



A Very Scandalous Fairbanks Christmas (Those Very Bad Fairbanks #14)

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Category: Historical

Description: The last thing Miss Caroline Fairbanks expected when she stole a wooden rocking horse from Daniel, the cold and arrogant Earl of Walcott, was that he would show up at her family gathering in Penporth.

She should despise him—his aloof nature, his sharp words—but from the moment they cross paths again, the attraction between them crackles like fire. Daniel is temptation itself, a man who makes her heart race and her pulse stutter with every heated glance, every stolen touch.

But he is also a man who makes no promises. A man who does not believe in love.

Even as she falls deeper under his wicked spell, Caroline knows surrendering to him may lead to heartbreak. Yet resisting him is impossible. So, she does the unthinkable—she indulges in a scandalous night in his arms, knowing he can never be hers.

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CHAPTER 1

It was the perfect gift.

Miss Caroline Fairbanks smiled as she hurried toward the wooden rocking horse, its polished mahogany gleaming under the flickering light of the small shop on High Holborn. The exquisite craftsmanship—delicate carvings of rearing stallions along the base, the saddle etched with fine details—made it the ideal present for Lily, the only person from her extended cousins for whom she did not have a gift. Caroline had searched endlessly for something special, and here it was, waiting for her as if fate had led her to it.

How serendipitous that she had even ventured this way! She had only intended to collect a hat for her brother but had been drawn to the little shop tucked between a bookbindery and a confectioner's. Now, she felt rather triumphant.

The chime of the bell above the door tinkled as she stepped inside, bringing a smile to her lips. A glance upward revealed mistletoe hanging in the doorway. How scandalous. The trend had become rather bold this season, with mistletoe appearing in doorways across London, inviting improper embraces.

With a shake of her head, she strode toward the rocking horse, her boots clicking softly against the wooden floor. A few patrons lingered among the shelves, examining delicate porcelain figurines and holiday trinkets, but her focus remained fixed on the carved stallion in the far corner.

As she reached for it, a large shadow loomed in her path.

A tall, broad-shouldered gentleman draped in a winter coat dusted with snowflakes stepped into her view of the wooden horse. He smelled of crisp pine and something darker—spiced leather, perhaps? The scent was warm, unmistakably masculine, and utterly distracting.

Caroline hesitated, then stepped aside to maneuver past him—only to falter as he lifted his hand. No. No, no, no. He was reaching for the rocking horse!

Panic flared. Without thinking, she lurched forward and grasped the polished handle, hastily attempting to lift it.

Good heavens. It was alarmingly heavy.

She gasped at the unexpected weight, her arms trembling as she tried to hoist it toward her chest. Surely, it would not do for a woman who had worked so hard these last two years perfecting poise and grace to drop a wooden horse in the middle of a respectable establishment.

A deep chuckle rumbled beside her.

Before she could protest, the gentleman reached over and plucked the horse from her grasp with infuriating ease.

Caroline was about to thank him when he turned as if to walk away, and it dawned on her—he meant to take it! The audacity! Her mouth parted. She quickly composed herself, drawing her shoulders back and schooling her features into polite disapproval.

“Forgive me, sir, but that horse belongs to me,” she said crisply, though she accompanied the words with a gracious smile.

He turned then, and she was ensnared by piercing silver-gray eyes.

His gaze was cold, amused, and utterly unimpressed as they swept over her body. The gentleman was impeccably dressed in dark trousers, a blue waistcoat, and a tailored winter coat. His windswept hair curled at his nape, adding to his effortless allure. His mouth held a sensual curve, his cheekbones were strikingly sharp, and his nose carried a regal pride.

The Earl of Walcott .

Recognition hit her with the force of a carriage wheel over cobblestone. Though they had never been introduced, she knew of him—everyone in the ton did. Daniel Hadley, the aloof, unsmiling earl who rarely graced social functions unless duty absolutely demanded it. A man who, if the whispers were true, had ice and disdain running through his veins.

And here he stood, smirking at her.

Caroline lifted her chin, determined to remain unfazed by his handsomeness and privilege. “I would appreciate it, my lord, if you would set my wooden horse down.”

“Do you make a habit of claiming ownership over items you cannot lift?” he drawled.

Heat flushed Caroline’s cheeks. The insufferable man. “It was not a matter of capability, my lord, but rather of timing. This wooden horse belongs to me as I reached for it first.”

His brow arched. “Did you?”

She pinned a polite smile on her mouth. “Yes.”

His gaze flickered to the rocking horse he now held with effortless ease, then back to her. The amusement in his silver eyes deepened, and something inside Caroline bristled.

“I hope you are not attempting to claim this horse for yourself but was rather being courteous in relieving me of its unexpected weight,” she said

“Then it would seem we are at an impasse,” he murmured.

“We are?”

His mouth quirked. “Yes.”

Oh, he was enjoying this entirely too much.

“Well,” she said, rallying her composure, “since you have already assisted in lifting it, I would be most grateful if you would also help me carry it to my carriage after I have completed my purchase.”

For the briefest moment, the silence stretched between them. A muscle in his jaw ticked, and his expression turned unreadable. Then, quite unexpectedly, he chuckled. A deep, rich sound that sent an odd little flutter down Caroline’s spine.

“Presumptuous,” he said, shaking his head. “I rather admire that. How interesting. If you will excuse me, I have no more time or inclination to cross wits with you.”

To her horror, he began walking toward the shopkeeper. Caroline’s stomach dropped. Dear heavens . He wasn’t actually going to buy it, was he? She gasped and hurried after him, her heart pounding as the earl strode toward the counter with the wooden rocking horse in tow.

Oh, no. No, no, no.

She could not let him steal her gift.

The shopkeeper, a balding, somewhat nervous-looking man, glanced up as the earl set the rocking horse on the counter. The poor fellow twitched at the sight of his imposing customer, his hands fluttering to adjust his spectacles. Before the man could utter a word, Caroline stepped forward with all the authority she could muster.

“This is my purchase,” she announced brightly, pressing her gloved fingers to the wooden horse.

The shopkeeper blinked. Then twitched again. His eyes darted from her to the earl. “But ... his lordship was the one to bring it up, my lady,” he said hesitantly.

Caroline’s stomach dropped. Of course. The shopkeeper would naturally assume that the Earl of Walcott, a man of status, power, and—blast him—an infuriatingly steady presence, was the rightful customer.

Her lips parted, ready to argue further, but the earl simply gave a small, knowing smirk. Oh, how she wanted to slap it off his insufferable face. Desperate, she turned to him with what she hoped was the expression of a reasonable and genteel lady rather than a woman about to throttle an aristocrat in public.

“My lord, perhaps I could offer you another gift for the child you are purchasing this for?” she suggested, her voice honey-sweet despite her irritation.

A slight pause. Then, cool as the winter breeze outside, he said, “I am not purchasing this for a child.”

Caroline blinked. “Then ... why are you buying it?”

His silver gaze held hers, unreadable and impossibly distant. “That concern is not yours.”

She gaped at him. “Not mine?”

“Not in the least.”

Flustered, she tightened her grip on the edge of the counter. “Well, I—I am purchasing this for my darling cousin.”

His brow quirked as if to say And that should interest me why?

Caroline inhaled sharply and pressed on, determined. “She has always wanted a wooden horse to practice on so that she might work up her bravery to mount her pony.”

The earl’s expression remained utterly unmoved. The man was carved from ice.

“That is not my concern.”

Caroline stared at him, aghast. He did not even attempt to feign civility!

“Good heavens,” she blurted. “You do not have the mark of a gentleman.”

His mouth twitched. “And you do not have the mark of a lady of quality. Where is your sense of decorum?”

Her cheeks burned like embers.

He leaned in slightly, not so much as to be improper, but just enough to ensure she would hear him over the growing noise of the shop.

“A true lady of quality,” he murmured, “would not be haggling over a toy with a man she has not been formally introduced to.”

A mortified flush climbed from her neck to her hairline.

The audacity. The arrogance.

Caroline glared daggers at him, barely resisting the urge to stamp her foot like a child denied sweets. Desperation forced her to turn back to the shopkeeper. “Sir, do you have another of these rocking horses?”

The man adjusted his spectacles and winced as if preparing for battle. “I fear not, miss. That was the only one of its kind.”

The only one.

Caroline could only watch as the shopkeeper wrapped her horse in brown paper and twine. Then, as if to add insult to injury, a footman in the livery of the Earl of Walcott stepped forward, took up the package, and strode toward the door. Caroline could only glare as the wretched man walked after his servant, his posture effortlessly composed, his movements smooth as ever.

Just before stepping into the waiting carriage, he glanced back at her, the lightest touch of mockery curling his lips. Then, with a graceful tip of his hat, he climbed into the carriage and disappeared into the bustling streets of London, taking her perfect Christmas gift with him.

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CHAPTER 2

“C aroline, please sit down and stop pacing—you are making me dizzy.”

Samuel Fairbanks leaned into the pianoforte, his fingers idly dancing over the keys in a soft, effortless melody. Caroline whirled to face him, her arms crossed. “I am infuriated. I must pace.”

Her brother chuckled, his fingers never missing a note. “I know,” he said. “You have been muttering about Lord Walcott for several minutes, wearing a hole into mama’s carpet.” He paused, casting an exaggerated glance downward. “Let us not hear that you ruined her Venetian carpet. It was imported, you know.”

Caroline huffed a laugh, the tension in her shoulders easing just a fraction. With a sigh, she strode toward Samuel and slid onto the bench beside him, lightly running a finger over the keys. A discordant note rang out, and Samuel winced.

“I have been trying to find a wonderful gift for Lily,” she murmured. “Fanny wrote that ever since she fell from her pony, she has not had the courage to start her lessons again. That she is scared seems to vex Lily even more. As you know, our precious hellion has always been fearless.”

Caroline sighed, her fingers tracing the ivory keys absently. “When I saw that wooden horse, I just ... I just felt it would be right for her. Lily is the only person I have not found a gift for Christmas. That thief !”

Samuel bit back a chuckle, though his eyes gleamed with amusement. “Given how

you told the story, the earl reached for it first.”

Caroline scoffed. “I placed my hand on it before him. And besides, he was anything but a gentleman.”

Samuel played a light trill on the pianoforte. “That much was clear. I am astonished you implied as much to him. Mother must never hear of this, or her nerves will be shattered.”

“He should have given it to me,” she grumbled. “Especially since he has no intention of gifting it to anyone. What in heaven’s name does a man like him need with a wooden horse?”

Samuel lifted his hands from the keys and turned toward her. “Well, it is in the past now. And it is not as if you can do anything about it.”

Caroline pursed her lips. “Not even ... appeal to his honor?”

Samuel choked on a laugh, his eyes widening in mock horror. “Have you ever followed the rumors about Walcott?”

Caroline frowned. “I know they say he is very arrogant.”

“And proud,” Samuel added. “And wealthy and a most ruthless orator in the House of Lords. Many dread going up against him in political debates.” He leaned closer, his tone dropping conspiratorially. “Unless you plan to steal it, forget thinking about appealing to his softer side. The man has no soft side, and I do not wish for you to be entangled with him.”

Caroline stiffened, her spine snapping straight.

Samuel blinked at her sudden stillness. “Oh, no. Absolutely not. Do not even think it!”

She nodded vigorously. “ Yes .”

He paled. “No.”

She grinned. “Why did I never think of it before?”

Samuel shoved back from the pianoforte. “Caroline. Do not be nonsensical .”

She laughed, giddy with the sheer brilliance of the idea. “I shall steal back my rocking horse.”

“It is not your horse!” Samuel practically yelled. “I forbid you from acting in this foolish manner.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “Well, I shall leave the money he paid for it so it would not be truly stealing.”

Her brother groaned and dragged a hand over his face. “You are not listening. I forbid you from acting so recklessly.”

Caroline rolled her eyes. “Have you forgotten? We are Fairbanks.”

He muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, which is precisely why I am worried. “You must promise me, Caro.”

She grinned at him, unabashed. “Perhaps it is time I lived up to the family name.”

Samuel snapped, “You already did when you slapped a lord with your parasol in

Hyde Park.”

The words hung between them. Caroline stilled, her playful defiance slipping for just a moment. That awful ache pierced her heart once more, and she looked away from her brother.

“I am still astonished that I can be rebuked for fending off a libertine who tried to take advantage of me. I am even more astonished that my brother still judges me for it very much like the prigs of the ton .”

Samuel cursed under his breath and sighed. “That was unkind and wrong of me. I apologize.” He reached for her hand. “Caroline, please do not do anything reckless.”

She hesitated ... then nodded. “Of course not.”

Samuel exhaled, relieved. “Good.”

Caroline rose gracefully from the bench, smoothing her hands over her dress as if brushing away the weight of her thoughts. “Now, if you will excuse me.”

Samuel watched her warily as she swept toward the staircase. “Where are you going?”

She cast him a teasing smile over her shoulder. “To not do anything reckless.”

He groaned. “Mother will happily send you to Penporth if you do not heed my words.”

Caroline turned slightly, her expression thoughtful. “I am going to Penporth, Samuel.”

He stiffened. “Why must you go against mother? We are supposed to spend two weeks in Derbyshire with the Countess—”

“The Countess of Merryvale,” she finished softly. “I am well aware of the invitation. Mother reminds me of it daily.”

She hesitated for a moment, staring at the shadows pooling along the doorway, gathering her thoughts. “I am ... pleased that Lady Merryvale did not snub mama after my supposedly shocking display in Hyde Park,” she admitted. “But I wish to spend Christmas with—” She faltered, then exhaled. “With people who do not expect me to be anything other than myself. Without worrying about propriety. It is exhausting, more so than I ever imagined. I am very surprised our cousins thrive so beautifully in society.”

Samuel said nothing, but the slight crease in his brow betrayed his concern. “Mother will be sorely vexed,” he finally muttered.

Caroline swallowed against the guilt curling in her chest. “I know,” she murmured before turning and stepping away from the music room.

Her mother, Mrs. Cecily Fairbanks, had carried high hopes for her children when she brought Caroline and Samuel to London over six years ago, visiting Cranston frequently. Their cousins had found unmatched success in the marriage mart after Colin Fairbanks unexpectedly inherited an earldom. The news had sent shockwaves through the scattered branches of their family—Cornwall, Herefordshire, Northumbria—all buzzing with the implications. No one had expected such elevated connections to exist, even if the ties were distant and thrice removed.

And mama had embraced it gladly and wholeheartedly.

Herefordshire had suddenly become unsuitable, its quaint quietness a prison rather

than a comfort. Lizzy and Penny were duchesses. Emma and Fanny married viscounts. Julia and Aunt Margaret were countesses. Caroline and Samuel's mother was the daughter of a local physician, and her husband, Elliot Fairbanks, had been a hardworking merchant. No one had ever dreamed their extended family, once removed from the glittering whirl of the ton, was now expected to thrive within it.

But Caroline ...

She had wanted something different living in their small village in Herefordshire. She could admit that much, even to herself. Life in Cranston had been terribly dull, though she had done her best to fill her days with reading and embroidery, both of which she genuinely loved. Through books, she explored a larger world but had been confined to a small piece with no hopes of ever leaving. When the invitation came from Ester and Ellie to visit London and stay at a townhouse rented for their family, Caroline had been thrilled at the opportunity. London had called to her like a siren's song—the theatres, the operas, the balls and masquerades, the balloon rides and Vauxhall Gardens. The promise of adventure.

Foolishly, she had allowed herself to believe that she might also find a grand love match, just as her cousins had. Caroline's step faltered at the bottom of the staircase. A pang, swift and aching, lodged in her chest. She had been so certain. So hopeful.

But hope could be a cruel thing.

Footsteps echoed through the hallway, and Caroline glanced up to see Mr. Fenton, their ever-dutiful butler, approaching with a stack of letters in his grasp.

She stepped forward, smoothing her skirts, anticipation curling in her chest. "Is there any letter for me, Fenton?"

"I believe so, Miss Caroline."

She smiled and held out her hand. “Thank you.”

With practiced efficiency, she quickly shuffled through the letters, her eyes skimming for any correspondence from Penporth. Dearest Phoebe was expecting her first child, and there had been murmurs that she might not make the journey to Penporth for Christmas with her husband, the enigmatic Gabriel Stanton. The very thought of Phoebe being absent filled Caroline with a pang of disappointment.

But as she rifled through five letters, none bore the familiar scrawl of Phoebe’s hand or any of her cousins. “Perhaps no news is good,” Caroline murmured, tucking the letters into the crook of her arm.

She turned toward the library—only to pause abruptly, her breath catching in her throat as something teased her memory.

Her gaze locked onto an envelope.

The elegant handwriting on the front was unmistakable.

Henrietta Darlington .

A name that set Caroline’s teeth on edge.

A cold, creeping sense of disappointment slid through her, tightening in her chest as she stared at the letter addressed to Samuel. It had been months since Henrietta last wrote—months since Caroline had forced her brother to end that foolish liaison.

And yet here it was. A rekindled connection? A desperate plea? A new scheme?

Her stomach twisted.

After all the work she had done to curb Samuel's reckless habits, was he now slipping back into ruin? She clenched her jaw, turned on her heel, and marched straight to the library. The door swung open with more force than necessary, drawing Samuel's attention from the book in his lap. His brow lifted in mild curiosity as she strode toward him.

Without preamble, she held out the letter, her fingers tightening around the edges. "Are you corresponding with Miss Darlington again?"

Samuel's expression shifted immediately, his face flushing a deep red. Guilt .

Caroline narrowed her eyes.

He hurriedly plucked the letter from her grasp, folding it in his palm as if that would erase its existence. "Where did you get this?" he asked, voice carefully neutral.

She scoffed. "Fenton handed me the letters, and I saw the name before I could ignore it. Should I have? Should I pretend you are not entertaining the woman who once bled you dry?"

Samuel scowled and shoved the letter inside his coat pocket. Caroline stared at him, arms crossed, thinking of the sheer number of times she had rescued him from his foolhardy ways since arriving in London.

Their father had left him a good inheritance—ten thousand pounds. A fortune.

And Samuel had squandered it.

First, in the gambling hells run by the Glendevons, where he had nearly ruined himself. She had prevailed upon their cousin Ester—reckless, daring, and delightfully devious—to break into the gaming den and steal back the proof of his debts before he

could be sunk into further disgrace.

Instead of learning from that mistake, Samuel had gone and done something equally reckless—investing in a venture too risky for a man with no means to recover if it failed. And fail it had. One thousand pounds lost in a blink.

Then came Henrietta Darlington.

A charming beauty with soft smiles and a talent for coaxing a man into ruin.

Samuel had fallen hopelessly in love, and instead of making an honest offer, he had done something far worse—he had rented a cottage in Brighton and showered Henrietta with gifts, foolishly spending what little remained of his inheritance with no plan and no means to grow it.

Caroline had confronted him, urging him to either make an offer for Henrietta or end the affair entirely.

He had ended it. Or so she thought. She inhaled deeply, masking her disappointment behind a brittle smile. “Why is she writing to you after months of silence?”

Samuel hesitated, his jaw tightening. “That is none of your concern.”

A sharp breath left her, the sting of those words slicing far deeper than she expected. She straightened, keeping her expression carefully schooled. “Forgive me, dear brother, if I feel otherwise. Your decisions do not exist in a bubble—they have consequences. For you, me, our younger siblings, and mama.”

Samuel’s gaze flickered, but he said nothing.

Caroline’s throat tightened. He had always been too soft-hearted, too eager to believe

in the best of people. But she had spent too many nights lying awake, worrying, calculating, trying to salvage the damage he had done to their family's position.

And she would not do it again.

Not for Henrietta Darlington.

Not for any woman who saw her brother as a means to an end.

Caroline exhaled slowly, clasping her hands before her. "Just ... be careful, Samuel. You have less than half of the inheritance father left you. It is still a fortune, but it will only stretch so far if you insist on living as though you are a young lord with limitless resources. If mama were to learn how poorly you have managed it, she would be devastated. And I will not go to our cousins for help again."

He looked at her then, something like shame flickering in his gaze. And that, more than anything, made her heart ache. Without another word, she turned and left the library, the letter—and the doubts—lingering behind her like a shadow. Caroline pushed the feeling aside, lifting her chin as she climbed the stairs. The image of Lord Walcott rushed through her thoughts, and she smiled. Her heart quickened, not with longing or uncertainty now, but with exhilaration.

Samuel was grown, and Caroline was determined to stop worrying about him. For now, she had something far more pressing to attend to. Retrieving the gift she had planned for darling Lily. A slow, wicked smile curled Caroline's lips as she opened her bedroom door. "I promise you, I shall be very careful, Samuel," she murmured, stepping inside. "I won't be caught."

Oh, yes . Caroline would be taking back her wooden horse. And a certain arrogant gentleman would never see it coming.

CHAPTER 3

Caroline huddled beneath the large mahogany desk in the Earl of Walcott's office, her breath shallow as she strained to listen. This was not how the night was supposed to unfold. If her brother or cousins ever found out that she was almost caught breaking into the earl's home, she would not be able to recover from her brother's constant rebukes and her cousins' teasing. Ester, who had been the cousin to teach Caroline about picking locks and being far too daring, would be especially mirthful.

It had taken her two days to glean the information from her brother about the earl's townhouse in Grosvenor Square. Samuel had been annoyingly reluctant, only parting with the details after she assured him—in the most sincere and innocent tone she could manage—that she merely intended to send the man a discreet letter.

Next, she had bribed a maid with a five-pound note to learn his schedule, knowing that such a sum would loosen even the most reluctant tongue. The maid's knowing smirk still made Caroline blush. Good heavens, the girl had thought she was planning a tryst!

She had entered the library only a few moments ago and barely had time to search before a soft moan interrupted her thoughts, and she had scurried under the desk just as the door opened.

This was a disaster. The earl was supposed to be at White's at this hour, safely ensconced in the gentlemen's club, sipping brandy and discussing politics with men who likely feared him. Instead, he had returned home with a lady love.

All the rotten luck.

Disbelief still filled her that he had chosen his office—of all places—for his affair. Did he not have a perfectly fine bedchamber for such matters? Scandalous men should have the decency to be scandalous in private.

Then came another breathy and high-pitched moan followed by the distinct rustle of fabric.

Caroline squeezed her eyes shut. I should not be listening. I should not be curious.

And yet ...

Biting her lip, she inched closer to the edge of the desk, her heart hammering in her chest. Just one peek.

One.

She carefully leaned forward and peered around the corner. There, sprawled in a large armchair by the fire, was the Earl of Walcott. Indolent. Unbothered. Utterly at ease.

His cravat was loosened, and he held a glass of liquor in his hand, swirling the amber liquid as though he had nothing more pressing in the world to concern himself with. A lady—curvaceous, dark-haired, and dressed in a deep red gown that plunged indecently low—perched boldly on his thigh, her fingers trailing over his mouth in a gesture meant to be seductive.

It did not appear to be working.

Caroline might not have much experience with seduction, but she knew boredom when she saw it. Lord Walcott looked as if he would rather be anywhere but beneath

the woman's hands. The lady pouted, evidently noticing his lack of enthusiasm.

"You are not smitten with me, my lord," she purred, running her fingers down his jawline. "I am using all my considerable skills, and I can tell your thoughts are not with me."

He sighed. Actually sighed.

Caroline scowled, offended for the unknown lady.

"That would be an astute observation, madam," he replied dryly, taking a sip of his drink without bothering to look at her. "I am indeed distracted. Do not allow it to stop your attempts; imagine the reward should they rouse me, hmm?"

Caroline barely held in a laugh. Arrogant.

A haughty little sniff filled the room, followed by the sharp tap of heels against the floor as the woman rose.

"I am not accustomed to being ignored," she declared.

"Then I suggest you find someone more easily enchanted. I know I promised a pleasurable romp ... however, I find that I am ... bored. Through no fault of yours, Helena."

A choked gasp of outrage escaped her.

"I shall send a diamond necklace to you tomorrow from London's premier jeweler as an apology."

The woman let out a small huff but thankfully took her tryst elsewhere, sweeping

from the room with dramatic flair. His low chuckle echoed in the room, and then his footsteps also retreated from the room.

Thank heavens .

Caroline waited. Counted to ten. Then to twenty. Silence. This was her chance. Caroline slipped from beneath the desk, her limbs stiff and aching from crouching in such an uncomfortable position for far too long. Swallowing the nervous flutter in her chest, she carefully rose to her full height, scanning the dimly lit library.

The air smelled of aged parchment, leather bindings, and a faint trace of pipe smoke, mingling with the flickering scent of wax from the dwindling candlelight on the desk. The room was vast, its towering bookshelves lined with countless tomes, their spines worn from years of perusal. A grand mahogany desk stood at the center of the room, cluttered with ledgers, quills, and a half-finished glass of brandy, as if the earl had abandoned his work without care. Heavy velvet curtains were drawn against the night, leaving only the soft glow of embers in the fireplace to cast flickering shadows across the room.

Where had he put it?

Her pulse hammered as she moved swiftly across the floor, her boots silent against the thick Persian rug. She eyed the high-backed armchairs, the corner reading nooks, even peered behind the sofa where books had been haphazardly stacked on the floor. Nothing.

A frown pulled at her lips. Perhaps he had hidden it elsewhere? Then, she saw it.

Tucked neatly in a shadowed corner, half-hidden behind an armchair, as if it had been forgotten entirely. A sharp stab of irritation went through her. So, the arrogant, insufferable Earl of Walcott truly had no use for the wooden horse.

And yet, he had taken it from her anyway.

Caroline's jaw tightened as she stalked toward it, feeling a satisfaction that almost made up for the absurdity of her predicament. Bracing herself, she bent forward and wrapped her arms around it, determined to reclaim what was rightfully hers—consequences be damned.

Still bloody heavy. And still mine.

Moving quickly, she made her way to the large desk, withdrew a fresh five-pound note, and placed it neatly in the center. That was the last of her allowance meticulously saved these last couple of years, but it was worth it. Then she reached for a quill, dipped it into the ink, and scrawled:

I have taken back my horse. I have left you more money than you paid for it. Consider this a fair exchange.

— a lady whom you wronged.

She grinned at her own audacity, blowing gently on the ink to dry it before setting the quill aside. Now ... to escape. Caroline exhaled slowly, steadying her racing heart as she tightened her grip on the wooden horse. It was time to go. But first, she had to make absolutely certain she would not be caught. She tilted her head, listening intently. The house was not silent—far from it. Somewhere in the distance, the muffled sounds of a door closing and the faint hum of conversation drifted through the halls. A footman, perhaps? A maid tending to the late-night fires?

Or worse.

The Earl of Walcott himself roamed his hallways. The thought sent a sharp thrill down her spine. She gritted her teeth and gently shifted the weight of the wooden

horse, careful not to let it scrape against the floor.

Good heavens, the thing was a beast. Far heavier than a simple toy had any right to be. Caroline bit back a curse and began dragging it across the thick rug, wincing at every creak and groan of the wood beneath her feet.

Slow. Steady. Don't rush .

She maneuvered through the dimly lit hallway, sticking close to the walls, pausing every few steps to listen. A distant cough. Her breath caught, and she immediately froze, pressing herself against the cool wooden paneling of the corridor.

The sound came from somewhere beyond the staircase.

A footman? She remained still, forcing herself to count the beats of her own pounding heart. Nothing followed. No approaching footsteps. No sounds of movement. She let out a silent sigh of relief and pressed forward.

Past the music room .

Her nerves stretched tight, every creak of the house making her pulse jump.

Past the drawing room .

A soft flicker of candlelight from under a closed door made her stomach clench.

Is he still awake?

She didn't know if Walcott had retired for the night or if he lingered elsewhere in the house, brooding over whatever dark thoughts occupied that cold, arrogant mind of his. Caroline didn't plan to find out.

Keep moving .

She reached the side door, the one she had entered through. A sharp gust of winter wind rattled the frame, cold night air creeping through the cracks. With careful precision, she eased it open, just wide enough to squeeze herself and the wretchedly heavy rocking horse through. The moment she stepped outside, the crisp December air hit her, biting at her cheeks.

She dragged the wooden horse into the side garden, maneuvering it behind the hedge where shadows concealed her well enough. Her fingers trembled slightly as she propped it against the garden wall, her breath coming in soft pants.

Almost there .

Just one more step, and she would be free. She paused one last time, ears straining for any sounds of pursuit. The house remained silent. And then—a creak. She stiffened. The sound had come from inside the townhouse.

Her breath hitched. A door closing? A set of slow, measured footsteps moving through the corridor? Caroline pressed deeper into the shadows, her heart hammering violently.

If she were caught now ...

No . That was not an option. She inhaled, counted to three, and rushed across the garden, her boots barely sounding against the frosted grass. The carriage was waiting with her footman standing alert, ready, just as instructed.

With a quick motion, she signaled to him. “The horse,” she whispered.

The footman hesitated briefly before going to fetch the toy, lifting it easily and

carrying it to the carriage. Caroline followed swiftly. She let out a slow, exhilarated exhale, watching as the footman secured the wooden horse and then climbed inside and sank into the seat, her pulse still thrumming. Then, without hesitation, she rapped her knuckles against the carriage wall. “Start for Penporth.”

The wheels lurched forward, the streets of Grosvenor Square slipping away behind her. She was free. And by the time Lord Walcott discovered what she had done ...

He would never see it coming.

She grinned, leaning back against the squabs, a giddy thrill racing through her blood. Caroline was not silly enough to remain in town after doing something so daring. Even if he did not know her identity, she presumed men of his consequences could easily find out. The carriage was packed, and her trunks and presents for her family were secured inside. She had even left her mother and Samuel a letter, claiming that she had been eager to begin her journey and had departed for Penporth, reiterating she had no wish to spend Christmas in Derbyshire.

It was done.

Her rocking horse was hers again.

And yet ...

A shiver coursed through her as she thought of Lord Walcott. His arrogance. His calm, unreadable gaze. His formidable reputation.

Oh dear. Had she just made an enemy of a man many found unfathomable and prideful? Caroline bit her lip. Then grinned. Perhaps. And yet, she wished she could have seen his frustration of being thwarted! Caroline sighed and closed her eyes, hoping she did not come to regret her reckless move.

CHAPTER 4

Daniel Hadley, the Earl of Walcott, emptied his third glass of brandy for the night. A pair of green eyes had been lingering in his thoughts, irritating him. Most astonishing, they had remained with him since his encounter with the unknown woman in the little shop on High Holborn. She had been remarkably pretty, all golden hair and defiant smiles, and the manner in which she had scolded him had been ... oddly appealing.

Daniel scowled at his empty glass. He had spent years building a formidable reputation—detached, unshakable, coldly rational. No one dared scold him.

And yet she had. And he had liked it.

The mere thought was so intolerable that tonight he had done something reckless—visited the Glendevons' club, where the gaming hell remained open until dawn. It had done nothing to clear his thoughts, so in an even greater lapse of judgment, he had brought home a lover for the first time in over a year.

He had expected passion. Or at the very least, distraction. Instead, he had felt nothing. Not even a flicker of desire. Emptiness slammed into him with a force that left him reeling. He wanted more. A wife. A son to carry on the title. Perhaps a family who would bring warmth to his life instead of this piercing loneliness.

Daniel scoffed. Christmas did this to him. Every damn year. The dull ache in his chest was a constant companion, a reminder that he had lost his mother, father, and older brother in a carriage accident on Christmas Eve fifteen years and several months ago. Daniel had once loved Christmas. It had been a time of laughter,

warmth, and cherished traditions. Every year, his family—his father, the formidable Earl of Walcott, his mother, the gentle yet sharp-witted countess, his younger sister Catherine, and his older brother, Charles, who was barely a year his senior—embraced the holiday with a sense of joy that seemed to make the world brighter.

In the mornings, after breakfasting, they would bundle into their winter coats, don thick gloves, and venture onto the vast frozen lake on their estate. Skating had been their favorite pastime, a tradition passed down from their father, who had learned it from his own father before him. Daniel could still recall the way his mother had glided effortlessly across the ice, her laughter echoing across the crisp winter air as she tried to outpace his father.

Charles, always competitive, would challenge Daniel to races, daring him to keep up as they cut across the lake in swift, powerful strides. Their father would join in, his deep voice booming with encouragement when Daniel managed to beat his older brother—something that didn't happen often, but when it did, the satisfaction had been unparalleled.

Afternoons were spent gathering pinecones and holly, which their mother and the housekeeper would use to decorate the great hall and drawing rooms. The scent of roasting meats, cinnamon, and mulled wine would drift through the corridors as the kitchen prepared the great Christmas feast. The three of them would chop wood for the fireplaces, a task their father insisted upon despite the many servants available, for he believed it was a lesson in discipline and self-reliance. Afterward, they would collapse in the smaller drawing room, warming their hands by the fire, drinking steaming mugs of cider, and listening to their mother read Dickens and Shakespeare's tales.

In the evenings, when darkness crept over the estate and the candlelit glow of the manor felt cozier than ever, they would gather in the music room. His mother would

play the pianoforte, his father would sing in his rich baritone, and Charles would tease Daniel about his reluctance to sing along. Sometimes, they would play parlor games or gather around the massive oak table in the library to play whist, his father feigning frustration whenever his mother won.

It had been perfect. Whole.

And then ...

It had all been taken from him.

He exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face.

Enough .

Shoving the memories aside, he turned toward the staircase, ready to retire for the night, when a knock sounded at his study door. His butler, Mr. Edwards, stepped inside with his usual stoic demeanor.

“My lord, you have a late-night visitor,” he intoned. “The Marquess of Camden.”

Daniel raised a brow. Jason? At this hour? With a sigh, he set his empty glass aside. “Send him to the smaller library, Edwards.”

His butler bowed and retreated. Daniel was waiting in the smaller library when his friend strolled in, looking as unbothered as ever. Jason, the Marquess of Camden, was the sort of man who never took life too seriously—a stark contrast to Daniel’s own temperament.

He was a handsome devil, with dark russet hair that always seemed artfully tousled, piercing blue eyes that saw too much, and an infuriating smirk that suggested he was

perpetually amused by life. Jason had once been one of the most reckless rakes in London, but in the last few years, he had settled into a steady and respectable role—at least, respectable enough for a man who had once gambled away a carriage and a prized stallion in a single night.

Daniel gestured toward the decanter of brandy, but Jason waved him off.

“Still drinking at this hour?” Jason asked, nodding toward Daniel’s empty glass.

Daniel leaned back in his chair, his gaze steady. “Fourth glass since I returned home from Glendevons.”

Jason arched a brow. “Ah. It must be Christmas.”

Daniel huffed a dry laugh but said nothing. Jason sprawled lazily into the chair opposite him, draping an arm over the side.

“I came to extend my yearly invitation,” he said casually. “The one you always refuse.”

Daniel’s lips twitched. “Your family still thinks they can fix me, do they?”

“They pity you, Walcott. Think you live too much in the past.”

Daniel’s jaw ticked. “I don’t need their pity.”

Jason tilted his head, studying him. “No. You need company, good cheer, good food and great tuppings. My home can provide everything but the tuppings.”

Daniel scoffed. “Staying at Camden estate with your three married sisters, their cherubic children, and your mother fussing over me would be ... painful.”

Jason smirked. “It would certainly irritate you, which is entertainment enough for me.”

Daniel shook his head. “No.”

He always refused. His friends knew he was alone—knew he had no one—and every year, they extended their kindness. And every year, he turned them down.

Yet ...

For some reason, this year, he hesitated.

Jason noticed. “You look ... distracted,” he said, watching him closely.

Daniel exhaled, a smile hitching his mouth. “I was thinking about a pair of green eyes.”

Jason blinked, then grinned. “Finally . A woman.”

Daniel ignored the teasing. “I don’t know who she is.”

Jason leaned forward with interest. “Tell me.”

So Daniel did. He described their encounter in the shop on High Holborn—the way she had scolded him without fear, the defiance in her stance, the spark in her voice. “The woman had the audacity to claim the rocking horse was hers,” he said dryly.

Jason’s lips twitched. “Was it?”

Daniel scowled. “I reached for it first.”

Jason chuckled. “And yet, here you are, drinking your third or fourth glass of brandy, still thinking about her.”

Daniel ignored him. “She was feisty. But ... alluring. I can’t quite explain it.” He leaned forward, his voice dropping slightly. “She has vivid green eyes, blonde hair, and a small scar on her chin. Barely noticeable, but it was there. Deep dimples when she smiled even though that smile was faked politeness.”

Jason’s amusement dimmed slightly.

For the first time, he looked thoughtful.

“Green eyes,” he murmured. “A small scar on her chin ...” Then, suddenly, his blue eyes widened slightly. “Bloody hell,” he muttered.

Daniel stiffened. “You know her?”

Jason hesitated, then exhaled. “It sounds like Miss Caroline Fairbanks.”

Daniel frowned. The name was vaguely familiar.

Jason sat forward. “You need to be careful, Walcott. That young lady belongs to those Very Bad Fairbanks .”

Recognition flickered in Daniel’s mind. The Fairbanks. A scandalous family.

“And Caroline Fairbanks herself?” Jason lowered his voice. “She was rumored to be the mistress of Viscount Dennison. And they had a public fight in Hyde Park.”

Daniel raised a brow. “A fight?”

Jason nodded. “She chased him down with her parasol. Beat him over the back with it.”

Daniel blinked. Then—unexpectedly—he laughed.

Jason looked at him, startled.

“Ah,” Daniel mused. “So that explains the fire in her eyes.”

Jason groaned. “You’re intrigued, aren’t you?”

Daniel did not answer. Instead, something else clicked in his mind. Rannulf, The Duke of Ravenswood. Ravenswood, one of their oldest friends, had married Elizabeth Fairbanks—another one of those scandalous Fairbanks. And hadn’t Ravenswood invited him to Penporth for Christmas these last couple of years? Daniel tapped his fingers against the arm of his chair, his mind turning over the implications. He had refused the invitation, as he always did.

But now ...

Now he was reconsidering.

Jason groaned, leaning back in his chair. “I can see the wheels turning in your head, and I don’t like it.”

Daniel merely smirked, swirling his brandy. Perhaps it was time to accept Ravenswood’s invitation after all. Daniel stilled.

Something was ... off.

His gaze flickered past Jason to the far side of the library, his mind taking a moment

too long to register what was missing.

The rocking horse was gone.

His chest tightened as his head snapped toward the empty space in the corner near the hearth, his brow furrowing in sheer disbelief. “Bloody hell,” he muttered.

Jason, who had been reclining lazily in his chair, lifted a curious brow. “What?”

Daniel didn’t answer. Instead, he surged to his feet, striding toward the spot where the wooden rocking horse had stood just hours ago.

It was not there. Not tucked away in a corner. Not moved slightly out of place.

Just ... gone.

Jason straightened. “What in God’s name are you doing?”

Daniel turned slowly, his voice flat with astonishment. “It’s gone.”

Jason blinked. “What is?”

Daniel dragged a hand through his hair, as if doing so would somehow restore his sanity. “The damn rocking horse.”

Silence stretched between them.

Then Jason snorted. “You can’t be serious.”

Daniel’s lips thinned. “Do I look as if I am jesting?”

Jason grinned. “I would never assume you were capable of jest.”

Daniel ignored him, his gaze sweeping the room. His gut twisted—not in anger but in sheer, stunned disbelief. Who in their right mind would steal a wooden horse from his study? Then, something caught his eye.

A slip of paper resting atop the his desk.

Daniel strode toward it, snatching it up, his sharp gaze taking in the words written in an elegant yet unmistakably bold hand.

I have taken back my horse. I have left you more money than you paid for it. Consider this a fair exchange.

– a lady whom you wronged.

A five-pound note lay neatly beside the letter. Daniel stared. Then, utterly without warning, he laughed.

Jason jerked back, eyes widening. “What the hell?”

Daniel shook his head, amusement tugging at his lips. “She stole it.”

Jason blinked. “Who—” he stopped, realization dawning in his sharp blue eyes.

“Miss Caroline Fairbanks.”

Jason released a low whistle. “I warned you about her. The family has no sense of proper behavior, conduct or sensibilities.”

Daniel’s mind spun, piecing together the audacity of the act. She had broken into his

home, retrieved the rocking horse, and left behind a note and money as if she had simply purchased it outright.

Cheeky little minx .

“She actually stole it back,” Daniel muttered, more impressed than angry.

Jason, however, was watching him far too closely. “You are entirely too amused by this.”

Daniel smirked. “It is not every day someone dares to rob me blind and leave money on my desk in apology.”

Jason groaned, rubbing a hand down his face. “Don’t tell me you are planning some sort of retaliation.”

Daniel turned the note over in his fingers, contemplating.

“I shall have to pay a visit to her home in town,” he murmured.

Jason sighed. “And if she is not there?”

Daniel’s smirk deepened. “Then I suppose I will be making a trip to Penporth. It seems as if their family gathers yearly for Christmas.”

Jason leaned back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. “This is a terrible idea.”

Daniel arched a brow. “Is it?”

“Yes.” Jason dropped his hand and fixed him with a warning look. “You said that

with the upcoming season, you would be seeking a wife.”

Daniel nodded. “That is still my intention.”

Jason exhaled. “Then recall that Caroline Fairbanks is not suitable to be your countess, and you do not need to be engaged with her in any regard, even if she is remarkably beautiful.”

Daniel didn’t respond.

Jason pressed on. “She is rumored to have been Viscount Dennison’s mistress. She had a very public row with him in Hyde Park. Even if half of it is untrue, the ton already believes it.”

Daniel studied the note once more, rolling the paper between his fingers.

Jason sighed. “A woman like that is not suitable for marriage.”

Daniel lifted a brow, his voice smooth. “I never said I intended to marry her.”

Jason stilled.

“I simply find her interesting when I do not find many things charming,” Daniel added.

Because the truth was ...

He was undeniably intrigued. And that, perhaps, was far more dangerous than anything else.

CHAPTER 5

Caroline had only arrived in Penporth yesterday, and already the entire manor buzzed with energy. Christmas was still eight days away, yet the Fairbanks were in full celebration mode. Servants and family members alike were adorning the halls with pinecones, mistletoe, and garlands of ivy, all woven with brightly-colored satin bows that added a festive cheer. The air smelled of pine and lemon wax, a scent that brought back cherished memories of past Christmases spent here.

And, amazingly, almost everyone had already arrived. Julia and Aunt Margaret, along with their husbands and stepchildren, would be traveling down closer to Christmas. Several cousins with their husband, wives, children and expectant mothers filled the house with laughter and love. Caroline warmed at the sight, though deep inside, a whisper of longing curled in her chest. She had barely stepped into the drawing room when she spotted James indulging in a rather salacious kiss with his wife, Sarah. She giggled against his lips as he nuzzled her neck, oblivious to their public audience.

Caroline tossed her hands in the air. “Honestly, must you? I just left Richard and Poppy in the music room in a far more compromising embrace. I have no maidenly sensibilities left,” she said laughing.

Sarah gasped, her cheeks pinking though her eyes danced with mischief.

James, utterly unapologetic, grinned wickedly and pulled his wife closer. “If you are scandalized, dearest cousin, you are free to look away.”

Caroline scoffed, crossing her arms. “The Fairbanks have grown shameless, indeed.”

Sarah only laughed, her gaze softening with happiness as she brushed a hand over James's cheek. "We should tell everyone this evening."

He placed a hand to her belly, and Caroline felt a pang in her heart at what his actions revealed.

Was Sarah with child?

She swallowed down the ache rising inside her chest. Everyone was so happy. Blissfully so. She had never seen a family so full of love—faithful, passionate, and enduring. At five and twenty, Caroline had begun to wonder if such a love would ever be hers.

James was devoted to Sarah.

Colin worshipped Hermina.

Lizzy and Rannulf were inseparable, and Nicholas never let go of Cressida's hand. Poppy and Richard doted on each other. Just moments ago, Caroline had left Phoebe in the drawing room, where she sat comfortably in the corner, her seven-months-pregnant form glowing with quiet happiness. One hand idly rubbed her rounded belly, while her husband, Gabriel, hovered close by, watching over her like a hawk—protective, ever attentive, as if ensuring no harm could so much as glance her way.

Caroline pushed the ache aside. This was a time for laughter, not for melancholy.

"Fanny and Ester have finished arranging the drawing room and invite you both to join us," Caroline murmured.

She gathered herself and joined the others in the larger drawing room, where they had

arranged themselves for an evening of charades and indoor games.

Lizzy was perched on the arm of her husband's chair, smiling softly down at him when the butler stepped inside and cleared his throat.

"Your Grace," the man said, bowing slightly. "There is a caller for you."

Rannulf sighed heavily, but his gaze softened as he turned to Lizzy. Without a word, he cupped her cheek and kissed her—a slow, deliberate press of lips that had his duchess blushing furiously.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, must everyone be so affectionate?" Caroline grumbled, though she smiled despite herself.

Rannulf smirked as he rose. "It is Christmas, cousin. Tolerate it."

Lizzy laughed as the duke strode from the drawing room, leaving them to resume their merriment.

Caroline turned to her youngest, twice-removed cousin, eight year-old Lily, and tapped her nose playfully.

"You, my dear, have grown into a beauty," she mused, tilting her head as if appraising her. "In a few years, young beaus will be collapsing at your feet."

Lily giggled, her vibrant green eyes twinkling with mischief. "I shall only marry a man like papa. If he is not just like papa, he will not do."

The entire room erupted into laughter, including her father Simon, Viscount Havisham, who was sitting nearby with his youngest son cuddled against his chest.

“Well, darling,” he said. “I do set a fine example.”

“Arrogant,” Fanny gasped, laughing.

“That is just a part of the charm of besotted husbands,” he said with a wink at his wife. “My beautiful, clever, most amazing daughter to ever exist is correct.”

Lily beamed, preening under the praise.

Caroline shook her head in amusement, but before she could reply, the sound of returning footsteps caught her attention. She glanced up just as Rannulf stepped back into the drawing room. And at his side was a shadowy figure.

Caroline’s heart stopped.

No .

It could not be. The shadow stepped forward, his imposing form moving into the light. The world tilted. She gasped, her shock bursting forth before she could stop it. “Did you follow me?”

The room fell silent. Every single gaze swung between her and the Earl of Walcott. Brows lifted. Eyes widened. A scandalous pause stretched between them, thick with intrigue.

The Earl of Walcott did not look the least bit perturbed.

Instead, he smiled roguishly, the corners of his mouth curling with mocking amusement. “What a remarkable coincidence. Please permit me your name as I’ve not had the pleasure.”

Caroline's face burned and her heart tripped.

A very bad sign.

Ester clapped her hands. "Oh, I sense a story!"

Caroline's stomach clenched. Drat. Everyone was watching. She forced a light laugh, waving a dismissive hand. "Oh, it's nothing at all. We merely had a chance encounter while shopping for Christmas gifts. I had no notion Lord Walcott would be a guest."

The room remained unconvinced. Too many knowing glances. Too many smirks. Caroline desperately needed to leave. "Excuse me," she blurted, rising far too quickly from her seat. "I have a time sensitive matter to attend."

"Ah, are you to leave without an introduction?"

That silken drawl halted her retreat and the amusement in his voice sent a wild flutter in her belly. She stiffened as Ravenswood stepped forward, his expression unreadable.

"Caroline," the duke said smoothly, "Lord Walcott is one of my good friends. I have invited him to spend Christmas with us for years, and he always declined. I am pleased he will be with us this year. Daniel, allow me to present my cousin by marriage, Miss Caroline Fairbanks. Caroline, the Earl of Walcott."

Caroline's stomach clenched even tighter. Years? She swallowed her surprise and forced herself to dip into a gracious curtsy. "My lord," she said lightly, masking her unease. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

His low chuckle sent heat licking up her spine. It was a sound of pure disbelief. And Caroline could not bear to stay a moment longer. She needed to gather her

composure—and she would not do it in front of him.

“If you will excuse me, everyone,” she said smoothly, forcing her voice to remain steady, “I shall return shortly.”

She felt his eyes on her as she moved past him—dark and assessing, wondering what she would do next. What would he say when he saw the wooden horse? Her pulse thrummed as she hurried from the room, her breath uneven.

She had stolen from him.

And now he was here.

Caroline slipped into the corridor, pressing her fingers to her flushed cheeks. What in heaven’s name was he really doing here? And why—why—did the thought both terrify and thrill her?

CHAPTER 6

The manor was silent, the hush of night settled over the grand manor like a thick, comforting quilt. A few lights still flickered from behind heavy drapes, but for the most part, the household had retired for the night, leaving nothing but the whisper of snowflakes tumbling from the sky.

Daniel stood alone on the stone terrace, a flask of whisky in hand, as he stared into the vast snow-covered landscape. The chilled air bit at his skin, but he welcomed it. A bracing contrast to the warmth burning inside him. Not from the whisky, but from the sight he had witnessed earlier—Ravenswood with his wife and children. The duke had been a different man in their company—his gaze softened, his touch lingering, his love for his duchess unmistakable.

It had been painful to witness.

A reminder of what Daniel did not have.

A wife and lover.

A home filled with warmth instead of an endless stretch of cold, empty halls. For so long, he had told himself he did not need such things. That the loss of his mother, father, and brother had been a lesson.

Do not love too deeply. Do not get close or allow anyone close because the loss is inevitable, agonizing and gut-wrenching. It took far too long to lift oneself from the quagmire of grief and pain that came with the death of a beloved. Daniel tipped the

flask to his lips, letting the whisky's burn sear away the thoughts.

He was two and thirty, and only now did he begin to feel the sharp weight of loneliness settle over him. His younger sister, Catherine, had fled England years ago, taking refuge in Italy with her husband, unable to bear the memories of their family's death. They wrote often, but he had not seen her in nearly five years.

Perhaps it was time to visit.

Daniel sighed, about to turn back inside the manor when a shadow moved in the distance. His body stilled, his senses sharpening. Someone was sneaking through the gardens.

At this hour?

Curiosity flickered in his chest as he watched the figure trudge through the fresh snow, moving toward the back of the property. Then the moonlight shifted, illuminating golden hair escaping from beneath a hood.

Daniel's brow lifted. Caroline Fairbanks .

A slow smile curled his mouth. She had been avoiding him all day, skirting out of rooms when he entered, refusing to meet his gaze. The lady had even taken her supper in her room, leaving him to endure the full weight of her family's curious and decidedly amused gazes as they dined.

Yet here she was, slinking through the shadows like a thief in the night.

He should leave her to her devices. Instead, he tucked the flask away and followed. She walked purposefully, her boots crunching against the snow-covered path, heedless of the cold. He kept his distance, watching as she made her way through the

trees into the woodland surrounding the manor.

Most ladies would not dare venture into a snow-covered forest alone—not with only the half-moon to guide them.

But Caroline Fairbanks did.

Brave little thing. Or reckless .

He wondered—was she meeting a lover? The thought twisted inside him, something dark and unfamiliar curling in his gut. She was the only unmarried lady in the house. Had she snuck out for a rendezvous? His jaw tightened as he moved quieter, his boots making little sound against the packed snow. He did not know why the thought irritated him.

Only that it did.

She stopped beneath a massive oak tree, its twisting branches stretching toward the sky. She began to climb it. Daniel halted, blinking. What in the devil's name was she doing?

The tree was massive, the bark slick with frost, the branches thin in places. Yet she climbed with determination, her hands and boots finding footholds with surprising ease.

A smirk tugged at his mouth.

How interesting you are, Miss Fairbanks.

She was doing well. Until she slipped. A startled cry tore from her lips. Daniel moved on instinct, surging forward just as she tumbled down. His arms caught her in the

nick of time, her body crashing into his chest with a force that nearly sent them both toppling over into the snow.

Her hands flew up, grasping his shoulders in a tight, desperate grip.

She gasped, her breath warm against his throat. Her fingers dug into his coat, her wide, green eyes locking onto his in shock.

“Lord Walcott?”

Her voice was a mixture of disbelief and outrage.

He smirked, his arms still wrapped firmly around her waist. “A pleasure, as always, Miss Fairbanks.”

She gaped. “Where did you come from?”

His smile deepened, his fingers spanning the curve of her waist as he set her down gently onto the snow. “I might ask the same of you,” he murmured.

Miss Fairbanks stared at him, her breath coming fast and uneven, the snowflakes melting against her flushed skin.

She was close enough to kiss.

And for the first time in a long while, Daniel had the distinct urge to do just that. To pull a woman close, feel her soft curves press against him, and taste the sweetness of her lips. The desire sliced through him, sharp and unexpected.

His gaze drifted over her face, illuminated by the pale glow of the half-moon. The pristine snow stretched around them, casting the world in a hushed, ethereal stillness.

Against that backdrop, Caroline looked almost otherworldly—her golden hair shimmering silver in the moonlight, her green eyes dark and luminous, filled with an emotion he couldn't quite decipher. A faint flush warmed her cheeks from the cold, making her lips appear rosier and softer.

He had seen countless beautiful women before, but there was something about her—something wild and untamed, something he shouldn't want. She must have sensed his thoughts because she suddenly hissed, pressing a firm palm against his chest.

“Do not do it, you scoundrel.”

He lifted a brow. “Do what?”

She blushed, the color evident even in the moonlight. “You were thinking of acting like a libertine!”

“Wrong,” he drawled, slow and deliberate. “I merely thought to kiss you. A libertine's thoughts would have been far more wicked.”

Her breath hitched, her fingers twitching against his coat before she abruptly whirled away from him.

“I have better things to do than stand here and be scandalized,” she muttered, marching back toward the tree.

Daniel folded his arms, watching with mild amusement as she braced herself and reached for a low-hanging branch once more. She climbed a few feet before her boot slipped against the bark, and she slid back down with a startled gasp.

He caught her without hesitation.

Again.

Her hands clutched at his shoulders, her face close enough that he could see the delicate golden flecks in her green eyes.

She released a frustrated breath, pushed away from him, and tried again.

And again.

And again.

He was there to catch her each time, steady and patient, though his amusement grew with every failed attempt.

After the fourth time, he asked, “Is it so important to climb?”

“Yes.”

The single word was quiet but fiercely determined. He studied her for a long moment, then exhaled. “Then let me help you.”

She blinked up at him, hesitation flickering across her face. For the first time, she looked ... uncertain. And the sight of it wrenched something odd and unfamiliar in his chest. She gave a small nod. Without another word, he stepped closer, bracing her by the waist, guiding her hands to the sturdier branches as she climbed.

Higher. And higher still. She didn't stop until they were so far from the ground, the sharp bite of cold air was even more pronounced, and a fall would surely break bones.

Daniel scowled. “If you think I'm leaving you up here alone so you can tumble to

your death when you decide to descend, you are sorely mistaken.”

She turned her head and smiled at him, her eyes glittering. “Then sit.”

His lips parted, ready to object, but then he saw the look on her face—the soft yearning, the way her gaze was fixed on the sky above them as if she were searching for something just beyond reach. With a sigh, he settled beside her, leaning against the sturdy curve of the branch. For a while, neither of them spoke, simply sitting there in the vast quiet of the night, the stars scattered brilliantly above them.

“Tell me, why is it so important to risk life and limb to make this climb?” His voice was dry with amusement. “At the very least, I’d like to know what I’ll have died for if I fall.”

A small laugh escaped her. “You won’t fall.”

“Tell me,” he insisted, his gaze steady on hers.

Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, she said, “It’s a family belief.”

He turned his head slightly, watching her instead of the stars. “What is?”

“That those we love ... the ones we’ve lost ... they live up there.” She tipped her chin toward the vast, star-studded sky. “They watch over us.”

Daniel exhaled, tilting his head to look up. “That’s fanciful.”

She smiled. “Perhaps. But it’s comforting.”

Something tightened in his chest . Comforting . He frowned, his thoughts drifting to the past, to memories buried beneath years of silence. His mother’s laughter, his

father's deep, rumbling voice, his brother's teasing grin.

Could they be up there? He nearly scoffed at himself. Foolish thought.

And yet ...

He found himself searching the sky anyway. For what, he didn't know. But perhaps, just perhaps, it was indeed ... comforting. Miss Fairbanks looked up at the sky again, the moonlight catching in the delicate angles of her face, making her look almost dreamlike.

She shifted slightly on the branch, tilting her head to study him. "Who did you lose?"

Daniel's body went rigid.

She must have felt the tension roll off him because she immediately rushed to amend her words. "Forgive me. I did not mean to pry ... I only recognized the pain on your face."

He said nothing for a long moment, his gaze still fixed on the stars above as if searching for someone. Daniel said nothing. Because what could he say? He had not thought of his father that way in years. He had not thought of his mother's voice, his brother's teasing, or how their home had once been filled with warmth and life.

Then, quietly, he murmured, "My mother. My father. My brother."

CHAPTER 7

Caroline sucked in a sharp breath, her chest tightening. “All three?” she whispered.

The earl nodded. “Almost sixteen years ago. A single carriage accident. My sister Catherine and I were spared.”

The words were flat, emotionless. But the weight of them ... she felt it. Caroline hesitated momentarily before reaching out, her gloved fingers brushing lightly over his. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “That must have been ...” She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Painful.”

Lord Walcott didn’t speak for a while. Didn’t pull away from her touch but didn’t acknowledge it either.

Finally, he exhaled. “Who did you lose?”

She carefully withdrew her touch from his. “My father.”

His gaze flicked to her. “How long ago did you lose him?”

She smiled at him. “I was about ten when he died. I remember him, but ... the memories fade more each year. And yet ... whenever I look at the stars, I remember climbing the trees back home with him. I remember the way he laughed when I reached the highest branch. The way he scolded me for scaring my mother half to death. And in that moment ... I remember him well. It is why I climb whenever I can. Living in London makes it difficult to enjoy this freedom.”

The night stretched around them, quiet and still, save for the soft whisper of the wind rustling through the trees. The cold pressed in, sharp yet oddly invigorating. Caroline let herself sit in silence for several long moments, her gaze drifting over the stars.

The wind picked up, curling through the trees in a sudden gust, lifting the strands of her loose hair and sending a fresh chill racing over her skin. She shivered before she could stop herself.

“Come closer,” the earl murmured, his voice low and even. “I’ll keep you warm.”

Caroline turned to glare at him, narrowing her eyes in suspicion. He laughed, the deep, rich sound striking an odd yet pleasurable note inside her body. Heat flushed through her, and she quickly looked away, irritated at her reaction.

“Think of me as one of your male cousins,” he drawled, still amused.

She scoffed. “That is not even remotely possible.”

Good humor rushed through her despite herself, but another sharp gust of wind had her shivering again, her arms tightening around herself. The redingcote was not enough protection against the wintry night.

Lord Walcott sighed. “Come here before you freeze. Or allow me to assist you down.”

She hesitated. But the cold bit through her coat, and reluctantly, she edged closer. As soon as she did, the remarkable warmth of his body seeped into hers, chasing away the cold like a slow-burning fire. It felt too good. A soft, involuntary sound slipped from her lips before she stiffened against the sensation.

Daniel stilled beside her, then chuckled. “Relax, I won’t bite.”

She gave him a sidelong glance, a small smirk forming. “I am familiar with men of your ilk, Lord Walcott. I cannot help but be on guard.”

He lifted a brow. “Men of my ilk?”

She nodded primly. “Those who are titled, wealthy, and well-connected. Men who would seduce a woman like me with no regard for her sensibilities or reputation.”

He considered this, his expression thoughtful. “Ah. A rake, then.”

“Precisely.”

A beat of silence stretched between them.

Then, quietly, he said, “I would only take you to my bed if you wanted it as well ... and if you understood I do not promise tomorrow.”

Caroline gasped, her head snapping toward him in shock. And that was when she saw it. The unmistakable heat in his gaze. Dark. Intense.

Desiring her.

Her pulse jumped in response, a strange, answering pull tugging her toward him, an awareness coiling low in her stomach. She stiffened her spine. Resisted.

“Well,” she drawled, tilting her chin up. “I suppose that means you would never consider marrying a woman like me.”

His lips curved slightly, but there was no amusement in his tone when he said, “You presume correctly.”

Caroline had known the answer before she asked. Still, it stung. Bluntly, she demanded, “Why?”

He exhaled, his eyes drifting back to the stars. “You have some connection through your cousins, but you lack wealth and reputation.”

Her cheeks burned, her heart clenching tight. She had walked right into that insult. For a long moment, she looked at him. Then, slowly, she turned her gaze away, her lips pressing together.

A beat passed before Daniel sighed.

“I did not mean to wound you,” he said, his voice softer than before. “I am accused of rudeness and arrogance often. Honesty is rarely appreciated.”

Caroline took a breath, forcing herself to shake off the sting of his words. She turned back to him with a half-smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I suppose that is something we have in common, my lord.”

He watched her, something unreadable flickering in his gaze. Caroline ignored it because she would not allow his words or attraction to affect her. She took a slow, steadying breath before offering him a small smile. “Thank you for sitting with me, Lord Walcott.”

The earl inclined his head, his gaze steady. “You are welcome.”

She hesitated, then glanced down. “I suppose I am ready to descend.”

He studied her for a moment before shifting, positioning himself slightly lower on the branch. “I’ll go first.”

He moved with effortless grace, descending the tree with measured ease as if he had done it a hundred times before. When he reached the lowest branch, he dropped lightly onto the snow-covered ground, his boots sinking slightly.

He turned and looked up at her. “Now you.”

Caroline bit her lip, lowering herself carefully. The bark was slicker than she expected, her fingers struggling to find purchase.

“Take your time,” he murmured.

She did, slowly maneuvering down, pausing when she reached the second-lowest branch. She hesitated, eyeing the drop.

“Let go,” Daniel said.

She narrowed her eyes. “That is easy for you to say.”

“I will catch you,” he said, his tone calm and sure.

Her breath curled in the cold air as she debated. Then she let go. Strong hands wrapped around her waist, steady and firm, breaking her fall effortlessly. For a moment, she was pressed against him, his body solid and warm against hers.

Her breath hitched. The air between them tightened, the night suddenly too quiet. Then, with obvious reluctance, he set her down. Caroline stepped back, her heart thrumming. “That was ...”

“Unnecessarily dramatic?”

She huffed but smiled despite herself. “I was going to say well done.”

His mouth quirked. “Of course you were.”

She rolled her eyes and turned toward the manor. They walked in silence, their boots crunching over the fresh snow, the wind curling softly around them. Inside, the house was still, the only sound the faint crackle of distant fires and the occasional creak of the old manor settling. Caroline was painfully aware of his presence beside her. The way his shoulder brushed hers every so often. The way he smelled—clean, crisp, with a hint of leather and something distinctly male. And most unsettling of all, the peculiar way her heart trembled in her chest.

They ascended the staircase, their footsteps muffled by the plush carpet and walked down the long hallway. The sconces cast a soft golden glow, flickering shadows stretching along the walls. Once they reached her door, she mustered a polite smile, her fingers curling around the doorknob.

“Good night, Lord Walcott.” She turned the handle, ready to step inside, when his voice stopped her cold.

“I believe you are forgetting something, Miss Fairbanks.”

Caroline’s fingers tightened around the knob. Slowly, she turned to face him. “Am I?”

His eyes gleamed with lazy amusement. “We have yet to discuss the matter of my stolen wooden horse.”

Her breath hitched. She gasped, muttering, “What stolen wooden horse?”

Daniel smiled, slow and knowing. “The one I already saw tucked neatly away in the smaller parlor, buried under a pile of presents.”

Her mind raced, calculating quickly. “I paid you handsomely for it.”

His gaze darkened with something wicked. “You stole it, Miss Fairbanks, and I do not believe I shall let you get away with it.”

Her heart thumped. “Why?”

“Because,” he murmured, stepping closer, “the wooden horse is mine.”

She bit her lip, weighing her next words carefully. Then she exhaled and said, “Might I prevail upon you to gift it to Lily? I am happy for you to claim the present as your own, so long as she receives it.”

The earl considered her, his expression unreadable. “I might be convinced.”

Something in his voice gave her pause. She narrowed her eyes. “Convinced how?”

His lips curved, deviltry dancing in his gaze. “A kiss.”

Caroline stiffened, heat pooling low in her belly. “One kiss?”

His eyes flared slightly, his gaze dropping briefly to her mouth before he met her eyes again.

“Yes,” he murmured. “One.”

She huffed, crossing her arms. “We need a contract.”

He laughed, a deep, rich sound. “And who will you take your grievance should I renege on my promise?”

She smirked. “Any one of my male cousins or cousins-in-law. And while you are powerful, so are they. Should they know of your kiss, despite your ... views, I am sure they might persuade you to marry me or make your life ... unbearable . So it is in your best interest I do not feel grieved. I will only feel that way if you go back on your word. Once the presents are given away, I will burn the contract before your eyes.”

His smile widened. “Very clever indeed.”

He stepped toward her, the space between them shrinking into nothing.

“We have a deal,” he said smoothly. “A single kiss and the wooden horse is completely yours—no strings attached. I need not even claim it as my gift.”

Her breath caught.

“You mean to kiss me here?” she whispered.

He nodded to the ceiling. “You are standing under a sprig of mistletoe.”

She snapped her head up, her stomach sinking as she caught sight of the traitorous greenery hanging above them. Scowling, she muttered, “I will wring my cousins’ necks.”

Then, without another word, she pushed open her door and stepped inside.

The earl followed. She turned, her eyes narrowing. “Are you not afraid of entering a lady’s chambers?”

He leaned against the doorframe, his silver gaze dark and knowing. “Are you not afraid of kissing me in the hallway?”

Caroline stilled.

“If someone were to witness it,” she murmured, her voice quieter now, “I would suffer the humiliation of you refusing to marry me.”

Something shifted in his gaze. A flicker of something she could not name.

Then, before she could process it, he stepped inside—

And before she could protest, he closed the door, hauled her into his arms, and took her mouth with his.

CHAPTER 8

Caroline's world caught fire. There was no hesitation, no gentleness in the way the earl kissed her. His mouth claimed hers, firm and insistent, parting her lips in a kiss that was deep, open-mouthed, and sensual. A gasp caught in her throat, but before she could draw breath, he tilted his head and kissed her deeper. A slow, intoxicating slide of lips and tongue that sent a sharp, unfamiliar heat spiraling through her body. Caroline's fingers curled into his coat, gripping the heavy fabric as her knees threatened to weaken.

"How sweet you taste," he murmured against her lips, his voice thick and sinful.

A tremor raced down her spine. Then his tongue swept inside, teasing, stroking, demanding a response she didn't even know she was capable of giving. Another sound—helpless wanting—escaped her, and he answered with a groan, pulling her closer, deepening the kiss, their tongues tangling in a way that sent her pulse spiraling wildly.

A raw, unexpected hunger unfurled beneath her skin, its heat curling through her like a slow-burning fire. Caroline's heart pounded, the rhythm exhilarating and terrifying all at once.

This was nothing like she imagined a first kiss to be.

It was chaos and possession, pleasure and recklessness, and oh, how she wanted more. Panic flickered beneath the pleasure, and with a sudden breathless sound, she wrenched her mouth away, her lips tingling, swollen. Her cheek brushed against his

jaw, the rough scrape of his stubble a startling contrast to the heated softness of his mouth. For one fleeting second, she lingered, pressing her face into the crook of his throat, inhaling the warm, clean scent of him—of spice and winter air. Then she pushed away, heart hammering, turning her back to him before she did something truly foolish. Heat poured into her cheeks, her body still trembling from the force of his kiss.

She was mortified.

She was thrilled.

And worst of all ...

Caroline knew she would never forget the way he kissed her. “My lord, I—”

“Daniel,” he murmured. “Permit me the liberty of calling you Caroline.”

She hesitated, still unable to look over her shoulder at him. “Should I gather my quill and ink?” she asked huskily.

His low chuckle sent a shiver along her spine. “No need. I wanted to kiss you far too badly, and it provided the perfect excuse.”

A wicked thrill rushed through her, sharp and exhilarating. She forced herself to suppress it, reminding herself of who he was—and who she was not.

He desired her. But not as a potential wife. As a lover. A mistress .

As if it were an afterthought, he added, “The wooden horse is yours.”

Caroline inhaled, then exhaled softly. “Good night ... Daniel.”

Finally, she turned, meeting his gaze. “Thank you for keeping me company in the tree.”

Then, before she could second-guess herself, before the dangerous warmth in his gaze unraveled her further, she stepped toward the chaise. Daniel studied her for a long moment, his gaze lingering on her face. Then, with a slow, almost reluctant nod, he turned and walked to the door.

Caroline didn’t move. She didn’t breathe until she heard the quiet click of the door closing behind him. Then, as if jolted back into motion, she hurried across the room, pressing the lock into place with trembling fingers. Her heart pounded so fiercely she feared it might burst from her chest. She stood there for a long moment, staring at the door, her body still humming from his kiss.

Finally, she exhaled, pressing a shaking hand to her mouth.

Dear God . She could still taste him—warm, sinful, devastatingly male. Caroline squeezed her eyes shut, willing away the memory of the wicked heat of his lips, the way his tongue had tangled with hers, the deep, unexpected pleasure that had curled through her like fire licking at dry parchment.

A shudder worked its way through her, and she forced herself into action, reaching for the ties of her clothes. She peeled away her coat, trousers, and boots, each layer falling to the floor in haste. Then she pulled her night rail over her head, the cool fabric doing nothing to chase away the lingering heat of Daniel’s touch.

With quick steps, she slipped beneath the coverlets, burrowing deep into the warmth of her bed, tugging the blankets up to her chin. But sleep did not come quickly. Not when her body still thrummed with awareness, when her lips still tingled from his kiss.

Daniel was dangerous.

Not in the way of villains and scoundrels, but in the way a man could unravel a woman with nothing but his presence.

With a look. A touch. A kiss.

She could not—would not—allow it to happen again. Because it would never be more than this. He had been brutally honest about what kind of man he was. Men like him—wealthy, titled, powerful—did not court women like her.

They seduced them.

Made them whispered scandals before casting them aside to marry someone more suitable. She had seen it before. Caroline had even received two such distasteful offers in the past—men who masked their intentions with false courtship and empty words, only to later reveal their true desires.

But Daniel?

He had not tried to deceive her.

He had told her exactly what he was, and worse—he had shown her. And somewhere deep inside her, that honesty unsettled her most of all. With a soft, weary sigh, Caroline turned onto her side, her fingers curled into the sheets, her pulse finally slowing.

She would not think of him anymore.

She would not let him slip into her thoughts, into her dreams.

Yet, as her eyelids grew heavy, the memory of his dark, hungry gaze lingered.

And she knew—

She was already lost.

CHAPTER 9

Daniel lay in his darkened bedchamber staring at the ceiling, utterly awake. Sleep eluded him. And he knew why. Caroline Fairbanks. He exhaled sharply, raking a hand through his hair, frustration prickling at his skin.

He wanted her.

More than he had ever wanted another woman. The awareness of it was baffling—a sharp, insistent pull that had lingered since the moment he met her in that gift shop. It wasn't just her beauty, though she had that in abundance—golden hair that shimmered in the firelight, eyes so vividly green they haunted him, and a mouth he had already tasted and wanted to taste again.

It was something more. Something that had been written in her eyes when he told her she was not the kind of woman he would marry. Something that told him she wanted more.

Marriage.

Children.

A life that had nothing to do with seduction or trysts in darkened bedchambers. Despite the scandal that clung to her name, despite the rumors and whispers, she would not be his lover. She would never settle for what he could offer. The lonely, wistful smile she had given him before bidding him goodnight—the memory of it pierced him.

What was he doing?

Daniel blew out a breath, shutting his eyes and pushing her from his thoughts.

He would not chase a woman who he could not give her what she wanted.

And Caroline Fairbanks ...

His gut warned him she was not a woman who would accept less. With that final thought, he turned onto his side, willing sleep to come. But even as he drifted off, her laugh echoed in his mind.

And her taste lingered on his lips.

Daniel woke to the soft glow of morning light filtering through the heavy drapes of his chamber. He blinked at the ceiling, disoriented for a moment, his body unusually warm and well-rested.

That was odd.

Most December mornings, he rose feeling tense and restless, his sleep broken by the usual nightmares—the echoes of his parents' screams, the terrifying crack of ice, the scream of his sister's merging with his, and the suffocating silence that followed. Most mornings, he would pace the hallways of his estate, or saddle his horse and ride for hours through the bitter cold, chasing away memories that threatened to consume him.

But last night ...

Last night, he had slept. Soundly. Deeply. Without dreams. And he knew exactly why.

Caroline Fairbanks. She had taken up every space in his dreams. Scowling at the unwanted thought, he threw off the covers and rose from the bed, dressing quickly and efficiently, as he always did. He had never been one to rely on a valet— he preferred solitude in the mornings, the ritual of fastening his own cravat and pulling on his boots a grounding habit in an otherwise unpredictable life.

Once dressed, he left his chamber and strode down the long hallway, surprised to find the house still eerily quiet.

Had he overslept?

A rare occurrence, indeed. Descending the grand staircase, he barely reached the landing before something caught his eye—a small figure sitting on the steps below, her delicate face forlorn as she rested her chin in her hands.

Daniel hesitated. The child, no more than seven or eight years old, perked up when she spotted him, her green eyes brightening with unmistakable excitement.

She scrambled to her feet and curtsied with great flourish. “Good morning, my lord! I am Lady Lily.”

Amused, he inclined his head. “Lady Lily.”

She grinned, then sighed dramatically, clasping her hands before her. “It is a terrible thing, my lord.”

“What is?” he asked, bemused.

“All of my aunts and uncles are still sleeping, and I wish to go skating! But mama says I cannot go outside without an adult.”

She pouted then, as if the world itself had betrayed her.

Daniel arched a brow. “Is that so?”

She nodded vehemently. “Yes. It is dreadfully unfair.”

“Mm.” He glanced toward the frost-laced windows, his gaze flickering toward the frozen pond in the distance. He remembered seeing it when he first arrived, a pristine sheet of ice nestled beyond the rolling snow-covered grounds.

The thought of gliding over that smooth, untouched surface ...

He couldn’t recall the last time he had skated. A small hand suddenly gripped his sleeve, tugging gently.

“Will you take me, my lord?” Lily asked, tilting her head at him, her hopeful smile impossibly endearing.

He should say no. But for some reason, he didn’t want to. Instead, he found himself saying, “Fetch your skates, Lady Lily.”

Her squeal of delight nearly deafened him, and before he could react, she darted up the stairs, moving with all the determination of a soldier preparing for battle. A short while later, they made their way through the snow-dusted grounds, the crisp winter air nipping at their skin.

The pond came into view, its surface a flawless expanse of glass-like ice, the edges lined with frost-covered reeds and towering pines. The sunlight cast a pale shimmer over the frozen water, making it look almost ethereal.

Lily practically bounced beside him, barely able to contain her excitement.

“Have you skated before?” he asked as he knelt, helping her fasten the small leather straps of her skates.

She shook her head eagerly. “Only a little! But papa is going to teach me more.”

Daniel glanced at the house in the distance. “And where is your father?”

She waved a hand dismissively. “Still abed, I think. He and mama stayed up very late last night playing cards with Uncle Colin and Aunt Hermina.”

A slow smile tugged at his lips. “Then I suppose I shall have to teach you instead.”

Her face lit up. “Truly?”

He nodded. “But only if you promise not to fall too often. I have no desire to explain to your parents why their daughter is covered in bruises.”

Lily giggled. “I shall try my best, my lord.”

With that, Daniel took her hand and led her onto the ice.

The first step was tentative, her small body teetering unsteadily.

He caught her easily, his grip firm and reassuring.

“Bend your knees a little,” he instructed, steadying her. “And keep your weight forward.”

She did as he said, her face scrunched in concentration. Then, with a careful push, he glided backward, pulling her along with him. Lily let out a delighted shriek, her laughter pealing across the frozen air.

“Again!” she cried, her fingers tightening around his hands.

Daniel smirked. “Very well, Lady Lily. Again.”

And so they skated, the child giggling with joy as he guided her across the ice, her feet stumbling but her determination unwavering. With each pass, she grew steadier, braver, until she was gliding on her own, her little arms outstretched for balance.

Daniel watched her, an unexpected warmth settling in his chest. It was a strange thing, to be here, on this frozen pond, with a child who was not his own—a child who adored her family, whose world was full of warmth and love.

For a moment, he wondered ...

Would he ever have this? The thought unsettled him. So instead, he pushed it aside—and let himself enjoy the moment.

CHAPTER 10

Caroline wrapped her arms around herself as she made her way toward the lake, her boots crunching softly over the frost-kissed path. The morning air was crisp, the sky a pale winter blue, the world still and hushed save for the occasional burst of laughter.

Then she saw him.

Her steps faltered. Daniel stood on the ice, his tall, commanding frame somehow at ease, his gloved hands steadying Lily as she wobbled unsteadily on her skates. He was smiling, his head slightly tilted as he listened to whatever she was saying, and then—

He laughed.

The sound was rich, deep, and utterly at odds with the cold and aloof earl everyone whispered about in the ton. Caroline's fingers fluttered to her lips, her breath hitching. In an instant, she recalled the feel of his mouth on hers—the shocking heat, the way he had kissed her as if he had every right to, as if he had already claimed her. The taste of him still lingered, dark and intoxicating, and warmth flooded her so swiftly that for the first time that morning, she no longer felt cold.

Lily, her cheeks flushed pink from the cold, beamed up at him with absolute trust.

“You must keep your knees bent just a little,” Daniel instructed, his voice calm yet firm. “And don’t lock your ankles.”

Lily nodded solemnly, mimicking his stance.

Caroline watched as he took both of Lily's hands in his, guiding her gently onto the ice. She wobbled but didn't fall, her gleeful laughter carrying across the lake.

"You're doing well," Daniel said, his own skates slicing effortlessly across the ice as he glided backward, keeping her steady.

Lily's small face lit with triumph. "I didn't fall!"

"Not yet," he teased. "Now, let's see if you can move without me."

"He is good with children."

Caroline started, a sharp breath escaping her as Ester suddenly appeared beside her, her expression amused. She turned, pressing a hand to her chest. "You startled me."

Ester grinned, her cheeks glowing with happiness, her dark curls loose over her shoulders. "You were staring at Lord Walcott so intently you did not even hear me."

Caroline flushed, her gaze darting back to the ice. Daniel was still standing with Lily, steadying her as she pushed forward on her skates, her delighted giggles echoing across the frozen lake. "I was merely ... surprised to see him," she said carefully.

Ester arched a brow. "Ellie was quite correct in saying there is an attraction between the two of you."

Caroline groaned, turning away. "No. There is not."

"No?" Ester drawled, her blue eyes gleaming and her lips twitching. "Just startled enough to hide in your room all of yesterday and conveniently miss dinner?"

Caroline glared, but her cousin only laughed. Before she could issue a proper retort, Lily spotted them. Her green eyes gleamed as she waved excitedly. “Cousin Caroline! Aunt Ester!”

She darted across the snow, nearly tripping over her own feet in excitement before throwing her arms around Ester’s waist.

Ester laughed, ruffling the child’s curls. “Come, darling. Fanny and Cook have made your favorite cookies.”

Lily gasped. “Chocolate and cinnamon?”

Ester winked. “Only the best.”

Lily whipped around and waved at Daniel. “Thank you, Lord Walcott! I must go now!”

Daniel gave her a slow nod, a faint smile still curving his lips. “Enjoy your sweets, Lady Lily.”

With one last gleeful look, Lily bound toward the house, her boots kicking up soft flurries of snow as she and Ester disappeared inside.

And then—

Caroline was alone with the earl. Daniel had turned, watching her and something in his gaze unraveled her. She forced herself to walk toward him, summoning every bit of composure she possessed, determined to appear calm and unflappable.

Even as her heart pounded wildly in her chest. Caroline barely breathed as she watched him. The cold winter morning felt hushed, as if the world itself had paused,

listening to the secrets they shared. Daniel waited, his posture rigid, yet there was something unguarded about him at this moment. The wind had ruffled his dark hair, the usually neat strands falling over his forehead in a way that made him seem less like an untouchable earl and more like a man at ease with the world. A man who had just spent the morning laughing with a child.

There was a dampness to his hair from the fine mist of snowflakes that had settled on it while they skated, and a single drop clung stubbornly to the sharp edge of his cheekbone before trailing down to his strong jaw.

His cravat was slightly askew, his greatcoat unfastened, revealing a hint of the crisp linen beneath. He was not the polished, coldly distant man she had first met in that little shop on High Holborn.

No.

Here, with the wind teasing his hair and a thoughtful expression softening the usual steel in his eyes, he was ... different.

More approachable. More human.

And she was achingly aware of it. Acutely aware of his closeness, of the faint scent of leather, spice, and winter air that clung to him. Her fingers fluttered slightly, wanting—for one foolish moment—to reach up and smooth back the unruly strands of his hair.

Instead, she curled her hands into her cloak and forced herself to look away, focusing on anything but him. The forest beyond them stretched into the distance, the towering trees blanketed in a thick layer of pristine white, their branches bowing slightly beneath the weight of fresh snowfall.

A few brittle twigs peeked through, their edges dusted with frost, and when the wind stirred, a fine spray of glittering powder cascaded down, the tiny flakes catching the weak morning sunlight. The lake behind them was a glistening sheet of ice, the smooth surface broken only by faint skate marks and the occasional fallen leaf, frozen in place like a relic from autumn.

Everything was still, save for the soft crunch of her boots against the packed snow as she shifted slightly, trying to gather her composure. Daniel's gaze remained on her, and she felt the weight of his scrutiny like a brand on her skin.

She swallowed. "You seem more relaxed."

His brow lifted slightly, as if surprised by the observation.

She cleared her throat. "I meant ... you are not as brooding as you were in London. I saw you a few times at balls and you do not dance or engage in conversation ..."

Oh, I am rambling!

A ghost of a smile touched his mouth, but it did not quite reach his eyes. "That is because London suffocates me."

Something in the way he said it—the quiet certainty of it—made her pause. She understood the feeling. There were days when London suffocated her too. But she did not say so. Instead, she forced herself to step back, creating distance, though the cold that rushed between them felt far less biting than the loss of his warmth.

"Thank you for indulging Lily," she said, her voice softer than she intended.

His gaze flickered with something unreadable. "She is a bright girl."

Caroline smiled. “She is. Though she has the makings of a true terror.”

He huffed a quiet laugh. “All children do, I imagine.”

She hesitated, then said, “You looked ... comfortable with her. You are good with children.”

He stilled again, his expression closing off as quickly as it had opened. She regretted the words almost instantly. “Have I said something wrong, Daniel?”

His gaze flickered over her face, as if measuring something in her expression. Then, after a long moment, he said, “No. I simply do not think of myself as a man who is good with children.”

“That is surprising. You seemed ...” Caroline hesitated. “At ease.”

His mouth twisted slightly, as if the idea amused him. “I generally avoid them.”

“Oh?” She tilted her head. “And why is that?”

He exhaled slowly, his breath a faint mist in the cold air. “I have little in common with children. What reason do I have to converse with those little hellions?”

A laugh burst from her before she could stop it. “Hellions?”

“You have not met many unruly children, have you?” he asked, his eyes gleaming with something warm, teasing.

She thought of the Fairbanks brood—of Lily running through the halls, Simon, Ester, and Ellie’s sons terrorizing the dogs, and Nicholas’s daughter giggling behind closed doors, no doubt plotting some form of mischief.

“Oh, I have,” she admitted, smiling. “Yet ... when I am around them, I feel this longing for my own.”

The words left her before she could stop them, and she sucked in a breath, her eyes widening in horror. Heat crept up her neck, mortification curling in her belly.

Daniel said nothing for a moment, merely watching her, his expression unreadable. Then, after what felt like an eternity, he said, “Perhaps ... they have that power. Children.”

She glanced at him, startled by the rawness in his voice. “Have what power?”

“To make you realize your secret longing. For many years, I dismissed the idea of a wife ... of children,” he continued, his voice quieter now. “I only thought of them in terms of duty . A necessity. Eventually, I would need an heir. But I never ...” He exhaled. “Even recently, I thought life ... can be rather empty. So perhaps it is time I fulfill my responsibilities.”

His gaze drifted toward the ice, his hands clenching slightly at his sides.

“But just now,” he said, voice gruff, “after spending time with Lily, I realized something. A child is not just a duty or an obligation. A child is ... a person. A living, breathing piece of oneself. Someone who would laugh, talk, cry ... rely on me to protect them from the world.”

A slight tremor ran through his voice, though his face remained impassive. “It is terrifying.”

Caroline’s breath caught. Something about the way he said it, the depth of emotion in his otherwise composed demeanor, made her chest tighten. Her eyes snapped to his, but just as quickly, the flicker of vulnerability was gone. His face was once again

cool, distant, unreadable. She suspected he hadn't meant to share so much with her—or perhaps, like her, he had done so because she had unwittingly bared a small piece of herself first. The realization sent a peculiar warmth through her, though she did not dare examine it too closely.

Daniel glanced down at her feet. “You came out to skate,” he noted.

“Yes.”

His gaze flickered back to hers. “Do not let me hold you up.”

She nodded, expecting him to turn and leave, but then his stare lingered—just for a moment—on her mouth before he looked away. An odd flutter started in her stomach, and before she could second-guess herself, the words left her lips. “Perhaps ... you could skate with me.”

He stilled, as if the suggestion had caught him completely off guard. A few beats passed before he turned back toward her. His silver eyes searched hers, and then, to her utter astonishment, he smiled. “Very well.”

Caroline bit the inside of her cheek to keep from beaming like a fool as he strode toward her with the grace of a man who was completely at ease on the ice. She, unfortunately, was not so skilled. The moment she attempted to move forward, her balance wavered, and she let out a startled gasp as her skates slid wildly beneath her. Before she could land in an ungraceful heap, strong hands caught her waist, steadying her.

“You are poor at this,” Daniel observed, his voice laced with amusement.

Caroline huffed a laugh, pushing strands of windblown hair from her face. “I was hoping you wouldn't notice.”

His mouth quirked. “Hard not to when you almost take a tumble two seconds in.”

“I just need a moment to find my rhythm,” she defended, trying to regain her dignity.

His silver eyes glinted with amusement, but he released her and gestured. “Go on, then.”

She took one step forward—and promptly lost her balance again. With a yelped laugh, she toppled backward, arms flailing, bracing for the inevitable cold and bruised pride. But Daniel was there. Once more, his hands found her waist, steady and impossibly warm even through the layers of her pelisse.

“You are determined to fall, aren’t you?” he murmured, his breath fanning against her temple as he effortlessly righted her.

Caroline laughed, feeling the sound bubble from her throat like champagne. “Perhaps I am testing you, my lord.”

His lips twitched. “Testing my patience?”

“Testing your reflexes.”

A low chuckle rumbled from him, rich and deep, and she found herself ridiculously pleased to have drawn that sound from him.

“Come,” he said, his tone softer now. “Let me teach you properly.”

He positioned himself beside her, taking one of her hands in his while his other lightly rested at the small of her back. Caroline gulped. His closeness was wreaking havoc on her heartbeat. They moved forward together, his firm grip guiding her movements, adjusting her posture.

“Bend your knees slightly—yes, just like that. Now, shift your weight onto your right foot ...”

She followed his instruction carefully, biting her lower lip as she wobbled only slightly before gliding forward.

“Yes,” he murmured approvingly, and something about the way his voice dipped sent a curl of heat through her veins.

They continued like that, slow and steady, the movements growing easier, the laughter more frequent whenever she wobbled. More than once, she found herself staring at his mouth, wondering how it would feel pressed against hers again.

Temptation curled within her, unbidden, startlingly strong. She blushed furiously and immediately looked away.

Daniel’s brows lifted, and a wicked smile touched his lips. “I am tempted to ask what wicked thoughts you are having to turn your cheeks apple red.”

Caroline groaned inwardly, cursing her complexion. She scoffed, tossing her hair over her shoulder as if completely unaffected. “It’s the cold.”

His smile deepened, but he did not argue. Instead, he continued guiding her across the smooth expanse of ice, their skates slicing through the surface in effortless glides.

“You are a wonderful skater,” she said after a moment, trying to steer the conversation into safer territory.

“Are you surprised?”

“A little,” she admitted with a teasing smile. “Who taught you?”

His expression shifted, something softer, almost nostalgic flickering across his face.

“My father,” he said simply.

Caroline didn’t miss the way his grip tightened slightly around hers, or the way his gaze drifted somewhere far away for a moment.

She hesitated, then murmured, “You must have been very young.”

His silver eyes returned to hers, something unreadable flickering within them. “I was about seven when he taught me and my brother. I have not skated in years; I am surprised I still remembered how.”

A faint sadness drifted through her chest, but she did not press further. Instead, she tightened her grip on his hand and smiled. “I am fortunate to have such a skilled teacher. Thank you.”

His lips quirked, but he said nothing. The silence between them settled, not uncomfortable, but lingering, as they continued their slow, gliding dance across the ice.

CHAPTER 11

The fire in the drawing room crackled softly, casting a warm, golden glow over the gathered family and friends. Laughter rang through the air, carefree and generous, filling the space with an undeniable sense of joy and ease.

Daniel sat near the hearth, his glass of port untouched in his hand, watching as the evening unfolded around him. The children had long since been tucked into bed, exhausted from a day of skating on the frozen lake. The adults, however, had transformed the drawing room into a lively parlor, where they engaged in charades, riddles, and all manner of games.

Not everyone had stayed for the evening's entertainment.

Phoebe, heavy with child, had retired early with her husband, Gabriel, his protective hand resting against her lower back as he guided her upstairs. Sarah, though not yet showing, had also left for bed, James following after her with a rather salacious wink. Sarah had only laughed, slipping her hand into her husband's as they disappeared down the hallway.

Daniel exhaled slowly, his grip tightening ever so slightly around his glass. Why did everything feel so ... different? Five days had passed since he had arrived in Penporth. Five days of witnessing a world he had never allowed himself to consider.

Happiness. Love. A family's warmth.

He had spent years believing that to have such things meant inviting agony—that the

deeper one loved, the greater the suffering when fate inevitably tore it away.

But now ...

Now, whenever he looked at these people, at their joy, laughter, and their devotion to one another, he felt something unfamiliar settle in his chest.

Envy.

It was strange, to feel this particular ache for the life he observed. Sometimes it felt as if he had fallen beneath deep waters and entered an enchanted world, one filled with possibilities he had never dared to imagine.

His gaze drifted toward Ravenswood and his duchess, seated across the room in a picture of effortless intimacy. Lizzy was laughing at something her husband murmured, her hand resting lightly on his knee. There was no distance between them, no hesitation. The love in Ravenswood's expression—the tender amusement, the possessive warmth—was a thing of wonder.

And Daniel did not understand it.

Because for the first time, he wanted to.

A ripple of feminine laughter drew his attention, and he turned his head, dragging his gaze away from Ravenswood and his duchess.

His breath caught.

Caroline .

She sat near the center of the room, her eyes bright with triumph, her mouth curved in

a delighted smile as she solved the latest charade puzzle with sharp wit and confidence.

By God, she is so damn lovely .

Daniel had always known she was beautiful. But tonight, something about her held him captive—the way her golden curls gleamed in the candlelight, the way her green eyes danced with mirth, the way her laughter wrapped around him, unbidden and inescapable.

A voice drawled behind him, low and amused.

“You are looking at Caroline as if you wish to cart her over your shoulders and take her to your room.”

Daniel smoothed his expression before turning to find Viscount Barlow standing behind his armchair, a smirk playing at his lips as he swirled the dark amber liquid in his glass.

Daniel arched a brow. “I hardly feel anything of the sort,” he replied dryly.

A lie . And his inner voice scoffed at him for it.

Barlow chuckled, clearly unconvinced. “You will soon get used to it,” the viscount murmured, taking a measured sip of his port. “When I fell in love with my darling Emma, I never thought I could end the loneliness that haunted my soul.”

Daniel stiffened, the words striking something deep within him. Was he so transparent that Barlow could see the emptiness inside him?

He glanced away, his gaze falling once more on Caroline, who was now blushing at

something Ester had whispered in her ear.

Loneliness.

Daniel had worn it like a second skin for so long that he had never once considered the possibility of anything else.

Not until now.

Not until he had seen how content, powerful, and influential men—men he had long respected—had allowed themselves to love freely, without fear. None of them bore the haunted look of a man who dreaded loss. None seemed burdened by the thought that loving deeply meant inviting inevitable pain and grief.

Colin, James, Richard, Rannulf, Lucien, Edmond, Shrewsbury, David and Nicholas—all the men in this room, men who had once been rakes, rogues, and hardened bachelors, now gazed at their wives with something close to reverence.

As if they worshiped the ground they walked upon.

As if they knew, without hesitation or doubt, that their love was worth every risk.

They did not hold themselves rigid with restraint. They did not glance over their shoulders, haunted by what-ifs or maybes.

They lived. Fully. Fearlessly. In the present.

He dragged his thoughts to present times when Penny clapped her hands, her smile mischievous and bright. “Attention, everyone! The treasure hunt will officially begin!”

Daniel lifted a brow, glancing around the room. Treasure hunt?

“We are to have a treasure hunt?” Poppy gasped, glancing up at Richard Fairbanks with a wide smile.

“Oh yes,” Ester chimed in, grinning as she walked over to her sister. “We have written a series of clues in the form of poetry. Every poem is different, but they will all lead to the same place—if one is clever enough to figure them out.”

“Since Penny, Emma, and I devised the riddles,” Ester continued, “we shall act as hostesses to ensure no one cheats.”

“Oh, I love treasure hunts!”

Caroline’s delighted exclamation drew Daniel’s attention at once. She was practically vibrating with excitement, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. Daniel smiled despite himself. There was something utterly endearing about her enthusiasm, the sheer unapologetic joy she exuded.

“You mean you love presents,” Hermina teased, laughing.

Caroline arched a brow, undeterred. “Please say there is a present at the end of the hunt. If not, I shall retire to my bedchamber with a book.”

Laughter rang through the room, rippling with amusement.

“Can we help each other?” Poppy asked, her voice conspiratorial. “Because I would gladly form a team with Caroline and Richard.”

“No,” Emma and Ester said firmly, speaking in perfect unison.

Daniel's frown deepened. The sisters had shared a look, one so conspiratorial that it immediately roused his suspicion. He wasn't the only one who noticed.

Rannulf, standing near the fireplace, snorted softly, shaking his head as he leaned into Lizzy's ear. Penny looked far too pleased with herself, and Ester had the audacity to smirk at Caroline before winking.

They were up to something.

And Daniel had a very strong suspicion that it involved Miss Caroline Fairbanks.

Had they all schemed to ensure she won the prize? Or worse ... Did the prize involve him? He did not miss the considering look Emma turned his way before she looked away. An icy sensation wormed its way through his chest.

"Come up and pluck a piece of paper from the hat," Emma invited, holding out a black silk hat filled with neatly folded slips.

Caroline rushed forward, selecting a slip with eager fingers.

Daniel waited, watching as the others picked their riddles one by one. When the line thinned, he started toward the hat—only to pause mid-step. Penny had discreetly dropped another piece of paper inside.

His eyes narrowed.

Had she planned for him to get that particular one? When he reached inside, there was only one slip left.

Of course.

With a slow exhale, he unfolded the paper, his gaze dropping to the elegant script.

The Riddle:

When daylight fades and moonlight gleams,

A secret stirs where warmth still beams.

Among the blooms both bright and rare,

A treasure waits in fragrant air.

Seek the hush where petals sigh,

Beneath the stars and winter sky.

Daniel's brow lifted. He glanced toward Penny, Ester, and Emma, who were huddled together in whispered amusement. Then he looked toward Caroline, who was grinning as she read her own clue, completely unaware of the intrigue surrounding her.

Slowly, a smile tugged at his lips.

Very well.

If the ladies of Fairbanks Manor wanted a game, they would have one.

And Daniel intended to win.

CHAPTER 12

Caroline hurried through the dimly lit corridor, her heart thrumming with anticipation as she clutched the riddle in her hand.

A secret waits where few may go.

Amidst the books both old and wise,

A treasure hides from prying eyes.

Seek the whispers, soft and low,

Where midnight oil dares to glow.

It had to be the library. She glanced around and noted that other couples were splitting off in different directions, each eagerly following their own cryptic clues. Her gaze involuntarily flicked to Daniel, who strode the opposite way, disappearing down another hallway without a single glance in her direction.

Caroline wrenched her thoughts away from him with sheer force of will. She was already irritated enough that for the past two nights, she had relived their kiss in her dreams—a kiss he did not seem remotely affected by.

If anything, he had been completely indifferent since that night. Since their conversation out in the snow, they had not spoken privately again. They had only interacted in the presence of her cousins and their husbands, and though there were

times when she felt his gaze settle on her, whenever she sneaked a peek, his expression was unreadable, his eyes guarded.

She despised how aware she had become of his every movement, how much she longed to know what he was thinking when his gaze lingered. And yet, tonight was not the night to dwell on a man who had made his stance perfectly clear.

The library doors loomed ahead. Pushing them open, she stepped inside. The warm scent of parchment and polished wood enveloped her as she entered. The space was vast, with towering shelves of leather-bound tomes, their gilded spines glinting in the soft candlelight.

A large stone fireplace stood at the far end of the room, its embers glowing a dull orange, casting flickering shadows along the Persian rug that stretched beneath her feet.

Plush armchairs were scattered near the hearth, along with a mahogany desk cluttered with quills and inkwells, remnants of whatever correspondence had last been penned here. The fire crackled softly, the only sound space, making the room feel both intimate and secretive.

Caroline inhaled deeply, steadying herself. She set to work, her fingers gliding along the cool wood of the desk, tugging open drawers and rifling through old letters and ledgers. Nothing. Frowning, she moved to the bookshelves, trailing her fingers across their worn leather bindings, searching for any irregularities.

One shelf caught her attention. A single piece of paper, tucked between the books, barely visible in the dim lighting. Caroline plucked it free and unfolded it, her breath catching in her throat as she read:

If you wish to escape the tedium of life and experience a bit of wickedness, walk to

the bookshelf and look between the pages of Persuasion . If you want only to win a gift, open the pages of Northanger Abbey .

Caroline froze. The words blurred before her eyes as she recalled the mischievous smiles from her cousins throughout the day. They had planned this treasure hunt seemingly just for her. Caroline's lips parted, torn between exasperation and intrigue.

Of course, they had schemed to put her in such a position.

To tempt her.

To see if she would take a risk ... or stay safely on the path of propriety. Her fingers curled around the note, her mind warring with itself. A conversation she had long tucked away rose in her mind, unbidden. It had been months ago, during the height of the season, at a ball brimming with laughter and champagne.

She had slipped out to the terrace for air, where the night stretched cool and endless before her. Ester had found her there, a knowing look in her eyes.

“ You seem so sad ,” her cousin had murmured, linking their arms together.

Caroline had forced a laugh, brushing aside her concern. “ I am fine .”

Ester had studied her carefully before sighing. “ You are not .”

Caroline hesitated, then confessed quietly, “ It has been over five years since I received your letter inviting mama, Samuel, and me to town. Temperance and Eliza were still in the schoolroom and did not come with us. I was so happy to leave Cranston behind, though I know I would miss my sisters dearly .” She swallowed, staring out at the glittering ballroom. “ I confess, dear Ester, I have found no happiness in town. Only offers to become a soiled dove and whispers that I do not

belong .”

Her throat had tightened. “ I am five and twenty, firmly on the shelf, with no adventures to boast of to my sisters whenever I return home. From the stories I tell them, dear Eliza has even bemoaned that London seems just as tedious as Cranston and she cannot imagine why mama wishes for them to visit once they are of age .”

She had turned to Ester then, a wistful longing gripping her chest. “ Sometimes ... I wish I could be a bit daring and wicked like you and Lizzy .”

Caroline swallowed hard. Her own words came back to haunt her as she stood before the bookshelf, her fingers hovering over Northanger Abbey.

She should pick it up. She should take the safe route, claim her gift, and put an end to whatever mischief her cousins had plotted.

But something plucked at her heart.

A whisper of longing.

A quiet, treacherous voice inside her that asked, why not ?

Why not be daring, just this once?

Why not take the path of wickedness—just to see where it led?

Her hand lowered. Caroline turned, stepping toward Persuasion instead. She hesitated only a breath before slipping it from the shelf and opening its pages. A second poem lay nestled within, and as she unfolded it, she read:

Where warmth lingers despite the frost,

Where petals bloom though all seems lost.

Find the place where glass meets light,

Where winter's chill stays soft and bright.

Her pulse kicked up. The conservatory. Caroline closed the book with a quiet thud, pressing her palm against the worn leather cover. She was walking into her cousins' mischief—of that, she had no doubt.

And yet ...

Something inside her thrilled at the possibility of something exciting. With her heart pounding—whether from nerves or excitement, she could not say—Caroline turned on her heel and headed outside for the conservatory. The night air wrapped around her as Caroline hurried through the snow-dusted gardens, her boots crunching softly against the frost-covered pathway. The cold nipped at her cheeks, a stark contrast to the warmth that coiled low in her belly as she clutched the poem in her hand.

She had chosen wickedness.

The thought sent a peculiar thrill through her veins, though she was still uncertain what sort of wickedness her cousins had arranged for her. The conservatory loomed ahead, its glass walls glistening beneath the silver moonlight. Even from outside, she could see the faint glow of lanterns within, casting a soft golden hue over the flora inside. She slipped through the arched doorway, her breath catching at the sudden warmth that enveloped her.

The scent of roses and citrus blossoms lingered in the air, mingling with the crisp fragrance of pine from the towering fir trees that lined one side of the glass walls. Moisture clung to the leaves, giving them a dewy sheen.

No one was here.

Caroline exhaled slowly, glancing around. Where did one even begin searching for a clue in a place so vast? She stepped forward cautiously, her skirts whispering against the stone floor, her ears straining for any sound of movement.

A sudden noise startled her. She spun instinctively, her pulse hammering, and hurried toward it—only to skid to a startled halt as a tall figure emerged from behind a large fir tree.

Daniel .

Her breath hitched as she took in the unexpected sight of him, his dark coat blending almost seamlessly into the shadows, the dim lanterns casting a golden glow on his sharp, aristocratic features.

He looked just as surprised to see her. They stared at each other, caught in a moment of unguarded silence. Then, before she could stop herself, she murmured, “Good heavens ... Do they mean for the earl to be my slice of wickedness?”

The words escaped before she could swallow them back, and the moment they did, a nervous laugh bubbled up her throat.

Daniel did not smile.

Instead, he watched her far too closely, his sharp gaze raking over her face, over the telltale flush she could feel creeping up her neck.

“You are blushing,” he said at last, his voice low, unreadable.

Caroline’s eyes widened. “I—” She straightened, lifting her chin. “I doubt you can

see me clearly in the low light.”

A soft sound came from him, something between amusement and disbelief.

He stepped forward and stopped before Caroline. The air between them shifted, thickened with something tangible, something unspoken. Without warning, he lifted his hand, his fingers brushing lightly, deliberately along her temple before he tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear.

The touch burned.

Her breath caught in her throat, her entire body locked in place at the intimate caress.

“You are standing beneath mistletoe sprigs,” he murmured.

Her heart pounded violently.

Caroline tipped her head back, her gaze catching on the dozens of sprigs tied carefully to the arching vines above them, dangling temptingly in the lamplight.

A shaky laugh escaped her. “Well,” she said, voice breathless, “it seems there is no escape from them once inside the conservatory.”

Daniel’s gaze remained steady on her, unreadable.

“I see,” he murmured.

Something in his tone changed, shifting to something colder, sharper.

“It is astonishing that your cousins would gamble with your reputation.”

The words struck her like ice, cooling the heat that had begun to spread through her chest. Caroline snapped her gaze back to him, startled by the edge in his voice.

“You—” Her voice faltered. “You are aware they pushed us together?”

A noncommittal sound left him, but his expression had closed off, his eyes dark and guarded. A slow, terrible realization curled through her.

He thinks this was planned .

That she had been placed here deliberately to be compromised. That her cousins had set a trap for him. Caroline’s stomach dropped. Her fingers clenched into fists at her sides, her chest tightening with disbelief and—oddly—hurt.

She had chosen Persuasion , had chosen wickedness, but she had not expected to be so wholly misinterpreted.

How dare he assume she—

No .

She took a slow breath, tamping down the prickle of offense rising in her throat. “I assure you,” she said, voice quiet but firm, “this was not my design.”

His jaw flexed, as if weighing whether to believe her.

And Caroline had the distinct impression that, for some reason, Daniel very much wanted to believe she was as calculating as he feared.

Somehow, it mattered.

It mattered too much that he would think so poorly of her.

Caroline lifted her chin, forcing herself not to shrink under his gaze, not to let the indignation rising in her chest turn into something more vulnerable, more revealing.

“Even if King George himself were to barge in and find us standing together,” she said coolly, “he could not force me to marry you.”

A slow, deliberate smile touched Daniel’s lips, though there was no warmth in it, only a flicker of something dangerously amused.

“A woman with little prospect as yourself,” he murmured, “would jump at the chance to marry an earl.”

She gasped. The sheer arrogance, the utter presumption of the man! Her hands clenched at her sides, and before she could think better of it, she snapped, “I would never marry a man I did not love.”

His brow lifted slightly, as if intrigued by her vehemence.

“Worse,” she continued, her voice low, fierce, “I would never marry a man who did not love me. Even if I were compromised.”

Caroline exhaled sharply, feeling the rush of heat in her cheeks, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. “My reputation should tell you that, my lord.”

Daniel’s expression shifted, just slightly. He studied her for a long, drawn-out moment, his gaze searching, unreadable. Then, at last, he murmured, “You refer to the scandal of you slapping the viscount with your parasol in Hyde Park.”

Caroline tilted her chin, unwilling to show even a flicker of shame. “Yes.”

“I heard it was quite the scandal of the season,” he said mildly.

She laughed softly, though there was no humor in it. “It was.”

Caroline hadn’t meant to lay bare the truth to him of all people. But there was something about Daniel that compelled honesty—or perhaps it was simply that he had already formed his judgment, and she refused to let him keep it unchallenged.

“He acted as if he was courting me,” she said, her voice quieter now, more measured. “But on the ride out in his phaeton—which he invited me to under the guise of a simple drive—he offered to put me up in a townhouse.”

She saw something shift in Daniel’s gaze, but she pressed on.

“He said that if I agreed to be his mistress, he would see to it that I was comfortable ... and should I find myself with child, he would provide for us.”

Her stomach clenched at the memory. She could still hear the silky confidence in the viscount’s voice, still feel the shock of disbelief and disgust that had curled through her at his proposition.

“The blackguard then tried to quickly steal a kiss,” she said, her voice tight with remembered fury. “So I slapped him with my parasol.”

Daniel’s eyes remained on her, unreadable, but his shoulders tensed slightly.

“Then I walked away,” she finished.

His expression did not change, but something in his stance shifted, as if a tension he had not even realized he held loosened just a fraction.

“He is a bounder,” Daniel said softly, his voice devoid of mockery now.

Caroline swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Yes, he was.”

The viscount was not the first to make such an indecent offer, but he had been the first she had trusted enough to believe he intended marriage.

And that had been her mistake.

Daniel exhaled, his gaze lifting momentarily toward the ceiling, where dozens of mistletoe sprigs swayed gently in the warm air.

“If not to compromise me,” he said at last, his voice more thoughtful, “then what did your cousins intend?”

Caroline blushed furiously. She cleared her throat, suddenly far too aware of how very alone they were, of how intimate the space felt beneath the glass ceiling, where the world outside was cold and stark, but inside, it was lush and warm.

She had chosen Persuasion , after all. And now she was here, face to face with the very man who had been haunting her dreams for nights on end. “I believe ...” she hesitated, her voice faltering.

Daniel lifted a brow, waiting.

Caroline forced herself to meet his gaze, even as heat crept up her throat, past her collar, into her cheeks.

“I believe they meant for me to be ...” She swallowed. “... a little bit wicked.”

His lips parted, his gaze sharpening, as if the words unraveled something unexpected

inside of him. And for the first time since entering the conservatory, Caroline truly wondered what she had just invited upon herself.

CHAPTER 13

A little bit wicked.

The words slammed into Daniel. Heat licked through his veins, stirring a dangerous hunger. His gaze dropped to her lips, those soft, plush curves that had haunted him since the moment he'd kissed her. The memory of that stolen moment had been living with him, burrowing under his skin, tempting him with the idea of seeking more.

"They want you to be a little bit wicked," he murmured, his voice rougher than he intended.

Her green eyes flickered with uncertainty, her throat working in a delicate swallow.

"Presumably ... with me," he continued, arching a brow. "Since they also led me here."

"Yes," she said, barely above a whisper, blushing furiously.

His chuckle was low, teasing. "And yet they are not planning a compromising trap?"

A spark of fury lit in her gaze. "Yes," she snapped.

Then, without another word, she whirled and marched away, her skirts swishing furiously around her legs. Daniel was tempted to stop her, to catch her by the wrist and pull her back—just to see the way her cheeks would flush with outrage. Instead, he watched her, fascinated, as she stormed toward the door, grabbed the handle,

and—

A gasp.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Let me guess,” he drawled, strolling leisurely toward her. “It’s locked.”

Caroline spun to face him, hand pressed against her chest, her eyes wide with alarm. “I promise you, this is not a trap.”

Her voice was breathless, almost defensive. Daniel stopped mere inches from her, close enough that he could see the frantic rise and fall of her breathing.

She exhaled sharply, as if trying to compose herself. “We are the bad Fairbanks, Lord Walcott. All of my cousins were quite wicked before marriage, with no expectations of ever being married.”

That startled him.

She cleared her throat, hesitated, then lifted her chin.

“It was only by chance,” she murmured, “that they all ... found love.”

Daniel stilled, something flickering in his chest at her soft, wistful tone.

“Even Lizzy,” she continued, “was Ravenswood’s lover long before they wed.”

The revelation rocked him back on his heels. Ravenswood. A duke—one of the most respected, powerful men he knew—had taken a Fairbanks as a mistress ?

And then married her? Daniel had heard countless whispers about the Fairbanks, but

he had never truly considered what it meant. Naughty, reckless, improper—he had assumed it was a scandalous nickname given to a boisterous family.

But now, standing before one of them, he understood.

They did not bow to society's rules. They lived by their own.

And suddenly ... he found himself wanting to know more. Heat pooled in his belly, a sharp tug of temptation tightening inside him. Before he even registered the thought, his hands shot out, catching her hips in a firm grip and hauling her against him.

A small gasp left her lips, but Caroline didn't push away. Instead, she went still, stunned, pressed lush and soft against him.

God help him, she fit perfectly.

He felt the curve of her waist, the subtle press of her breasts against his chest, and lower—the cradle of her hips flush against his thighs.

His heart pounded. The conservatory was warm, humid, scented with roses and pine, but nothing compared to the heat of her body against his. Every nerve in him stood on edge, fiercely aware of how she felt, how she smelled, even the delicate hitch in her breathing.

Dangerous. Caroline Fairbanks is entirely too dangerous.

She lifted her head, and he saw uncertainty flicker in her eyes.

“Do you understand,” she said, “that I would never allow anyone to force me to marry against my will?”

Daniel smiled slowly, liking the fire in her gaze, the defiance in her voice.

His grip tightened, his thumbs stroking small, absent circles along her curves. “Yes,” he murmured. “Do you understand the same about me?”

“I understand,” she whispered.

A thick silence stretched between them, charged, breathless.

Then, recklessly, he murmured, “Do you wish to be wicked with me?”

A tremor ran through her.

Her gaze dipped to Daniel’s mouth. That small action sent a bolt of raw awareness through him, as if she had already kissed him. As if her lips were already pressed against his.

Daniel inhaled sharply, his fingers tensing on her hips.

Damnation. What would she say? Would she choose wickedness? Or would she run?

Her lips parted slightly, her breath soft and uneven, as if she were on the verge of bolting. But then ...

She lifted her chin, her green eyes gleaming with something dangerously tempting, and her hands slipped around his nape, her touch hesitant at first, then bolder.

“Wickedness,” she whispered, her voice a breath of sin and silk.

Then she kissed him.

It was a whisper of warmth at first, tentative, almost questioning. Then he felt her sigh against his lips, as if surrendering to something inevitable, and just like that, the ground beneath him vanished. A groan dragged from his throat as his hands came up, spanning her waist, tugging her closer, molding her against him. His fingers flexed over the soft curves of her hips, the layers of her gown suddenly an unbearable nuisance.

Her lips parted beneath his, and the slow, aching slide of his tongue against hers sent a jolt of desire through his veins. She tasted like warm honey and winter spices, and he was drowning in her. Daniel slanted his mouth over hers, deepening the kiss, plundering, demanding, savoring. A small, breathless noise escaped her, something between a sigh and a moan, and it undid him completely.

His hand traveled up the curve of her back, settling between her shoulder blades, anchoring her as he devoured her mouth. She met him stroke for stroke, her fingers threading through his hair, tightening, nails grazing his scalp.

Heat coiled low in his belly, sharp and insistent, fanning out in waves.

God, she felt so soft, so perfect, pressed against him.

The kiss deepened, their breaths mingling, her body molding to his in a way that made his mind go utterly blank. He could feel the faint, wild hammering of her heart against his chest, matching his own frantic rhythm.

Outside, the cold night air whispered against their skin, the scent of pine and roses from the conservatory surrounding them. Snowflakes drifted lazily against the glass panes, but he was only aware of her warmth, the way she clung to him, the way she gave as much as she took.

Time blurred.

He had no idea how long they kissed.

A minute? Ten? A lifetime?

All he knew was that he did not want to stop. But Caroline was the one who finally broke the spell. She tore her mouth from his, her breath ragged, her cheeks flushed. Her lips—rosy and kiss-swollen—trembled slightly, as if she, too, felt the undeniable shift between them.

Daniel rested his forehead against hers, his breath unsteady, his grip still firm at her waist, unwilling to let go just yet.

“I want you,” he murmured against her lips, his voice rough with need, “too damn much.”

She laughed softly, a breathless sound, her fingers still tangled in his hair. “I should be incensed, but I have never been dishonest, even with myself,” she whispered. “I want you too.”

Daniel exhaled sharply, his body still burning, still craving.

And God help him ...

He wanted more. Even as he knew it was dangerous, for a woman like Caroline deserved more than he was willing to give.

Just a little more ...

Caroline barely recognized the thought, lost beneath the sensual haze of Daniel’s spell. Her fingers tightened in his thick, silken hair, urging him closer. That was all the encouragement he needed. His mouth once again crashed against hers, hot and

demanding, devouring. His tongue swept inside, tasting her, learning her, making her shiver from the sheer possession of it.

A soft moan escaped her lips, swallowed greedily by his kiss. She had never known kissing could feel this devastating, this deep, this utterly consuming. The world tilted, and a hazy moment later, Caroline found herself sinking into the chaise, her back pressed against the plush upholstery, her skirts of her winter gown fanned about her thighs.

Heat. Strength. His scent.

Daniel loomed over her, his powerful body caging her in, enclosing her in warmth, hunger, and the dark gleam of his silver eyes. She should have been frightened—should have felt overwhelmed by the sheer force of him—but all she felt was need.

His lips brushed hers again—a coaxing temptation, lighter than before, before he trailed kisses down her throat. A pleasurable shudder racked her as he nipped at the sensitive skin, then soothed the spot with his tongue.

His hands moved, skimming along her stocking-clad calves, making her gasp.

Then higher ...

Caroline's fingers curled against his shoulders as he tugged at the garter, playfully snapping it against her skin. She gasped, her head falling back against the chaise as something hotter than embarrassment twisted inside her.

“You’re trembling,” he murmured against her throat, his breath warm, teasing.

“I—I ...”

He pressed a soft kiss just beneath her ear, sending another shiver dancing over her flesh.

“Tell me to stop,” Daniel whispered, his fingers now skimming beneath her bloomers, tracing the delicate skin of her thighs.

Caroline couldn't. Instead, she arched into him, helpless against the fire curling in her belly. His fingers slid under the thin linen, parting it, his palm warm as he cupped her sex intimately.

She stilled, her breath catching in sweet, startled shock. A new ache unfurled, deep, insistent, blinding in its intensity. His thumb grazed her curls, then lower, slipping through the damp heat of her most intimate place.

“Daniel,” she whimpered, barely recognizing her own voice.

A wicked groan vibrated against her skin. “God, Caroline ... you're so wet.”

A helpless moan escaped her lips, her lashes fluttering closed. His fingers teased, explored, learned, sliding over that exquisitely sensitive part of her with slow, exacting precision. A pulse of liquid pleasure rippled through her as he circled her aching nub again and again, sending sharp spikes of need down to the tips of her toes.

“You are so beautiful like this,” he rasped against her throat. “So soft ... so responsive.”

And then he slipped a finger inside her. Her back bowed, her breath leaving her in a shocked cry.

“Easy,” he soothed, pressing a kiss to her parted lips.

His touch slowed, then stroked deep, stretching her, filling her. Pleasure clawed up her spine, and she gasped again, gripping his coat as if she might drown. Then he added another finger, stretching her more, pressing into the silk and heat of her with deep, lazy thrusts.

A sharp, startled cry left her lips as something new and powerful coiled deep in her belly.

“That’s it,” Daniel murmured carnally. “Let me feel you fall apart.”

His thumb found the bundle of nerves, stroking in slow, precise circles. Pleasure built higher and higher, tightening inside her, and she whimpered, arching desperately as her body burned, climbed, shattered—

And then she broke.

A sharp cry left her throat as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her, sweeping her away in wicked, blinding sensation. Daniel groaned, watching her fall apart, his fingers still teasing her through the aftershocks. She trembled beneath him, boneless, dazed, her chest rising and falling in ragged pants.

And before Caroline could even gather her scattered wits, he dipped his head and replaced his fingers with his mouth.

A helpless cry tore from her lips. “Daniel, I—”

He groaned against her, the vibration sending a shocking jolt of raw pleasure through her.

His tongue swept through her slick folds, tasting, savoring, as if she were his most decadent indulgence. Caroline twisted, helpless, trying to close her legs, but he spread

her wider, holding her open to his mouth, his fingers biting into her hips as he licked her in deep, aching strokes.

Another wave of pleasure built, faster, hotter, sharper than before. He suckled that sensitive peak, tortured her with his tongue, and she splintered again, her world unraveling in shuddering, breathless pleasure. She barely had time to recover before he drove her into another peak, his mouth relentless, his hands holding her in place as he pleased her like a man starved.

Her body climbed higher, faster, shattered again, and her cry echoed in the glass conservatory. Only then did Daniel pull away, his breath ragged, his chest heaving. Caroline lay trembling, spent, her limbs feeling liquid and weightless. His eyes were dark silver, burning with desire as he stared down at her.

Then with a rough, agonized groan, he tore himself away and rasped, “Go.”

She blinked, still dazed from the pleasure, not comprehending.

“Now, Caroline.” His voice was hoarse, filled with a need he was barely controlling.

Something in his gaze sent a shiver down her spine—a warning. He was at the edge of his restraint. Her breath still ragged, her body still shaking, she forced herself upright, smoothing her skirts with unsteady hands. A last lingering look at him—a shadowed figure, his jaw clenched, his hands fisted, his body taut with hunger—and she turned, hurrying away.

The conservatory door was miraculously unlocked this time, and she fled into the night, through the cold, through the empty, silent house, and into her chamber. Once inside, she shut the door, locked it, and pressed a hand to her still-pounding heart.

She removed her coat and gown with trembling fingers, slipping beneath the

coverlets, still burning, aching, reeling. Her fingers hovered over her kiss-swollen lips, remembering the taste of him, the feel of his mouth on hers, the wickedness they had indulged in.

And she knew, with bone-deep certainty—this would not be the last time.

CHAPTER 14

The sound of splintering wood and twisting metal echoed in his skull. “ Daniel! ”

His sister’s scream ripped through the night, piercing through the roar of the storm, the violent crashing of the carriage snapping apart, the icy plunge into the water.

They were drowning. They were all drowning. And he could only save one. Daniel jerked upright, his breath coming in harsh, ragged gasps. Darkness pressed in around him, the sheets damp beneath him from sweat, the echoes of the past still roaring in his ears. His hands were clenched so tight his knuckles ached, and the room felt too small, too suffocating.

Dragging in a shuddering breath, he scrubbed a hand down his face, swallowing the bitter taste of old fear. It had been sixteen years since that night.

Yet on this night, every year, his mind dragged him back into the wreckage.

Slowly, he exhaled, pressing his palms into the mattress, grounding himself in the present. It was not a stormy night. There was no snow howling in the wind, no ice waiting to drag him under. The manor was quiet, warm, alive with laughter only hours before.

With a sigh, Daniel swung his legs over the edge of the bed and pushed himself to his feet. His body felt weighted, exhaustion pressing into his muscles, but he knew sleep would not come again tonight. He padded over to the window, pushing back the thick drapes. Moonlight spilled into the room, illuminating the frost-kissed grounds below.

The stars were brilliant, scattered like silver dust across the velvet black sky.

Christmas Eve.

The anniversary of their deaths. His mother. His father. His brother. The night his entire world had shattered. Daniel sighed, pressing his forehead against the cool glass.

For years, he had avoided this night, avoided Christmas itself, unwilling to let himself dwell on the memories, unwilling to let himself feel.

Yet now, something unexpected stirred inside him.

“It is a family belief that our loved ones become stars when they leave us.”

A wry chuckle escaped his lips. Whimsical nonsense, but ...

His eyes traced the shimmering constellations, and he let himself wonder, for the first time, if maybe—just maybe—somewhere up there, his mother still smiled. His father still watched over him. His brother still stood beside him.

The thought was foolish.

Yet ...

Yet he liked it.

Daniel turned from the window and reached for his clothes. He dressed swiftly, tugging on his boots and his winter coat. The house was silent as he stepped into the hallway, his footfalls muffled by the thick carpet.

He needed air and he needed something more than memories and ghosts. Daniel descended the staircase, barely paying mind to the festive garlands still strung along the banisters and stepped outside into the cold night. The world was quiet beneath the weight of the snow. The air was crisp, the wind light, carrying the scent of pine and frost.

His feet carried him without thought, away from the house, toward the great oak tree at the back of the property. He found himself climbing without hesitation, gripping the rough bark, pulling himself higher. It was easier than he expected, as if his body already knew the path.

When he reached the branch where they had sat before, he stilled, exhaling a breath that clouded in the frigid air.

From here, the world felt different.

Smaller. Quieter.

He leaned back against the trunk, tilting his head toward the sky.

The stars were still there. He imagined his mother's soft hands brushing through his hair, the way she always did when he was a boy. He thought of his father's steady voice guiding him as they skated on the frozen pond, his brother's laughter as they raced across the ice.

He could almost hear them.

Almost.

A knot tightened in his chest, but for once, it was not just grief. There was something else there too. Something that had not been there before.

Caroline . Daniel's lips twitched into a small, wry smile, though he hardly knew why. She had been avoiding him since that night in the conservatory, and he had let her. Because he wasn't ready to face what had happened either. He had never wanted a woman the way he wanted her. Not just in body—but in ways he did not understand.

Tonight, he had watched her at the unexpected bonfire Colin had built outside, her face illuminated by the golden glow of the flames against the endless stretch of snow-covered fields. The heat of the fire had thrown flickering shadows across the pristine landscape, making it feel like something out of a dream, a scene carved from an untouched winter paradise.

The scent of burning wood and the faintest hint of pine drifted on the cold night air, mingling with the sounds of mirth and music from inside the house.

And there she had been.

Laughing, her eyes bright with excitement, her cheeks flushed from the cold and her lips curved in a way that tugged at something deep inside him. She had been wrapped in a red cloak, her golden hair escaping in loose tendrils from beneath her hood. And for one reckless moment, Daniel had wanted nothing more than to walk over, drag her into his arms, and kiss her senseless beneath the stars.

But he had stayed where he was, a silent observer to the warmth and joy she so easily brought to the world around her. And he had felt it then—the sharp ache of longing, the sudden weight of loneliness, pressing in more than ever before.

A couple of nights ago in the conservatory, it had cost him everything not to take her. He had wrestled with his desire, reining in the wicked hunger clawing inside him. He had refused to go further when he knew he could offer her nothing.

But, God ... he had wanted her.

Even now, his gut burned with the ache of unfulfilled need, a hunger that refused to fade.

He could still feel her fingertips ghosting over his jaw, a sensation seared into his skin, like a lingering brand. He could still taste her pussy on his tongue, a wicked torment that made his body tense with memory. He could still feel the tightness of her body around his fingers, the soft gasps and helpless cries that had torn from her throat as she came undone in his hands.

Daniel raked his fingers through his hair, muttering a silent curse. Why the hell was he allowing that sensual memory to rattle him so?

Exhaling sharply, he closed his eyes.

A little bit wicked .

That was what she had whispered so achingly against his lips, right before she had kissed him. Before she had surrendered herself so sweetly to his touch. He tipped his head back and stared up at the velvet stretch of night, where thousands of stars gleamed in icy brilliance. “I have met someone, Mother,” he murmured.

His lips twitched into a half-smile as he imagined her reaction. “If there is any possibility that you are listening, you must be wondering why it took me so long to talk to you.”

His smile faded slightly as he considered the thought. “A part of me thinks it is whimsical nonsense, but ...” Daniel’s chest tightened with something foreign. “The person I met ... she believes it. And damn if I understand why, but her belief makes it easier for me to believe too.”

He let out a rough chuckle, one that held no humor, just a vague sense of

bemusement. “Her name is Caroline Fairbanks ... and she is unexpected .”

Daniel did not like the restless sensations coursing through him one bit. They felt foreign—unfamiliar, something he could not control.

This was not him.

He exhaled a long breath, shoving a hand into his coat pocket as if to anchor himself. “I am not sure what to make of her or why I like her so much,” he admitted. “She is beautiful, yes. But more than that ... she is charming and witty. Generous. Loving to her family. She spent today visiting people in the village, taking baskets of food. And she was ... incredible. She spoke to everyone so naturally, made them feel at ease, as if she belonged among them. As if she had always been there.”

He clenched his jaw, recalling how effortlessly she spread warmth wherever she went.

“I do not think she would be a suitable countess,” he said, his voice quieter now. “Nor do I believe she meets any of the expectations you had for me. I still recall you had already picked my bride when I was merely twelve. Lady Roslyn Ashman was your choice. You would be pleased to know she is unwed.”

Daniel let the silence settle around him, staring at the endless sky. “I do not think—”

A rustle came from above him, followed by a soft, hesitant voice.

“I did not intentionally eavesdrop ... forgive me.”

Daniel stiffened, his body going taut at the unexpected sound of her voice. He lifted his head sharply and found her perched a few branches higher than him, her figure silhouetted against the night sky, moonlight casting a soft glow over her wind-swept

hair. He heard the throb of emotions in her tone, that slight hurt and thought of what he had just said.

Had she heard everything?

“You went higher tonight,” he said, his voice low and deliberately unreadable.

Caroline shifted, the branch beneath her giving a soft creak. “I—I had the urge to speak to my papa too,” she said quickly, her voice unsteady. “And when I saw you come up ... I only meant to remain still until you left.”

Daniel let the silence stretch between them, the weight of unspoken truths pressing in. “Because you’ve been avoiding me,” he murmured.

A slight pause. Then, softly, she admitted, “I have been running.”

“Running from what?”

“From the reckless need pushing me toward you ... because I knew it would not lead anywhere.”

His throat worked on a tight swallow. Daniel had expected her to avoid the truth, to brush him off with laughter or sharp wit. Instead, she had given him honesty.

It wrecked him.

“I like you too, Daniel,” she said with a light laugh. “I am not afraid to admit it.”

His heart lurched in his chest—a sensation so foreign, so startling that it knocked the breath from his lungs. He turned his gaze upward, staring at the vast stretch of stars, his mind a tangled mess of emotions he wasn’t ready to name.

Silence stretched between them, thick and potent, as if they had both stumbled too close to something raw and dangerous.

Then, softly, she said, “Tonight must be incredibly hard for you. Do you wish to speak about it?”

A shuddering breath left him, the frigid air burning his lungs. He never spoke about it. Never let anyone close enough to know.

Yet, tonight, the words came anyway.

“I had the chance to save my mother,” he said hoarsely, the memory slamming into him like a fist. “I swam toward her ... but then, she looked past me. Over my shoulder.”

He swallowed, his throat raw.

“She was looking at the current pulling my sister away.”

He saw it now, clear as the stars above them. The terror in his mother’s eyes, the sudden shift of emotion when she realized Daniel had a choice.

“I stopped going to her,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “I turned away and shouted that I would save Catherine. I was the strongest swimmer. I knew I could reach her.”

His fingers clenched against the bark, his nails digging into the rough surface as the memory ripped through him like a blade.

“And my mother ... she was relieved. I saw it in her eyes. She smiled, just for a moment. Then I dove after my sister. Every time I thought I wouldn’t make it, I

remembered that look in my mother's eyes. That belief she had in me. And I dragged Catherine to the riverbank."

Daniel inhaled sharply, his chest aching with the phantom weight of that night.

"When I turned back to the water ..."

He closed his eyes, as if that could stop the ice-cold memory from pressing in.

"They were all gone."

The wind whispered through the trees, snow drifting gently through the night, the weight of old grief settling deep in his bones.

Then, a warmth.

Soft. Gentle.

Caroline's fingertips brushed against his hand, tentative and light, yet it rocked him to his core.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "It must have been unbearable."

He didn't reply. Daniel stared straight ahead, feeling her soft touch against his skin, the warmth of her fingers searing through the cold night air.

Then, as if realizing she had been too bold, Caroline slowly withdrew her hand.

He let her.

And yet, the ghost of her touch remained. "I like your touch," he said gruffly.

Daniel didn't expect her to climb down. And yet, she did. The moment her boots met the lower branch, she hesitated, her gaze searching his in the moonlight. Then, with a small breath, she stepped into his arms and wrapped hers around his waist, pressing her cheek against his chest.

For a moment, he went utterly still, the warmth of her body seeping through his coat. Then he closed his arms around her, holding her tightly, as if by instinct. And just like that ... the weight of everything bled away. The grief. The guilt. The empty ache in his chest that had lingered for far too many years.

It was as if she had pulled it all from him, leaving something lighter, something warmer in its place. He swallowed hard, lowering his head slightly so that his chin brushed against her hair. "What did you talk to your father about?"

He felt the soft curve of her lips against his chest before she murmured, "I received a letter from Julia."

He stiffened slightly, but only because he knew how much the Fairbanks family meant to her. "Your cousin who married the Earl of Ashton last year?"

"Yes," she said, sighing. "She wrote to say that next season, they'll be traveling to Italy, Venice, and France. She invited me to join them."

Daniel stilled.

"She knows how much I've always wanted to travel," Caroline continued, her voice carrying the echo of a wistful longing. "Ever since I was a little girl, I imagined walking the streets of Paris, standing beneath the towering spires of Notre-Dame Cathedral, and marveling at the beauty of Chateau de Versailles." She let out a breathless chuckle. "Just imagine, Daniel. The Hall of Mirrors. The gardens. The very place where queens once walked ..."

He pictured the light of a thousand chandeliers reflected in the grand mirrors, the endless halls filled with echoes of history.

She lifted her face to his, smiling faintly. “I’ve dreamed of it for so long.”

But there was something else in her tone, something he didn’t like. Sadness. “Why do you sound disappointed instead of thrilled?”

Caroline hesitated, then let out a quiet, wry chuckle. “Because Julia didn’t anticipate that I might be ... engaged or married by then.”

His grip on her waist tightened instinctively.

She exhaled, shaking her head. “It’s a silly thing to be upset about, I know. And yet, sometimes the reality of it feels like a claw in my chest.”

Daniel closed his eyes briefly, suppressing a wave of frustration—not at her, but at society’s damned expectations. A woman’s reputation could be shattered with a single misstep, yet a man could walk away from a scandal completely unscathed.

It wasn’t fair.

He had always known it, but holding Caroline, hearing the ache in her voice—it felt unforgivable.

She wanted to see the world. And for the first time, he felt the need to give her everything she had ever dreamed of. The realization stunned him.

“Tell me,” he said, his voice rougher than he intended. “What else have you always wanted?”

Caroline blinked up at him, then let out a soft laugh, as if caught off guard by the question.

But when she answered, her voice carried a note of wonder.

“I want to go to Egypt,” she said, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “I want to stand before the Great Pyramids and see the Sphinx up close. Can you imagine what it must feel like to be in a place so ancient, so full of mystery?”

Daniel watched the moonlight dance across her face as she spoke.

She had never looked more beautiful.

“I want to see New York,” she continued, her smile turning mischievous. “Ester wrote to me once and described it as a place of bustling streets, towering buildings, and endless possibilities.” Caroline sighed, shaking her head. “Imagine stepping onto a ship, sailing across the ocean, and arriving in a city where everything feels new and exciting.”

Daniel almost smiled at the breathless way she spoke, as if she could already see it all so clearly in her mind. He had traveled more than most. He had been to Venice, had seen the rolling countryside of France, and had ridden beneath the blazing sun in Egypt, feeling the weight of history press upon him. But he had never spoken of those journeys with such unfiltered longing, such pure excitement.

Caroline sounded as if she ached to experience the world in a way he had never thought to appreciate before.

“And the ocean,” she murmured, tucking her head against his chest. “I want to sail the ocean. I want to stand on the deck of a ship, the wind in my hair, nothing but endless blue stretching out in every direction.” She sighed softly. “I know I cannot

remain in this little corner of England forever. I need to see what else is out there. I need to know what the world has to offer beyond these shores.”

Daniel’s fingers flexed on her waist, his heartbeat thundering in his chest.

He had always viewed his life as one path, his responsibilities as unshakable truths. He would marry a respectable lady, produce heirs, and uphold his family’s legacy.

He had never considered that life could be something more.

Something wild.

Something free.

And yet, here she was, whispering about adventure and possibility, and damn him if he didn’t want to offer her the world.

CHAPTER 15

Christmas evening at Fairbanks Manor was a riot of warmth, joy, and laughter. The manor brimmed with life, the sound of family and love echoing through its halls. Earlier in the day, they had made a grand procession of carriages into town for the Christmas service. The Fairbanks family, known for their sheer numbers and infamous reputation, had caused quite the spectacle. Heads had turned, whispers had followed, and yet Caroline had only smiled, for she was surrounded by those she loved most in the world.

Now, as the evening stretched on, Fairbanks Manor was alive with celebration. Gifts had been exchanged in a chaotic flurry of ribbons and wrapping paper, filling the air with laughter and delighted exclamations. Lily had shrieked with joy upon receiving her wooden horse and was already chattering excitedly about trying to ride her real pony again. Fanny had mouthed a grateful thank you to Caroline, who grinned before exchanging an intimate smile with Daniel. Caroline had received a stunning set of leather-bound novels from Julia and a delicate pearl bracelet from her mother, while her younger sisters had all but shrieked in delight at their gifts.

Dinner had been a feast so grand she doubted she would ever eat again. The long dining table had groaned under the weight of roasted turkey, honey-glazed ham, steaming bowls of root vegetables, and the most decadent plum pudding dripping with brandy sauce. The meal had lasted for hours, filled with witty conversations and fond teasing.

Now, outside in the crisp night air, another bonfire roared, casting golden light onto the snow-covered lawns. The frozen lake beyond the manor glistened, reflecting the

flames as family and guests glided across the ice.

Caroline stood at the edge of the bonfire's glow, her hands tucked into her muff, her heart light and heavy all at once. Her mother and siblings had arrived just after the church service, much to her delight. Now, her younger sisters were shrieking with glee, pelting each other with snowballs, while Lily dodged between them, giggling.

A soft laugh rumbled in the distance, deep and rich. Caroline's pulse tripped.

She turned her head slightly, her gaze unerringly finding Daniel where he stood speaking with Rannulf. Daniel was laughing, his head tipped back, his broad shoulders relaxed in a way she had rarely seen. His hair was tousled by the wind, and the crisp white of his cravat stood out against the dark wool of his greatcoat. The firelight played across his strong, handsome features, illuminating the sharp cut of his cheekbones and the curve of his sensual mouth.

Caroline whipped her gaze away, heat blooming across her cheeks.

Tomorrow, he would leave.

And she might never see him again.

Her stomach twisted unpleasantly, the weight of that truth settling deep.

A soft hum of amusement drew her attention, and she turned to find Fanny standing beside her, wrapped in a thick, fur-lined cloak, her blue eyes gleaming with mischief.

"What is that look in your eyes, Caroline?" Fanny asked, tilting her head slightly. "You seem as though you are pondering something very dangerous."

Caroline sighed, offering a wry smile. "I was thinking about wickedness."

Fanny arched a delicate brow, intrigued. “And?”

“And the rewards and consequences that follow.”

A knowing smile played on Fanny’s lips. “Are you speaking generally? Or is there a particular temptation that has your thoughts so preoccupied?”

Caroline said nothing, but her gaze flickered, betraying her thoughts.

Fanny followed her stare, and her expression softened. “Sometimes,” she murmured, “we must follow our hearts, even when we think it is leading us toward scandal.”

Caroline let out a quiet laugh, shaking her head. “That is easy for you to say. You married your viscount and are utterly adored.”

Fanny sighed dramatically. “Yes, well, I wasn’t always so lucky, was I? You know very well I made quite the fool of myself before Simon and I were wed. We are Fairbanks, Caroline. We are made for grand, messy, passionate love stories, not tidy little courtships with appropriate gentlemen.”

Caroline’s heart squeezed painfully. A grand, messy, passionate love story.

Her gaze drifted once more to Daniel, who was now speaking with Colin. His expression was serious again, his brows drawn slightly together, as though his thoughts had turned inward.

He had been different these past few days.

Or perhaps it was she who had been different.

She had been reckless with him. She had let herself be vulnerable in a way she had

never been before, showing him pieces of herself no other man had ever glimpsed. And now, she was left with this aching, gnawing uncertainty.

Did it mean nothing to him? Did he feel even an ounce of this wretched longing that had taken root in her chest?

Fanny watched her, perceptive as ever. “You could always write to him.”

Caroline let out a small laugh. “A letter? And say what?”

Fanny grinned. “Why, that you are utterly ruined for all other men, of course.”

Caroline groaned. “You are impossible.”

“I am happily married,” Fanny teased, nudging her. “And I believe in love, even when it terrifies us.”

Caroline swallowed hard, her throat tightening. Because it did terrify her. The way she felt about Daniel ... the way she had never felt this for anyone else.

A sharp gust of wind sent a shiver down her spine, and she pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders.

Fanny’s eyes sparkled. “You are cold. You should go inside.”

Caroline shook her head. “Not yet.”

Not when this might be the last time she saw him.

She watched as Daniel bid Rannulf goodnight and turned toward the house, his strides long and sure. She had no doubt he would be leaving at first light.

Perhaps she should say something.

Perhaps she should ... follow her heart, as Fanny suggested.

But she remained frozen in place, watching him disappear into the manor.

Tomorrow, he would be gone. And she had no idea if she would ever see him again. Her hands clenched into the fabric of her cloak, her heart a tangled mess of longing and regret.

Maybe ... just maybe ... she had been a little too careful after all.

Daniel folded another shirt and placed it into his valise, his movements precise, mechanical. He had long since perfected the act of packing without thought. He should have felt nothing about departing Penporth.

And yet.

His hands stilled over the next item, his jaw tightening as a thought slipped unbidden into his mind. Caroline . Would he see her again? She had not sought him out, had not asked for a moment alone with him, though there had been something in her eyes when he'd announced his departure at dinner. A shadow that had flickered before she masked it with a bright smile.

It had been the same smile she wore all evening, laughing with her cousins, playing in the snow, chasing Lily when the child pelted her with a well-aimed snowball. He had watched her, unable to look away, feeling something inside him shift and settle into unfamiliar longing. He didn't know what to do with it, didn't want to know.

Damn it all .

He scrubbed a hand over his face, his fingers dragging through his hair. He should not be thinking about her. And yet ... he wanted to see her. To bid her farewell, to hear her voice one last time before he left Penporth behind. Before he left her behind.

A knock sounded at the door.

His breath stilled in his chest, something curling tight in his gut. He knew who it was before he even turned.

God, he hoped it was her.

Daniel strode forward, his movements almost reluctant, his pulse inexplicably quickening. He hesitated, then grasped the handle and pulled the door open.

When Daniel opened the door, he was utterly unprepared for the vision before him. Her golden, unbound hair rippled in wondrous waves down her back and over the front of her nightgown. It hid her figure completely, but that denial of flesh only tempted his baser urges more. How much longer could he resist the temptation of her?

She met his gaze, startlingly direct, her emerald eyes holding no hesitation, no coyness. Finally, she cleared her throat, tilting her chin up in that familiar defiant way that always made him want to kiss her senseless. Then she lifted a hand to his cheek, her touch featherlight, her fingers trembling slightly as they brushed against his skin.

“I want you,” she said softly, each word weighted with intent.

Her green eyes searched his, flickering with emotions she had not yet voiced. For a moment, neither of them spoke, the silence stretching, thick with all the words they had not said.

“I have no other expectations other than ... wickedness. I have no expectation other than tonight.”

His breath turned shallow, his entire body going taut at her words, at the raw honesty in them. He closed his eyes briefly, knowing that if he kissed her now, if he pulled her into his arms and allowed himself to drown in her, he might never let go. He opened his eyes, his gaze locking onto hers, the space between them charged with an intensity that stole the very air from the room.

“Caroline—”

She swallowed, her throat working, and then, slowly, she went up on her toes, pressing the softest, most delicate kiss against his lips. It was not the wild, untamed passion of their previous encounters. It was something deeper. Something that shattered him completely.

And Daniel knew, in that moment, that leaving her might be the hardest thing he had ever done.

CHAPTER 16

Caroline barely had time to take a breath before Daniel slipped his arms around her waist, lifting her effortlessly. A startled gasp left her lips as he carried her deeper into the room, his movements decisive, unshakable. The door clicked shut behind them, sealing them in a world of flickering candlelight and the heady scent of pine and burning wood.

He swept her onto his bed, the feather mattress dipping beneath her weight. She had imagined this moment, dreamed of it in ways that left her body aching, but reality was so much more devastating. He stood over her, his storm-gray eyes dark and hungry, as if drinking in the sight of her alone could satisfy some deep, insatiable need.

“Daniel ...” Her voice was barely a whisper.

He knelt beside her, one hand sliding into her hair, threading through the waves he had admired in silence for far too long. His other hand tugged at the ties of her nightgown, loosening them with infuriating slowness. The thin linen fell from her shoulders, pooling at her waist before he guided it down her hips, baring her completely to his gaze.

Caroline’s breath hitched. Heat flushed her skin at the raw reverence in his expression. He did not rush. He did not move to cover her. Instead, he studied her, as if committing every inch of her to memory. His fingers traced the slope of her collarbone, then lower, brushing over the swell of her breasts. She shivered.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured, his voice rough with restraint.

Then his mouth was on her. A kiss to her throat, lingering, savoring. Another along her shoulder, the scrape of his teeth sending sparks of sensation through her nerves. When he reached the peak of her breast, he circled her nipple with his tongue before drawing it into the heat of his mouth. Caroline arched with a sharp cry, her fingers sinking into his hair, her body trembling as he lavished her with slow, unrelenting attention.

His hands roamed lower, down her ribs, over the flat plane of her stomach. She gasped when he cupped her between her thighs, his fingers exploring her most intimate place with a touch both reverent and claiming.

She should have felt embarrassed, should have been shy—but the way he touched her, as if she were something precious, something to be cherished and devoured in equal measure, stripped her of every inhibition.

When he slipped a finger inside her, she moaned, her hips instinctively pressing into his palm. He groaned at her response, his mouth returning to her breast as he thrust deeper.

“So perfect,” he murmured, slipping a second finger inside her.

Caroline whimpered, her body stretching to accommodate him. His fingers moved with agonizing precision, curling, pressing into something that sent pleasure shattering through her nerves. Her nails bit into his shoulders.

“Daniel ...”

“Yes?” His voice was deep, almost teasing, but there was an unmistakable strain in it.

She could not form words—only gasps, whimpers of desperate need. He thrust his fingers deeper, then added a third, stretching her, claiming her, and suddenly she shattered. Her body arched, her thighs clenching around his wrist as pleasure crashed over her, a sharp cry ripping from her throat. He did not stop. He coaxed every last tremor from her, watching her unravel beneath him with a look of pure masculine satisfaction.

Before she could recover, he lowered himself between her thighs. She barely had time to register his intent before his mouth was on her, his tongue parting her, stroking her with deliberate, unrelenting precision.

“Daniel—oh—” She could not breathe.

He groaned against her, as if tasting her was his sole purpose in life. His hands gripped her hips, holding her in place as he licked her over and over, dragging her closer and closer to the edge.

“I cannot get enough of you,” he murmured against her, the vibrations of his voice sending a fresh wave of pleasure rolling through her.

Her hands fisted in his hair, her body bowing beneath him as she came apart once more, her cries muffled only by the thick blankets beneath her. When she finally surfaced from the storm of sensation, Daniel was rising above her, shrugging off his shirt, unfastening his trousers with steady, unhurried movements.

She had known he was strong, had felt the power of his body each time he touched her—but now she saw him in full, and her breath caught. He was beautiful, all sculpted muscle and bronzed skin, his chest dusted with dark hair, leading down to the thick, rigid length of him.

She swallowed hard. A flicker of uncertainty passed through her—he was so large,

and she ...

He caught the look in her eyes, his gaze softening. Leaning down, he kissed her, slow and deep, as his hands skimmed over her body, soothing her nerves with touch alone.

“I will not hurt you,” he promised against her lips.

“I will make this good for you.”

She trusted him.

When he positioned himself between her thighs and began to press inside her, she gasped, her nails digging into his back. The pressure grew, a slow stretch that burned with both discomfort and something deeper, something overwhelming.

A sharp ache flared as he seated himself fully within her, his breath shuddering against her cheek. He groaned, his entire body taut with restraint.

“God, you are so tight,” he rasped.

Caroline whimpered, her thighs trembling around him. The pain was there, undeniable, but beneath it was something else—the delicious fullness of him, the heat of his body pressed so intimately against hers.

He kissed her deeply, his tongue stroking hers in time with the slow, measured movement of his hips. A careful retreat, a gentle thrust back in. Her body adjusted, the burn giving way to a strange, curling pleasure.

He moved again, deeper this time, and she gasped at the friction, at the way her body clenched around him instinctively.

“That’s it,” he murmured, voice thick with need. “Let me love you.”

The next thrust sent a shudder rolling through her, the pleasure mounting, sharper now, undeniable. He rocked into her, slow and steady at first, but soon his control frayed. His pace quickened, his groans vibrating against her throat as he drove them both higher, into a world of nothing but sensation.

Caroline cried out, her fingers clutching his shoulders as he sent her spiraling over the edge once more. He followed with a hoarse groan, his body tensing before he shuddered above her, his release spilling deep inside her.

As the world settled, he pressed soft kisses along her jaw, her lips, her collarbone, holding her close as they both caught their breath.

“You were incredible,” he murmured against her hair.

Caroline smiled, drowsy, sated. “So were you,” she whispered, curling into his side and falling asleep.

Caroline stirred, sensing warmth and movement. She was in someone’s arms. The scent of sandalwood and crisp linen surrounded her. Then she felt the softness of a bed beneath her, and her eyes fluttered open sleepily. She was in her bedchamber. Daniel, now fully dressed, his shoulders rigid with tension.

Her heart lurched, and she murmured, “You are leaving.”

You are leaving .

The quiet words came from behind him, laced with something raw, something unspoken. The room was dim, bathed in the soft glow of early morning light filtering through the parted curtains. The fire had burned low, the embers glowing faintly in

the hearth. Daniel sat on the edge of the bed, already dressed, his valise packed and waiting.

Daniel closed his eyes for the briefest moment before turning.

Caroline sat upright in bed, the sheets pooled around her waist, her golden hair a riot of waves over her bare shoulders. There was sleep in her eyes, but also awareness. Understanding. A quiet kind of heartbreak that she was trying desperately to conceal.

“Yes,” he said, his voice rough.

She held his gaze for a moment longer before lowering it to her lap, her fingers twisting the coverlet. “I suppose I knew you would.” A small, uneven breath. “You made no promises.”

His stomach clenched.

“I made no promises,” he agreed, hating the words even as he said them.

Her throat moved as she swallowed. Then, with slow deliberation, Caroline lifted her chin and looked at him again. “I did not expect them, my lord.” Her lips curved into something that almost resembled a smile, but it did not reach her eyes. “I was fully aware of the risk I took.”

Daniel wanted to say something—anything—to ease the quiet pain in her voice, but he knew there was no comfort to offer. No words that could fix what this was. What it had always been.

And yet...

He stepped forward, drawn to her like a man stepping toward the edge of a precipice.

He reached for her, cupping her face with both hands, brushing his thumbs over the soft skin of her cheeks.

Then he kissed her.

Not with the hunger that had consumed him in the conservatory. Not with the reckless passion that had burned between them in the darkness of the night. But with something slower. Deeper. Something that terrified him far more than desire.

Her lips parted on a breath, and he took it, claimed it, swallowed it like a man desperate for air. He kissed her again. And again. Letting the taste of her imprint itself onto his tongue, as if somehow that would be enough. As if somehow that would be enough to keep her with him.

But it wouldn't.

With a shuddering breath, he forced himself to pull away.

Caroline's lashes fluttered open, her gaze slightly dazed, her lips pink and bruised. For one impossible moment, he thought about staying. About throwing all logic and reason to the wind.

But then reality reasserted itself, and he stepped back.

She inhaled sharply, her hands tightening in the sheets as if to keep herself from reaching for him. He turned away, grabbing his valise, and without another word, he strode to the door.

He did not look back.

The air outside was sharp and biting, the pre-dawn sky painted in soft hues of blue

and gray. Snow crunched beneath his boots as he made his way down the steps, the waiting carriage a dark silhouette against the pale landscape.

The groom dipped his head as Daniel approached. “Ready, my lord?”

He nodded and climbed inside. The door closed behind him with a soft thud, sealing him away from the house. From her.

The carriage jolted forward, the horses’ hooves clattering against the frozen ground.

He let out a slow breath, but the weight in his chest did not ease. With every turn of the wheels, every rhythmic clack against the snow-packed road, the crack inside him deepened. Daniel curled his hands into fists atop his thighs and closed his eyes.

And yet he could not shake the sound of her laughter. The way her eyes lit up when she spoke of her dreams. The warmth of her body curled against his in the middle of the night. Daniel blew out a slow breath, staring out the window at the snow-covered countryside rolling past. He would not look back. But his mind betrayed him. He saw her on the bed, the shimmer of unshed tears in her eyes, her hands gripping the edges of her sheet as if holding herself together. He saw the way her lips had trembled, the moment of weakness she had fought so valiantly to hide.

God, he had been a fool to touch her at all.

Daniel’s heart damn well pained him. His body was still taut with restraint, still aching for what he had left behind. He inhaled deeply, then released it in a slow, controlled breath.

I only knew her for eight bloody days .

It shouldn’t feel like this. It shouldn’t feel as if something inside him had been

hollowed out and left empty.

It is just the wonder of Christmas. That is all.

Daniel closed his eyes and forced himself to believe it.

A warm house filled with music, the laughter of a family that loved each other unconditionally, the bright joy of a holiday he had long ago abandoned. It had only been that. The magic of it all. And Caroline... she had simply been part of that enchantment.

Nothing more.

He would return to his estate in Berkshire. He would stay away. And if the longing remained, if the ache did not fade, then he would understand what it truly was.

And if it did fade... then he would know it had only ever been an illusion.

Caroline curled into herself, hugging her pillow tightly as silent tears slid down her cheeks. Her chest ached, her heart squeezing painfully with every breath she took. She allowed herself this moment of grief, sobbing softly into the linen, muffling the sound so no one would hear her. Only when she heard the distant clatter of carriage wheels rolling away from the manor did she force herself to stop. Her breath hitched as she listened to the faint echoes of departure, each sound hammering home the painful truth.

The earl was gone, and he had deemed whatever lay between them unworthy of pursuit.

A deep breath shuddered through Caroline. Enough. There was no use crying over what had never been promised. She had always known he would leave. She had never

expected him to stay. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she reached for the bell pull. Within minutes, a maid entered, her expression warm.

“Would you like a bath, miss?”

“Yes, please,” Caroline murmured.

The maid bobbed a curtsy before disappearing into the adjoining bathing chamber. Soon, the scent of roses and lavender filled the air, the delicate floral fragrance mingling with the rising steam curling through the dimly lit room. When the bath was ready, Caroline dismissed the maid and stepped into the deep copper tub. She lowered herself into the heated water with a sigh, closing her eyes as the warmth wrapped around her, soothing the tension in her limbs and dulling the ache between her thighs.

A blush crept up her skin at the memory of him, of the passion with which they had come together last night. She had never known such pleasure, such overwhelming desire. Caroline let her head fall back against the rim of the tub, her breath shaky as she recalled the heat of his touch, the possessive way his hands had gripped her hips, how he had taken his time unraveling her, making her his.

I am falling in love with you, Daniel... Did you fall a little for me as well?

The thought whispered through her mind, breaking her already fragile restraint. Her throat tightened, and she squeezed her eyes shut, but the truth crashed into her with all the force of a storm. She loved him.

It felt impossible—madness, really—but now she understood what Ester had meant when she had once confessed she had known, within days, that Edmond was the one for her. Caroline had thought it absurd at the time. But now... Now, she saw the possibilities with Daniel so clearly. Long walks in the woodland. Laughter and

whispered secrets. Climbing trees and teasing one another like reckless fools. Sharing quiet, intimate mornings. Raising children. Loving and exploring life together.

A fresh wave of grief threatened to consume her, but she fought it, her fingers curling into fists beneath the surface of the water. How had she not anticipated this? How had she been so blind to how much she had given her heart to him?

Caroline slid down into the bath until the warm water covered her entire body, submerging her beneath its soothing embrace. She stayed under for a few long seconds, the silence pressing in around her, blocking out the ache in her chest. When she surfaced again, water streamed down her face, mingling with the last of her tears.

“No more tears,” she whispered, her voice unsteady but determined. “No more regrets. Not when the night was so beautiful, and I will have this memory forever.”

With that silent vow, she pushed herself upright, drained the bath, and reached for a drying cloth. She refused to wallow in misery. Not now. Not when there were people she loved downstairs, celebrating the warmth and joy of the season.

She rang for the maid again, allowed herself to be dressed in a soft winter gown, then smoothed her hands over the fabric and lifted her chin. A deep breath. And then, without another glance at the empty bed where he had once held her, she turned and made her way below stairs.

Caroline hugged her coat tightly to her chest as she walked outside, the crisp morning air chilling her skin. The world was quiet, the kind of stillness that came after fresh snowfall. The scent of pine and frost filled her lungs as she inhaled deeply, hoping the brisk air would clear the lingering ache in her chest. She had barely taken a few steps when she noticed a familiar figure walking toward her, bundled in a thick shawl and lined cloak.

Her mother. She was a plump woman with kind, knowing eyes and softly flushed cheeks from what had likely been a brisk morning walk through the snowy woodlands. Her breath misted in the air as she approached, her brow knitting in concern the moment she caught sight of Caroline's face.

"You have been crying."

Caroline stiffened, but then forced a smile, closing the distance between them. She slipped her hand into her mother's, their fingers entwining as they often had when she was a child. "It is not worth mentioning," she said lightly, hoping to dismiss the matter.

Her mother made a small, disbelieving sound and gently tugged her toward the lake. Caroline followed, her boots crunching over the frozen ground. When they reached the edge of the lake, she took in the sight before her and felt an odd pang in her heart. The ice was beginning to melt.

A week ago, it had been thick enough to hold the weight of dozens of skaters gliding across the surface, their laughter echoing through the valley. Now, small cracks spider-webbed through the remaining ice, the edges softening into water. The children would be disappointed.

"You will not distract me, my dear," her mother murmured, her gaze gentle yet unwavering.

Caroline exhaled, staring at the lake instead of meeting her mother's eyes.

"Does this sadness have anything to do with Lord Walcott?"

Her head snapped up. Shock fluttered through her chest. "Mama—"

Her mother's lips twitched as she turned to face her. "Must you look so scandalized? I may not be as sharp as your Aunt Margaret, but I am not blind."

Caroline swallowed, stunned by the declaration. "I—"

Her mother sighed, shaking her head as she looked out across the shimmering ice. "You are both so transparent in your feelings. The way he stared at you with such want made me blush several times. More than once, I nearly marched over to demand he marry you at once."

A choking sound escaped Caroline, and she turned wide eyes on her mother, scandalized. "Mama!"

Her mother chuckled softly, though her expression remained thoughtful.

Caroline's lips parted to deny it—to insist that there was nothing between her and Daniel, that what had happened was a fleeting moment, one with no promises attached—but the words wouldn't come. Instead, she dropped her gaze to the icy lake, twisting her fingers together inside her gloves.

Her mother once again sighed, the sound quiet and full of sadness. "The earl departed early this morning."

Caroline closed her eyes briefly, then nodded. "Yes."

"I see."

They stood in silence for a long moment, the air between them filled with the distant sounds of the household stirring awake behind them. A flock of birds took flight from the nearby trees, their wings rustling against the pale sky.

“I wish,” her mother murmured at last, “that I had a good dowry for you.” Her eyes shone with quiet sorrow as she continued, “You have such wonderful connections, my darling. But it is not enough. Not always.”

She glanced back at the house, where her other daughters and son were undoubtedly still abed. “I fear for you, and for Temperance and Eliza, that you will never make good matches, that you will live the rest of your lives lonely.”

A hard lump formed in Caroline’s throat.

“I was fortunate,” her mother continued, her voice wistful. “Your father and I loved each other dearly. We had little wealth when we married, but we were happy before he went on to his rewards. One of my only wishes in life was for my children to have good marriages... to find that same happiness.”

Caroline swallowed past the tightness in her chest, but she couldn’t speak.

Her mother turned to her, searching her face. “Did you fall in love with Lord Walcott?”

Caroline exhaled shakily, her breath misting in the air. Yes .

He had made her feel alive, like she could do anything, be anything. In his arms, she had felt bold, beautiful, desired. She had felt something deeper than she had ever known before.

A small, trembling smile touched her lips. “Perhaps I did,” she admitted softly.

Her mother squeezed her fingers gently. “Then do not despair just yet, my dear. I know what I saw in his gaze. Life has a way of surprising us.”

Caroline inhaled deeply, blinking against the stinging in her eyes. She hoped her mother was right.

CHAPTER 17

Three months and seventeen days had passed since he had last seen her, and Daniel stood in the shadows of the terrace, his gaze fixed on Caroline Fairbanks. The distance between them had done nothing to diminish his feelings for her. In truth, it had only sharpened them, turning longing into something raw and unrelenting. His hunger for her had not faded—it had grown, deepened, until it gnawed at him, a relentless ache that refused to be ignored.

Every day, he had written to her. At first, the letters had been simple—an update on his day, an idle mention of something that had reminded him of her. But soon, they had become something more, each word spilling with the truth he had tried to deny. Yet he had never sent them.

Tonight, Caroline was a vision of loveliness, draped in a gown of pale gold that shimmered under the glow of the chandeliers. The delicate lace at her décolletage enhanced the graceful slope of her shoulders, and her golden curls were swept up, save for a few wisps that framed her face, making her look softer, more vulnerable.

He had missed her fiercely.

These last months had been an exercise in discipline. He had buried himself in work, focusing on Parliament, pushing through reforms, anything to keep his mind off the woman who haunted his dreams. And yet, here he was, standing in the dark like a man starved, unable to look away.

She stood at the edge of the ballroom, apart from the laughter and whirling dancers.

Though she smiled politely at those who approached, there was a distance in her expression, a loneliness that tugged at something inside him. He had been watching her for the better part of an hour, and not a single gentleman had asked her to dance.

“Good God, you are watching her as if you mean to devour her,” came the wry voice of his friend, Camden.

Daniel didn’t glance away.

“Why not take her as your mistress?” Camden continued, taking a sip of his brandy. “She is ruined for marriage. And you clearly still want her.”

“She is not a lady meant to be any man’s mistress, but a woman who should be adored, respected and revered. If I cannot give her that, I am unworthy.”

Ignoring his friend’s shock, Daniel emptied his glass of whisky, set it aside, and stepped forward. He descended the stairs, his movements deliberate. The chatter in the ballroom softened as he crossed the floor, but he paid no heed to the ripple of whispers.

Caroline saw him approach and gasped, her green eyes widening in a way that made his chest tighten. She looked utterly helpless, her lips parting as if she might say something, but no words came. Her mother, standing beside her, spoke behind her fan, her expression one of tight displeasure.

Caroline wanted to be anywhere but here.

He stopped before them, meeting her gaze and allowing himself a moment to drink her in before speaking.

“Miss Fairbanks.” His voice was smooth, measured. “Would you do me the honor of

this waltz?”

The tension in the ballroom thickened. A lady near them gasped softly. Her mother stiffened beside her even as her eyes glowed with hope.

Caroline hesitated only a second before she curtsied. “I would be honored, my lord.”

He extended his hand, and when she placed hers in his, a jolt of sensation shot through him. He led her to the center of the ballroom as the orchestra struck up a new tune, the melody swelling through the air. Drawing her into position, he placed one hand at the small of her back, the other enclosing her fingers within his grasp. She felt delicate beneath his touch, yet there was strength in the way she held herself, as if she were fighting against every emotion that threatened to surface.

They began to move.

She fit against him as perfectly as he remembered, her body gliding with effortless grace, following his lead without hesitation. Every step, every twirl was an exquisite agony, reminding him of how much he had wanted her, how much he still wanted her.

“Why did you ask me to dance?” she whispered, her voice almost lost in the strains of the waltz.

“Why do you think?” he murmured back, his grip on her tightening slightly.

Her lashes lowered, but he caught the tremble in her breath. He watched her lips, remembered their taste, their softness, and his hunger flared.

He pulled her closer, propriety be damned, letting the world fade until there was only

her, only this dance, only the undeniable pull between them.

“You shouldn’t have asked,” she said softly, but there was no conviction in her voice.

His lips quirked in a ghost of a smile. “And yet, here we are.”

His voice softened further. “I have missed you every day these last few weeks. And every night, I have dreamed of you.”

Caroline’s breath hitched, her eyes pooling with unshed tears. “What is the point of telling me these things?” she whispered, her voice trembling.

He searched her gaze, desperation coiling in his chest. “Tell me, Caroline. Do you long for me in any regard? Was it the same for you or did I vanish from your thoughts within a few days.”

Something flickered in her eyes—pain, desire, longing—before she suddenly wrenched herself from his embrace. Gasps erupted around them as she turned and fled through the crowd, whispers rising in her wake.

Daniel’s jaw tightened. He could already sense the beginnings of another scandal. Without a word, he discreetly left the ballroom through a different entrance, his path leading him through the music room and into the gardens. The cool night air barely registered as he strode forward, his pulse hammering.

Then he saw her.

Caroline was hurrying along the garden path, her delicate shoulders shaking as she clutched her skirts, trying to escape him, trying to escape whatever emotions had just surfaced between them. Regret twisted inside him, mingling with an overwhelming sense of love that almost crippled him. He could not let her go. Not again.

With quick strides, he rushed toward her.

Caroline rushed through the ballroom and outside, her chest heaving, tears slipping unchecked down her cheeks. The cool night air hit her, but it did nothing to quell the storm inside her. She could hardly breathe, her heart pounding against her ribs as she fled into the gardens, desperate to escape the turmoil Daniel had stirred within her.

How she had missed and longed for him.

The sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel behind her made her pause. She hastily brushed at her damp cheeks and turned sharply, already knowing who had followed her.

Daniel.

He stood there, breathing hard, his gaze burning into her. Moonlight bathed his strong features, and for the first time in months, she allowed herself to truly look at him, to drink in the man she had loved and lost.

“I have been a damn fool,” he said, his voice low and rough with emotion.

She swallowed hard. “What do you mean?”

He took a step closer. “I thought I could forget you. I thought if I buried myself in my work, in Parliament, in anything that would distract me, the ache in my chest would fade.” His hands clenched at his sides. “But it didn’t. It only grew stronger.”

She remained silent, waiting, not daring to believe where his words might lead.

His voice softened. “I had this grand plan that I would court you properly, that all of society would see how much I wanted you in the way you deserved.” He let out a

rough breath, shaking his head. "And in doing so, I wasted precious time."

Caroline stared at him, her lips trembling. "Yes, you have," she finally said, her voice thick with emotion.

A ghost of a smile touched his lips, but it quickly faded. "The time apart has only shown me how much you mean to me. Every day, I longed for you. Every day, I thought of your kisses, the feel of you in my arms. Every day, I waited, thinking these feelings would wane." He swallowed hard, his voice raw with truth. "But they didn't. They only grew."

She clenched her fists at her sides, torn between love and the fear of having her heart shattered again. "Daniel ..."

He took another step forward, his eyes holding hers with quiet intensity. "Give me a chance to make this right. I love you , Caroline. Desperately."

Her throat tightened. "I love you," she whispered, the words slipping past her lips before she could stop them. "But I will not be your mistress. Even if the pain of separation haunts me for years, I would not be your mistress."

Something fierce flashed across his face, and before she could react, he reached for her, cupping her face between his warm, strong hands. His mouth found hers, stealing her breath, his kiss deep and filled with all the longing of the past four months.

He pulled back just enough to murmur against her lips, "Not my mistress. My wife."

A sharp gasp escaped her, her hands gripping his arms for support as her heart pounded wildly. "Your wife?"

"My lover," he continued, his voice like a vow. "My dearest friend. My countess. My

dearest beloved.”

He reluctantly lowered his hand and reached into his pocket, retrieving a bundle of letters tied with a deep blue ribbon. Daniel held them out to her, his fingers tightening slightly around the packet before he released them into her trembling grasp.

With unsteady hands, Caroline took them, her breath catching in her throat. She stared at the familiar, bold scrawl on the front of each envelope, unable to believe that he had written to her. That he had held on to these words instead of sending them.

Slowly, she untied the ribbon, the silk slipping through her fingers like water, and randomly selected a letter. She broke the seal, unfolded the parchment, and tilted it toward the lantern’s glow, her eyes quickly scanning the first few lines

Dearest Caroline,

It has only been a day since I departed Penporth for my estates, and I already miss your smile. I foolishly looked up at the night sky, wondering if you were perhaps watching the stars too, thinking of our time on the branch. I had never once believed in fanciful things, but damnation, I find myself wanting to now. Perhaps it is your influence, or perhaps it is that I cannot forget you. Either way, I do not regret it.

Daniel

Her heart squeezed, and her vision blurred as she clutched the letter to her chest before reaching for another.

Dearest Caroline,

It has been seventeen days, and you haunt my dreams and my waking moments. Today, I wrote to my sister and made plans to visit her in the spring. I wish you to be

by my side and meet her. Would you like to see Italy, to walk through the vineyards and feel the warmth of the sun on your face? Would you like to visit Rome and stand before the Colosseum, knowing that I am beside you? I should not be thinking such thoughts, yet I cannot seem to stop myself.

Daniel

A choked sob tore from her throat as she fumbled for another letter, her pulse roaring in her ears.

Dearest Caroline,

For the last few days, I have been working on motions to introduce a new bill in the House, and yet my thoughts stray to you. I find myself wishing you were here, curled on the chaise in my library, reading as the fire crackled beside us. I imagine you listening to my arguments, challenging my stance, pushing me to defend my reasoning. I wonder what you would think, what you would say. Would you smile at me as you did that night beneath the stars? Would you place your hand on my arm, drawing me back from the madness of politics with a simple touch? I miss you. There is no other way to say it.

Daniel

Tears spilled freely down her cheeks, her chest rising and falling in ragged, uneven breaths. Her emotions swelled and burst, a rush of love so intense she could hardly contain it. With a broken laugh, she pressed the letters against her heart and turned to Daniel.

Then, without thought, without hesitation, she launched herself into his arms, sobbing and laughing at the same time. He caught her instantly, his arms closing around her like a vice, one hand cradling the back of her head as if he never wanted to let go.

“I love you,” she whispered through her tears, pressing her face into the warmth of his chest. “Oh, Daniel, I love you.”

“Thank Christ,” he said gruffly. “Marry me, my love.”

More tears welled in her eyes, but this time, they were not from sorrow. Joy surged through her, fierce and overwhelming. A laugh bubbled past her lips, mixing with a sob as she threw her arms around his neck, pressing herself against him.

“Yes,” she whispered before kissing him again, deep and desperate, pouring every ounce of love she had for him into the press of her lips.

His arms locked around her, holding her close as he kissed her with equal passion, as if he would never let her go again.

And she knew, without a doubt, that he never would.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 2:04 am

The soft glow of the morning sun bathed the deck of the grand yacht as it bobbed gently through the English Channel, the vast, endless blue of the sea stretching before them. A crisp spring breeze carried the scent of salt and freedom, mingling with the distant cry of gulls that followed their path. Caroline inhaled deeply, letting the fresh air fill her lungs as she gazed over the endless waters, excitement thrumming through her veins.

She had dreamed of this journey, of traveling the world, and now it was real. They were on their honeymoon, embarking on a grand tour of Europe together, a journey filled with promise and adventure.

Strong arms slid around her waist, drawing her back against a familiar, solid chest. Daniel's warmth wrapped around her, and she sighed in contentment, leaning into the cage of his embrace. He pressed a soft kiss to the side of her neck, his breath stirring against her skin.

"Are you happy, love?" he murmured, his voice low and smooth.

She turned in his arms, tilting her face up to his. The sunlight caught the flecks of silver in his eyes, making them burn with something deeper, something tender. Her heart clenched with love so powerful it nearly stole her breath.

"I am," she whispered. "More than I ever thought possible." She brushed her fingertips along his jaw, feeling the rough shadow of stubble. "And I love you."

His lips curved into a slow, knowing smile before he bent to kiss her. It was soft at first, lingering, reverent, as if he were savoring the words she had just spoken. Then,

as she melted against him, the kiss deepened, and the taste of him sent warmth curling through her.

When he finally pulled away, his forehead rested against hers. “I love you too,” he murmured. “And I am damn glad you stole that wooden horse.”

A laugh bubbled from her lips, light and full of joy. “I cannot believe that all of this began with a rocking horse.”

He tightened his hold on her, his fingers splaying possessively along her back. She let her eyes drift shut for a moment, feeling the gentle sway of the yacht beneath them, the rhythmic pulse of the waves against the hull. The sea shimmered, stretching infinitely before them, a perfect reflection of the life they would build together—boundless, untamed, and full of promise.

As the yacht sluiced through the sparkling waters, carrying them toward new adventures, she knew with absolute certainty that her greatest adventure had already begun and as Daniel kissed her again beneath the golden spring sky, she knew she would never want for anything more.