



A Wallflower Demands Satisfaction (Revenge of the Wallflowers #55)

Author: *Andrea K. Stein, Wallflowers Revenge*

Category: Historical

Description: Olivia Jones needs justice more than she needs a husband

Olivia Jones is the acknowledged best laundress in London. She's spent years perfecting her methods of producing the softest, lavender-infused linens. Some of the wealthiest lords in England send their soiled shirts to her and don't count the cost.

She's become comfortably well off managing the exclusive laundry for Goodrum's House of Pleasure, owned by Captain Eleanor Whitcombe, Duchess of Chelmsford, and her side business of custom laundry for the tonnish families in Mayfair.

Although Olivia does not need, or want a husband, her adoptive brother has wangled a Season for her and a large dowry, both sponsored by the duke and duchess, in exchange for an, um special favor he provided Her Grace several years earlier.

A notorious blackmailer picks on the wrong woman

At her first formal ball, Baron Barclay Reynolds approaches her and demands she accept his offer of marriage. If she doesn't, he'll turn over what he knows about her real mother, a well-known opera singer to the gossip sheets. The blackmailer has underestimated the rage simmering beneath the surface of the sweet young laundress. She determines to destroy the disgusting baron on her own terms.

Total Pages (Source): 16

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:46 am

PROLOGUE, EARLY JUNE, 1826

* * *

Captain Eleanor Goodrum's Townhouse

Grosvenor Square

El knew it was only a matter of time before someone caved to Perseus Whitcombe's demands and offers of obscene amounts of money to lay bare her many, um, business interests throughout England and abroad. She had to work fast to make sure she knew what he knew, before he knew it.

She looked up at a light patter of boots on the marble floor in the foyer of her townhouse. A few seconds later she said, "Come" at the light tap on the door to her sunny, private parlor.

Dickie Jones appeared in the open doorway, tugging on the hand of his sister, Olivia. The young woman was a bit older than the young street spy El had come to rely on to carry her messages and keep her secrets. The girl was maybe only fourteen but a consummate genius at laundering the clothing and linens that came off the drying lines in Goodrum's back gardens as sweet-smelling and soft as when they'd been newly created.

Despite her mastery of the laundry at Goodrum's, and being a teacher of cleaning secrets to other young men and women at El's many estates, Olivia remained extremely shy.

“Please, Olivia. Come sit and have some tea.”

“Is there something here you’d like me to take down and soak in lemon and lavender, Captain?”

“No, Olivia, just come sit with us for a few minutes.” El patted the seat next to her on a curving settee in front of a floor-to-ceiling window. The towering trees outside shaded and dappled the sunlight piercing the white lace curtains. Dickie chose a chair closer to the hall entry and sat facing the two women.

She smiled at her two young proteges fondly. “I have need of your talents to help me keep a very powerful, wealthy man from snooping his way into our business.”

Dickie immediately took the offensive. “Tell me who the cove is, and he won’t bother you again.”

El smiled indulgently. “We shouldn’t dump another body into the Thames for a while. The river police are getting suspicious. I don’t want that handsome magistrate to put Col on our trail.” She pushed a stubborn auburn curl behind one ear and continued. “This is going to call for an, um, diplomatic touch, Dickie.” She paused a few moments, trying to collect just the right words. “We don’t want to hurt this man, we just need to slow him down. He’s a powerful duke.”

“Cor—.” Dickie exploded out of his chair and paced to El’s side. “What’s he done? I don’t care how important he is, I won’t see him interfering in your work.”

She laid a calming hand on Dickie’s arm. “It’s not what he’s done. It’s what I’m afraid he might do. You see, he thinks he knows everything about our business, and he’s determined to expose what he doesn’t understand.”

Dickie remained silent for a matter of seconds while his clever ten-year-old mind

clicked into a dawning awareness. “Oh...he thinks you’re taking advantage of the people you help. He doesn’t know what we really do.”

She gave the boy a slow smile and nodded her head. “He’s convinced I’m guilty of dark deeds, the knowledge of which he intends to use to stop me from investing in his brother’s publishing business.”

Dickie stroked his chin. “If he’s going to snoop around all three country estates, I’ll have to spend lots of time following him...” He shot her a meaningful look.

“Name your price.” El was prepared to be at the bright young runner’s financial mercy for the great task she was about to entrust to his wisdom. “And include Olivia’s time, since I need her knowledge of the languages her students speak so that she can assist in questioning them to see what he’s up to. We have to organize the hundreds of eyes that are in place at all my estates.”

Dickie turned to his sister. “Olivia, could you please go see what’s taking so long for our tea?”

The young woman rolled her dark blue eyes and headed out into the hallway. Dickie waited until the echo of her slippers could be heard hastening down the steps leading to the vast kitchens on the first floor.

Only then did he turn back to El. “I don’t need the money so much as I used to, Captain. I live with CB, Nathaniel, and Aunt Camilla now. They take care of whatever I need.”

El’s mouth flew open in surprise.

The look on Dickie’s face turned speculative. “There is one thing, though, I need from you.”

“Anything. You know you can count on me.”

“It’s Olivia. I want more for her than a position as a laundry maid.”

“But she’s the best laundry maid in London. I take very good care of her financially. Otherwise, someone would have hired her away by now.”

“I want something for my sister money can’t buy.”

Now El was intrigued. “What would that be? I’ll help if I can.”

“I want Olivia to grow up and marry a kind gentleman who’ll take care of her and give her a family. My sister deserves to be a lady, with fine, soft hands covered inside silk gloves. You have the power to make that happen.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:46 am

1

APRIL 13, 1830

GOODRUM'S HOUSE OF PLEASURE

* * *

C aptain El's Office, Goodrum's

Olivia fumed at the enforced inactivity whilst enduring yet another endless session of soaking her hands in rose-scented milk.

Her patroness, the Duchess of Chelmsford, sat in the corner of her office at Goodrum's House of Pleasure, supposedly absorbed in a book, but with an eagle eye on Olivia's twitching.

"Stubble it, gel." Her Grace pushed her reading glasses to perch on the top of her head, the better to glare at her young protege. "Those reddened, rough hands of yours need to slide like silk itself into your new buttery, soft gloves. Which requires copious soaking of those laundry-ravaged hands before your come-out ball two weeks hence."

"Are you really reading that book?" Olivia interrupted the lecture she'd heard numerous times before.

"What? Douglas's Treatise on Naval Gunnery ? Of course, for the third time, if it's

any of your business - lots of good ideas in here.” She tapped the page with an elegantly manicured finger.

Olivia made a face and stuck out her tongue. “Ewww...how can you read something that boring?”

“What would you have me read? A truly yawn-inducing book, like endless descriptions of young, inane women falling madly in love with monstrous older men whilst wandering the halls of drafty abbeys?”

Olivia had the good grace to glance away to hide the flush in her cheeks. Her employer, actually business partner, she had to remind herself, must have been alerted to the pile of Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels in her bedchamber at the top level of Goodrum’s House of Pleasure. Damn those gossiping housemaids.

“Some of us would rather escape into fantasy than deal with the reality of...that.” She pointed to the heavy tome Eleanor Goodrum Whitcombe, Duchess of Chelmsford, currently balanced on her lap.

“After weeks at the helm of The Lady Muirgen , I have to do the same thing, no matter how much I try to protect my hands whilst I’m at sea.”

“Why? Why do you subject yourself to...to all this?” Olivia pointed to the elegantly attired and manicured duchess.

“Because I love Percy, and my moving through the drawing rooms of Mayfair looking like a Barbary pirate would hurt him.”

Olivia shook her head in silence.

“Just wait.” Her Grace leveled a knowing stare at Olivia. “One of these fine days

you'll meet a man who will turn your world upside down. You'll do things to please him you cannot possibly imagine at this moment. You'll sacrifice your very sanity for the privilege of seeing him smile."

Olivia opened her mouth to protest, only to be interrupted by an imperious look from her benefactor.

"Just you wait."

* * *

Later that night, Olivia looked both ways down the hallway outside her cozy rooms at Goodrum's before breathing a sigh of relief. Everyone was sound asleep on the servants' level, except for the guards who periodically swept through every hallway at Goodrum's, day and night.

When she turned and beckoned to someone inside her room, two men slipped out, carrying her few personal belongings, disguised in the empty hat boxes she'd retrieved from her huge wardrobe already stored within her chambers in the Duke of Chelmsford's elegant mansion on Berkley Square. She went over her mental checklist again, reassuring herself that her profitable laundry venture, run from the depths of Goodrum's, was in good hands.

Her brother Dickie scolded their old friend, Will, who'd uttered a loud whisper of an oath after jamming his toe against her wardrobe in the dark. Whilst she and Dickie wore black to make sure they weren't spotted moving her things into the mansion on Berkley Square, poor Will was dressed in the garish brass-buttoned blue-tailcoat jacket, trousers and top hat of the new Peelers police force.

For some unfathomable reason, the beleaguered Peelers were required to wear the damned uniforms the whole damned day...and they had to work seven days a week,

remaining available at all hours of the day and night. Fortunately, Will had been assigned to Division C, which was a short walk to the east of Goodrum's.

She had to stop thinking in what Her Grace referred to as "vulgar pejoratives." Otherwise, she might spit out the word "damned" in polite conversation. The duchess had also forced her to work with a tutor to learn proper diction.

When Olivia stopped suddenly at the top of the back staircase because she was certain she'd heard something, Will slammed into her back with the pile of boxes he was balancing that impeded his vision, not to mention the dark. "What are you doing?" she demanded in a loud whisper. "What don't you two understand about 'careful' and 'quiet'?" One of the tightly covered boxes Will carried careened down the first set of stairs and thudded to a stop at the landing.

Within minutes, Captain El's chief guard, Obadiah, poked his head around the corner and glared at the three of them before bending over to help retrieve the fallen box. He beckoned sharply for them to follow him out to the darkened carriage awaiting them in the alley in front of the mews behind Goodrum's.

Once they were settled inside and headed west toward Berkley Square, Olivia leaned back with a sigh. When she looked at Will and her brother, she couldn't help but remember their early days when they'd all made their homes in the rookeries. Will, a tall, broad-shouldered man, now twenty, had resembled more of a malnourished scarecrow back then. And her brother Dickie...cleverest spy in the Dials...had filled out and grown into his lanky frame at barely sixteen.

Will, the oldest of the three, because of his size and strength, had easily found a job as a drover, carting vegetables from Surrey to Covent Garden's market. After years of hard work, he'd abruptly shown up at her laundry at Goodrum's one day, grinning nonsensically in a garish Peelers uniform. Her stomach had dropped like a heavy stone into a pond out of fear for him, but she'd pretended enthusiasm for his new

occupation which she was privately certain would not end well.

She'd lived a hard life from the time she was a child of three and had been abandoned on a street corner in Seven Dials by whoever had been caring for her. She often wondered if she'd ever had a mother who'd loved her, but whenever that thought had intruded into her busy life, she'd roughly shoved it to the side. She'd spent a number of years being trained and used as a pickpocket because of her innocent looks. About the time she'd turned eleven, the procurers who roamed the streets and alleys of Seven Dials had tried several times to lure her into a life of prostitution. She'd been hiding and doing whatever she could to steal or earn enough food to eat by day and hiding beneath piles of refuse by night to escape when she'd met Dickie. He'd taken her home to his mother, and that very night she'd become his sister as if they'd shared actual blood. From that time forward, she was under his protection. When he'd been taken into care by Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby and her nephew, Lord Carrington-Bowles, surgeon to the poor of the Dials, he'd insisted Olivia be protected alongside him as his beloved sister.

Olivia had gone to work at Goodrum's House of Pleasure as a laundress. Before a year had passed, she'd researched the best ways to care for the clothing of the rich, and had taught the tricks she'd learned to the rest of the staff at Goodrum's House of Pleasure. The owner of the establishment, Captain El, now the Duchess of Chelmsford, had appreciated Olivia's gift for managing people and pleasing clients. She'd made her manager of her laundry, and since that time they'd made a fortune pleasing the rich and particular denizens of Mayfair. There were certain lords, whilst in residence at their country estates, who'd deliver their linen shirts by mail coach to Goodrum's door for Olivia's ministrations.

Tonight, she'd turn her back on all she'd known and sneak into the Chelmsford mansion. She'd walk through the back servants' entrance as plain Olivia Jones. In the morning light she'd become Lady Olivia Whitcombe, niece of His Grace, Perseus Whitcombe, Duke of Chelmsford.

A hand reached out in the coach's darkness and covered hers. Another hand soon followed, pressing softly atop her brother's. "This is what I've always wanted for you, Olivia," Dickie muttered low.

The third companion echoed her brother's declaration. "You deserve a fine gentleman as husband and the safety of a forever home, Olivia." Will's disembodied voice trembled across the vastness of the Goodrum's carriage and startled her. Nothing frightened Will. They'd faced down vicious thieves, gang leaders, and worse over the years. What the hell was he wavering about now? He sounded more like a small, lost boy than Will Beckford, London's newest, and toughest, Peeler who patrolled some of the wickedest neighborhoods of the rookeries.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:46 am

2

APRIL 14, 1830

CHELMSFORD MANSION

* * *

B erkley Square

Olivia took her time spreading marmalade on her thickly buttered toast, careful to keep her fingers at a proper, ladylike angle. His Grace, Perseus Whitcombe, Duke of Chelmsford, quietly lowered his copy of *The Times* he'd been hiding behind ever since she'd joined him at the breakfast table.

"Where is, um, Her Grace?" She added "Your Grace" at the last minute, causing her face to flush hot beneath her infernal lace cap. She'd been assured by her aunt, Lady Camilla, every proper lady of the ton should wear one during mornings at home.

He gave her a mischievous look. "I thought you might know." And then he laughed. When his entire face lighted up at the small joke, she suddenly suspected what few members of the ton realized. She saw a glimpse of what made Captain El become animated at the mere mention of the duke's name.

Olivia fairly itched to ask the tall, handsome, unflappable duke how he and the duchess had met, but she knew that would be an intrusion too far.

“And, please. Anyone hearing you address me as ‘Your Grace’ would doubt the veracity of our familial connection.” After a short pause, he added, “Uncle Percy is what my brother’s children call me.” He hesitated another tiny moment. “And that’s how you should address me as well if we’re to pull off a charade in public that you’re truly a long, lost niece.”

She stiffened and frowned.

“That way, we’ll have time to practice here at home before we’re out in society.”

“All right, ‘Uncle Percy.’” She relaxed a bit at his explanation and tucked into her cup of hot cocoa and plate of Cook’s perfectly golden toast.

The duke explained, “My wife comes and goes at all hours. I’m never quite sure where she is, but neither of us ever doubts the depth of our affection for each other.” He took a deep sip of black coffee and continued. “As you well know, much of her work centers around saving and protecting those who cannot defend themselves. I trust when I awaken to an empty bedchamber that she’s off somewhere, rescuing someone in some dark corner of the world.”

“Are you never concerned for her safety,...Uncle Percy?”

A sober look replaced his former cheerful mien. “She is an elusive creature, feared from the depths of the London rookeries to the velvet-hung drawing rooms of Mayfair, and all the way across the Mediterranean.” His engaging, charismatic smile returned. “I’m just grateful I can be here to provide the comfort and shelter of my arms when she returns from her latest adventure, good or bad.”

* * *

After her adopted “uncle” left for a meeting at Westminster, Olivia asked for an

additional pot of hot tea to be brought to the family sitting room where she could wait for Madame Clarot to complete the fittings for her coming-out ball dress as well as an additional, extensive wardrobe to get her through the Season. The closer the date of her coming-out loomed, the more nervous she became. She had to quell the urge to run from the Berkley Square mansion, screaming that she was an imposter who had to return to her lodgings at Goodrum's House of Pleasure. Goodrum's, where she managed a particular laundry for Mayfair's wealthiest patrons, had come to feel like home.

The thing was, Eleanor Goodrum's magnificent club was the only place she'd lived since she'd left the St. James Square mansion of Lady Camilla Bowles Attington Carrington Whitby. She and her brother Dickie had been whisked from the streets of Seven Dials by Lady Camilla and her nephew, Lionel Carrington-Bowles, a surgeon to the poor of the Dials. Dickie had supported her as well as himself over the years by peddling information. Information for which the immensely wealthy denizens of London were willing to pay handsomely.

Olivia had done her part by taking in laundry. When Captain El had discovered the young woman's talent for keeping linens brightly clean and smelling of lavender, she offered her a job in Goodrum's laundry. Within weeks, she'd been promoted to managing the business and had begun attracting the patronage of the wealthiest families, even when they were in residence at their country estates. They'd send their most delicate clothing to Goodrum's by mail post carriage. Damn the cost.

And then something inexplicable had happened. Dickie had performed a favor of apparently such enormous service to the Duchess of Chelmsford when she was the former Captain Eleanor Goodrum, that he'd exacted a promise instead of his usual fee. He'd made her vow to ensure that Olivia would be given the opportunity to have a coming-out during the Season when she came of age.

As far as Olivia was concerned, she'd have been happy to continue on indefinitely as

a laundress extraordinaire at Goodrum's. She'd never even considered marriage, after the terrifying childhood she'd endured. Her expectations of the sort of life she'd one day have were minimal. Shelter, warmth, a full belly were luxuries she and Dickie had never imagined when they were merely trying to survive on the streets of Seven Dials.

Yet here she was, living in a duke's mansion, waiting for an exclusive modiste to clothe her from head to toe in preparation for an adventure she wasn't even sure she welcomed.

At a light tap of the door, she said, "Come," and their Graces' head footman entered with an elegant white rectangle imprinted with black flowery script on a silver tray. When Olivia took the card, John Footman intoned, "Madame Clarot and her assistant await."

"Please have them meet me in the small drawing room." After John snicked shut the heavy door behind him, she gathered her warm, woolen shawl around her and headed toward the wide staircase leading to the formal level below.

* * *

When Olivia joined the modiste and her assistant, the two women were patiently waiting, measuring tapes draped around their shoulders and pincushions attached to their wrists.

A fragile-looking, thin white muslin dress lay carefully spread out across a blue silk settee. The dress had elongated puffed sleeves from shoulder to elbow that tapered to fitted, silver-embroidered fabric that would encase her arms from elbow to wrist. A quilted border trimmed the hem, and tiny pearls followed a path about two inches above the border. More silver embroidery accented the bodice.

When she entered the drawing room, both women sucked in a shocked breath. “What’s wrong?” she demanded, wondering what social transgression she might have committed. She knew the two women were aware of her previous vocation of laundress to the wealthiest members of the ton. Madame Clarot had in fact called upon her many times to fix disastrous stains and rips in some of the ton members’ finest clothing.

By tacit agreement, and no doubt generous bribes as well as threats from the duchess, the two women had been sworn to silence on the matter of Olivia’s former calling. The two women had worked with her on numerous occasions in the past, so their current shock at her appearance could have nothing to do with what they already knew about her past.

Madame Annalise Clarot hastily covered for their shocked silence. “Good morning, mademoiselle.” A younger apprentice had been sent to take Olivia’s measurements several days earlier preparatory to the rapid construction of the dress designed for her come-out ball.

Madame and her partner Marie were meeting Olivia to finish off measurements and fabric choices for her extensive wardrobe for the Season. “ Pardonne-moi ,” Annalise continued, “but your eyes...your eyes... c’est magnifique .” Annalise turned quickly to Marie, and the two exchanged an odd, knowing look. “Now we know which colors to choose for the rest of your wardrobe for the season.”

“One encounters such striking, deep blue eyes but rarely,” Marie added, before the two women exchanged a second look full of meaning.

Olivia could swear something was off from the way the modistes were reacting, but she was too nervous about getting her wardrobe right to waste time interrogating them.

“How much will this wardrobe cost?” Olivia believed in coming to the point as quickly as possible. She refused to weave around the May pole in her dealings with tradesmen.

“How much does perfection cost? What is the right match with a paragon of a gentleman worth?” Madame Clarot threw her hands wide in what Olivia was certain was meant to be an exaggerated French gesture.

Olivia frowned before giving the two women a strained eye roll. “I don’t want to be a burden on His Grace.”

Marie twisted her mouth into a self-deprecating moue and feigned ignorance. “Her Grace said no matter the cost of the wardrobe, she’ll never be able to repay you for making her laundry such a success.”

“Oui,” Annalise added. “Everyone in London wants to know how you get linens so white whilst still keeping that mysterious lavender fragrance.” She added, “One of our clients in Surrey swears that just opening a box from your laundry makes her whole house smell like spring breezes, even in the depths of winter.”

Olivia groaned inwardly. What were these two women up to? She could swear their entire conversation was designed to keep her from asking too many questions about their earlier demonstration of shock when she’d first entered the room.

And then all the talk about her laundry, actually El’s laundry at Goodrum’s, sent a sharp twinge of guilt straight to her gut. She worried about all of her regular customers. Were the men and women she’d so carefully trained over the last year truly ready to carry on her high standards?

Of course, she also worried about the most precious bundle of laundry she received and personally watched over each week: the clothes of her old friend and recent

“Peeler” hire, Will Beckford. She seethed whenever she thought of his new job of which he was inordinately proud.

The Peelers had to work seven days a week as well as remain on call day and night. And...they were expected to wear their uniforms at all times in public, even when not working. As such, managing his laundry was damnably difficult. She'd taken over that onerous part of his chosen profession.

Olivia had personally purchased a spare uniform for her old partner in crime. When she'd gone to Moore & Co. on Old Bond Street to obtain a second pair of white trousers for Will, she'd been appalled at the price which the newly formed police force officers had to take on as personal expense if they desired an additional set of trousers to maintain cleanliness, beyond what they were issued by Sir Robert Peel. In addition, they were allowed only five days off a year, which included all holidays.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:46 am

3

APRIL 15, 1830

PICCADILLY STREET

* * *

P iccadilly Street, Mayfair

Will Beckford swung along Piccadilly in the weak morning sun, Dickie Jones hurrying along at his side, gamely trying to keep up with the tall Peeler's stride.

"Is this a race or are we actually headed somewhere important?" Dickie gave up trying to pretend he wasn't bothered by the lightning pace they'd maintained down so many city streets. He sucked in a deep, noisy breath and huffed it back out. "Do you always walk this fast, or are yer tryin' ter kill me?" A shortness of breath had brought on a fit of the cant of the rookeries his adoptive father had worked for months trying to eradicate from his speech.

"We're going to check on Olivia before I'm missed at station...and...I have to cover this beat in double time so I won't be caught out having left the street to make sure your sister's safe.

"Why wouldn't she be safe? Is there something you're not telling me? Somethin' I should know?"

“Chelmsford’s mansion is a big place full of lots of expensive pieces of art, statues, and Lord knows what else, just begging to be stolen. The footmen can’t be everywhere at once. What if someone breaks in, and Olivia happens to be in his way?”

Dickie chuckled to himself, and a small piece inside his brain, like a random chunk of a wooden puzzle, clicked into place. He wondered if his sister suspected the depth of feelings Will harbored for her. He dismissed that thought out of hand. His sister was so single-minded in the way she approached life, he was sure she didn’t suspect. She’d always seemed totally unaware of how the tall, gangly boy had always given her any extra blankets they could cadge and the best bits of food they could find each day. He’d probably been cow-simple about her from the beginning.

They’d found her one night in Seven Dials, crouching beneath a huge pile of refuse in an alleyway, trying to escape the gang who wanted to force her into working as a prostitute. Will was as gentle as he was broad-shouldered and gruff. He’d found some clean water and soap and carefully cleaned the bruises and scratches she’d suffered during the battle royal with a gang of older boys. She’d apparently given as good as she gotten. Dickie’s mother had still been alive then, and despite having no other income than the laundry she took in, welcomed Olivia to the small tenement room they’d shared.

After his mother had died of consumption, Dickie and Olivia were adopted by CB, who at the time was treating the poor as a volunteer surgeon out of various inns throughout the rookeries. He now had a permanent free clinic on Rose Street near Covent Garden. Dickie’s Aunt Camilla had welcomed all of them into her home on St. James Square. By that time, Will had managed to start a small business as a drover delivering vegetables by pony-drawn cart from Surrey to Covent Garden Market and could afford a room of his own.

However, Dickie had no idea what had possessed Will earlier that year to give up a

perfectly good business to sign on as a Peeler in the newly formed police force. He covered Division C, which, coincidentally, covered most of their old thieving grounds. Dickie had concluded his old friend had either turned daft in his old age, or was working some angle he had yet to figure out.

* * *

April 15, 1830

Chelmsford Mansion Kitchen

Berkley Square

Will sat in the vast, recently renovated kitchen in the depths of the Duke of Chelmsford's Berkley Square mansion. He'd heard the rumors about why the renovation had been undertaken shortly before His Grace took Captain Eleanor Goodrum as his wife and duchess. Everyone from the heights of the ton to the lowliest fishmonger had followed the gossip sheets and speculated: Why?

He smiled and took a second cup of tea offered by one of the pot girls. He knew what it felt like to love a woman, in his case, one particular woman who was more than capable of driving a man to allow the destruction of his own kitchen.

As usual, Will had scoured the halls of the Chelmsford mansion, top to bottom, ensuring there was nothing amiss, no kidnapper or murderer lurking in a dark corner...just waiting to harm Olivia.

The buxom downstairs maid suddenly plopped down next to him onto the bench at the long, well-worn wooden table before the fireplace. Rumor also had it this particular table was the only thing His Grace had insisted should remain from the mostly destroyed original furnishings. Will let his hand drift down the edge of the

table to a deep gash no doubt left by a cleaver of some sort. He smiled again and turned to thank the young woman next to him. She leaned forward, offering Will a plate of biscuits as well as a generous view of her plump breasts. He politely averted his eyes.

The women crowding around the table using various excuses to edge nearer to the Peeler let out a collective gasp.

“Will Beckford—” Only Olivia could make his name sound like an epithet shot from her mouth like a cannon ball from one of his majesty’s ships. What had he done wrong now? He was here only because of her, and those damnably bright sapphire eyes. However, that was the last thing he’d ever have the courage to tell her.

She marched toward the crowd of women servants, and with one vicious look cleared the area around Will. At the other side of the kitchen by the wood-fired cook stove, Cook gave out a low chuckle.

* * *

Olivia searched her memory for any other person...man, woman, or beast, who had the power to reduce her to a shrill harpy. Will Beckford apparently formed a species all his own. Hera alone knew how a man as tall and brawny as her old friend could slip in and out of the Chelmsford mansion without her knowledge. When she finally found her voice, all she could manage to bleat out was, “Where is your laundry?”

He stared back like a great, gawping dog she’d chastened until he finally found his voice. “I’m fine, Miss Whitcombe. How are you this glorious morning?” Outside, rain pummeled the cobblestones of the lower level courtyard like an army of ugly gray avengers.

Arghh...this was the part where he turned her into that hateful harpy. “Don’t you

have somewhere you should be? How can you traipse about London doing as you please and still take the King's coin?"

Will said nothing in reply. He stood, picked up his stovepipe hat from one of the wall hooks, and bowed low before clattering up the rear stone staircase to the tradesmen's entrance.

She stamped a foot in frustration before realizing all the women servants still in the room had been unobtrusively spying on them and would dine off her behavior for weeks over the table in the servants' hall.

* * *

April 15, 1830

Division C Peelers' Station

Will quick-trotted all the way back to the Soho station on Beak Street where he filled out forms to show the beats he'd patrolled and anything he'd seen worthy of passing on to his superiors. The captain to whom he reported leaned out the door of his small office and beckoned to Will. However, before Will could reach his side, he was cut off by the desk sergeant leading an obviously wealthy woman attired in a long, deep-green wool cape with fur trim and expensive leather boots, no doubt from Hoby's.

To be honest, very few women ever ventured into the Peelers' station, let alone one garbed in such finery. At the last moment, she turned as if sensing Will's presence. If Will were a weaker man, he'd have fallen on his arse. The woman who'd just turned her sad-sweet smile on him had the same raven-dark curls as Olivia, which was not exactly unusual. The older woman's hair was shot with a bit of silver at the temples.

However, the thing that had nearly set Will onto his arse was her eyes. Bright

sapphire snapped out at him, probing deep into his soul. Of course, he seated himself as close to his captain's office as possible. He had to know why this older version of Olivia had presented herself at the Section C headquarters. If he had to eavesdrop, so be it. He had to know. Was this woman possibly connected in some way to Olivia?

By the time she'd exited the office a long time later, Will had descended into a dark place of desperation. What he'd just overheard could upend Olivia's world and destroy her chances of finding a kind gentleman of the ton who would love and cherish her for life. He had to make sure that never happened.

4

APRIL 16, 1830

CHELMSFORD MANSION KITCHEN

* * *

B erkley Square

Olivia crossed her arms and tapped her new rose kid slippers on the polished tile of the kitchen floor. She'd come to expect Will around eleven each day, as dependable as the chimes of the hall clock. And today, his partner-in-crime Dickie sat next to him at the long heavy wooden table that took up most of the space in the center of the cavernous kitchen.

Why Cook hadn't thrown both of them out on their arses was a mystery. Oh—. Her pretend Uncle Percy had joined them, and all three of them were gobbling down chocolate biscuits fresh from the oven as if a famine were imminent.

His Grace saw her first. "Come join us, Olivia, before they're all gone."

The duchess had glided silently up behind Olivia and tapped her gently on the shoulder. "They're behaving like a nursery full of hellions."

"Are all men this attics to let?" Olivia's question came out in a soft whisper, but she really wanted to know. When Her Grace didn't answer, Olivia turned, and the

expression on her employer's face conveyed the wordless message: "I can't believe you asked that."

Will was the first to spy Her Grace and leapt to his feet with a deep bow. The other two biscuit thieves followed suit.

"Percy," the duchess said, "with me," and crooked a finger. He followed her back to the upper levels like an obedient, albeit tall, puppy.

"What in St. Martin's name are you two doing here at this hour of the day?" Olivia hated the way they made her feel.

Will spoke first. "I was making my rounds and after I checked the upper levels, Cook offered me refreshments on my way back to the station."

"Do you still work at all for Sir Robert Peel's police force?" Olivia demanded, an exasperated tone in her voice.

Will hung his head and mumbled something unintelligible.

"I can't hear you." Olivia moved closer and frowned at them.

"He said he's sorry," her brother Dickie assured her.

"For what?"

"For whatever you've got your gob all twisted about."

"I'm not talking to you." Olivia threw Dickie a murderous look.

Will raised his head. "I can apologize for myself, but you must see how dangerous

the city can be for a lady like you. You need protection.”

“In the mansion of the Duke of Chelmsford?”

His Grace, who had returned for another handful of biscuits, unhelpfully added, “I’m fairly sure Berkley Square has become the safest place in Mayfair. I, for one, am deeply grateful.”

Will nodded in acknowledgement but also had the good grace to flush a deep shade of red.

“I think the true reason you two are here all the time is because of the attention you get from the kitchen and house maids.” She glared at both Will and Dickie.

“No—.” Will started to protest but stopped at the sight of the crushed expression on her face.

“Um, these are actually for Her Grace.” The duke made his excuses along with a hasty exit at the growing tension in their voices.

“Now Olivia, you know that’s not true...” Dickie tried to defend their friend and calm his sister.

“Don’t ‘Olivia’ me. You’re a couple of useless saunterers and satyrs.”

“Says the woman who is being cosseted and readied for a grand ball.” Dickie ducked just in time to avoid being hit by a chocolate biscuit expertly lobbed at him by his sister. He caught the missile before it hit the tiles of the kitchen floor, popped it into his mouth, and turned a mocking smile on his sister.

Without waiting to empty his mouth of said biscuit, he taunted her. “You’re fishing

for a lord with whom to spend the rest of your life. Why do you care what Will does?”

Olivia sucked in a sharp breath and could not believe she was on the verge of not only tears, but a full-blown sobbing session. She raced out of the kitchen without a further word, leaving two men with their mouths hanging open.

* * *

When Olivia stormed out of the kitchen, Will's heart retreated so far inside him, he was afraid the cowardly, thumping thing had abandoned him. What had he done? What could he possibly have said that would have sent her racing away?

When his heart finally reappeared, the panic in his gut set the fickle thing to pumping in double time. He'd spent years expecting to see Olivia's beautiful face again with those sparkling blue sapphire eyes. And now he'd said or done something to make her hate him and run off.

And that wasn't the worst of it. If she knew what he was keeping from her, she'd despise him at whole new level.

Dickie turned a puzzled gaze on him. “What in blazes did we do?” He licked at the remaining crumbs on his lips and mused, “Women, who knows what goes on inside their heads?”

“Olivia's not like that,” Will interrupted.

“What do you mean?” Dickie swept an arm encompassing the maids who were beginning to crowd around them at the table. “She's jealous. She's probably set her cap at you.”

“She has not . Take it back.”

“Cor...for a tall lunk who’s supposed to be a smart Peeler, you’re as dense as a pile of cabbages on a farm cart.”

* * *

Her Grace listened patiently while her thick-headed, albeit gorgeous, husband related how concerned he was about the young friends who’d invaded their kitchen to raid Cook’s supply of fresh, warm chocolate biscuits.

“Do you suppose Miss Jones is having a fit of nerves over the ball? Should we change the date to give her more time to prepare?”

She reached over and lovingly used her thumb to remove a smudge of chocolate from his chin. “Too late. All the invitations have been sent and most have replied already. In spite of their haughty disapproval of our, um alliance, the entire ton seems inordinately fascinated with what goes on in this house.”

“I hate to see those young friends at odds, though. They’ve always seemed so loyal to each other.”

“Percy—stop worrying.” She favored him with an indulgent smile. “I suspect this has something to do with Olivia’s single-minded approach to life. She’s spent all of her nineteen years worrying about survival. This is probably the first time she’s had hours to herself to contemplate her life. Perhaps she’s never realized her true feelings for her old friend.”

Percy finished the thought for her. “And now all the attention he’s being showered with by our, um, staff has forced her to see anew how important he is to her.”

She pointed an elegant finger toward the duke and nodded her head in assent. “You’re not as muddle-headed as you seem. And we’re going to have the safest mansion in Mayfair for the near future.”

He gave her a wolfish smile whilst taking her finger into his mouth for a long, leisurely suck.

She gave a small moan of pleasure and pulled him over to a low settee along the wall of her office.

* * *

Olivia pulled on a warm pelisse over her morning dress, settled her stylish, towering, wide-brimmed hat onto her head with a plethora of hatpins and headed out into the park at the center of Berkley Square. She hadn’t ventured more than few steps beyond the gate when Dickie appeared at her side. He was like a wraith. You never knew he was there until he was too close to warn off. But she supposed that was why he was such a good spy.

“Livvy, you know I’m right.”

“About what?” Her tone came out a tad sharper than she’d like.

“You need to find a good husband, a gentleman who’ll make sure you never have to worry again.”

“Since when are you the best judge of what’s right for me?”

“Since the night we found you under that pile of refuse in a Seven Dials alley. Will was with us then. He’s with us now, and he knows I’m right too.”

“So, two out of three of us think you’re right. That still doesn’t make it right.”

“What are you saying? Don’t tell me you’ve set your cap at Will?”

With that, she turned and used the pointed end of her parasol to thrust hard onto the top of one of Dickie’s boots.

“Ow—why’d you poke me?” He moved away from her to the far side of the path.

“Because that seemed to be the only way to get your attention.”

“I’m listening.”

“I haven’t decided yet if I want to spend the rest of my life with some high-in-the-instep ‘gentleman.’”

“I knew it...you do want Will instead.” He doffed his bowler hat and slapped it hard against his trousers. “Are you saying you want a man whose whole life, night and day, is devoted to work with the Peelers? What kind of marriage would that be? With the small amount of blunt he makes, you’d be back running the laundry at Goodrum’s before I could say ‘cock o’ the walk.’”

She turned on him, furiously windmilling her fists at his chest.

“Now wot?” He gently took both of her gloved hands in his.

“What’s wrong with my running a profitable business like the laundry? Why wouldn’t I want to go back?”

As the first tear spilled down her cheek, her brother ceased his “helpful” speech and simply took her in his arms while she sobbed out her frustrations. The thing was, she

had no idea why she was frustrated. Will was the best friend besides her brother that she'd ever had. Why would she marry him and spoil that?

5

APRIL 17, 1830

MADAME CLAROT'S MODISTE SHOP

* * *

Bond Street, Mayfair

Madame Clarot gave her assistant a measured look. "The opera singer, Miss Constantia Villeneuve, is coming in today for a final fitting on a gown I designed and began work on last month."

Her partner Marie nodded, but there was a question in her eyes.

Annalise acknowledged what she assumed her partner was thinking. "Yes, Miss Whitcombe is the very image of Miss Villeneuve, but we mustn't even whisper a word of comment about the extreme likeness."

"Surely Miss Villeneuve would know if Miss Whitcombe were her daughter."

"Perhaps, but that is none of our business." Annalise raised an index finger in warning. "Not a word...to anyone. Our business depends on discretion in all things. If our clients suspect we are revealing on dits about their private lives, we would have to wave good-bye to all of this." She swept her arm around the elegant surroundings of the shop they'd worked years to build with the custom of the wealthiest women of

the ton.

“Of course,” Marie assured her, but later that day she paid a hack driver to deliver her to Monmouth Street where all the most successful gossip sheets were printed.

* * *

April 17, 1830

Covent Garden Theatre

London

Constantia Villeneuve frowned and handed over a fistful of five-pound notes to a well dressed man who visited her every Thursday afternoon at her dressing room at the Royal Opera. She had no idea how much longer she could appease the bastard before she'd have to confess all to her current protector, Lord Brantford, and throw herself at his mercy.

Even though she played most major parts that became available in London for coloratura sopranos, the pay she earned was barely enough to fulfill the blackmailer's never-ending demands. At the moment she was playing the Queen of the Night in *Die Zauberflöte* at the Covent Garden Theatre. Without the support of Brantford, she wouldn't be able to keep a roof over her head in her tiny cottage in St. John's Wood.

She gave her chin a stubborn tilt. “When will I be able to see my child?”

“I'm afraid that would not be wise at this particular time.”

“Why? Is there something wrong with her?” A note of panic crept into her voice.

“Oh, no, no, no. You fret for nothing, Miss Villeneuve.” His mocking tone implied he knew full well that was not her real name. “She’s been taken in by a highly placed family of the ton. Now that she’s launching into her first Season, I don’t think you’d want to raise a hue and cry that she’s your by-blow with a former lover.”

“And I suppose you’re taking my last bit of money to ensure that no one learns she’s a bastard?”

He reached out and touched her bare shoulder with a familiarity that made her want to cast up her accounts. “That, my dear, is up to you.”

When he finally left her alone, she stretched out on her rose-silk-covered chaise longue and sobbed noiselessly into a pillow.

* * *

April 18, 1830

Duke of Chelmsford’s Mansion

Berkley Square, Mayfair

Olivia listened so intently to the dance master the duke had hired, she feared she’d have a fit of the megrims. She’d never had the need, or desire, to dance the intricate steps required of ballroom dancing. Why had she let her dratted brother talk her into this charade?

“...and then all couples allemande in the opposite direction until they meet their original partners in the center of the line,” he droned on.

Directly across from her Dickie tried to make her laugh by faking a cross-eyed look.

Will stared woodenly at the dance master, deep in concentration, looking as flummoxed as she felt. Thank the goddess she didn't have to face this alone. The duchess had insisted that Dickie, Will, and His Grace stand in as dancing partners, since they were always hanging around anyway. They might as well earn the copious amounts of food they managed to put away whilst haunting the ducal kitchen.

Her dearest female friend, Lady Alice Perriton, had joined them, along with her toddler, P.D., and her husband, Sinjin. P.D. had recently learned to climb up on his plump, shaky legs and race about the house, causing everyone to scatter to help keep him safe from committing mayhem.

Olivia had met Alice several Seasons earlier when her friend had been suffering through her third wallflower Season. They'd become fast friends almost immediately. In fact, Olivia had helped Alice wreak revenge on two young bucks who had been making her life miserable. Who knew how easily itching powder could be introduced into men's linen shirts with no clues leading back to the perpetrators?

At the moment, the duke had bowed out of dance partner duties to take P.D. to the library where he insisted he and the boy would read something together. Her Grace and Alice had rolled their eyes as one, but everyone breathed more easily after the two had disappeared behind Uncle Percy's library door, followed by a long, blessed silence.

Olivia watched Alice and her handsome husband perform the first couple's maneuvers with admiration. They made dancing look so easy. They didn't even need to mind where their feet were. They stared instead into each other's eyes. Olivia had to swallow a lump in her throat. Alice and Sinjin were clearly in love. The dancing was easy because they didn't worry about the steps. They had eyes only for each other. When they reached the far end of the ballroom, they stopped and clasped their hands high in the middle. Alice motioned with a nod of her head for the others to follow their lead.

Mrs. Miller, the housekeeper, had been pulled into dance practice as Will's partner. Olivia wondered if Her Grace had paired him with the silver-haired woman on purpose. Had servants' gossip reached the duchess about how jealous Olivia got when Will hung out with the pretty, young housemaids? She reddened at the thought but took a deep breath and met her brother in the middle to mimic the steps down the long ballroom to meet the others.

Her Grace had dragged a tall footman into the ballroom to make up for the missing duke who was probably asleep along with the baby by now. They brought up the final steps to complete the set.

Once Olivia was surrounded by friends determined to make sure she didn't make a fool of herself at her own coming-out ball, she relaxed a bit. She found herself whirled momentarily in Will's arms several times as the dancers moved through the set and took entirely too much pleasure from the brief encounters. By the time they'd finished the complicated dance several times, she was not only exhausted, but ready to take on the judgment of the ton.

* * *

Will followed Dickie and Olivia into the library where, as suspected, they found the Duke of Chelmsford with the Perritons' baby P.D. asleep in his arms. Since the duke appeared to be sound asleep as well, Olivia carefully extricated the child to carry him back to his mother who was now resting in the family sitting room with her feet up on an ottoman whilst her husband cosseted her with a hot cup of tea and some of Nathaniel's raspberry macarons.

Olivia had shushed him and Dickie several times whilst they'd followed obediently in her wake. There was something he couldn't quite identify that happened as he watched Olivia's fierce protectiveness of P.D. whilst carrying him down the vast marble hallway in her arms. She paused several times to snug the boy's blanket

around his arms before hoisting him onto her shoulder and jiggling his sleeping form as she walked.

When Will reached forward to steal a soft touch atop the baby's head, P.D.'s light brown curls were damp from having shared the duke's warmth as he slept. The warmth and moisture on his fingers brought an unbidden scene where a boy of his own was being dandled on Olivia's shoulder. He nearly slapped himself at that sudden thought and dug his nails hard into his hands instead. What the hell was he thinking?

The minute a footman opened the door to the sitting room and they entered, everyone quieted as one. It seemed the general consensus was the small Perriton tyrant would be better to remain sleeping and soothed. Olivia gently placed him in Alice's lap. After kissing his curls, Alice handed him off to Sinjin for a trip up to the duke's nursery.

A burning sensation hit Will squarely on his breastbone. He'd always assumed he'd never have a family of his own, because of all the years he'd focused on nothing more than survival. Now he wanted that family. He wanted to be the one carrying a warm, slumbering babe up to a nursery of his own. He wanted to share that nursery with Olivia.

At that moment, he turned to his old friends. "I have to leave."

"Wot?" Dickie seemed so surprised at his abrupt departure, he reverted to his old speech of the rookeries.

"I'm expected back at the station."

"No, you're not." Olivia gave him a skeptical look.

“You said it yourself. I’m nothing but a saunterer. It’s time I returned to somewhere I’m needed.” With that, he rushed out of the family sitting room, clattering down to the front entrance of the mansion, not even bothering to make the longer side trip to exit through the tradesmen’s entrance by way of the kitchen.

6

APRIL 19, 1830

DUKE OF CHELMSFORD'S MANSION

* * *

Berkley Square, Mayfair

Olivia could generate barely an ounce of enthusiasm for the task ahead of her. Outside her bedchamber window, a weak spring sun pushed at gray-puffed clouds, mirroring her own thoughts.

Everything had come together at once in preparation for her coming-out ball a week from Tuesday. She'd been so busy learning ballroom "etiquette" from Alice and proper movements from the dance master Her Grace had hired, that she'd convinced herself the actual ball was still somewhere in the far distant future.

But now her cowardly brain had to accept the truth. The ball her brother had plotted and connived to obtain for her was actually going to occur...the following Tuesday. She'd have to bare herself to public inspection, like a mare at an auction at Tattersall's.

And the hoped-for outcome? Ending up leg-shackled to a stiff-rumped "gentleman" whose hopes and dreams would be nothing like hers. She'd spend the rest of her life living a lie. She knew in her heart of hearts: She was no lady. She was a woman with

dreams and aspirations of her own.

Trying on the vast wardrobe that had been delivered that morning from Madame Clarot's was the last thing she wanted to do. Each confection was designed to present to perfection her complexion and blue eyes praised by many as startling. And she had to admit the many evening gowns, dinner ensembles, day dresses, carriage dresses, and one glorious green velvet swirling cape made her itch to try them on and see if she'd look like the elusive "lady" her brother expected her to be.

She slumped into the chair at her ruffled dressing table, put her elbows onto the top, cupped her hands beneath her chin, and stared at the face in the mirror. Her deportment tutor would faint if he could see her now.

Who was she, exactly? Where did she come from? If she had parents, and surely she did, somewhere, why had they abandoned her to the streets of London when she was a toddler? The years she'd spent being groomed as a pickpocket sped through her memory like a blur of crowds, constantly moving, like throbbing masses of insects on the streets of London.

She remembered little from that vignette into her past. The part she could not forget were the years after her handler had no further use for her. Once she'd grown beyond the innocence of a child with impossibly large blue eyes and dark curls, he'd abandoned her back to the streets where he'd found her. The streets teeming with other men who wanted to exploit her for the only thing she had left.

Something back then had cracked in her still youthful mind. She'd decided she was through with being used. The night Dickie and Will had found her, Olivia had been ready to give herself up to the soothing flow of the Thames.

They'd been her only and best friends since then, and now she'd pushed Will away. He'd not reappeared at the Chelmsford mansion for over a week. Everyone had

commented on his absence, even the duke, who inexplicably seemed to miss their daily raids of the biscuit supply in the kitchen.

Her lady's maid, Louisa, found her there, deep into a dark fit of the blue devils. "I'm not going to ask why a young woman about to come out into society is acting as if someone stole her puppy, but here's a new pile of gossip sheets Her Grace just finished reading." She plopped the lot on the bed's counterpane.

"Let me know when you're ready to try on that magnificent wardrobe of yours. I'll be down in the servants' quarters having my morning tea. Just ring." With that, she left as quietly as she'd slipped in.

Olivia walked over to the selection of scandal sheets, took one, and flopped down on top of the counterpane to read the latest on dits of society's mistakes. The fact that she wasn't the only victim of the ton's unforgiving eye gave her some comfort.

And then she saw it. The on dit was a small item on an inside page, but the words seared into her brain:

What well known opera soprano hides a long, lost illegitimate daughter? Who could she be? This correspondent has seen a similar set of eyes the rare sapphire color of said soprano's eyes only once before...in Mayfair. We prefer not to mention names, but rumor has it the other owner of those eyes will soon celebrate her coming-out ball under an assumed name.

Olivia rang the wall bell for a footman and strode to the parlor's writing desk. She had just finished the final flourishes to her message when the footman tapped at the door. She handed him the folded, sealed missive and explained, "This has to get to my brother at Lady Camilla's house on St. James Square as quickly as is physically possible. The young man gave her a quick look of something like a cross between sympathy and understanding, grabbed the message, and took off toward the front

staircase at a fast trot. St. Giles's toe bone...did everyone read the gossip sheets? More to the point, did everyone now suspect she was the blow-by of an opera singer?

Olivia knew the one person who most certainly would have read that on dit and would know better than anyone what this could mean for her. She had to see the duchess, Olivia's former savior and employer, Captain El.

* * *

April 19, 1830

Bow Street

Near Covent Garden Theatre

Will trotted up Bow Street at a fast clip, trying not to stand out in his garish Peeler uniform. He'd tried to time his comings and goings so that he didn't overlap varying shifts of Runners. He didn't want to be marked as showing up at the same time every day.

He'd bribed a worker at the Covent Garden Theatre to let him know when the famous opera singer, Constantia Villeneuve, who was performing as Queen of the Night that month in *Die Zauberflöte*, came and went from her rehearsal sessions. He'd taken up a discreet spot safely hidden in an alleyway to spy on the woman who'd come to the station the week before inquiring as to the whereabouts of her lost daughter.

Will fairly ached with the need to tell Olivia. He so wanted to let her know her mother had not abandoned her, but instead had apparently turned her over to criminals who'd at first extorted money from the woman ostensibly to care for the babe. After years of lies, they'd simply told her the girl had been adopted and then severed contact. Now, she was desperate to find her daughter.

He secretly wondered if Miss Villeneuve had told his captain the whole story. What had happened to bring on her sudden desperation? Telling Olivia the story her heart needed to hear was out of the question before she secured a good marriage. No gentleman of the ton would want to take to wife the by-blow of a famous opera singer. He promised himself he'd send a long letter of explanation once she was safely married.

And then he saw the same man who'd shown up at exactly the same time each day. He entered the performers' entrance as if he belonged there, but Will suspected otherwise. The dark-haired man showed up each day a half hour before Miss Villeneuve ended her rehearsal. He dressed in the finest of clothing and was picked up by his own personal carriage at the end of his visits.

The unknown man left about twenty to thirty minutes later carrying a thick envelope. Several minutes after his exit, the performer herself left through the side stage door, her shoulders slumped and her head down.

One day Will ventured into the theater and introduced himself to the stage manager. "I've been on this beat a few weeks, and I've noticed a man who seems not to be a performer going through the stage door each day at the same time. Is he an employee here?"

The other man tilted his head and gave Will an odd look. "Are you one of those boys who can't stop eyeing Miss Villeneuve?"

Will steeled himself not to react or, God forbid, flush bright red. "I'm merely executing my duty, sir."

"If you're going to watch over the theatre, then you might want to acquaint yourself with the ways of opera singers, actresses, and the like. The man you're concerned about is Baron Barclay Reynolds, and I presume he's, um, one of Miss Villeneuve's

protectors.”

“Thank you sir, for all your help.” Will slapped the dust off his stovepipe hat against one trouser leg, gave the manager a short bow, and escaped back out onto the street to trot back to his regular beat. A week wasted, and he was no closer to finding out what had so terrified Olivia’s mother that she’d come to his station for help.

* * *

April 19, 1830

Duke of Chelmsford’s carriage

Streets near Piccadilly

Perseus Whitcombe, Duke of Chelmsford, had observed his newly found niece, Olivia, mope about the house so often in the last few days that he’d decided to take things into his own hands.

Even as he’d made the decision, he knew Her Grace would give him a tongue-lashing for interfering in the poor girl’s affairs. And a good tongue-lashing from Eleanor sometimes turned out to be so enjoyable that, frankly, he could not envision a down side.

And so here he was having his driver slowly course along the streets of Will Beckford’s beat whilst also sending two of his strongest footmen running along side streets to see if they could get a glimpse of the missing Peeler. After showing up almost daily for weeks, the man had virtually disappeared for the last week and half leading up to the imminent coming-out ball. Olivia was never going to find a husband with a long face and trembling frown.

After several hours of twists and turns, Percy knocked on the roof of his cavernous carriage. When his coachman pulled up the perfectly matched grays, Percy stuck his head out the window and said, “Let’s go out on Piccadilly for a few streets.”

“Goin’ to be slow work this time of day, Yer Grace.”

“What else do I have to do today?” Percy asked, and motioned the man onward before sitting back inside against the soft squabs. He’d nearly drifted off to sleep when he heard one of his running footmen shout, “There he is—.”

7

APRIL 19, 1830

DUKE OF CHELMSFORD'S CARRIAGE

* * *

S treets in vicinity of Piccadilly

Percy stared across the space in the center of the ducal carriage toward the stubborn young man seated facing him. Will's chin jutted forward, his hands were clenched into fists, and the ridiculous Peelers' oversize stovepipe perched on the seat next to him. Will's earlier explanation for Sir Robert Peel's design of the hat was so that they could stand on them to look over fences. Frankly, that made the whole idea even more ludicrous.

"Mr. Beckford, I hate say this, but I believe I see in you the man I used to be prior to my marriage."

Will gulped, obviously stunned, without a reply.

A chasm of silence yawned between them until the young man finally spoke. "I must apologize, Your Grace. I must have confused you with my sudden change of, erm, habit."

"Yes. I rather miss our morning raids on Cook's chocolate biscuits."

“I’m afraid I’d become the source of much frustration on Miss Jones’s part.”

“I didn’t see that at all,” Percy interjected.

“Please let me finish.” He unbuttoned the top button on the heavy, long wool coat that was part of his uniform.

Percy took a languid look out the coach window. “It is unseasonably warm today, isn’t it?”

“I may have been a little too, um, friendly with your kitchen staff, for which I apologize.”

“And you believe that is what caused Miss Jones to take umbrage?”

He squirmed a bit, readjusting his lanky legs to the side, before leaning over in a gesture of confiding. “I have to say, I’m not sure what caused her to turn on me so suddenly. Sometimes, I think I’ll never understand women.”

Percy gave Will a long, serious stare before breaking out in a peal of laughter. He laughed so long and hard, he eventually began to wheeze and had to stop.

“No man understands women. We’re not meant to,” the duke assured him. “Anyone who says he does is a deuced liar.” He leaned in closer. “Olivia’s lost her nerve, Will. She’s a young woman who’s lost her way. She needs you to come back and tell her she can do this. She must do this to secure her future. You’re her best friend. Nobody else can give her the prod she needs to stand on her own and give as good as she gets from those high-in-the-instep snobs of the ton.”

“But she has Dickie.”

“He’s her brother, and he loves her. He coddles her too much. Dickie’s afraid to prod Olivia in the direction she needs to go.”

At that moment, the carriage ceased moving. They were back at the spot on Piccadilly where the duke’s footmen had snatched Will away from his beat. “I know this is none of my business, but please think about it, for her sake.” After a long moment, he added, “And yours.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. I will.” And with that, Will slipped through the carriage door and disappeared into the crowds surging amongst the shops along Mayfair’s great thoroughfare.

Percy knocked twice on the roof, signaling his coachman to drive on home. He sat back and smiled a self-congratulatory smile. If he knew anything about young men and how they approached commitment to the women they loved, he’d poked Will into action as surely as if he’d poked a bear.

* * *

April 20, 1830

Lady Camilla’s drawing room

St. James Square

Olivia swung her gaze around the circle of her friends, all with grave expressions on their faces. Dickie looked as if he wanted to find someone to punch senseless; Lady Camilla looked like an invading Hun plotting mayhem beneath her perfectly coiffed silver curls; and her former employer, the Duchess of Chelmsford, sat on the edge of her chair and looked like she was ready to head out to sea to renew a life of piracy.

And then there was Will. Dickie had obviously dragged him in from the middle of his beat. She wondered how he managed to keep his regular job with the Peelers. His face was so pale, he looked as though someone had drained all his blood during the previous night and left him for dead. She felt a small twinge of guilt and wondered whether he was eating and sleeping properly what with his grueling work schedule on top of all his other racing around Mayfair making sure she was safe.

Everyone had a copy of the small bit of gossip which had appeared in The Morning Post, and was the reason she'd called them together. Olivia spoke first, voicing what she was sure everyone was thinking. "Is there any way this woman could possibly be my birth mother? And if she is, why has someone exposed her secret after all these years since she abandoned me on a street in Seven Dials? Who would have seen both of us to connect the similar odd coloring of our eyes?" She shook her head slowly. "I've never even been to the opera."

Her Grace snapped her fingers, jumped up and began to pace. "That's it."

"Wot is?" Dickie couldn't help himself and reverted to his old accent.

"Olivia has to go to the opera and see for herself if this woman might be her mother."

"How do we even know which opera singer she is? I say this is a bad idea. We shouldn't drag Olivia to every theater in town looking for the right opera singer." Will shook his head vigorously.

Lady Camilla interrupted. "There's only one opera production currently in town - Die Zauberflote at Covent Garden Theatre.

Her Grace stopped pacing. "Then it's settled, Will. You and Dickie will escort Olivia to the production tonight and use our box seats."

“Why can’t you and the duke escort her?” Will’s voice took on a touch of a whining tone.

“Because we want her to be able to get a discreet look at this woman to determine if she is indeed her mother. If Percy and I were to show up, every nosy person in the audience would be staring at the box all night. Olivia would have no privacy.”

Lady Camilla finally leaned forward to cover Olivia’s hand and spoke. “Would you like to meet the woman who might be your mother?”

“Good heavens, no. All I want is to be sure some horrible gossip about my being a bastard is not going to spoil the efforts you all have put into making sure I have a Season.” Olivia paused for a moment to collect herself before going on. She’d be damned if she would cry. “She abandoned me on a street in the rookeries when I was so little, I don’t even remember what she looked like. I have no desire to meet someone who could do that to another human being.”

* * *

April 20, 1830

Covent Garden Theatre

London

Will watched with trepidation as Lady Camilla’s nephew, Carrington-Bowles, stepped from Chelmsford’s carriage into the gaslit splendor of the pillared entrance to the Covent Garden Theatre. Dressed in dark evening attire, he cut a fine figure as he handed down the a mysterious masked woman from inside the carriage. Glimpses of a violet silk dress peeking through the swirls of a dark green woolen cape completed her aura of intrigue.

Will slid out behind her with Dickie close behind. They stared carefully at the crowd and the shadows beyond as though they were her bodyguards. A buzz of gossip and speculation began immediately amongst the crowd assembled in the queue outside to enter the theater. Opera patrons rarely attended performances with their faces covered with masks.

CB had finally consented to accompany the young people to the opera that night after concurring with his aunt's assessment that the combination of the three volatile friends on such a sensitive mission might end in bloodshed before the evening was over without a level-headed chaperone in charge. His partner, Nathaniel, was catering a private party that night, and, besides, he'd admitted he was curious about the coloratura soprano singing the part of the Queen of the Night in *Die Zauberflöte* .

Will gritted his teeth to keep from blurting out what he knew about the performer, and Olivia rolled her eyes at CB. She was determined to hate the woman who might be her mother, and Will couldn't convince her otherwise without revealing his own failure to tell her what he knew. He convinced himself the lie was a small one...and only for her own good.

8

APRIL 20, 1830

DIE ZAUBERFLOTE

* * *

Covent Garden Theatre

Olivia settled into one of the cushioned chairs in the Chelmsford private box, her eyes watering from the scent of the gaslight sconces and the glittering grandeur of the theatre assaulting all her senses. She'd never experienced anything so entrancing in her life. The gaslight's reflection off the gilding on all of the intricate wood fronts of the boxes and the stage gave a surreal glow to both the theater and the audience.

The most fascinating part was the audience: hundreds of people crowded the area below in front of the orchestra, which was making trilling, tuning noises whilst readying for the curtain to rise on the overture. The levels of finery would tax anyone's powers of description.

And then there was the reflected twinkle of countless be-jeweled women crowding the boxes all along the second level. She knew instinctively that many of those women were not the wives of the wealthy men at their sides. How many of them would one day, or perhaps already had abandoned children to the streets of the rookeries?

She hadn't expected the level of raucous noise from the crowd, both on the ground floor and from the small balcony near the ceiling. Under all was a constant buzz of conversation.

Of course, she could have afforded to attend the opera before, but the idea had never occurred to her. She and Dickie had attended some circus acts at Astley's, but those performances and that venue had been nothing compared to the opulence of the Covent Garden Theatre.

She'd worn the mask because the unwritten law of the ton specified a young woman was not supposed to appear in public venues until she'd had her coming-out event. Olivia had chosen a peacock blue satin gown for that night's excursion which revealed a great deal of her shoulders with a deep décolletage as well. A sapphire brooch, courtesy of Her Grace, secured a thin white lace cape covering her shoulders. When the lights were turned up just before darkening for the performance, she observed a theater full of people from the highest to the lower levels of society...and it seemed they were all staring at her. Maybe wearing a mask hadn't been such a good idea.

One of Aunt Camilla's footmen had brought up the rear with a basket of food prepared by Nathaniel's kitchen and several bottles of sparkling wine.

When she gave out a heavy sigh, the footman placed a flute of wine in her hand and offered a small tray of puffed pastry. At the first sip, she relaxed back into the thickly cushioned seat and vowed to ignore all the rude stares from the audience. She popped two of the small treats into her mouth in fast succession before downing the remaining wine and extending her empty glass toward the footman for a refill. Soon, her fears of the crowd's attention faded.

Behind her, Will stood guard at the entrance to the box. Dickie sat close by her side, squeezing her hand. "Be careful of that stuff," he warned, pointing at her glass. "It

goes down too easy. I'd hate to see Will have to carry you out of here back to the carriage. If you think people are staring now..."

She cut him off. "Dickie Jones, don't you dare let Will Beckford carry me anywhere or you'll regret the day you were born."

Dickie leaned close to his sister and whispered low. "Oh, so now that he's back, you're going to pretend you're enemies?" He ignored her return glare and shook his head. "Women. Can't please 'em, can't shut 'em up."

"Shut yer gob," she spat back, not caring who heard. The mask might come in handy after all. But then again, she was in the Chelmsford private box. She crossed her fingers behind her back, praying Captain El didn't find out she'd behaved like a hoyden at the opera.

Some time later when the woman who might be her mother began her aria as the Queen of the Night, Olivia's mouth dropped open. In the context of the plot, the character treated her stage daughter badly in the scene. How appropriate.

But even she could not fail to be overwhelmed by the strength, talent, and skill required of the part. In the scene where the singer produced a musical series of shrieks meant to chastise her daughter, the notes produced were so high whilst still so forceful that Olivia marveled the woman could stand and deliver such a performance night after night.

No wonder this strange woman was famous in London. But as far as Olivia was concerned, aside from her dark hair and striking sapphire eyes, she could not see any resemblance. However, when she sneaked a glance at her fellow listeners, the looks on their faces revealed what she'd dreaded. Apparently, she was the only one unable to see the similarities. Even Lady Camilla's footman let slip a sympathetic stare which he quickly hid by turning to fetch another chilled bottle of wine.

When she could no longer hide the flood of tears threatening to pour out from under her mask, she jumped up from her chair and fled out of the box and down toward the lower level of throngs of people moving to and fro and conversing raucously. She regretted the mask but knew it would be the end of her reputation if she took it off, so she plunged wildly into the mob of opera revelers.

Suddenly, a large hand of iron gripped her by the waist and slammed her back up against a solid, immovable chest. She stiffened in terror and cursed herself as a ninnyhammer.

“Where in the name of all that’s holy do you think you’re going?” The voice was scolding and stern, but familiar.

Will .

She was still so frightened, she could barely speak, but managed a small squeak of protest. “Why should you care?”

“Because I’m the one who’s been watching over you for as long as either of us can remember.”

She’d turned in his arms by then. “Then where have you been? I thought you’d abandoned me.”

“Never,” he said, in a hoarse whisper. “Not now, not ever.”

When he marched her back to the staircase leading up to the level of the private boxes, she turned and swiped at the tears that had escaped below the mask and down her cheek. “From where I stand, you certainly don’t act like someone who’s devoted to me.”

He turned ominously silent until they reached the staircase landing.

She started to complain again, but before she could, he pulled her toward a darkened corner, leaned down and claimed her lips in a short, rough kiss. When he pulled away quickly, as if contact with her mouth had scorched his skin, she pulled him back for a deeper kiss. He didn't pull away this time.

After a tentative exploration of his lips, Olivia opened her mouth to him and he probed her depths with his tongue, until they sank into a final kiss so deep and long, that they didn't hear Dickie glide up.

“St. Swithin's elbow...where in Hades have the two of you been? I was about ready to call in Obadiah and his outriders to find you. I thought you might be floatin' in the Thames, but nooo, here you are in a dark corner carryin' on like a couple of shriekin' cats in an alley.”

Olivia could barely breathe for aching with want, and she was pretty sure Will was grateful at that moment for the roomy trousers of the Peelers' uniform, which they were forced to wear everywhere.

Her head spun with questions. What had just happened? Why had Will been pretending to be nothing more than a friend all this time? More importantly, how could she go through with the silly charade of finding a gentleman of the ton to marry when the man she wanted in her bed, and in her life, stood before her, shifting from one booted foot to the other, his face a scarlet shade of shame?

April 23, 1830

Duke of Chelmsford's Mansion

Berkley Square, Mayfair

Olivia cocked her head to the side and walked slowly around her bedchamber, trailing the fingers of one hand along the many ensembles laid out on the top of the counterpane of her bed. Madame Clarot and her assistant stood in the corner awaiting her verdict. Each ensemble had been carefully wrapped and padded with tissue paper to discourage wrinkling. Empty boxes the dressmakers had brought full of their frantic week's worth of work were piled high in the hallway outside.

She was having a hard time concentrating on her wardrobe for the Season after what had happened at the opera earlier that week.

In all her daydreams where she'd imagined a first kiss with Will, the reality of how he'd stolen one the night of the opera had taken her breath away.

She'd pictured a scene where, similar to a farce on a Covent Garden stage, the dialogue would be something along the lines of: "A kiss?" he'd say. "What's this?" he'd say. "You're just a child...you're my best friend's sister."

The reality of his passionate seizing of her lips had taken her totally by surprise. Even now, the memory was like something that had never entered her wildest imaginings.

She ended her reveries abruptly and gave her lady's maid a mischievous look. "What shall we try on first?"

"Miss Whitcombe, please..." Madame Clarot interrupted, "let's see you in your ballgown first so that we can start the alterations as soon as possible."

Olivia frowned.

"The ball is happening next Tuesday no matter what you do. You do realize that?" Her maid, Louisa, gave out a small huff of exasperation.

“All right. Let’s get this over with.” She raised her arms so that Louisa could lower the gown over her stays, shift, and petticoat. The elaborate dress settled over her body like the whisper of a white linen cloud. When she joined the modistes in front of the full-length mirror, she caught a glimpse of a virginal young woman cloaked in a fragile mist of icy white innocence. The thought caused her stomach to turn in disgust.

She didn’t feel virginal, although in fact, she was. The reason she was still virginal had nothing to do with virtue. A sudden realization slammed into her. The only man with whom she’d ever have considered sharing her body was also the only man who’d always been too proud and stubborn to accept what she had to give.

Why did he have to be so damned noble?

Madame Clarot snapped her fingers and ordered in a garbled tone through a mouth full of pins, “We’re done with this one, Miss Whitcombe. Let’s move on to one of the carriage dresses, for heaven’s sake. Otherwise, you’ll need to start making reciprocal calls after your coming-out...with nothing to wear.”

Olivia jerked back to reality and obediently raised her arms again. Agreeing to Dickie’s cork-brained idea of her becoming a lady of the ton had been one of the most colossal bad ideas in her short life.

9

APRIL 23, 1830

DUKE OF CHELMSFORD'S MANSION

* * *

B erkley Square, Mayfair

Just then, her bedchamber door opened a crack, and Alice popped her head around the corner. "How goes the preparation for battle?"

Olivia sighed and raced to her friend's side dangling half-pinned parts, with Madame Clarot in hot pursuit. "Ladies, ladies...how will we ever be ready on time if we can't stand still for a few moments?" She'd pasted a friendly smile firmly on her face, but somehow, Olivia wasn't convinced.

Alice intervened smoothly. "Why don't you and your assistant begin work on the changes you've already measured whilst I steal Olivia away for just a few minutes of last-minute details about the ball we have to discuss?"

"But of course, Lady Alice." Madame Clarot was smiling with her voice, but the slight frown on her face told another story. "We have plenty to keep us busy until the two of you return."

Alice flashed her brightest smile. "Thank you so much." At the same time, she

grasped Olivia's hand and dragged her out of the room into a nearby empty bedchamber. Once they were safely inside, she leaned all the way out of the doorway and looked both ways up and down the hallway before shutting the door and turning back to her friend. She motioned to the bed where they both climbed up and sat cross-legged.

Even after all her precautions, Lady Alice still spoke barely above a whisper. "There are some things you need to know before we descend into the cage of tigers that your coming-out ball will be."

Olivia gazed at her, wide-eyed. "What have you heard?"

Alice returned a puzzled look. "What should I have heard?"

Olivia cast down her gaze, unable to face her friend. "There is an ugly rumor which may or may not be true, but I can't take any chances."

Alice sat for long moments, staring off in the distance and chewing on her lip. For one horrible moment, Olivia feared the possibility of scandal about to fall down on her head might have pushed her friend to a place where she'd be afraid to help her for fear of scandal by association.

Finally, Alice spoke. "Here's what we're going to do. I've already spoken to Lady Camilla. She knows what happened at the opera, because CB filled her in on the striking resemblance. However, no one knows you were at the opera, except for our close circle. We've all decided we're going to stonewall the gossip. Whoever is spreading that horrible rumor has some ulterior motive. Otherwise, why now? It's their word against yours."

"But why would anyone believe me? I'm a nobody, a lowly laundry maid."

Alice gave out a low chuckle. “You’re the niece of a duke, for heaven’s sakes. Have you forgotten already, you silly girl? Now straighten that backbone of yours and listen to me.

“I have a list of the wallflower’s do’s and don’t’s I drew up during my three dreadful Seasons: 1 - never dance with someone to whom you’ve not been introduced, and once you’re introduced to an upstanding gentleman, you cannot refuse to dance with him, unless you feign extreme illness and dance with no one else the rest of the night; 2 - never allow any man, no matter how handsome, talk you into going off somewhere alone with him during the ball without a chaperone; 3 - never, ever dance with the same gentleman more than twice; and most important, 4 - never show your anger in public, but always get even. And then there’s the hand signal.”

“What hand signal?” Olivia wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“If you’re cornered or held up on the dance floor by some lackwit or boor, use a hand signal to alert all of us you need help.”

“How about I wiggle three fingers behind my back?”

“That could work, but make sure you’re in a position where we can see your sign of distress. We’ll have plenty of gentlemen, all known to you, who will patrol the perimeter of the dancers, ready to swoop in and save you.”

“I can take care of myself. You forget I’ve been in more street fights than any duke’s niece would have a right to claim.”

“Just remember, though, you’ve probably never encountered the likes of the disgusting rakes and lechers of the ton. They rely on young women being afraid to cause a scene in the middle of a ball. Personally, I like to catch them off guard, stomp my heel on top of one of their feet, and pretend it was an accident. That usually gets

their attention and encourages them to move on.”

* * *

After Olivia and Alice had left the modistes alone, Madame Clarot turned on her assistant Marie. “ Why , in the name of all that’s holy did you pass on the on dit about our client to The Morning Post ? I know it was you.”

Marie sniffed back a tear and bowed her head. “I’m so sorry, Madame, but I needed the money.”

“Don’t tell me you’re selling secret information about my clients behind my back now?”

The other woman began to sob. “He...he won’t leave me alone, and each week he wants more money.”

“Who?”

“The blackmailer.”

“My God, Marie. What have you done?”

* * *

Will swallowed the lump in his throat and reminded himself of the duke’s warning. Olivia needed him, she needed her best friend to give her the courage to stand up to all the ugliness and snobbery of the ton. Instead, he’d flummoxed both of them the night of the opera with his inexplicable rude, bad behavior. However, he was not sorry for the outcome: Olivia crushed to his body, Olivia responding and returning his kiss with such fervor. He was surprised Dickie hadn’t found them with Olivia against

the wall, her legs wrapped around him, his... God...he had to stop thinking about what might have been.

He'd slip over to Berkley Square, spend maybe a few minutes giving her encouragement, and then he'd be gone. He didn't want to linger to find out in the days and weeks ahead that she'd accepted a proposal of marriage and would be sharing her life (and bed) with someone she barely knew. But the stranger would be a gentleman. That was the most important thing.

He'd be damned if he'd stick around to watch her walk away on the arm of another man. That was a favor too far, even for the Duke of Chelmsford.

When he slipped through the servants' entrance and headed on through the kitchen, Cook motioned for him to sit down for biscuits and tea. "Can't stop today," he apologized. "I'm only here for a few minutes. Is His Grace at home?"

Cook rolled her eyes and motioned upward with her thumb. "He's up there in Her Grace's study."

Damn . He'd have to wait. His captain was beginning to get suspicious of his long absences between walking his assigned beats, and he'd hoped to slide in and out of the house within a few minutes. But he didn't want to neglect to check in with the duke whilst he was there. He wanted to make sure His Grace knew he was doing what he'd suggested. He'd learned long ago that "suggestions" from the Duke and Duchess of Chelmsford were not really suggestions. Their suggestions were actually orders, and they expected their orders to be followed.

With a sniff of Cook's chocolate biscuits fresh from the oven and a pot of steaming hot tea awaiting him at the duke's favorite table, Will sighed and lowered his tall form onto one of the wooden benches.

Within a few minutes, the rich cocoa aroma must have reached the upper level where the duke was doing who knew what with his duchess. At the thought of the beautiful, fiery Eleanor Whitcombe, a sort of high seas smuggler when she wasn't the Duchess of Chelmsford, Will mused that the duke must indeed be addicted to Cook's biscuits.

The lanky duke, every bit as tall as Will, sauntered over to his side and joined him on the bench. Within minutes, the platter, which had been piled high with the confections, was empty with only a smattering of crumbs remaining.

"What you prompted you to grace us with your presence today?" The duke popped his third biscuit in as many minutes into his mouth.

Will had the good grace to mop crumbs from his lips before answering. "I wanted to let you know the reason I haven't checked on your household for over a week."

"Indeed?" The duke swallowed the last biscuit but kept his eyes trained on Will, deadly in earnest.

Will continued. "I've been away on an, um, special assignment."

Without commenting on Will's frail excuse, His Grace moved on to the most important question. "Have you spoken to Olivia?"

"Erm, not exactly."

"I see. I suppose stolen kisses in dark corners with masked women do not count as actual conversation."

Will sucked in a deep breath and felt his body heat with embarrassment from the top of his head to his neck. He wished for nothing more than for the kitchen floor to open and swallow him whole.

* * *

Olivia secretly was enjoying Will Beckford's extreme discomfiture. Served him right. He'd spent all those years making her think she was just a friend, the tagalong sister of his bosom friend Dickie. The question was, how long should she make him squirm?

A footman had delivered him to the family sitting room like a huge barrel of soap on wash day at Goodrum's before slamming the door behind him.

He stood there like a great, hulking bear about to growl. "I'm sorry, Olivia. I've been a terrible friend. I've taken advantage of your regard and confused you in the midst of your preparation to find a proper gentleman for a husband."

"Then why the hell are you here?" she shot back.

"I hope you don't talk like that at your coming out ball...you need..."

She interrupted him with the duchess's favorite command. "Stubble it—. I'm not your responsibility, nor do I have need of any of your cork-brained advice."

"But..."

"Stop. I'm going to go through with the coming-out ball my brother seems to think I need, and I'm not afraid of facing the high-in-the-instep, self-important members of the ton. They can look down on me, they can give me the cut direct, but they can't change how I feel about myself in here." She thumped her chest hard.

At the stricken look on his face, she softened her tone. "We'll always be friends, but you don't need to watch over me anymore. I can take care of myself from now on." When he hung his head, she added, "If you're worried about my assuming you care

for me because of what happened in that darkened corner, I'm willing to forget if you are. Let's blame that kiss on too much bubbly wine." She stood then, extended her hand, and sent him away with nothing more than a short "Good-bye."

On his way out, before turning toward the kitchen and the tradesmen's entrance below, he had to pass the duke's study. He'd nearly passed by when an arm shot out and dragged him inside.

10

APRIL 27, 1830

DUKE OF CHELMSFORD'S MANSION

* * *

Transformed Upper Level Ballroom

Olivia had a problem. She'd memorized all of Alice's do's and don't's, she'd burned into her brain all of the cautions she'd learnt from her etiquette tutor, and she had a fair mental list started of the most "eligible" men of the ton. After all, if she was going to live a life without love, the best thing she could do would be to ensure she caught a man with the most power and money.

However, that annoying notion of "love?" She was having a damnably difficult time standing still and keeping a serene smile on her face whilst imagining all the naughty things she'd do to Will if she were free to love him. She had to clench her legs together to ease the ache in her quim at the very thought of what he'd do to her in the darkness of night on a bed covered with virginal white, lavender-scented linens and lace-trimmed pillow covers. She'd pull him down to her and spread..." She started at the sound (insistent) of Lady Camilla's voice accompanied by the subtle rap of the lady's fan against her wrist.

"Miss Whitcombe, may I present Doctor Charles Fitzgibbons, physician at the Royal Hospital for Seamen at Greenwich?"

At his bow of acknowledgment, Olivia curtsied slightly. "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Doctor Fitzgibbons."

She maintained her perpetual smile, hoping that after several hours, she still looked like a real person and not some fashion doll in a modiste shop. The man before her was appealing in a bland sort of way. However, he did have kind eyes. That was something. He was probably at least sixteen years her senior, but she supposed that really didn't matter. Perhaps men became less demanding as they entered their dotage. That should count for something.

"Miss Whitcombe, would you honor me with the favor of a dance?" He bowed low again, and she worried he might hurt his back with so much bending up and down.

"It would be my pleasure, Doctor Fitzgibbons." Since couples were lining up for the dance already, they hurried across the floor. Olivia calculated the complicated set would take at least an hour...an hour in which she wouldn't have to engage in frivolous conversation. And then perhaps she could escape to the ladies' retiring room for a few blessed minutes of rest and refreshment.

* * *

The Duchess of Chelmsford placed a hand over her husband's behind his back...and squeezed, hard, as only she could. At first he grimaced a bit and continued to smile at their guests as they were announced and filed past into the upper floor they'd turned into a vast, temporary ballroom.

Eleanor's gracious smile never wavered, but she increased the pressure on his hand until he was forced to lean his head close to hers so that she could whisper into his ear. "Did you interfere in those young people's lives?" she rasped low.

"Of course not," he started, and then groaned when she ground her nails into the top

of his hand.

She skillfully continued conversing with late arriving guests. “Lord Havers, Lady Havers...Please enjoy yourselves this evening. The orchestra will remain until dawn, supper will be served at one, and a breakfast brunch will be served promptly at five. Refreshments will be available all evening from footmen at the edges of the dance floor, as well as in the card area and, of course, the ladies’ retiring room. Now, if you’ll please excuse us, we have to deal with, um, a bit of a set-to below stairs.” She waved a hand dismissively. “A minor contretemps, nothing more.”

With that, she motioned to Lady Alice and her husband Sinjin to move over to take their places in the receiving line. Their good friends, the Earl of Framlingwood and his Countess Cassandra were already assisting with greeting the hundreds of guests who kept arriving in waves.

Alice moved smoothly into place without question, pulling Sinjin along with her. They continued greeting guests as Eleanor pulled Percy into the servants’ passageway between the two sides of the ballroom, which the rest of the year served as a formal dining room at one end and a mammoth drawing room at the other. A grand staircase landing across from a concealed pantry and food service area took up the center space.

Once in the darkened passageway, she pulled him to the side so that no unsuspecting footman fell over them and grasped him by his earlier elaborately tied neckcloth.

“I say, Eleanor. Are you trying to choke me?”

“No, Percy. If I wanted to choke you, and I’m still debating that course of action, you’d already be dead.” She tightened her hold to demonstrate her force of will. “Now, tell me before I do choke you: Did you interfere in the lives of Olivia and Will?”

“No, not really. Well, maybe a little.”

She let him go suddenly and slumped back against the wall. “That explains a lot. Have you noticed at all the level of enthusiasm Olivia’s shown thus far for all the eligible men Lady Camilla and her pack of aristos have introduced to the befuddled young woman?”

“You mean the way she acts like a prize mare who’s not impressed with any of the mediocre studs sent her way?”

“Percy—.” Her Grace dissolved into waves of laughter until tears rolled down her cheeks. “Percy, sometimes, you so surprise me. For someone who’s such a stiff-rumped scion of the ton as well as a Whig for God’s sakes, you have a truly naughty side.” She turned and captured his lips in a kiss so extended and intense, that a footman nearly did fall over them in his haste to deliver more sparkling clean glass tumblers.

After the poor man collected himself, and Percy helped him retrieve some of the glasses that had rolled off his tray, he returned to his wife and hung his head. “I imagine the next question out of your mouth, now that you’re done ravaging me with it, is whether or not Mister Beckford is here tonight.”

“Is he?”

Percy didn’t answer but didn’t lift his head either.

* * *

Will, dressed in a spare uniform belonging to one of the Whitcombe family footmen, had lurked all evening near the dance floor. Boredom had set in quickly, and he’d ended up actually helping with some of the endless carrying of trays of food up from

the kitchen in the lower level of the mansion. The cork-brained idea the duke had insisted was the best way to make sure Olivia was happy and safe was for him to stand by throughout the ball and be there if at some point she changed her mind.

Who says “no” to a duke? Will had gone along with Chelmsford’s obviously flawed plan and exactly what he’d feared had set in. He’d glimpsed Olivia dancing in the midst of the throngs of other dancers in various sets. He couldn’t say if she was exactly happy, but he certainly couldn’t offer her anything near what the wealthy and titled men in attendance could.

And then his heart launched into a precarious tattoo. The last interminable set had ended, and Olivia was passing by his vantage point inside the pantry hallway at the exact moment the musicians chose to launch into a waltz. The heat of the crowded event, combined with the energetic, extended dance she’d just finished, sent lavender-scented pheromones pulsing off her body. He had nothing to lose. They’d practiced the waltz amongst a dozen other types of dances when he’d volunteered as a partner. He could do this.

* * *

Olivia was so exhausted from all the forced conversation and dancing, she was ready to give up and seek her bedchamber for the night. Instead, she’d fled after the last set with the kind-eyed doctor to the women’s retiring room to regain some strength and perhaps indulge in a steaming cup of tea.

She was within a few steps of the oasis away from the crowds when a familiar iron grip snatched her away from her mission and through the servant passageway door near the pantry. She huffed out a deep sigh. “Will—what are you doing? Someone will throw you out of the mansion, head-first; your captain will find out; and you’ll lose your job.”

He placed a soft finger across her mouth. “Shhh...the music’s started.”

Without another word, he threaded his arms around hers and clasped her elbows. The music had started slowly, thankfully, for the two of them to become comfortable with the movements. Once the music reached a dizzying pace, she held tight to his strong arms and felt the wind on her face as they circled up and down the servants’ passageway. After a few minutes, a number of serving maids and footmen had stopped to watch, and to allow them as much room as possible.

Everything Olivia had been taught about proper tonnish behavior screamed through her ears until the sound finally died, and all she could hear was the music. All she could feel was Will’s arms around her. All they had was a tiny oblong circle in the tight passageway, but it felt like they were gliding along the actual polished and sanded ballroom floor beyond the walls. However, there was something about being on the servants’ side of the walls that felt right, and being in Will’s arms felt not only right, but perfect. This was where she belonged.

Suddenly, the music ended, Will rushed her back out to the ballroom, and she made her way toward the lady’s retiring room once again, a little giddy from so many dancing turns, she told herself, denying the dizzying effect a mere caress from Will had on her.

11

APRIL 27, 1830

DUKE OF CHELMSFORD'S MANSION

* * *

T transformed Upper Level Ballroom

When Olivia returned to the heated whirl of the ball, she felt somehow deflated. The stuttering way her heart had felt whilst in Will's arms was gone. Another lengthy, intricate dance was forming out in the middle of the floor. The musicians had just returned from a well-deserved break and were making the nonsensical sounds of tuning their instruments.

She sighed and sought out Lady Camilla and Lady Alice who were taking their leisure in comfortable seats at the side of all the dancers. Lady Camilla, of course, had the excuse of age. Oliva's friend Alice had confided just the day before that she and Sinjin were expecting another child, and she intended to sit out this ball. As she approached her small group of supporters, a dark-haired older gentleman walked up to Lady Camilla to pay his respects. When he tilted his head toward her, Olivia noticed that despite the fitness of his athletic body, there were slashes of silver at his temples.

When she arrived, Lady Camilla turned to her with a mild, noncommittal look. "Miss Whitcombe, this is Baron Barclay Reynolds, an old friend of my estates manager.

Lord Reynolds, this is Miss Olivia Whitcombe, niece of the Duke of Chelmsford.” Olivia returned his bow with a small curtsy and eyed the empty chair at Alice’s side with relish.

“Miss Whitcombe,” he intoned. “May I escort you to the dance now forming?”

Damn . She so wanted to say “no,” but knew that was one of the major sins a young woman could never commit at a ball, especially one in her honor. As they walked toward the other dancers, he touched her back lightly with his hand as if moving her where he wished and demonstrating his power over her. A chill coursed down her back at his touch.

She took her place and wondered whether she’d actually danced a hole in one of her slippers. Her feet ached with an intensity much worse than she’d ever experienced standing all day in her laundry. Her aching feet had made her forget another of Alice’s warnings. It was midnight already, and supper would be served at one. She was now obliged to sup with this overbearing man.

Once the dance started, they passed each other rarely, but the times they did come together lasted all the way up the line and made it possible for some limited conversation.

When they came together at the bottom of the line, he looked directly into her eyes and she thought he said, “Your eyes really are like hers.”

When he twirled her around and they were facing each other again, she said, “I beg your pardon. I didn’t understand what you said.”

“You look just like your mother. The two of you have eyes unlike any others I’ve ever seen.”

Just before they parted at the top of the line to make way for the next couple, she gave him a cold look and said, “My mother is dead.”

He laughed as though she’d just related a humorous one and moved away through the set.

* * *

The duchess joined the ladies who sat serenely at the edges of the dance floor of the ballroom. “Lady Camilla, who is that man dancing with Olivia?”

“He’s a friend of a friend. Baron Barclay Reynolds.”

“Oh, the tin man.” El recalled hearing about the man from Percy.

“What?” Alice had nearly drifted off to sleep but jolted awake at the words, “tin man.”

“He claims to own tin mines in Cornwall, but I’ve never seen him leave London. He’s a member of Percy’s club, White’s.” El’s face took on a speculative look. “The true source of his income is somewhat of a mystery. Percy can’t make out how a man with so little land could have accumulated so much wealth.”

“Surely you have something on him through Goodrum’s.” Alice gave her a questioning look.

“He never comes to Goodrum’s, and I’ve never heard of him gambling at anyone else’s tables either. A very strange sort of bird.” El shook her head. “I hope Olivia’s not too tired to stand up for herself if he’s too boring, or controlling. I don’t like his attitude.”

“Oh, we have a signal set up.”

“A signal?” Lady Camilla peered at Alice with interest.

“Of course. It’s one of the unshakeable laws of being a wallflower. You have to let your friends know you need help with a pre-arranged signal.”

“And what did you and Olivia settle on?” El leaned close

“She said she’s going to wiggle three fingers behind her back to summon the cavalry.”

Lady Camilla gave out a throaty giggle. “Then we shall have to send Captain Atherton to the rescue.”

They stared out onto the floor at the same time, but Olivia was still dancing, no finger wiggling in sight.

* * *

Will and the duke stood with the door cracked open at the entrance to the servants’ passageway and spied on the dancers out on the floor.

“Who is that man?” Will’s tone came out sharper than he’d intended.

“A bit of a mystery. He’s a member at White’s, keeps himself to himself. He presents like a gentleman with a great deal of wealth, but the only thing anyone knows about him is he has a tin mine out in Cornwall. The price of tin being what it is, that line of business is hardly the way for a man to live like a nabob who made a fortune in India.”

Will said nothing, but he felt as though his entire insides were turning to ice. He had no claim on Olivia. He had no right to influence whatever choice she'd make, but he'd be damned if he'd let her go to some sneaksby.

His Grace was quiet for a long time before adding as an afterthought: "You won't say anything to Her Grace about our little talks today...will you?"

It was all Will could do to keep from laughing. One of the most powerful men in the kingdom was terrified of his wife. But then not many men would be up to the task of being married to the fearsome Duchess of Chelmsford, otherwise known as Captain Eleanor Goodrum Whitcombe, proprietress of the infamous Goodrum's House of Pleasure.

* * *

Olivia had concerns of her own. Against her better judgment, she allowed herself to be led into supper by the obnoxious Lord Reynolds. She wistfully recalled the lighthearted conversation with Alice about the perils of wallflowers. She fairly itched to wiggle three fingers behind her back. She knew the legion of gentlemen who attended Lady Camilla would come charging to her defense.

However, she was certain the lizard of a man escorting her would not flinch at publicly condemning her as the bastard daughter of a famous opera singer. The damage he could do to her was nothing compared to what would happen to the duke and duchess. After all, they'd made up a Banbury tale about her being Percy's niece. And then there was the ethereally beautiful opera singer she'd observed what now seemed a lifetime ago. She did not feel any kinship with the woman, but she knew instinctively the scandal he could spawn in the middle of her coming-out ball would probably destroy Miss Villeneuve's career as well.

She gave the him a sideways glance. She wished there were something she could do

to stop him. Unfortunately, no poison appeared to be at hand that she could slip into his food.

Once she was seated at one of the small tables for supper, he fetched a plate of a wide assortment of delicacies from the buffet table. He'd no sooner than returned with their plates than her "Uncle" Percy glided up.

Lord Reynolds, who had just sat down, leapt up again. "Your Grace." He nodded in deference to the duke.

"Lord Reynolds...I trust you're enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, of course, and the company." The baron gave Olivia a fond look.

"Well, carry on." The duke paused for a moment before adding, "Olivia, you're looking a bit tired. Is it possible you've enjoyed the dancing a little too much?"

She gave the duke a blank stare, hoping to the gods she didn't give away her abject fear.

"Perhaps you might want to retire a bit before dawn?"

"You're right. I'll consider slowing down after supper. Thank you so much for all your kindness and providing all this." She spread her arms wide, encompassing the beautifully set supper buffet and the masses of fragrant flowers brought in from their country estate.

"Well, um, if there's nothing else I can do for you, niece, then I'll go, um, find Her Grace."

As soon as the duke had circled back to where Lady Camilla sat with Lady Alice,

Sinjin, and the duchess, Lord Reynolds leaned conspiratorially across the table. “He doesn’t trust me, but he will when you tell him you won’t marry anyone but me.”

Olivia nearly cast up her accounts at that pronouncement, and carefully set down the tumbler of punch she’d been drinking so as not to bring on a fit of coughing.

“I’m sorry sir, but you are mistaken...I could never—.”

He interrupted her harshly. “But you will. You have no choice. Otherwise, I’ll destroy everyone you care for. I’ll even turn in your lover, that hulking Will Beckford, for eavesdropping on Miss Villeneuve’s visit to his Peeler office and then following me all over London like some ridiculous dog.”

Olivia thought the worst of what could happen to her had already passed, but the bit about Will was slowly sinking into her consciousness. “What did you say about Mister Beckford?”

“Oh, he didn’t tell you, did he?” He laughed his oily, nauseating laugh again. “Your stupid mother ignored my warnings and went to the Peelers to try to get them to find you.”

“Why? Why would she do that, after all these years?”

“Because she didn’t leave you on that Seven Dials street corner. I did. I knew one of the pickpocket kings would scoop you up in a heartbeat. You had the face of an angel, one that no one would suspect was emptying their pockets.

“She’s been paying me all these years for your keep with a ‘wealthy’ family.”

“What kind of monster does that?”

“Me, and yes, I can. This is how I’ve always earned a living, but now, with your ducal dowry, I can leave that business behind.”

“I’m not going to marry you. I’ll pay you what you want. Leave Miss Villeneuve and duke out of this.”

“Oh, no, my love. That dowry is my ticket to retirement. Miss Olivia Jones, a laundress at Goodrum’s, cannot possibly come up with the equivalent of a ducal dowry on her own. You will marry me, and you’ll like it.” He extended his hand across the table and gripped hers so tightly, tears came to her eyes.

She endured the pain and refused to call for help. She would bring this monster down on her own and enjoy every minute of his torture.

One minute they were alone, and she was at his mercy, but the next minute, there stood her brother Dickie looking like an avenging angel. “Is everything all right here?” His voice vibrated with warning. He was not really asking a question.

Lord Reynolds rose immediately, his evil look replaced by a genial man-of-means look. “I do not believe we’ve been introduced, sirrah.”

“You’re right. We haven’t. Miss Whitcombe is my sister.”

“Pardon my ignorance. I did not know Chelmsford had a long-lost nephew as well as a niece.”

“Well, now you know. Miss Whitcombe is under my protection.”

“Dickie...” Olivia warned him with a whisper. “Please don’t.”

Dickie bowed low. “Olivia, Lord Reynolds, I’ll take my leave now, but I will be

seeing you again.”

Olivia’s heart felt as though it was clawing its way up her throat. How was she ever going to extricate her family and friends from the clutches of this fiend?

12

APRIL 28, 1830

DUKE OF CHELMSFORD'S MANSION

* * *

B erkley Square, Mayfair

Captain Eleanor Goodrum Whitcombe, otherwise known as the elegant Duchess of Chelmsford, smelled a rat. And he'd appeared at their front door that morning to call on Percy. When her husband had exited from his meeting with Lord Reynolds, his face was pale with rage.

She and Olivia had been reading through nearly a week's worth of *The Morning Post*, but when the two men arrived in the family sitting room, the air was so thick with animosity, they both set aside the gossip sheets.

"Olivia, Lord Reynolds has asked my permission to call on you, but I will not agree to such an arrangement until I hear you say this is what you want."

The baron smirked at Olivia. "Of course, this is something we both want, isn't it, my dear?"

"I want to hear what Olivia has to say, in her own words."

If anyone could slay with a look, it was Percy Whitcombe, Duke of Chelmsford. El could almost feel the floor of the sitting room vibrate with Percy's anger and his raised eyebrow signaled a warning no other being in the ton could mistake.

"I...I'm honored that Lord Reynolds chooses to call on me." Olivia kept her head bowed while answering so that her words came out semi-muffled.

El was certain from the trembling and softness in her voice that Olivia wanted nothing of the sort, but her instincts honed from many years of tight situations and negotiations told her to keep silent.

"Then I shall collect you this evening at eight for a rout at the Countess Zofterhollen's townhouse." With that, the odious man bid them good day and rushed out to his curricule, relieving his tiger of the reins.

The room remained unnaturally silent for many minutes whilst Olivia kept her head down. El was not fooled. She could see tears dripping off the silly goose's nose. When she finally looked up, it was to announce she'd be taking her lady's maid as chaperone.

"No, you won't," El said. "Tonight, I'm coming along as your chaperone."

This time, Olivia's face blanched. "No, please. You shouldn't have to put up with him."

"I don't know what's going on here, but I don't trust that bastard. If he tries anything with either one of us tonight, I'll slit his throat and drink his blood."

At that point, the duchess's warlike threats were interrupted by the arrival of Lady Alice, Sinjin, and baby P.D.

Alice immediately dragged Olivia up to her bedchamber for a private talk.

* * *

Once they were alone on their usual cross-legged perch atop the counterpane on Olivia's bed, Alice gave her a stern look. "You have to tell me. What in Hera's name is going on with you and that horrible Baron Reynolds?"

Olivia had had enough of sobbing and feeling sorry for herself. She slid off the bed and began to pace. She turned at last and stared at Alice. "We have to destroy him."

"Whew...that's a little strong."

"No, it's not. He deserves whatever we can devise to make him wish he'd never been born."

"Good heavens...what has he done?"

"He's a blackmailer."

"Your best friend is a Peeler. Turn that insect of a man in to the police."

"I can't prove anything. It's just my word against his."

"Who is he trying to blackmail?"

"Me. He's threatening to expose my real name and embarrass the duke and Aunt El if I don't go along with an engagement and marriage so he can get his hands on my dowry. He's been taking money from my mother for years for what he claimed was my upkeep. And now he's also threatening to expose her for having a bastard child and ruin her career in the opera."

“Wait,” Alice said, and crawled closer to the edge of the bed, nearer to Olivia. “Your mother? I thought she abandoned you years ago?”

“So did I, but it appears the opera singer, Miss Villeneuve, may indeed be my mother. He’s been lying to her for years and extorting money he never gave to anyone to care for me.”

“How did you find out?”

“Someone submitted an anonymous on dit to The Morning Post , saying she had an unacknowledged daughter with eyes the same unusual color as hers...a daughter who was about to have a coming-out ball in Mayfair.”

Alice’s mouth dropped open, and for the first time in Olivia’s memory, her friend seemed speechless.

Eventually, Olivia demanded, “How are we going to bring down this monster?”

After some thought, she said, “I have an idea. Remember what we did to those rakes who made your last Season miserable?”

“Of course. But we can’t put itching nettles in his shirts. Everyone would remember the last time we did it, and then we’d all be in the soup, including poor Sinjin.”

“Then here’s a better plan. There all sorts of nasty potions we use at the laundry to clean stubborn stains. When he’s planning to go to a big event, we’ll bribe someone in his kitchen to add a smidgen to his soup or something, so that he’ll lose physical control of his innards in public.”

“Ewww...we can’t do that.” Alice hunched her shoulders and squinted with her eyes before suddenly opening them wide. “What if you accidentally kill him?”

“Not a chance. I know what I’m doing. All I’ll use is just a tiny bit to make him a laughingstock in public.”

* * *

Percy knew better than to argue with his duchess when she made terrifying threats, because he knew she was more than capable of carrying them out. However, he did shudder at this particular wild plan to chaperone Olivia. No matter. He had important messages to send. He grabbed a couple of footmen on the way to his study so that he could rally his own private army of spies without delay.

* * *

Jameson tapped at the door to the family sitting room at precisely eight o’clock, intoning in his familiar, gravelly voice, “Lord Reynolds has arrived.”

“Send him up,” the duke ordered, without looking toward his wife and Olivia who sat stiffly nearby on a wildly floral-patterned, silk settee.

Jameson nodded and walked rapidly away and down the staircase to the ground floor. Their stoic butler, a former sergeant in Captain Atherton’s cavalry division, made obvious his disdain for Reynolds in every bit of body language he could muster.

A normal, concerned husband of the ton might balk at allowing his duchess and niece to ride off into the night with a man of such questionable moral character. However, Percy knew for a fact no harm would come to them, because he’d been with El earlier that evening as she strapped numerous weapons to her person. Watching his wife, erm, arm herself was one of his favorite things. Baron Reynolds was no match for his smuggling pirate of a wife.

Most of the time, Eleanor scared the hell out of him, but he’d trusted her once with

his life, and she hadn't let him down. He knew no harm would come to either her, or poor Olivia, who was trying hard to mask her trembling whilst awaiting the baron's appearance. He was also reasonably sure his pretend-niece was armed and knew how to take care of herself as well. She was, after all, Dickie Jones's sister.

And speaking of Dickie...the duke pulled out his pocket watch. He'd summoned a war council which would be gathering as soon as the women left with Lord Reynolds.

* * *

Jameson, Percy's oldest, and most trusted, servant poured small crystal tumblers of brandy whilst Col, Dickie, and Will took turns filling him in on what they'd discovered thus far about Baron Reynolds.

The look on detective and sometime Bow Street Runner Archer Colwyn's face was grim. "This man is one of the most prolific blackmailers I've ever encountered, and he's been plying his trade for years beneath the noses of the magistrates and Runners..."

The duke motioned for Jameson to pass around the drink and then interjected. "You seem as if there's more you want to say, but aren't quite ready to reveal."

"It's...it's just that the immensity of his network of blackmail victims is so stunning as to be unbelievable."

"In other words," Dickie filled in, "e's probably got a network of Runners and Peelers being paid to keep their gobs shut."

Silence filled the room as they each savored their drinks before setting their tumblers back down.

“How can you be so sure?”

Col leaned forward. “Dickie came to me even before your message arrived. We’ve been shadowing him for days.”

“Is it just him, or does he have a network of collectors?” Percy motioned for Jameson to refill the men’s tumblers.

“Looks like it’s just him.” Col shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s a bloody full-time job for the bastard, it is.” Dickie fairly vibrated with animosity toward the man.

Will added what he knew. “We’ve all been following him in shifts, and one of the nights I followed him, he ended up at a very interesting address.”

The other three men turned toward him at once. “Where?” Percy demanded.

“Madame Clarot’s modiste shop on Bond Street.”

No one said another word, but Percy could almost hear a final piece of the puzzle dropping into place. That could explain the leak to The Morning Post . Why hadn’t they all thought of that?

Percy could sense when they all came to the same conclusion, but it was Dickie who snapped his fingers and explained, “The seamstresses working on Olivia’s wardrobe must have also done work for the opera star, Miss Villeneuve.”

Col added, “The unusual color of both women’s eyes probably alerted them to a connection, and the one of them being blackmailed probably needed the money she got from the gossip sheet for passing on the on dit .”

13

APRIL 28, 1830

COUNTESS ZOFTERHOLLEN'S TOWNHOUSE, HANOVER SQUARE

* * *

Olivia's skin literally felt like snakes were slithering across her whilst she watched the baron work his smooth way through the crush of revelers at Lady Zofterhollen's rout. He had a small notebook he kept secreted within his waistcoat, but pulled out and recorded notations periodically if he heard a particularly interesting piece of gossip.

She and Her Grace frequently exchanged glances fraught with revulsion. At one point, he stopped to talk to Lady Haddon, one of the ton's most notorious gossips. "Lady Haddon, this is Miss Olivia Whitcombe, my betro...umph" El had immediately stepped in and tramped forcefully on the top of the flimsy slippers he wore as part of his evening attire.

El turned before the woman could see fully what had happened and grasped both of her hands as if they were the best of friends. "Lady Haddon, it has been so long. You must call on us soon." At the sound of low muttering behind them, the duchess changed tactics. "In fact, we're having a few friends in for a late supper after the theatre next week. I'll send round an invitation.

After that, it was simple to escape the baron by disappearing into a large, noisy crowd

in the music room. Once out on the street, they raced over to Oxford Street and hailed a passing hack cab.

Once they were safely inside and the driver was headed back to Berkley Square, Olivia cautiously looked over at the duchess who returned the stare, and then they laughed so hard, it took Olivia a while to recover and ask, “Is it all right if we stop by Goodrum’s before we go home?”

Her Grace gave Olivia an odd look. “What do you need?”

“There’s something I left behind in my room, and I really miss it. It won’t take but a minute. You can wait for me outside.”

Captain El shook her head slowly, telling Olivia she didn’t believe that Banbury tale for one moment, but she knocked on the carriage roof. When the driver stopped, she gave him directions to Goodrum’s.

True to her promise, Olivia returned to the hack within minutes with a small box beneath one arm. She tried to ignore the questions on the duchess’s face as they headed back to the ducal mansion, but tightened her grip on the box.

* * *

April 29, 1830

Duke of Chelmsford’s Mansion

Berkley Square, Mayfair

When Jameson announced there was a Peeler at the door, Olivia assumed Will had come back for her. But when her face lighted up with a broad smile, Jameson put a

finger to his mouth and motioned for her to follow him to the duke's study.

Olivia's world crumbled as she stood behind Jameson and listened to him explain to His Grace that the Peeler at the door had come to search her room and take her back for questioning.

"What?" The duke thundered.

The shouts from the entryway from the Peeler demanding to see Olivia mingled with the duke's raised voice brought Aunt El racing down from their bedchamber to see what was happening. When Jameson explained the presence of law enforcement in their entryway, Her Grace ignored her husband and strode down to investigate.

The young man who'd been trying to bully the footmen standing by the entryway ceased his complaints when he caught sight of the infamous Eleanor Whitcombe, complete with the scar from a sword slash across one cheek. Added to that was her considerable height which allowed her to tower above most men.

The young man mumbled a bit at her demand to explain himself and then insisted, "I have to search Miss Whitcombe's bedroom."

"Why?" El demanded, refusing to yield her ground.

"Because Baron Reynolds was poisoned last night in his home with salts of lemon someone put into a pie in his kitchen larder."

"What does this have to do with my niece?"

The young Peeler suddenly regained his sense of superiority. "She's a laundress, ain't she? And they, of all people, have access to salts of lemon for getting stains out of clothes and such."

Meanwhile, the object of their discussion, Olivia, had crept back up the stairs to her bedchamber to wait for disaster to swallow her whole.

* * *

All El could think of was getting word to Barrister Stephen Forsythe as fast as humanly possible. Her hands itched to send one of the nearby footmen running to the man's office, but she refused to abandon the household to the obnoxious young man now blocking her entryway. "All right, if I show you Miss Whitcombe's bedchamber, and you find nothing, will you leave us in peace?"

The young man was becoming more nervous of the intimidating duchess by the minute and merely nodded. El noticed, out of the corner of her eye through the still open front door, the cumbersome ducal carriage lumbering down the street at its usual sedate pace. She smiled. Percy was always there for her. And, if she wasn't mistaken, someday that man might make a great smuggler.

"Follow that footman," she said and brought up the rear as the silly man trudged up her fine, carpeted staircase in his muddy boots. El was afraid of no one, living or dead, but she'd included a footman to stand by while the Peeler searched Olivia's bedroom. She might need someone with a strong back to get rid of a body later.

* * *

Olivia stood just inside her bedchamber door holding the box she'd gotten from Goodrum's the night before. She'd donned a serviceable redingote over top of her morning dress so that she'd have some protection to keep her warm once they'd trundled her off to jail. She felt this was for the best. No more scandal would be heaped upon the duke and duchess because of their friendship. At least the blackmailer was dead, and she wasn't sorry.

When the footman leading the Peeler tapped lightly on her door, she stood there with the box, which she handed over to the young man. He seemed taken aback for a minute and then opened the box. The stringent smell of salts of lemon immediately filled the room.

“Are you admitting you killed Baron Reynolds?”

“No, but I am a laundress, this is one of the tools of my trade, and I’m not sorry the bastard’s dead. Take me away.”

* * *

April 29, 1830

Bow Street Magistrates’ Court

Bow Street, London

Instead of taking her to the nearest police station, the young man delivered her to the Magistrate’s Court on Bow Street. The duchess, of course accompanied her. On the way to court in the hired hack the young Peeler had hailed, she leaned close to Olivia’s ear and whispered, “Percy left to get help, and I’m sure Col and Barrister Forsythe will be there to meet us and straighten out this horrible misunderstanding.

Olivia had been overcome with a strange sense of calm. She was glad the entire nightmare was finally over. There was only one person she wanted to see, but she was afraid he’d abandon her when he found out she was a suspect in a poisoning murder.

When they arrived at the court, the room was full of people shouting over each other. One tall man broke away from the crowd and walked directly to Olivia and took her

in his arms. The scary look he levered at the other Peeler frightened even her. “You touch this woman again, and I’ll slit you nose to toes.” The young man’s face turned an odd shade of green, he dropped the box containing the bottle of salts of lemon, and raced from the courtroom.

Olivia smiled up into Will’s face. “Would you really kill a fellow Peeler here in the courtroom, just for me?”

“I’m surprised you have to ask.” He pulled her more tightly against him and threw a crazed, murderous look at anyone who dared step near.

“Stop that,” she said, and laughed. “If you’re not careful we’ll end up in adjoining cells.”

He pulled her more tightly to him and said, “That would suit me just fine.”

Her Aunt El was not a patient woman and demanded, “What are we waiting for?”

“There are several cases ahead of us, and we’re waiting for Dickie, Col, and Barrister Forsythe.”

“That’s good news. What have they found?” Her aunt gave out a huge sigh.

Will loosened his hold on Olivia just long enough to tick off on his fingers: “Baron Reynolds’s little black notebook with the names of all his victims; his housekeeper who saw the woman who was still hiding in the kitchen pantry this morning before she fled when the doors were unlocked...” He paused then in his recitation. “And...the woman who poisoned the baron turned out to be Madame Clarot’s assistant, Marie. He’d been blackmailing her for years because he had proof she’d murdered her late husband. She had a change of heart after implicating Olivia with the salts of lemon. She’s confessed to Forsythe, and he’s bringing her in with him.”

Olivia sagged against Will and sobbed just as the rest of their party walked in, having added Alice and Sinjin to the mix as well.

Alice walked directly to Olivia, pulled out a handkerchief to dry her face, and shook her index finger at her friend. “No more revenge plans, and the next time you’re in trouble, for the love of Hera...wiggle your fingers—.”

14

MAY 3, 1830

ALONG THE RIVER WHEY, DUCHESS OF CHELMSFORD'S SURREY
ESTATE

* * *

Olivia watched her brother throw another pile of papers confiscated from the blackmailer's house onto the towering flames of the bonfire they'd built.

She and Will stood close together, watching the flames consume the hateful files that had caused so much misery to so many people. The magistrate had ordered the victims mentioned in the huge collection be the ones to benefit from the enormous estate the odious baron had left. He'd been childless with no other relatives.

Lady Camilla the day before had finally managed to get Olivia to meet with the woman who had given birth to her. Even though she now knew Miss Constantia Villeneuve had believed she was doing the right thing for her daughter all those years ago, she still had occasional twinges of resentment, but decided forgiveness would be as peace-giving for herself as for her mother.

Miss Villeneuve had immediately embraced her when she'd first entered Lady Camilla's drawing room, but Olivia sensed there was still an inevitable distance between them. When she'd screwed up her courage and asked who her father had been, a horrible look of sadness had crossed her mother's face. He was a boy she'd

loved when she was very young, but was the son of a noble family and could not marry her. He'd died at Waterloo, bravely, she told her daughter, and then Miss Villeneuve had become silent on the subject.

Olivia now had a tough decision of her own to make. She was still trying to decide what to do with the declaration her heart had been wanting for so long. Will had asked her to marry him after he and her brother had been hired by Archer Colwyn to be part of his new firm of investigators. She loved Will with a blazing passion, but she still wanted to be practical. "How will we survive on what you earn as a detective?"

"We don't have to..."

"What? We don't have to survive?"

"No. Remember my drover business?"

"Yes. You gave it up to become a Peeler. We assumed you weren't making enough money and abandoned the venture."

"Not exactly. I turned it over to a savvy group of brothers in Covent Garden to manage, and actually, while I'm still not a wealthy man, I'm comfortably well off."

"Wait—. Why did you take on a job with the Peelers if you don't really have to work?"

"It was the only way I could think of to stay close to you. I missed you on all those long days away on trips into the countryside. I can do whatever I like as long as you're by my side. Now, will you, for the love of Zeus, be my wife?"

"That depends."

“On What?”

“On whether you take me to bed right now or insist on doing the noble thing and risk losing me.”

He scooped her up into his arms and marched her back toward the hunting lodge they’d passed on their way to the river.

* * *

Many steps behind them, after Dickie had poured buckets of water on the fire, he plodded along, his boots making sucking noises in the mud. He shook his head at the lovers ahead of him, oblivious to anything around them.

He laughed out loud and wondered if they even realized he was still following them. “Mind she doesn’t strain your back from all those chocolate biscuits she’s been eating,” he shouted out. He was right. They ignored him.

THE END

MAY 1838

Pulteney Hotel

Piccadilly Street, London

Will Beckford, alias Horace Greenborough, the wealthy railroad investor, and his spoiled, bejeweled wife, Sybelle, played by Olivia Beckford, were arguing with the sommelier at the Pulteney about the proper way to present, and pour, a vintage bottle of wine worth a hundred pounds.

Their dining partner, who puffed arrogantly on an expensive cigar, was one Abe Bratten, posing as the owner of rich lands in Brazil he claimed he was willing to sacrifice for pennies on the dollar because the Greenboroughs had become such good friends of his.

The Greenboroughs were ready to buy, but they said they had someone they wanted Abe to meet before they finalized the deal. Mister Owens-Kline, their trusted financial adviser, was going to join them and perhaps would also like to invest a few thousand pounds in the overseas venture.

Their adviser, when he arrived, took an inordinate amount of time crossing the hotel dining room after entering through a side door, stopping every few tables to chat or slap a friend on the back. The dark-haired man did not seem exactly handsome, but he had what Bratten would consider an interesting, compelling face. However, the financier did seem to have a huge following amongst the wealthy denizens of London.

Bratten's overall assessment of the man was that he was more of a boxer than a financial wizard. His compact, wiry body gave the impression of a lethal spring capable of loosening the fires of hell on anyone crazy enough to oppose his will.

He went out of his way to visit the musicians who'd been playing softly in the background ever since Bratten had arrived. Did he just slip them a huge stack of blunt? That was a surprise. Most men of his acquaintance who were wealthy weren't prone to sharing it so publicly.

When he finally reached their table, he shook hands vigorously with Greenborough before they moved on to introductions. Bratten rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"Mister Owens-Kline, I hear you're looking for a few high-return investments." Bratten believed in throwing his cards into the mix as soon as possible to get things moving.

"I never do business before pleasure, and with the Greenboroughs, I love to see them dance. Are you married, Mister Bratten?"

He was mildly flummoxed at the sudden, odd turn in conversation. "Well, I never...I..."

"You're either married or you're not. Which is it, Mr. Bratten?"

"Um, no, actually..."

"That's too bad. I'm not either, but I love watching the Greenboroughs dance." With that, the musicians struck up the chords of a popular waltz, and the formerly lethargic Mister Greenborough took his wife's hand and led her to the small dance floor near their table at the front of the restaurant.

The music started at a slow, swaying rhythm, but within seconds, the waltz had segued into a fast tempo. On the dance floor just steps away from them, Bratten witnessed one of the most erotic dance performances he'd ever seen. It was mesmerizing, and he couldn't look away. Their version of the waltz was a dreamy twining of arms and legs that eventually led to a crescendo of sound and movement just before the abrupt end of the music.

He'd been totally pulled into their performance but reluctantly turned back to his other table partner. Owens-Kline was staring directly into his eyes. "Do you have some figures and deeds to show me?"

"Of course. When Bratten reached into his portfolio at his feet to retrieve the false deeds and numbers, his hand grasped at nothing but empty space. He immediately leaned across the table with a closed fist, in an attempt to threaten the man on the other side.

Owens-Kline took his fist as if it were a child's toy and deftly snapped it backward, breaking Bratten's wrist. When he roared in pain and leapt to his feet, several men who had been sitting in the restaurant came to his side and forcefully escorted him toward the exit.

As they began to lead him away and he was leveling murderous stares at his former dinner partners, Owens-Kline warned in a low, barely audible tone. "The next time you run a confidence game in London, try not to use your, um, skills on individuals who are friends of the queen."

"Dickie—." Missus Greenborough raced over and embraced her brother. "We did it, didn't we?"

"We always do. And where are my nieces and nephews tonight?"

"They're 'helping' Uncle CB at the clinic," Will filled in.

“God help him,” Olivia added.

“We might as well drink that shamefully expensive bottle of wine, don’t you think?”
her brother suggested.

“If you insist.” Will beat them back to the table and began filling their glass wine
balusters.

* * *

If you enjoyed reading *A Wallflower Demands Satisfaction* , and you want to know
more about Olivia and Will’s world, the best place to start is with *Dallying with the
Diamond* , first novel in the “*S??, Lies, & Forbidden Desires*” six-book series.
Dallying is Captain and Honoria Atherton’s story.