hydraulic engineering would be scintillating, or even educational given her own study of the subject, but she could scarcely abandon Allie in her hour of need.

“Of course,” Isolde replied. “I should be delighted.”

Which is how Isolde found herself walking beside Allie across Grosvenor Square and down Brook Street toward Hyde Park.

Ethan, bless him, took on the role of entertaining the Duchess of Andover, walking ahead of Allie and Isolde. As usual, Ethan poured on the charm and soon had the duchess laughing.

“Ethan truly is a national treasure,” Isolde murmured to Allie.

“Indeed, he is.” Allie lifted an eyebrow. “I’m going to tell him you said that.”

“It will go to his head.”

“Absolutely. But it will also make him more likely to run interference like this again.

Thank you for joining us, by the way. The duchess refused to accept my demure attempts to avoid this excursion. I think she wished to flirt with Ethan.”

Given the duchess’s bark of laughter, Isolde didn’t doubt it.

“My pleasure,” Isolde replied, taking in a careful, shallow breath and swallowing down the bile climbing her throat.

Now that she knew she was pregnant, everything assaulted her senses—the noise of carriage wheels clattering on the flagstones, the stench of horse manure, the drifting waft of coal smoke.

Isolde pressed a handkerchief to her nose in order to combat it.

When they paused at Park Lane to cross the street into the parkland proper, Allie looked at her with curiosity, gaze dropping to the cloth Isolde religiously breathed through. After a moment of staring, Allie’s eyes went round as saucers.

“I see,” she said in delight, placing a hand on top of the wee swell of her abdomen where her own child grew.

“See what?”

Allie grinned. “Niente . Merely that I am eager to become an aunt and for my child to have a cousin as a playmate.”

She paused, waiting for a confirmation that Isolde did not give. Tristan still deserved to hear the news before his sister, twins or no.

Allie’s chin lifted in understanding. “I take it my twin does not know yet.”

A break in the traffic permitted their party to cross the street, tiptoeing around manure. Reaching the opposite side, they stepped onto the wide gravel path and strolled into the park. The dimming of noise and the fresh air through the trees eased Isolde's stomach, allowing her to drop the handkerchief.

"I haven't spoken to Tristan yet." Isolde shook her head. "I only realized this morning after he had left for the day."

Allie leaned in as if to say more, but Lady Lavinia's strident voice reached them. "Whatever seriousness are you two discussing?"

The woman had paused on the pavement several paces ahead.

"Nothing of import, Lady Lavinia," Allie called sweetly.

Ethan, the Duchess of Andover, and Cousin Aubrey glanced their way but continued to stroll ahead.

Lady Lavinia, however, waited for Isolde and Allie to catch up to her and then glued herself to Isolde's side as they walked.

"Well, if it is nothing of import, then pray tell," Lady Lavinia taunted.

Allie and Isolde exchanged a look.

Allie's eyes sparked with mischief. "We were merely trying to decide which of our husbands appear to greater advantage in a well-cut coat. As you can imagine, I keep insisting it is my Ethan, but the duchess has been refuting my claim."

Lady Lavinia's mouth closed with a snap.

“Kendall is most dashing,” Isolde agreed, “particularly in evening attire. As his twin sister, you must acknowledge as much.” She lifted an eyebrow at Allie.

“He is my brother. I am blind to any physical charms he may possess.”

“And what about my Aubrey?” Lady Lavinia tilted her head.

“What about him?” Allie replied, her words politely inquisitive, as if she couldn’t imagine why a milksop like Aubrey should be placed in the same category as finely-made male specimens such as Ethan Penn-Leith and the Duke of Kendall.

Lady Lavinia soldiered on. “Aubrey was not part of your conjecture?” She looked pointedly ahead to where her husband strolled with Ethan and the duchess.

“Oh! About hydraulic engineering or his . . . physique?” Allie gave Isolde an exaggerated glance of dismay.

“His physique, of course,” Lady Lavinia replied as if Allie were an imbecile. “That is what we are speaking of, is it not?”

“Of . . . course,” Allie said, swallowing at the end. “Uhm . . . Aubrey’s manly . . . appearance.”

Isolde ordered her lips not to smile. It was a difficult task.

Allie said nothing more, appearing lost and unsure. The silence lingered, speaking volumes as to the inadequacies of Lady Lavinia’s choice of husband.

As if on cue, Aubrey squealed like a wee girl and began waving his arms frantically over his head, spinning in a circle.

“Is the bee on me?” he yelped, bouncing from foot to foot on the gravel path. “Can you see it?”

“Gracious. Such panic is hardly warranted,” the Duchess of Andover intoned, stepping out of the way of her son-in-law’s flailing and shooting a telling glance back at her daughter. “’Tis merely an insect.”

Ethan paused and surveyed Cousin Aubrey still swatting at the air. “I believe ye have vanquished the beast, Mr. Gilbert.”

Allie giggled at Isolde’s side.

Fortunately, Isolde still held her handkerchief and could use it to hide her own smile. But given the dagger-sharp glare Lady Lavinia gave her, Isolde doubted the cloth concealed anything.

Nostrils flaring, Lady Lavinia pivoted toward her husband, but as she moved, her shoulder bumped harshly into Isolde’s, sending Isolde stumbling. Only Allie’s strong hand grasping her elbow kept Isolde from pitching head-first onto the gravel path.

“Oops! Pardon me!” Lavinia snipped, not a trace of apology in her tone.

The woman stomped to her husband’s side and grabbed his arm. “I agree with Mr. Penn-Leith, my dear. The bee is gone. Shall we continue on to the Serpentine?” She gave Isolde and Allie another daggerish look over her shoulder. “I, for one, am all anticipation for your discourse on its formation.”

The small group walked quickly on, Ethan offering his arm to the Duchess of Andover.

Allie growled. “Uffa , but I hate that woman!”

“Aye.” Isolde let her handkerchief drop. “I have rather vivid fantasies of retribution that end in Lady Lavinia on bended knee begging for my forgiveness.”

Allie laughed.

Lavinia whipped her head around to glare at them.

Which, of course, only made Allie laugh harder.

They continued along the path, staying a wee bit behind the rest of their party and Lady Lavinia’s malicious glowers.

The path emerged from trees to the wider open grassy areas that led down to the Serpentine, the large man-made lake in the center of the park. Couples and groups walked the gravel paths, as well as servants rushing to complete tasks. Children with nurses in tow screeched across the lawn, chasing balls and each other, filling the air with shrieks of laughter.

Gracious. Those could be Isolde’s own future children in just a handful of years.

Arriving at the Serpentine, they followed the shore to the cement bulwark at its southern end—the point at which the River Westbourne had been dammed to create the lake. The path continued right onto the top of the dam, the retention wall dropping straight into the water. Children ran about here—some shooting marbles and some playing tag—all under the watchful gaze of nurses and maids. No railing or balustrade separated the path from a perilous drop into the water. A childish tumble could easily turn deadly.

Pausing, they surveyed the expanse of water, Allie and Isolde keeping some space between themselves and Lady Lavinia. Isolde had no desire to experience more of the lady’s vitriol.

Cousin Aubrey, in an attempt to redeem his manhood, explained how the dam had been built. Or rather, shouted his explanation over the crying and laughter of the children.

He carried on for several minutes. “As you can see, the cement poured here provides . . .”

Screams from two boys playing marbles on the level flagstones drowned out the rest of Aubrey’s words.

“ . . . and then an outlet was built for the river to flow—”

A particularly loud shout of triumph from a blonde boy interrupted Aubrey’s pontificating.

At that point, the duchess made her impatience known.

“Yes, that is all well and good, I am sure, but my ears grow tired of this mayhem.” She glanced pointedly at the children darting to collect the rolling glass marbles, a nurse bending to help them. “Ah, look. I believe I see an acquaintance. Shall we walk on?”

The duchess pivoted and continued walking without looking to see if they would heed her words.

Ethan lifted a hand to Allie, gesturing for her to join him.

Stifling a smile, Isolde turned to follow.

Two of the children playing tag raced past, causing her to pull up quickly to avoid running into them. Instinctively, she placed herself between the children and the lake.

At the same moment, a pair of hands pushed against her upper spine—hard—sending Isolde pitching toward the water.

Arms windmilling for one breathless second, she teetered on the edge of the dam. And then her body lost its war with gravity, tipping over the edge. Intuitively, Isolde twisted in the air as she fell, anything to avoid hitting the water face first.

This meant she caught Lady Lavinia's triumphant smirk and a wee boy shouting, "The lady pushed her!"

And then, the cold, dark water of the Serpentine swallowed Isolde whole.

Tristan alighted from his carriage, motioning for the footmen to remain in their high perches behind the coach.

This was his final stop of the day—the last clue from his newspaper advertisement to hunt down. This particular reply was intriguing. Some informants came to Gilbert House in person with their information, but this one had simply included an address and a terse message written in a crude hand.

I know what happened to Mr. Adam Ledger. I will tell only if ye promise that the bobbies won't be called.

The note was the first to lack obsequious words and fawning promises. Instead, the tone sounded careful and even a mite scared. If this person was afraid that the police would be summoned, it meant that whatever they had to reveal was not precisely legal. All of which, naturally, amplified Tristan's concern. If this was a legitimate source, what nefarious thing had occurred?

Of course, like every other missive, this one could simply be a dead end, as well.

The address had led him to a ramshackle boarding house on the fringe of Seven Dials, the grimmest rookery in London. Though not within the rookery itself, the townhouse had certainly seen better days. Its shutters hung loose at ungainly angles, and refuse gathered in murky heaps beside the front stoop.

Tristan climbed the dirty steps and rapped the grimy door with the head of his

walking stick. The proprietress answered—a middle-aged woman with hair pulled into a severe bun and an equally severe expression upon her face. Unlike Ledger's sister, this woman looked Tristan and his gleaming carriage up and down with wary disdain.

“Can I help ye, sir?” she said in a thick Northumberland accent.

“I am Kendall. I received a summons from this address.” He waved the battered bit of foolscap in his gloved hand. “Someone here claims to have knowledge as to Mr. Adam Ledger's whereabouts.”

The woman licked her lips. “I never said nuffin' about knowing Mr. Ledger's current location.”

“You are the sender of this then?” He tipped the foolscap in his hand.

“Aye.”

“But you do not know Ledger's whereabouts?”

“Nae. I said I know what happened to him. Not where he is right now.”

Tristan ground his teeth at the woman's semantics.

“Any information you can supply would be appreciated. If I deem it valuable, there will be a reward.” He fished a half-crown from his pocket, the metallic coin catching in the light.

The woman looked at it with hungry eyes.

“I need your word of honor as a gentleman that ye won't be calling the bobbies to my

door.”

His eyebrows rose. Again with the police.

“Have you yourself harmed Mr. Ledger, madam?”

“Nae!” She shook her head vigorously, eyes darting again to the gleaming coin in his fingers.

“Then you have nothing to fear.” He rocked the coin between his knuckles, letting it glint in the sunlight.

The woman licked her lips.

Tristan fetched a second half-crown from his waistcoat pocket.

Her breath caught.

“If you are innocent, then there is no fear in telling me what you know. Mr. Ledger is a good man. I am his friend and wish to locate him.”

Wringing her hands in her dirty apron, the woman looked to the house behind her.

“Ye have to understand that my man, Richard, he’s not a bad person. But times are hard, and we have many mouths to feed.”

A chill chased Tristan’s spine.

“What occurred?”

“A well-dressed lady found Richard begging along Piccadilly. My man does that

sometimes to earn an extra coin.”

Tristan nodded, heart a thunder of hooves in his ribcage. “What did the lady say?”

“She promised Richard two quid if he pushed a man named Adam Ledger, secretary to the Duke of Kendall, under a carriage or into the Thames. ‘Make it look like an accident,’ the lady said. Richard agreed to do it. We needed the money, and the lady didn’t specify that Richard had to kill this Ledger fellow. So my man figured he could do the deed without causing Ledger no serious harm. He does have a decent heart, my Richard. He wouldn’t kill for money.”

Tristan’s blood turned to ice. He knew of only one lady in Ledger’s orbit who might have something to hide. Only one lady who possessed the arrogance to demand a servant be hurt for countermanding her.

What the hell was Lady Lavinia trying to conceal?

“What occurred?” Tristan asked. “What did your man do?”

“Richard followed Mr. Ledger. He stayed a night at a house near St. Paul’s Cathedral. The next morning, Ledger visited a bank close to Westminster Abbey. After Mr. Ledger left the bank, he walked across Westminster Bridge and strolled along the embankment of the Thames there. Richard saw his opportunity and nudged Ledger over the edge and into the river, no one the wiser.”

Numbness spread down Tristan’s arms, setting his fingers to tingling. Did Ledger know how to swim? Panic momentarily paralyzed Tristan’s tongue as he didn’t know the answer to that question. “And Ledger? Did he survive then?”

“Richard didn’t stick around to see. He had done his bit.”

Swallowing back the knot of frustrationconcernanger in his throat, Tristan nodded. “Thank you. This information has been most helpful. If you do happen to hear of Mr. Ledger’s current whereabouts, please send word to Gilbert House once more.”

He offered the coins.

The woman snatched them both from his fingers.

Grimacing, he turned for his coach, ordering his coachman to return home.

Damn Lady Lavinia to hell and back! He could only surmise that Aubrey had been part of this plot, too, as he had been the one to sack Ledger.

The marble columns of the Covent Garden market passed outside Tristan’s window, but he scarcely saw them.

His thoughts roiled.

Assuming Lady Lavinia and Aubrey were the culprits, why had they wanted to harm Tristan’s secretary? Petty revenge? Or something more sinister?

Worst of all, what had become of poor Ledger after he landed in the Thames?

Tristan breathed past the ball of emotions lodged in his throat. The fear that his one and only potential friend had perished before their friendship had truly begun.

The coach had barely rolled to a stop before Gilbert House when Tristan threw open the carriage door and took the front steps two at a time. He burst through the front door, intent on hunting down his cousin and beating him bloody until he confessed all he knew.

Tristan relished the prospect.

But he had scarcely crossed the threshold when Fredericks accosted him. The butler looked, in a word, frantic .

“Thank the Lord you have returned, Your Grace.”

“Whatever is the matter?” Tristan shucked his hat, overcoat, gloves, and walking stick, handing the lot to a waiting footman.

Fredericks placed a palm over his heart. “There has been an incident, Your Grace.”

Isolde finished braiding her wet hair—still warm from her bath—tying off the end with a ribbon before crawling into bed. Her impromptu swim had heightened her nausea and fatigue. At the moment, she wanted nothing more than to sleep through to tomorrow morning.

She heard Tristan’s footsteps racing up the stairs a few moments before the ducal bedchamber crashed open.

Her husband stormed through the doorway, brows marshaled like a thundercloud.

“What the devil has happened? Fredericks told me there had been an incident.” He shut the door and instantly crossed to their bed. “Are you hurt, my love?”

“I am well,” Isolde sniffed, instructing her overwrought emotions not to react, but she feared that her pregnant body might have other ideas.

Tristan’s frown deepened. Tugging off his shoes and shrugging out of his coat, waistcoat, and cravat, he immediately joined her in their bed, pulling her into his arms, wet hair and all.

“Forgive me, but you do not appear well,” he grumbled against her temple. “What has happened?”

Isolde opened her mouth to tell him about Lady Lavinia, being pushed into the lake, the crowd that gathered to witness her humiliating swim to the bank, and Ethan helping her—dripping wet and shivering—out of the water.

Instead, a hiccupping sob emerged.

“Ah, love.” Tristan pressed a kiss to her forehead and gathered her even closer.

He let her cry for a moment and then propped himself up on one elbow, so he could look down at her and smooth the damp hair from her brow.

“Who put these tears on your cheeks?” he asked, expression dark and serious. A curl of his gray hair slipped from its pomade to tumble across his forehead. “I need to know so I can turn their lives into a living hell.”

His words made her cry harder. Damnation. Such an outburst was so unlike her normal self. The babe would likely rule her emotions for next year at the least.

“I’m w-with ch-child,” she stammered out.

Tristan stilled. “What did you say?”

Isolde peered up into his dark eyes. Reaching for his hand, she placed it on her abdomen. “I’m p-pregnant.”

If Isolde had harbored any concerns over his reaction, the incandescent joy on Tristan’s face removed all trace of worry.

He looked between her face to his palm on her belly and back again. “Truly?”

“Aye,” she smiled through her tears. “I consulted a physician earlier today, just to be sure. But yes, we are going to be parents.” She swiped at her damp cheeks. “Och, this bairn needs to stop making me greit. I fear I shall be forever wiping tears.”

“Permit me.” Bending, he began kissing the tears from her face, murmuring endearments against her skin. “My love. My darling. Amore mio.”

Though he spoke fluent Italian courtesy of his Italian mother, Tristan rarely lapsed into it. But in this moment, he released a string of melodic words, the only ones that Isolde understood were *bellissima* for most beautiful and *la mia innamorata* for my lover.

Finally, he pulled back and pressed his forehead to hers. “So if you are currently growing our daughter—”

“Or son,” Isolde interrupted. “We truly do need a son.”

“Yes, in due time, darling. But this one—” He put his large hand on her stomach once more. “—this babe will be a girl. A daughter as bonny and wild as her mother. I will settle for nothing less.”

“Absurd,” Isolde laughed through the tears that continued to fall. Was this the reality of pregnancy? Crying the day long?

“But I must ask, if you are merely *incinta*, as the Italians say, why are you sopping wet? What is the ‘incident’ Fredericks mentioned?”

Ah, that.

Well . . .

Isolde sighed, her lip quivering once more. “Lady Lavinia pushed me into the Serpentine.”

Tristan went terrifyingly still beside her.

“I believe I am going to need you to repeat what you just said, Wife.” He said the words innocuously enough, but the deathly quiet in his tone and murderous glint to his gaze sent a chill down Isolde’s spine.

“Just that.” Isolde relayed their stroll into Hyde Park and what had occurred, trying to keep her tears at bay. “We all turned to leave, and I stopped to let the children race by. That was when someone pushed me in the back with two hands and sent me tumbling into the lake. It had to have been Lady Lavinia, as she was the only person behind me.”

“That damn harpy is fortunate you didn’t crack your head! I would have seen her hang for such an offense.”

“Fortunately, I am no stranger to near drowning, as well ye know. I swam to shore easily enough, and Ethan helped pull me out of the water.”

“I should never wish you to revisit the horror of a near drowning, Wife. Did Lady Lavinia offer an excuse?”

“Of course not. She declared herself innocent. However, two of the children and their nurse saw what happened and kept saying, ‘The lady pushed her’ and pointing at Lady Lavinia. But, naturally, Lady Lavinia claimed the nurse and children were lying to cover their perfidy. The Duchess of Andover believed her daughter.” Isolde swallowed, lifting a hand to cover her eyes.

It was just . . .

She was so tired. It was exhausting spending every day with an eye fixed over her shoulder, fretting about what awful thing Lady Lavinia would contrive to do next. Surely, the termagant would find a way to sabotage the ball.

“Lady Lavinia has been making your life a living hell,” Tristan said.

“Aye,” Isolde sniffed. “Your cousin has terrible taste in wives.”

“Another example of Aubrey’s imbecilic nature.”

Isolde managed a gasping laugh. She simply wanted off this Catherine Wheel. She wanted peace and harmony restored to her life.

But that wasn’t quite the hand she had been dealt at the moment.

She took in a stuttering breath and, once again, wiped her face. “I will confront Lady Lavinia about this tomorrow—”

“No.” Tristan’s voice held a sharp finality.

She met his gaze.

Oh!

Gracious.

Jaw tense, teeth clenched, eyes chips of ice—

Italian mercenaries battling the infidel hordes to the death had likely appeared less

fierce.

“I can fight my own battles, Tristan,” she said, but the quivering wobble in her voice belied her words.

He bent down, their noses nearly touching. “I know you can, love. It is one of the kaleidoscope of things I adore about you. But in this, I. Do. Not. Care.”

“Tristan—”

Lifting a hand, he cupped her face, tilting her chin until she peered deep into his soul.

“Believe me, Isolde Gilbert, when I say this.” He bit out the words with chilling enunciation, eyes burning with a holy fire. “I will burn this god-forsaken country to the ground for you.”

His words sent gooseflesh skittering across her skin.

He meant it, her glorious Tristan.

Hand at her cheek, he continued, “I will eviscerate anyone who dares harm or threaten you. I will take that damn ferret of a woman and turn her life into a wasteland of regret and horror.”

“Tristan, but—”

“No buts . I know you can fight this battle, my love, but I can no longer remain a passive bystander. I will tear this realm apart with my bare hands before permitting anyone to harm one more hair on your beautiful head.” He leaned down, his forehead pressing to hers. “Understand this simple truth—I am your sword, cara mia . You have only to point the blade.”

His declaration was simply too much. How could she ever have believed this man would not be the most devoted of husbands?

Sobbing, Isolde wrapped her arms around his neck and collapsed her head on his chest. The warmth of his large body instantly surrounded her.

He let her go, bless him.

“I have come to a decision,” he said once her weeping had quieted. Gently, he shifted to look down at her once more. “We have both been concerned about me retreating into my haughty Kendall self or imploding due to a lack of purpose. I have even been having fantasies of a simpler life, one where I am not hemmed in by ducal duties and am free to spend every minute with you.”

“I would adore that life.”

“As would I. But I have realized a different truth just now—I am Kendall. And at times, it is useful to be Kendall in order to protect those I love. I will never stop wielding the might of the dukedom to secure your happiness. That—” He dropped a soft kiss on her lips. “That is my purpose.”

Isolde pressed a hand to his chest, tears threatening once more. How she adored him.

His dark eyes stared deeply into hers. “Moreover, I am eternally tired of attempting to adhere to the rules of the ton. To hell with them. We are not followers of custom, you and I. We make the custom, Isolde. If we decree that husbands and wives should revel in one another’s company, then others will follow. If we wish duchesses to be scandalously educated and outspoken, then so they will be. We set the rules, and others hasten to observe them.”

“Oh, my darling!”

“This is what is going to happen, my love.” His head dropped to her ear. “You are going to stay here, safe and protected in my bed, growing our babe and recovering your strength. I, on the other hand, will don my fiercest Kendall face and lay waste to my cousin, his wife, and likely the Duchy of Andover while I am at it.”

Never had she adored this man more.

“I-I love y-ye,” she hiccupped.

“Not as much as I love you, cuore mio .”

My heart.

She knew those words, too.

“C-can you lay waste tomorrow?” she asked, burrowing into his chest. “This is n-nice, and I w-want to cuddle m-more.”

“Hush, my love. I’m not going anywhere until you release me.” He kissed her again. “But then, I will attack with brutal savagery. That, my darling, I promise.”

Tristan still had a full head of steam when he alighted from his carriage before Buckingham Palace the next morning.

He had meant every word he had said to Isolde—

Protecting her and their life together was his purpose.

He would reduce the entire kingdom to ash in order to ensure her safety and wellbeing.

Thankfully, he had left her curled on a chaise in her private sitting room with instructions to do nothing but rest for the day. He had even sent a footman to the local bookstore to purchase a stack of titles he thought she would enjoy. Hopefully, when he returned later, he could sit beside her and listen as she recounted the worlds she had traveled through words.

Between now and then, he had business to address. His first inclination had been to confront Cousin Aubrey and Lady Lavinia, demand answers for their assault on Isolde and Ledger, decide if he wished to summon the magistrate, and if so, bring criminal charges.

But his cold, calculating Kendall self—the ruthless part of him that plotted enemies' downfall and silenced opposition—instantly pointed out potential problems with that course of action.

First and foremost, it would pit him against the Duke and Duchess of Andover, and by extension, possibly Queen Victoria herself. Granted, as Kendall, Tristan was not without power and clout, and surely Hadley would add the weight of his political and economic arm to assist Tristan and Isolde in their fight. Even so, openly accusing the daughter of a high-ranking Peer of murder, or even attempted murder, would invite scandal.

Therefore, a modicum of diplomacy might better serve his aims and perhaps avoid steep societal repercussions for himself and Isolde.

Hence his unannounced arrival at the palace.

Mounting the stairs, he handed his hat and calling card to the waiting butler, requesting to speak with the Duchess of Andover.

“I know Her Grace is in residence at the moment,” Tristan said.

“Of course, Your Grace. I shall inquire if Her Grace is at home to visitors.”

For the woman’s sake, Tristan certainly hoped she was.

A few minutes later, the butler returned and led Tristan through a series of staterooms that terminated in a luxurious, but cozy, sitting room.

Two women already occupied an armchair and the sofa—the Duchess of Andover and Queen Victoria herself.

“Kendall.” Queen Victoria inclined her head.

“Your Majesty.” He bowed.

“It is our understanding you wish to speak with Her Grace.” The Queen motioned to the duchess seated opposite.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Silence.

“Well.” The Queen flicked a hand. “Get on with it. I haven’t all day.”

Tristan’s gaze moved to the Duchess of Andover. The glint in her eye said she knew Tristan had come to discuss her daughter’s behavior toward Isolde, and she had no intention of making the conversation easy for him.

Ah, yes.

But did Victoria know about the incident with the Serpentine? And did either lady know about the attack against Ledger?

It scarcely mattered.

Tristan had wanted a battle, and God bless the duchess for providing one.

“As you wish, Your Majesty.” He turned to the duchess. “Your Grace, I am here to notify you of my intention to evict my cousin and your daughter from my home. They will no longer be welcome at any property owned by the Dukedom of Kendall. I will also be reducing my cousin’s allowance to the barest pittance permissible.”

Tristan would have removed it entirely, but his father’s will had stipulated that some allowance must be given. Unfortunate, but legally binding just the same.

The duchess bore the news with a slow blink of her eyes. “And why, pray tell, are

you tossing your own heir from your home and behaving in such an ungentlemanly manner, Kendall?”

Foolish woman.

She was taunting him, assuming that he would have the delicacy to avoid directly besmirching a lady’s honor—detailing Lady Lavinia’s perfidy, for example—in front of the Queen.

Hah!

“Yesterday, as I am sure you are aware,” he said, “Lady Lavinia deliberately pushed my wife, the Duchess of Kendall, into the Serpentine.”

Queen Victoria gasped, her brows drawing into a fine line.

The duchess’s chin dropped and her eyes widened in outrage.

Excellent. So the duchess had not told the queen her version of what had occurred. The lady was not as skilled an opponent as he had supposed.

“Kendall!” Her Majesty said in scandalized tones. “To speak of a lady in such a manner . . .” She fanned her face.

The duchess’s expression morphed into a smirk.

Tristan’s resolve didn’t falter.

“I apologize if the directness of my manner offends, Your Majesty, but I will not be silent when the lives of those I love are placed in jeopardy.”

“Lives were hardly in jeopardy, Kendall. You are being hysterical,” The duchess snorted. “By all accounts, it was a simple accident, and the Duchess of Kendall was unharmed. Her life was certainly never at risk. She swam to the shore and walked home. You forget yourself, Kendall. I was there.”

“My wife is with child, Your Grace,” he spat. “I was speaking primarily of the life of my unborn heir.”

“Oh!” The Queen placed a hand over her heart.

The Duchess of Andover blanched, taking in a sharp breath.

“Furthermore,” Tristan continued, “Lady Lavinia had no understanding that my duchess knows how to swim. She pushed my wife off to a watery grave. Your daughter, Duchess, has much to gain if my wife dies, miscarries our child, or suffers an accident that renders her unable to bear children. So I do not take physical attacks on Isolde’s person lightly. At the moment, I have decided not to bring charges of assault or attempted murder against Lady Lavinia, but that could easily change.”

“Bah!” The duchess waved a careless hand. “Again, you are being histrionic, Kendall. Lady Lavinia assured me that she did not cause the duchess’s fall. It was the children racing around who—”

“Nonsense!” he interrupted. “Two children plus their nurse witnessed what transpired—Lady Lavinia braced both hands on my wife’s upper back and shoved. My sister, as well as Mr. Penn-Leith, were also there, Duchess, and heard the whole of it. And Isolde herself distinctly felt two adult hands push her between the shoulder blades, far higher on her back and with more force than a child could manage. I would tread carefully when questioning the honor of my wife or that of my twin sister.”

“This is all merely hearsay and prattle,” the duchess sniffed. “You can prove nothing against my daughter.”

“Indeed? Shall I file charges of attempted murder against Lady Lavinia then—summon witnesses and let a jury decide her guilt?”

“Kendall!” Victoria admonished. “Cease this crass behavior. I fear your wife’s manner of speech has begun rubbing off on you.”

He bowed to the Queen. “I apologize, Your Majesty, if the manner of my address is distressing, but I will not apologize for its content. I love my wife. I love our unborn child. I will not stand idly by and permit either to be threatened, abused, or harmed. I certainly will no longer house those who wish my duchess and our unborn child ill.”

Both women stared at him.

“Additionally,” he bit out, “it has recently come to my attention that this is not the first time Lady Lavinia has attempted to drown those she perceives as a threat. I learned just yesterday that a lady matching Lady Lavinia’s description hired a street ruffian to push my former secretary into the Thames.”

“Kendall!” Victoria gasped. “This truly is ludicrous! I begin to doubt you are fully in charge of your mental capacities.”

“Hear, hear!” the duchess harrumphed. “Perhaps we should summon a physician.”

“Your Majesty, you know me to be a gentleman of the strictest decorum. I have never once stooped to falsehoods or exaggeration.”

Queen Victoria’s lips pursed as if remembering every past instant of Tristan’s sanctimonious behavior.

“If you doubt my word now,” he continued, “again I say we call a jury and witnesses and let the courts decide this matter. It is my belief that, after reports of my demise, my secretary uncovered proof that Lady Lavinia and my cousin were meddling in my private affairs, likely hatching some plan to declare themselves regents of the duchy, pending my appearance and proof of my sound mental state. Given that they have your ear, Your Majesty, the plan might have worked had I not returned to Town unexpectedly as I did. Regardless, as even temporary regents, they could have plundered the family coffers. My secretary stood between them and that goal, and therefore, they had him sacked and further silenced before he could sound the alarm.”

Victoria stirred in her chair. “Our summons was designed to flush you out, as it were. To verify the true status of your wellbeing. The Dukedom of Kendall is too powerful an entity to permit rumors regarding your health to run rampant. You should have returned to Town much sooner than you did. Such a lack of oversight was badly done on your part, Duke.”

Tristan acknowledged the blow with a nod of his head. “I agree, Your Majesty. Please accept my apologies. I offer no excuse, only that with my private secretary dismissed, no one remained in Town to inform me of the rumors . . . as was my cousin and Lady Lavinia’s plan. Unfortunately, my secretary is still missing, so I may have to open a criminal investigation, regardless. If he is found dead, I will hunt down his murderers, make no mistake. He was a good man and did not deserve such cruelty.”

Glancing at the Duchess of Andover, Tristan noted the color had drained from her face, leaving her skin ashen. Her gaze flitted to his.

She knew.

The lady knew that her daughter had done these things, that Lady Lavinia’s scheming had gone too far. Even Victoria had been concerned for the dukedom, it seemed. The

duchess also recognized the dire legal quagmire that she and her family now faced.

Those in upper aristocracy might have their differences, but a conspiracy against a sitting Peer and attempts to kill his lady and unborn heir would be viewed with horror. If Kendall went public with his accusations, even if there were only a thread of proof, the court of public opinion would excoriate Aubrey and Lady Lavinia, and by extension, her parents and family.

Queen Victoria pinched her lips together, her gaze darting between the Duchess of Andover and Kendall, clearly reading the duchess's concern over her daughter's guilt.

Tristan continued to hold the duchess's gaze. "As of yet, I have taken no legal action. It is my hope that my secretary will be found well and whole, and with Lady Lavinia's dismissal from my presence, these malicious attacks will cease. However, I do not wish to see hide nor hair of Mr. Gilbert and Lady Lavinia for the rest of my days. I have come here today as a courtesy to inform Your Grace that your daughter and son-in-law will soon be homeless. They are no longer welcome at Gilbert House or to set foot on any property owned by the Duchy of Kendall. I suggest removing them to the country post-haste."

With that, Tristan gave both women a clipped bow and, at the Queen's flicking hand of dismissal, exited the room.

An hour later , Tristan strode into Gilbert House, his mood greatly improved.

Now, all that remained was clearing his home of vermin.

The voices of Cousin Aubrey and Lady Lavinia wafted out from the breakfast room.

Excellent.

Straightening, he channeled his father's ghost—gaze steely, mouth a tight slash, jaw stiff. Only one positive had come of his brutal father's legacy—Tristan's ability to instantly morph into a cold monster in defense of those he loved.

He paused in the doorway. Aubrey and Lady Lavinia were seated comfortably at the table, enjoying a luncheon of ham, bread, and stewed fruits and quarreling over something in the newspaper before them.

Absorbed, they didn't notice Tristan at first.

He cleared his throat.

They both paused and looked up at him. Slowly, Aubrey lowered his fork. Lady Lavinia blinked.

Tristan continued to survey them with calculating indifference. The key, he knew, was to speak terrifying things as conversationally and unemotionally as possible.

“Aubrey, Lady Lavinia, there you are. A couple of items. I have reduced your allowance to one-fourth of what it has been. When my heir is born, it will be severed entirely. I never wish to see either of you again. That also means you will never again set foot on property owned by the Duchy of Kendall. Therefore, you have—” Tristan tugged his pocket watch from his waistcoat and made a show of casually studying it. “—precisely fifty-nine minutes to permanently remove yourselves and your belongings from my home.”

He pivoted to leave.

Behind him, chairs screeched and clothing rustled as his cousin and wife stumbled to their feet.

“P-pardon,” Aubrey stammered.

“Your Grace!” Lady Lavinia called.

Tristan turned around, expression blank and indifferent.

Both Aubrey and Lady Lavinia stared at him, their eyes flared and rather wild looking.

Perfect.

“Was anything I said unclear?” Tristan asked. “Your funds have been reduced and you have been banished. You will leave. Now.”

Aubrey spluttered, his cheeks turning a florid shade of red, mouth agape like a carp.

As usual, Lady Lavinia recovered first. “Your Grace, I am at a loss as to understand why this has come about?”

Tristan blinked. “Truly, Lady Lavinia, I did not realize you were so lack-witted. You plotted with your husband to remove myself as paterfamilias , including hiring a ruffian to silence my poor secretary, Mr. Adam Ledger, who I presume had uncovered your scheme. From there, you similarly attempted to drown my duchess and our unborn child by pushing my wife into the Serpentine. Naturally, such unlawful and unsavory behavior would incur consequences.”

“Kendall!” Aubrey recoiled. “Those are most shocking allegations.”

“Truly, Your Grace,” Lady Lavinia agreed, “I do wonder about your mental soundness. I fear I shall have to say something to my parents about your delusional accusations. Perhaps a doctor should be summoned to assess your intellectual

fitness.”

Tristan nearly smiled. Their scheming was so transparent now that he understood the depth of their plotting.

“Yes,” he said, voice still emotionless, “Her Majesty expressed a similar sentiment this morning. However, being a woman of sound judgment, Her Majesty immediately changed her opinion as I outlined the evidence and witnesses I have collected of your perfidy, Lady Lavinia. Of course, if you prefer, I would be more than happy to summon the constabulary and accuse you both of attempting to murder my wife, our unborn child, as well as Mr. Adam Ledger. I am content to let a judge and jury decide your fates, if that is your wish.”

Now it was Lady Lavinia’s turn to go deathly white.

Tristan studied his watch again. “You are now down to fifty-five minutes. Every minute that you are here beyond your allotted time, I will reduce Aubrey’s allowance by another half.”

“Y-you can’t do that!” Aubrey shouted.

“I can and I have. I actually wished to discontinue your funds altogether, but my duchess—wet and shivering from her swim in the Serpentine—begged me to reconsider.” This was a small falsehood, but Tristan didn’t care. He speared Lady Lavinia with a sharp look. “So know that every mouthful of food you eat, every bit of coal that keeps you warm, each stitch of clothing on your body comes from her largesse and forbearance.”

Lady Lavinia pressed a hand to her waist.

“But . . . b-but where shall we go?” Aubrey asked.

“To Hell, if you wish. I do not care. But rest assured, you are no longer welcome here.” Tristan consulted his watch once more. “Fifty-three minutes and counting. You may want to start packing.”

Turning, he left the room, ignoring their shouts of protest.

In the end, Cousin Aubrey and Lady Lavinia were three minutes late in exiting Gilbert House.

Lady Lavinia’s angry screeching and the elated smiles of Tristan’s staff were a balm to his soul. As was the blessed silence after Fredericks slammed the front door behind them with a muttered, “Good riddance.”

“Thank you, Fredericks.” Tristan nodded.

“I assure Your Grace, it was my pleasure.”

Finally, Tristan permitted himself a broad smile and a low chuckle.

Fredericks followed suit.

“If you need me, Fredericks, I shall be with my duchess.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

And with that, Tristan took the stairs two at a time.

This , he vowed.

This was how he would spend his days—

Cherishing and defending those he loved.

The next morning, in keeping with his newfound resolve to assist those he cared for, Tristan determined to hire an investigator to uncover what had happened to Adam Ledger. Knowing now that the man had been toppled into the Thames, surely someone had come to his rescue or, heaven forbid, discovered his body.

Tristan voiced his plans to Isolde.

“I think ye are wise to seek more professional help at this point,” she murmured from where she lay on his chest. “Someone somewhere has to know something about Ledger. Perhaps an investigator could uncover more clues.”

They were yet abed, reveling in the quiet of their house and the absence of Lady Lavinia’s shrill voice. Tristan dragged his fingers through Isolde’s loose hair. He shamelessly took advantage of every chance to see her glorious hair unbound and tumbled. Isolde responded by pressing a kiss to his bare skin under her cheek. He couldn’t stop a soft, contented sigh.

A maid had entered earlier to draw the window curtains and leave a breakfast tray, newspaper, and the morning post on a bedside table. Despite the scent of fresh scones and hot chocolate perfuming the air, Tristan was content to hold his wife for a moment longer.

“Agreed, my love. And Ledger merits every effort.” His words were true, but a heavy pall settled on his shoulders when he contemplated what information an investigator might unearth.

But just as Ledger had traveled the length of Great Britain to retrieve Tristan's body . . . Now, Tristan would do the same if needs be. It's what a friend did, after all.

Isolde kissed his chest one more time and then leaned across him to lift the bundle of post off the tray. He continued to trail his fingers through her hair as she sorted through the letters—two for her, five for him.

He pushed to sitting and began to read his correspondence, Isolde leaning her head against his arm.

His third letter made him inhale sharply.

Your Grace,

Forgive this intrusion, but I only now was made aware of the notice posted in The Times regarding Mr. Adam Ledger. I am a doctor with a surgery near Blackfriars. Nearly a month ago, a man calling himself Mr. Adam Ledger was rescued from the Thames and brought to my premises for treatment. I will say no more, as I do not wish to violate the sanctity of my Hippocratic Oath, but if you wish to know more, please visit the address listed below.

With deepest regards,

Dr. George Fitzhugh

Tristan's hand trembled as he read.

At last!

"What is it?" Isolde peered around his upper arm, reading the spare lines. She bolted upright. "Oh, gracious! Do ye suppose this to be genuine information?"

Tristan swallowed. "I can hardly say. Very few know of Lady Lavinia's perfidy. This could be an attempt to swindle money by those culpable . . ."

"But given the potential for arrest, that seems unlikely to me."

"Wise, as ever, my love." Leaning, he pressed a kiss to her temple.

If this report were true, Ledger had initially survived his tumble into the Thames and had been taken to a nearby doctor. The address listed wasn't in Blackfriars but pointed to what Tristan presumed was a residence in Thorton Heath outside London. A homey, staid sort of village. Hardly a hotbed of vice and corruption.

His hand continued to tremble, causing the bit of paper to quake.

Well.

"We should investigate this immediately," Isolde said.

"You wish to come?"

"Of course! Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. I want to be there to console yourself, in case the news is dreadful. Or to celebrate, if it be otherwise."

Intense love and gratitude swelled his lungs, a veritable sun warming him from within.

"Bloody hell but I love you, Isolde Gilbert." He kissed her soundly.

"I love ye, too, my darling." Snatching his hand off the counterpane, she wrapped both her hands around it, dropping a kiss on his knuckles. "Let us go find more clues as to your Ledger's whereabouts."

After stopping twice to ask directions, the ducal carriage rolled to a stop before a small cottage on the outskirts of Thorton Heath. Set back from the road and nestled under the shade of an enormous birch, the house appeared tidy and freshly painted with mullioned windows and an age-worn oak door.

Tristan studied the bucolic scene. It did not appear the abode of someone desperate to swindle the Duke of Kendall out of a few tuppence.

“It seems a respectable sort of place,” Isolde echoed his thoughts at his side, her hand wrapped around his.

“Yes.”

The footman lowered the steps and opened the carriage door.

Neither Tristan nor Isolde made move to exit.

“Courage,” she whispered, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek.

Swallowing, Tristan nodded.

Hand in hand, they walked up the short path. Tristan rapped on the door.

Please let the news of Ledger be of a happy sort , he pleaded.

A young maid answered.

“May I help ye, sir?” she asked, eyes wide as she took in the liveried footman and gleaming carriage.

Tristan cleared his throat. “I received a letter from Dr. George Fitzhugh, stating that I

would find information about Mr. Adam Ledger at this address.”

“Of course. Dr. Fitzhugh sent word that someone might be by. Please come in.”

The maid took their hats and gloves and led them into a small but well-appointed parlor. Tristan handed her his calling card.

The girl’s eyes widened at reading the neatly printed Duke of Kendall .

“I will fetch my mistress, Your Grace,” she said with a curtsy and quietly left the room, closing the door behind her.

Isolde wrapped an arm around Tristan’s waist, resting her head on his upper arm. “Ye be the best of men, Tristan Gilbert.”

He snorted in surprise. “Why do you say that?”

“Ye don’t have to be here. Ye could have sent a servant to make this inquiry, but your big heart simply couldn’t pass this task to another. Ye had to make the effort yourself.”

“In other words . . . I am impatient and a bit controlling?”

His lovely wife grinned, lifting onto tiptoe to rest her chin on his shoulder. “Remind me to show ye later precisely how deeply I admire yourself.”

“If your goal is to distract me, Wife, you are doing a most excellent job.” He kissed her nose.

“Thank ye.”

How he loved this woman. No matter the difficulty, no matter what he would learn when the lady of the house arrived, a glimmering surety hummed in his veins. That together, he and Isolde could conquer anything.

A moment later, the door opened and a pretty woman stepped into the room. Though of average height and build, her blue eyes sparked with humor and warmth.

“Your Graces.” The woman curtsied, the cultured tones of her speech instantly defining her as a lady. “I am honored to have you in my home. I am Mrs. Elizabeth Bertram.”

“A pleasure, madam.” Tristan inclined his head.

The woman smiled. “My brother, Dr. Fitzhugh, sent word earlier today that I might expect a visit from a representative of the Duke of Kendall in the near future, but I cannot say I expected to see Your Grace in person. Not to mention your lovely duchess, as well.”

Tristan nodded. “Mr. Adam Ledger was a valued servant, and I was deeply distressed when I learned of his dismissal. Please tell me, as I am most anxious to know, do you have any information as to Mr. Ledger’s welfare? He has been a constant weight on my mind these weeks, and I am desperate to know the state of his health and wellbeing.”

“Mr. Ledger is well enough, Your Grace.”

Tristan’s knees sagged, relief pouring over his head and down his body, brilliant sunlight breaking through the clouds of a dreary day.

“God be praised,” he breathed. “He lives!”

“That is the best news,” Isolde agreed, her fingers lacing through his.

“Please, could you tell me his direction?” Tristan asked. “I am most eager to ascertain the nature of his health for myself. If he wishes, I intend to offer him a position with me, or barring that, at least ensure past wages are paid and Mr. Ledger receives a glowing letter of commendation.”

The woman gave a soft smile. “Your concern for our mutual friend is to be commended, Your Grace. But you needn’t wait. Come.” She beckoned. “Adam would speak with you, if you would like.”

“He is here?”

“Yes.”

Tristan exchanged a wide-eyed look with Isolde. She squeezed his hand reassuringly.

Mrs. Bertram led them across the small entrance hallway and into a study of sorts.

There, resting in an armchair before the window, sat Adam Ledger, thinner and pale, but very much alive. Simply dressed in shirtsleeves and a waistcoat with a banyan over the whole, he appeared well enough, though the pallor of his complexion pointed to a recent illness. His hair was longer than Tristan could ever remember seeing it, but his brown eyes still sparked with intelligence behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles.

“Ledger,” Tristan said, torn between whooping for joy and pulling the man into a tight hug out of sheer relief.

He settled for nodding in greeting and shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Your Grace,” Ledger nodded in return. “Forgive me for not standing, but my health . . .” His words drifted off to a cough.

“Of course,” Tristan said, emotions tight in his throat—happiness, relief, joy, and a strong affection he suspected might border on a sort of brotherly love.

“Come, Your Grace,” Mrs. Bertram motioned to Isolde. “Perhaps we should give the men a minute alone.”

Isolde shot Tristan an encouraging smile, before turning to Ledger.

“I am glad ye are alive, Mr. Ledger,” she said. “We had feared the worst. Ye have been sorely missed.”

And then the women were gone.

Tristan sat in a chair opposite Ledger, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on his knees.

Ledger stared at where the women had just been, brows furrowed and confused.

He brought his gaze back to Tristan.

“Feared the worst? You thought I was dead, Your Grace?”

“Yes. Thank heaven I have found you at last.” Tristan sat back in his chair. “You have been a difficult man to locate.”

“B-but . . . how?”

Tristan understood what Ledger was asking: How did you find me? Why are you

here?

“Hah. You didn’t leave many clues. I managed to uncover a hint which led me to your sister’s house on Gresham Street.” Tristan knew he would have to confess to reading Ledger’s correspondence, but maybe not at the moment. “All my attempts to locate you from there reached a dead end. In desperation, I placed a notice in The Times asking for help in locating you.”

“Yes, Elizab—ehr, that is Mrs. Bertram—mentioned the advertisement just this morning.”

Tristan pretended not to hear Ledger’s slip, though it rather illuminated the lay of the land, as it were. Ledger’s cheeks pinked as he spoke of Mrs. Bertram. Tristan couldn’t stop a smile. It seemed he was not the only one to have found love recently.

“My notice proved fruitful,” Tristan said. “I received a missive from a woman who claimed her husband had been hired to push you into the Thames.”

Ledger froze for the space of two heartbeats and then sat upright as if stung by a jolt of electricity. “I knew it! The man who pushed me . . . it had to be deliberate. But why?”

“Mr. Gilbert and Lady Lavinia wished to keep their attempts to undermine the duchy quiet. They clearly saw you as a threat to that quiet.”

“That doesn’t entirely surprise me. They snooped around Gilbert House like a pair of ravenous hounds and were apoplectic when I confronted them about their behavior. Mr. Gilbert made it clear he would have me arrested if I returned to Gilbert House or attempted to contact you.”

The bloody tyrant. Abruptly, Tristan regretted not beating Aubrey before tossing him

into the street.

“What happened?” Tristan gestured to Ledger’s convalescing form. “You survived the tumble into the Thames but not unscathed, I gather.”

Ledger nodded. “Thankfully, I can swim, but I still swallowed an unhealthy amount of water.”

Tristan winced. Most of the effluence of the city drained into the Thames. It was a cesspool on the best of days.

“I understand only too well the fear of nearly drowning. We both have had close calls these past weeks.”

“Indeed, Your Grace. In my case, I surfaced downstream, coughing and gagging and barely able to breathe. Thankfully, a pair of bargemen fished me from the water and dragged me to Dr. Fitzhugh. I rapidly developed pneumonia and lay in a fevered haze for well over a week, they tell me. I was slow to heal after the worst of my fever had passed, so Dr. Fitzhugh sent me here to his widowed sister to further recuperate. Once I was lucid enough to explain the situation, everyone agreed it would be best if I remained silent. After all, it did appear that someone had attempted to end my life, and we thought it prudent to not bring my continued existence to Mr. Gilbert’s attention by attempting to contact Your Grace. No need to tempt fate.”

“You acted wisely, Ledger. My cousin and his wife have been brazen in their attempts to undermine the duchy. Her Majesty is aware of their perfidy, I assure you. They have been dealt with and will bother you no more. I have declined to bring charges, but that can change if you would like.”

Ledger blinked. “The queen knows what occurred?”

“Yes.”

Ledger sat in silence as if his brain struggled to accommodate the fact that even the sovereign had involved herself in his plight.

“To respond to your earlier question, Dr. Fitzhugh responded to my advertisement and here I am.” Tristan spread his arms.

“I see.” Ledger swallowed. “But why did you . . .”

“Why did I come, and not some other lackey?”

Ledger nodded.

A soft smile touched Tristan’s lips. Dammit, he could feel emotion rise in his throat.

“I came because not so many weeks past, you traveled the length of Great Britain to ensure that my body was returned to Hawthorn in state.”

“I was merely doing my—”

“Job?” Tristan supplied. “I know, but no one else had even thought to act. No other person had given a fig. Returning the favor seemed the least I could do.”

Silence for a long moment.

“Incidentally, Ledger, your sister said she misses you,” Tristan continued.

The man winced.

“And Mr. John Rutland hopes you are well.”

Ledger pinched his brow.

“You visited them all, Your Grace?” he asked in a strangled voice.

“I did.”

Ledger plucked at the belt of his banyan, unable to meet Tristan’s gaze. “That was very kind of you, Your Grace. You must consider me the worst of gentlemen to keep my friends and family in the dark as to my location.”

“Quite the contrary, I assure you. I have learned you are a devoted son, brother, uncle, and friend. You are the sort to engender loyalty, as shown by Mrs. Bertram’s reluctance just now to tell me of your location until she knew my intentions.”

“Intentions, Your Grace?”

“Yes. You were dismissed most unfairly, Ledger.” Again, Tristan swallowed back the lump swelling in his throat. “And I was decidedly upset, once I learned what Mr. Gilbert had said and done.”

Ledger drew in a slow breath. “You . . . are not angry with me?”

“Angry? Whyever should I be angry?”

“I failed you, Your Grace. I couldn’t stop whatever thing Mr. Gilbert had planned.”

“Nonsense. Their wrongdoing does not rest on your head. I am eternally grateful you are well, Ledger.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Do not thank me quite yet. I would like to extend an offer to you.”

Ledger lifted his head, a question mark in his eyes.

“Would you be willing to return to my employ as my personal secretary?”

“Personal secretary? Not your diary secretary?”

Before, Ledger had been the secretary in charge of Tristan’s daily diary, but no one had filled the role of primary secretary—the man who would know all of the goings on within the dukedom.

“Yes, my personal secretary, Ledger. It comes with an increase in pay, as well as back wages and a substantial bonus.” Here Tristan paused, darting a telling look toward the door, and the murmur of women’s voices drifting in from the parlor. “It would likely be enough for a man to marry, I should think.”

Ledger blinked. And then blinked again. His head swiveled from left to right, as if ascertaining the soundness of the reality around him.

“What say you?” Tristan extended a hand. “Will you join me?”

Tentatively, Ledger lifted his hand and shook Tristan’s.

The man’s eyes filled with tears. “You truly mean to rehire me, Your Grace?”

“Nothing would please me more. Though I do have one request?”

“Oh.”

“Please call me Kendall.”

Ledger froze at that.

“Kendall,” he whispered as if trying the name on for size.

“Precisely. It’s how I prefer my friends to refer to me.”

It took Ledger a moment, but the meaning eventually sank in.

“Friends,” he repeated, an incandescent smile brightening his face.

“Friends.” Tristan gave Ledger’s hand another firm pump. Those damn emotions swelled once more. Yes, it was a brotherly sort of love. “I have so very few friends, you see. I can’t afford to lose one of them.”

Ledger’s eyes went glassy.

Tristan cleared his throat.

Ledger did as well.

They both looked away for a moment.

“When you feel ready, send word to Gilbert House,” Tristan said, gruffly. “I will dispatch a coach to fetch you.”

“Let me speak with Elizab—ehr, Mrs. Bertram, and I shall send you word. Thank you.” A pause. “Kendall.”

“Think nothing of it. I am merely grateful to have your keen observations and intelligent mind working on my behalf once more.” Tristan said the words simply enough, but given Ledger’s radiant smile, the man heard the affection in them.

“Anything I can do to earn my keep will be appreciated . . . Kendall.”

“Hah! I am glad you said that. I do have one assignment for you, if you feel you possess the energy. Something that could easily be done from here. I think you will enjoy it.”

When Lady Hadley first suggested a ball, Isolde had flinched in dismay.

A ball? With herself as hostess?

The horror!

But now that the day had finally arrived . . .

Well, Isolde felt positively giddy.

Tristan had been true to his word—together, they would be the duke and duchess they wished to be, not what society decreed.

To that end, over the past two weeks, Tristan had routed all her enemies and ensured that Isolde was tended to and entertained. Instead of separating each morning to pursue their own activities, they spent their days in each other's company. They visited museums and the theater. When Isolde hosted visiting hours, Tristan sat at her side. They argued philosophy and gathered before the hearth of an evening, each reading their separate tomes but occasionally engaging in conversation when one asked a compelling question. Often, Allie and Ethan would join them, making a merry party of four.

Most importantly, Isolde did not attend a single event she did not wish to, and neither did Tristan.

In short—life was bliss.

And now, the evening of their ball had arrived at last. All was prepared in readiness. Hopefully, guests would be arriving soon.

Isolde stood before the looking glass in her dressing room, watching as her lady's maid finished adjusting the silk ballgown hanging from Isolde's shoulders.

"You look lovely, Duchess," the woman said, smoothing a bit of cream lace.

"Thank ye." Isolde turned to the side, admiring the subtle flounces in her full skirt. "I think His Grace will like this dress very much."

Made of shimmering dark green silk, the gown skimmed her shoulders and cinched her waist and showcased yards of expensive lace. The rich colors set her hair afire. She touched the emerald necklace glinting on her collarbones. Tristan had raided the Gilbert family jewels for her tonight.

A knock sounded.

"Come," Isolde called.

She knew that bold knock.

Tristan strode through the door, a smile tugging on his lips. To say he looked devastatingly handsome would be like declaring the sun shone in the sky or the ocean stretched to the horizon—a statement so banal, it was patently absurd. The bronze of his Mediterranean skin gleamed against the white of his collar and neckcloth, while the rich black of his evening dress pulled out the remaining dark strands in his gray hair.

“Good evening, my love.” He crossed and pressed a careful kiss to her cheek.

Isolde’s maid dipped a curtsy and departed, closing the door behind her.

“Husband.” Isolde patted his chest.

“You will put every other lady to shame tonight with your brilliance.”

“Thank ye,” she grinned. “That was my plan.”

Tristan laughed and withdrew a slim box from his breast pocket. “For you, my love.”

Ah.

Isolde had heard of this. Of gentlemen gifting their wives jewelry on the evening of important events.

“Are my emeralds currently insufficient?”

Tristan’s expression turned cryptic. “Not precisely. Consider this something to complement them.”

Intrigued, Isolde opened the box.

Inside, instead of finding another necklace or bracelet, she was greeted by a piece of folded parchment.

On a frown, she set down the box and, unfolding the paper, read its contents.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

“Tristan,” she gasped. “How—”

“My love?” He lifted an eyebrow, face impassive but eyes glinting with humor.

“Ye bought me an island!”

“No, I bought you our island—the Isle of Canna. ’Tis a small but rather important distinction.”

Isolde was already shaking her head. “You can’t purchase an entire island, my love.”

“I’m quite sure I already did. Ledger was delighted to help. Do you not like it? I can send it back.” He reached for the paper.

“No!” She lifted the paper out of his reach. “I love it.” She sniffled back tears. “But what about the caretakers and their family? Mr. and Mrs. Thorburn? Where will they live?”

“I ensured they were taken care of, love. I knew that would be important to you.”

Still shaking her head, Isolde stared at the paper once more. “I can’t believe you purchased our island. Why?”

Tristan grinned at that, low and decidedly wicked. “Some of my best memories happened there. And I very much like the idea of keeping those for myself. Perhaps even repeating them from time to time . . .”

“Tristan!”

His smile softened. “Ah, love. I want a place for us to escape, somewhere away from the pressures of the dukedom and Parliament. I want our children to grow up with

memories of us there as a family. I want for us all to go a little feral—chopping wood, racing along the beach, climbing the moorland, and just . . . breathing.”

“Oh! I want that, too. Can we leave tomorrow?”

Tristan pulled her against his chest. “If I could, I would say let’s leave right this instant. But as we have a ball to host, tomorrow will have to do.” He kissed her gently. “Come, Duchess. Let us go show London how balls are done.”

Grinning, her hand threaded through Tristan’s elbow, Isolde descended the main staircase in a rustle of silk. A quick glance at the clock said there were still ten minutes before guests would begin to arrive. And as with all things in London, everyone wished to be fashionably late, so she anticipated a few moments yet of reprieve.

She tugged Tristan into the ballroom. “Let us admire our handiwork before our guests make a hash of it.”

Tristan chuckled. “What do you think they will do? Dandle from the chandelier?”

“I’ve heard stories.”

His eyebrows rose. “Have you now?”

She winked at him.

The ballroom of Gilbert House gleamed in the gaslight like a jewel, cascades of ribbon and greenery hanging from sconces and swagged across the ceiling. A small orchestra of musicians sat tuning their instruments in an alcove at one end.

Isolde took a deep breath, smoothing her skirts with her palms.

Tristan pressed a kiss to her temple. “You will be the toast of London tonight and forever after, Duchess. Mark my words.”

“Do you truly believe that?”

“Without a doubt.”

Isolde turned to look up at him, words stacked on her tongue, but a sharp rap sounded on the front door.

Isolde frowned. “So soon?”

Tristan offered her his arm again. “We set the trends, remember? I think arriving early for one of our renowned entertainments might be a new one.”

Together, they strode into the entryway, smiling as Fredericks and two footmen helped a group of lords and ladies with their coats and hats.

Beyond their shoulders, a string of opulent carriages disappeared around the corner of Grosvenor Square, coachmen patiently waiting to discharge their passengers.

“What did I say?” Tristan murmured. “The toast of London.”

Taking in a deep breath, Isolde turned to their guests, a wide smile on her lips and the warm press of Tristan’s palm against her spine.

“Good evening!” She strode forward, hands outstretched. “Welcome to our home. We are so glad you could join us this evening.”

Epilogue I

Two Years Later

July 17, 1851

Canna, Scotland

Tristan blew out the candle and slipped into bed, pulling the heavy bed curtains closed and tugging Isolde's spine against his chest.

His wife sighed and relaxed into the curve of his body, the dark of the bed box enclosing them. The box bed was constructed into the eaves of the roof, with pine planks lining three sides, leaving just one curtained side exposed to the room.

"Mmm." Isolde slid her chilly feet against his calves. "Thank ye for warming me, Husband."

"My pleasure, Wife." Tristan could feel her grin in the sinking of her ribs under his palm.

He nuzzled her braided hair, pressing a kiss to the nape of her neck. His lovely wife already knew this was his favorite place on the planet—snuggled into their bed in their tiny cottage on the Isle of Canna . . . or rather, their Isle of Canna.

He would never regret this purchase.

“I have dreamed of this moment for nearly a year,” she said.

“Have you, now?”

“Aye. Almost every day some memory of last August gleams in my mind.”

Last summer had been their first on the island as a family with four-month-old Beatrice, their tiny daughter. Given Beatrice’s age, they had only stayed a week before heading on to visit Dunhelm Castle and Sir Rafe just north of Inverness. But the weather that week had been heaven-kissed—endless hours of light with a gentle warmth in the ever-present wind, the striking blue water of the bay glittering in the sun.

Yesterday, they had arrived on their steamship, the SS Statesman. Tristan’s spirits had lifted to see the small house with its fresh coat of white harling nestled into the dunes of the protected bay. Over the winter, he had hired local workers to carry out needed repairs on the house to ensure it was comfortably appointed for his family. This year—given that their Honey Bea was toddling around, babbling words, and loved nothing more than being outside—they intended to stay for a month.

“Perhaps, we should celebrate our return,” Tristan whispered.

Isolde turned in his arms. “Mmm, I like the sound of that. What did you have in mind?”

“Well—”

The sound of Bea’s broken-hearted wail interrupted Tristan’s thoughts.

Isolde sighed. “Och , she’s gernerig again.”

“Growing teeth is hard business.” Tristan kissed Isolde. “I’ll see to her.”

Pushing out of the bed, he crossed the small landing, pausing to glance out the gabled window there. The SS Statesman rocked at anchor in the bay, bobbing in the moonlight.

Ledger remained aboard ship with his wife, the former Elizabeth Bertram. The pair had married in a simple ceremony at Hawthorn six months after that day in Thorton Heath, Tristan standing as best man for his secretary-turned-friend. Having a friend had been an illuminating experience. Of course, Isolde would always be his best friend, and Allie, as his twin, claimed a distinct portion of his heart. But Ledger had filled a place in Tristan’s affections he hadn’t realized was lacking. There was just something about a male friend—the ability to be gruff and jest and tease as men did. Maybe Tristan was becoming more like Hadley than he suspected.

Slipping into the cottage’s second bedroom, he fumbled to the window and pulled the curtains open. Moonlight flooded the room and illuminated Beatrice curled into her own tiny box bed.

“P-Papa!” Bea raised her hands to him, tears leaving shining trails down her cheeks. “Up!”

“Hush, darling girl.” Tristan lifted her into his arms. As usual, Beatrice melted against his chest, giving her entire weight to him with unwavering trust.

He rubbed a soothing hand up her spine. Red-haired and every whit as mischievous and daring as her mother, the tiny girl shone like a rare comet.

Tristan loved her with staggering force. Some days, it felt as if every particle that made up his soul had been created to care for her. Perhaps his most astonishing revelation over the two years since his marriage had been just that—the heart’s

capacity to love, his heart specifically, appeared endless.

Pacing, he walked Beatrice back to sleep, crooning a soft lullaby he remembered his Italian mother singing. For just a brief moment, he pondered the man he had been three years before. A man without friends or love in his life. A man who thought power and revenge would bring him joy.

What a fool he had been.

He doubted a day would ever pass that he didn't thank God for sending Isolde into his life. The blessing of her continued to multiply, day after day, year after year.

A few minutes later, Beatrice sank back into sleep, but Tristan continued to hold her, standing before the window.

This.

This moment right here . . . right now. Another gift from Isolde.

The simple joy of holding their sleeping daughter in the silver moonlight.

This was the truest purpose of life—to give love and receive it in return.

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Epilogue II

A Letter from the Duke of Kendall to His Duchess on the Occasion of Their 10th Wedding Anniversary

Heart of my heart,

My love, how the years have flown. As well you know, I generally do not heap praise upon Ethan Penn-Leith. The man will always remain too saccharine for my tastes. However, today of all days, I wish my pen held a thimble's worth of his knack for poetry. (Please do not tell Allie I described her husband so lavishly. Her teasing would be merciless.)

Had I the gift of words, I would spill them all attempting to capture the vivid joy of you, my Isolde. I would choose light-bringer and beloved—soulmate, life-friend.

I would string together descriptions like “the scarlet beauty of a winter rose against snow” or “the honey warmth of a mulled-wine kiss.”

But such phrases would frustrate me with their insufficiency. The impossibility of confining the depth of my love to vowels and consonants.

So I merely say this—

All that I am. All that I will ever be. Every last atom of my being.

There will only, always, be you.

Yours will be the last syllable on my dying lips. The last image, feather-light, behind my eyes.

Isolde.

My love.

My forever.

Your Tristan