







# A Wallflower Never Forgets (Revenge of the Wallflowers #41)

**Author:** Anna St. Claire

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** What happens when her childhood crush becomes the man she can't live without?

The first time she loved him...

Lady Melanie Stenson lost her heart to her brother's best friend, Viscount Jonathan DeLacey, at the tender age of twelve, when he saved her from drowning in the pond on her family's estate. But when she attended her first ball at seventeen, Jonathan shattered Melanie's heart when he treated her as though she were still a child, seeming to look right through her and then, announcing his engagement to Lady Diana Thurston.

The second time he loved her...

Jonathan DeLacey was done with love when his betrothed jilted him for a Duke. Burying himself in his work as an agent of the crown, Jonathan developed a reputation for taking on the most dangerous assignments. Four years later, as he's tracking a suspect through the streets of London, he saves a young woman from a runaway carriage, whom he realizes is Lady Melanie Stenson. No longer the little girl he once knew, Jonathan was taken with Melanie's beauty and vibrant spirit. Unfortunately, Melanie seems not to care one whit for Jonathan. Curious and captivated, Jonathan is determined to change her mind.

Will the third time be the charm?

When they see each other again at a Christmas house party to celebrate her grandmother's 70th birthday, can Melanie and Jonathan reconcile past mistakes and misunderstandings and realize they've been meant for each other all along?

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# Page 1

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Mayfair, London ~ May 1817

“Confess! You like him. I know you do,” Lady Lilian Harlow said with a playful glint in her blue-green eyes.

“Don’t tease our dear Melanie so,” Lady Lydia Yarstone said to her twin sister. “After all, there’s no need for her to confess something we’ve known since childhood!”

Lady Melanie Stenson rolled her eyes at her friends. “Not all of us are as fortunate to have found true love as you both have.” Lilian and Lydia had been fortunate and found love matches. And in twin fashion, they married in a double wedding ceremony a little over a year ago.

“Oh, dearest, I’m certain your time will come. You are beautiful inside and out, and your heart is full of love.” Lilian pulled Melanie into a warm embrace.

“If only our dear big brother would finally come to his senses,” Lydia sighed.

Melanie swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. She adored her friends and was happy to return to their company again. But that also meant being around Viscount Jonathan DeLacey, Lydia and Lilian’s older brother and the most perfect man in the world, as far as Melanie was concerned.

Melanie had been living in Scotland with her mother’s family for the past two years since the passing of her father, while her brother Gavin took on the duties of his new title as the Earl of Rochester. Now, at seventeen, Melanie had only just returned with

her mother for her come out. In the time he'd been away, she'd never forgotten Jonathan. Not a day went by that she didn't think about him and recall every single conversation they'd ever had. She'd kept in touch with her friends, writing to them weekly, and had known that Jonathan was still a bachelor. Her friends had assured her that Jonathan didn't seem at all interested in any of the young ladies of the ton .

That gave Melanie hope.

She took a quick peek over at Viscount Jonathan DeLacey, who stood across the room with Gavin and several of their friends, chatting amiably. Dark chestnut wavy hair that seemingly could never be tamed framed a face that seemed almost sculpted, enhanced by piercing blue eyes that sparkled like sapphires.

“Thankfully, Jonathan has no idea just how handsome he is; if he did, he'd be unbearable to be around,” Lilian said, her voice low but filled with mischief.

“What makes you say that?” Melanie asked, her gaze once more straying to the viscount, his presence made her heart skip a beat. It had been that way for as long as she could remember.

“My dear, big brother has always had a gift for making people feel comfortable around him,” Lilian said. “When Jonathan speaks to you, it's as if you're the only person in the room.”

Melanie couldn't disagree. She hadn't had many opportunities to speak with Jonathan, given the difference in their ages, but whenever she did, she'd found herself tongue-tied and in awe of his presence, his easy confidence, and that charmingly crooked smile. She recalled one of her happiest memories of Jonathan.

She had been ten, and she, Lilian, and Lydia had been giggling and taking turns pushing each other on the swing with the sturdy wooden seat hanging from the large

oak tree at Elysium Manor. Jonathan and Gavin, who'd been home from school, had just come back from a ride. Jonathan had sauntered across the yard, his hands in his pockets. He was tall but still on the lanky side, just hinting at the muscular physique he had today.

"Ah, yes. That was my favorite tree, as well," she remembered him saying, flashing that crooked smile. "See that branch?" He pointed to the sturdy branch where the swing was attached. "That branch is deceptively higher than it appears. When I was your age, I climbed the tree and stood on top of that branch. Your brother, Gavin, dared me to jump rather than climb back down. I took him up on his dare. Unfortunately, I landed hard and broke my arm. So be careful if you're climbing."

Melanie sighed at the memory. Jonathan's blue eyes sparkled as he winked at them before he strolled back to his group of friends. Even now, seven years later, the man's smile lit up the room like sunshine. He'd always treated his sisters and her as if they mattered—not like silly young girls. "I've always liked him. But that doesn't mean I like him," she said with a nonchalant shrug. But the truth was, she couldn't remember a time when she didn't pine after Jonathan. Now that she was finally and officially out in Society, she hoped that he'd ask her to dance. This was the second ball of her first Season. Jonathan had been out of town for her first ball, which had been a huge disappointment.

"You don't fool me, Melanie Stenson," Lydia whispered. "Remember, Lilian and I are your best friends, we can almost read your mind. And we know how you really feel about him."

"But what girl doesn't dream of being whisked away by her very own dashing hero?" Lilian said. "Jonathan certainly looks every bit the part. Just look at those broad shoulders. One day, he had normal shoulders. And then, poof! He came home looking different—and all the debutantes took notice."

Melanie felt her face flush again . This time, more intensely. Lilian was known for speaking her mind without hesitation. “Hush, I don’t want the entire world to know my secret.” She grabbed her fan from where it hung on her wrist, opened it up, and began to fan herself while trying to appear inconspicuous. Yes, Lilian was right. Melanie had always hero-worshipped Jonathan. He was different from her brother’s other friends, and not just because of that smile and the way he made her feel—like she mattered. But in truth, he was her hero. He’d saved her more times than she could count.

The first time, he saved her from nearly drowning in the pond on her family’s estate. She’d tried to rescue a stray calico kitten who had managed to climb up a maple tree and was teetering along a branch that jutted over the pond. Melanie had climbed up the tree and had the kitten in her hand when she tumbled into the pond, kitten and all. Luckily, Jonathan had come upon her and scooped her out. He’d nicknamed her Kitten after that day. Melanie had nearly swooned when he’d started calling her that. After all, her father had had a nickname for her mother; he’d called her Rosebud, and her mother always blushed whenever he did that, although Melanie had no idea why.

Then there was the time the three girls had climbed the tree, each determined to climb higher than the others. Melanie had been determined to win, which meant she had to climb the highest. She climbed to the top and looked down, only to see Lilian already on the ground, looking up at her and Lydia on a lower branch, starting to make her way down.

“You win, Melanie,” Lydia said. “Even I won’t climb that high. Better stop going up and start moving back down. And be careful.”

“I...I can’t,” Melanie recalled saying as she gripped the tree and hugged it tightly to her chest. “I think I’m in trouble.”

As it happened, Jonathan and Gavin rode by and saw what had happened. Jonathan

got off his horse and handed Lillian his coat. He climbed the tree—to the top, where Melanie clung to the tree and coaxed her down, step by step.

“Listen to my voice, Kitten. Feel for the branch below you before stepping down on it. I’m watching, and I’m here,” he said gently.

Miraculously, she made it to the bottom and clung to him, tears streaming. Neither he nor Gavin said anything remotely reproofing.

“You’re okay, Kitten.” He leaned down and hugged her.

Perhaps the most daring rescue happened when she, Lillian, and Lydia had been out riding at Stenson Hall, her family’s estate in Falmouth, and noticed a storm brewing. They’d tried to beat the storm back to the stable. But a clap of thunder startled Scout, Melanie’s two-year-old gelding, causing him to bolt across the fields. Melanie could hear Lillian’s and Lydia’s shouts; her friends had managed to rein their horses in, but Scout was too spooked to pay attention to Melanie’s commands.

The rain had begun pouring heavily. Another clap of thunder and flash of lightning made Scout veer towards an old stone fence. Melanie knew that stone fence. It stood almost five feet tall and was thicker than most fences. They would never make it. Scout would be injured—or worse, he might lose his life. Struggling to keep her panic in check, Melanie leaned down and whispered to Scout. But nothing slowed him.

Luckily, Jonathan and Gavin had been out searching for them and spied them from the ridge. Jonathan reached her first and galloping alongside her mount, he leaned over, wrapped his arm around her waist, and effortlessly lifted her in front of him as Gavin grabbed Scout’s reins, successfully slowing him to a stop.

The incident had scared her to death, but she tried not to cry. Instead, she wiped the



tears away as she buried her head against Jonathan's chest, elevating him to hero status in her thirteen-year-old mind.

"You're all right, Kitten. Gavin has Scout. And I have you. I won't let anything happen to you," Jonathan had said, squeezing her tightly against him.

"You...you are my hero," she recalled telling him.

"I will always protect you, Kitten," he said.

Ever since that day, Melanie had dreamed about Jonathan. About one day, growing up into the kind of woman who could make a man like Jonathan fall in love with her.

How she hoped for the chance to have just one dance with him. A waltz. And tonight, he was here. They were at the same ball. She stared across the floor at him.

Please look my way, Jonathan .

She hadn't seen him in two years. Would he notice her? Would he see that she was all grown up? Would he take one look at her in her pale blue gown and compliment her? Would he ask her to dance?

Please look my way, Jonathan , she repeated to herself, like a mantra.

She fumbled in her reticule and felt for her small pencil, making sure it was there so he could sign her dance card.

"Who is that woman with Jonathan?" Lydia whispered. "I think she just arrived."

"I'm not sure," Lilian whispered back. "But Jonathan certainly seems to know who she is."

Melanie looked up and froze, her pencil still in her hand as she watched Jonathan make his way over to the raised dais where the orchestra was waiting to begin to play. On his arm was a tall and slender young woman with golden blonde hair wearing a gown of cream and gold that seemed to shimmer as she gracefully walked by his side. She looked to be a few years older than Melanie and very beautiful. Melanie suddenly felt like an awkward baby doe compared to the graceful gazelle who glided beside Jonathan.

“May I have your attention?” Jonathan asked from the podium. He turned to the blonde woman on his arm and smiled that charmingly crooked smile at her.

A hush fell over the crowded ballroom.

A cold dread shot through Melanie. No, no, no, no ...

“Allow me to introduce my fiancée, Lady Diana Thurston, the daughter of the Earl of Biggerly.”

The orchestra performed a brief musical flourish, and all at once, people began congratulating the beaming couple. Jonathan and his fiancée made their rounds to the many well-wishers before making their way across the floor to where Melanie stood next to Lilian and Lydia and their husbands, who’d just returned from the billiard room.

Jonathan greeted his sisters and brothers-in-law, introducing his fiancée to them.

Then he turned to Melanie.

“Hello, Kitten,” he said, squeezing Melanie’s hand. “I trust you’re having a good time.”

“Yes, thank you, my lord,” Melanie said, barely getting the words out.

“Allow me to introduce you to my fiancée, Lady Diana Thurston,” he said with that same crooked smile Melanie had loved her entire life.

“Congratulations,” Melanie said in a reedy voice. She ventured a glance at Lady Diana Thurston and noticed the older woman wore a smile so stilted and stiff Melanie thought it would snap in two. But it was the look in Diana Thurston’s eyes that shocked Melanie. If looks could kill, Melanie would have dropped dead that second.

Melanie couldn’t fathom it but wouldn’t let her smile falter. That would show weakness in front of this woman even as she felt Diana’s icy blue eyes scrutinizing her from head to toe.

The strains of a waltz began. The waltz that Melanie had hoped she would dance with Jonathan.

“Darling, will you do me the great honor of dancing with me?” Jonathan asked, lifting the hand of his fiancée to his lips.

Diana fluttered her lashes and gave him a shy smile.

Melanie hated that smile. If there was ever a fake smile, it was that one.

“If you’ll all excuse us.” Jonathan’s eyes briefly landed on Melanie, and he flashed her a quick wink before turning and sweeping his fiancée onto the dance floor.

Melanie’s chest constricted, and she felt as if she couldn’t breathe. Her entire world was crashing around her, and she wished the floor would open and swallow her whole.

At that moment, she realized that her feelings toward Jonathan had been nothing but the silly dreams of a foolish girl. Here, she'd hoped he'd ask her to dance, and instead, he'd gone and asked Lady Diana Thurston to marry him. The man she'd worshipped her entire life was going to marry another woman, and Melanie's life would never be the same again.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:18 am*

### Chapter One

Paris, France ~ November 1821

“I’ve got you now, you rotter,” Jonathan DeLacey muttered under his breath as his eyes focused on the man sitting at a table outside a taverne on Rue de Rivoli. He’d been chasing the man for weeks and had finally caught up to him. Jonathan observed his target casually tucking into a hearty stew while flipping through a newspaper.

The rich aromas floating from the establishment made Jonathan’s stomach rumble. Watching the server bring a basket of bread and a bottle of wine to the man’s table reminded him that he hadn’t eaten in almost two days. Another stomach rumble prompted Jonathan to move closer to the restaurant.

He would assuage his hunger once the miscreant was apprehended and locked up. Jonathan glanced at his men, who waited across the street. Remarkably, the three agents had managed to keep up with him and, at the same time, maintained their distance and cover over the past few days as Jonathan followed the trail of the would-be insurrectionist. He gave them the signal to be ready.

“Enjoying your meal, Talbot?” Jonathan asked, stepping in front of the man and slipping his hand in his pocket to feel for his pistol.

Talbot lowered the paper and stared, his eyes flashing with amusement. “We meet, at last, my friend.”

“Quite bold of you to be sitting in such a public space,” Jonathan said, gesturing to

the tables that surrounded them, packed with diners enjoying the surprisingly balmy autumn evening.

Talbot sipped his wine and set down his glass, waving his hand dismissively. “The wine is very good here. May I offer you a glass?” Talbot said, a placid smile on his face.

Why was Talbot so calm? Surveying the immediate area, Jonathan quickly assessed his surroundings, looking for any possible signs of a trap. Seeing no potential threat, he signaled his men to move in.

“Monsieur Talbot,” he said, “I shall keep your recommendation in mind. One never knows when it will come in handy.”

“It appears I let my guard down too quickly,” Talbot said. “But...I’m certain you don’t plan on taking that pistol out in such a public space with so many innocent people at risk.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Jonathan replied.

“Good. Because in a few moments, I will calmly get up and leave.” The traitor gave a meaningful pause. “And you will not stop me.”

“Really?” Jonathan arched a brow at the arrogance of the man before him. “And you believe that... why?”

“Because, my friend, you are alone, and I doubt you will pull your pistol out to shoot me. Not when there are so many people around.” The man tossed his head back and laughed.

Talbot was undoubtedly the brashest of men. “Are you certain you have all the

facts?” Jonathan asked as his three protégés seamlessly emerged out of nowhere and easily surrounded Talbot.

Jonathan leaned forward and set his knuckles on the table as he regarded the traitor, who now sat frozen in his seat. Talbot’s eyes widened in alarm as he realized he was well and truly caught. “The facts are that you are under arrest, Monsieur Talbot,” Jonathan said. “The British government is very interested in what you have done and what you were planning to do—and once they are done interrogating you, you will look back on this moment and rue your arrogant assumptions and perhaps long for that Bordeaux you’re so fond of. There won’t be any more wine for you, Monsieur Talbot. Not where you’re going.” He nodded to his agents. “Take him.”

“The Cabernet Sauvignon is an excellent year. Please accept what’s left and the warm bread with my compliments.” Talbot sneered. “But you have not seen the last of me. I promise.”

Jonathan watched as his men escorted Talbot away with his hands now firmly shackled. The capture had taken place smoothly, and the patrons of the tavern seemed too engrossed in their meals and conversations to pay much heed to Talbot’s sudden departure.

Jonathan wasn’t worried about Talbot’s empty threats. It felt good to finally arrest the bastard. The man was a chameleon—and a dangerous one at that. He had been stirring up discontent in England through various nefarious and underground channels. He’d caused no end of concern for King George that England would be pushed into a revolution. Indications were that an equally dangerous partner was already in England. Jonathan hoped Intelligence could wrangle the necessary information from Talbot that would lead to the capture of whoever Talbot was working with. He had chased Talbot throughout France for weeks and was glad he could return to London with the knowledge that one of the most dangerous revolutionaries had been taken off the street.

In a few hours, Jonathan would board the boat for England. While he felt no immediate pangs to return home, he was tired from all the travel.

Talbot's server stopped at the table and set a clean glass down. "Nos compliments, monsieur," he said with a grin. Jonathan ordered the boeuf à la mode. He might as well assuage his hunger.

As Jonathan raised the glass of rich, dark wine to his lips, he reflected on his upcoming trip home to England. He hadn't been home in a long time, and for the first time in years, he was looking forward to seeing his friends and family. He'd been a carefree bachelor in his younger years, but four years ago, he'd met a young woman who'd completely captured his heart—or so he thought. Biting into a piece of still-warm bread, he chased it down with a sip of wine as he recalled the day he'd learned a valuable life lesson.

Lady Diana Thurston—the woman he'd given his heart to, the woman he'd intended to spend the rest of his life with—left him at the altar four years ago and eloped with the Duke of Aumale. No explanation, no letter, not even a note. As though Jonathan had needed one. The duke was as rich as Croesus and as old as time. Jonathan shook his head at his own foolishness. He'd ignored his friends' warnings about Diana's true motives. Jonathan had believed his friends were simply jealous of his happiness. Especially his best friend, Gavin Stenson, now the Earl of Rochester. What a naïve young man he'd been. Never again. He'd left his foolish pride in the past and threw himself into working for the Crown as a government agent.

As the years passed, he began to feel a sense of liberation, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Despite his grueling work that had left little time for him to brood, a profound loneliness had begun to gnaw at him. Jonathan realized that he still hoped for the kind of marriage his late parents had. The kind of love they'd shared. And the kind of wife who would cherish him for who he was rather than for his status or wealth. He finished his meal in a contemplative mood, wondering if that kind of



love was even possible...

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:18 am*

### Chapter Two

#### King Street, London ~ The Next Day

Jonathan stepped down from his carriage and walked up the steps to the office of his father's man of business. The front door jangled, as a bell announced his entry to the second-floor office. "Lord DeLacey, it's a pleasure to see you," a slightly balding man with spectacles said, standing to take Jonathan's coat and hat. "Mr. Slade will return shortly; he had an errand to run. May I offer you a glass of water, my lord? Or, if you prefer, I can offer you something stronger."

"Thank you. Something stronger would be good," Jonathan said.

"Yes, my lord."

A moment later, the bell clattered again, and Nash Slade entered the office. Slade was the cousin to Lady Maggie, the wife of Max Wilde, the Earl of Worsley. Over the past few years, Slade had become a valued member of Harlow's family—despite Slade being illegitimate, he'd overcome a nefarious history in his youth and had matured into a man of wit and honor with a thirst for knowledge and an intuitive approach to discovering lucrative investment opportunities. Through Harlow's connections, Slade had become established and successful with clients numbering among several of the most influential and titled men within the ton .

"DeLacey, glad to see you're back," Slade said, shaking Jonathan's hand. "I have the file for your father's property in Tintagel, Cornwall."

“Elysium Manor? Interesting. I wonder what he has in mind,” Jonathan murmured.

“Brandy, my lords,” Mooney said, handing both men a snifter.

“Good man,” Slade said.

“Thank you, Mooney,” Jonathan added.

The door closed behind the clerk and Jonathan leaned back in his chair, swirling his brandy in the bottom of the glass, admiring the deep red dregs left on the inside of the glass. “I’m back but I’m not sure how long I’ll be in London.”

“How was Paris?” Slade asked, taking a sip from his glass.

“The usual. But we caught the rat. The only problem is there may be more.”

Slade gave a knowing nod. “Glad to hear it.”

Jonathan gave a harsh laugh. “Yes. It is a problem—one I hope to rectify as soon as possible. While Father is still handling the properties and hasn’t pressed me for more involvement, yet, I have time to resolve it.”

Slade was trustworthy. He knew what Jonathan had been working on but not the specific details. Slade had always been a good resource, not only because of his finesse in matters of business but because of his own background growing up in the criminal underworld. Jonathan also knew that Slade would never share anything he knew with Jonathan’s father.

Jonathan’s father did not approve of his working for the Crown, especially considering he was the only son. His father considered it selfish for him to have “gallivanted” off to France.

“Just because that harpy broke your heart doesn’t mean you have to throw your life away,” his father had railed at him four years ago after Jonathan made his decision to work for the Crown.

Perhaps in the beginning he’d acted reckless and impulsive, but his spy work had become important and meaningful to him. His father had never been able to understand that. Even so, Jonathan knew the risks he took could have had dire consequences for his family’s legacy. Hunting down Talbot and arresting him had been his final assignment. He’d promised his father he would come home and take a more active role in managing the family’s estate and holdings.

He knew his father would once again launch back into the “marriage” talk with him, insisting that marrying and having children was also doing his duty for the Crown. It wasn’t that Jonathan refused to marry; it was that he didn’t think he could have the kind of marriage his parents had. Or find the kind of woman several of his closest friends had been fortunate to find.

Worsley’s wife, Lady Maggie, was as brave as she was beautiful and had become a force to be reckoned with. She was Worsley’s partner in every sense. Jonathan doubted he would be as lucky as his friend had been. He’d been young and foolish when he’d met Diana, unable to see her for who and what she was. When he decided to think seriously about marriage, he would never make that mistake again.

“I am compiling a dossier outlining all your family’s investments along with my suggestions for future growth. I should have it completed soon,” Slade said, bringing Jonathan back to the matter at hand. “In the meantime, perhaps you can discuss matters with your father and mutually agree on a good time to consider taking more responsibility and then we can meet again. I mean, with your other issue still awaiting a final solution—this doesn’t seem the best time.”

Jonathan smiled tightly. Slade had also become quite diplomatic in his ability to

communicate when there was a conflict in the families of his clients. “Yes...I agree. But I’m hopeful to have that resolved soon. As far as Elysium Manor is concerned, Father and I have discussed the shift in responsibility. No date has been decided, but I know Father wishes to spend more time with Mother traveling and visiting family and friends, so yes, I’ll be ready. He wants me around more. And I find that I want to be around more, as well.”

A knock sounded at the door. “My lord, Mr. Slade, a man just delivered this for Lord DeLacey.”

Jonathan perused the note. “I’m sorry, Slade. I must cut our meeting short.” He had just received a note from an informant asking that they meet on the corner of Bond and Oxford. The missive conveyed a sense of urgency.

Slade nodded. “Don’t worry. We can continue this later in the week.”

They concluded their meeting as Slade promised to contact Jonathan in a few days.

As Jonathan stepped from the building, a woman’s shrill scream heralded the thunder of horses as pounding hooves, wild and frenzied, echoed through the narrow street, followed by the piercing squeal of horses fighting their reins. His head snapped toward the source—a black carriage, sleek and ominous, tearing around the corner, its four ebony horses in a desperate, uncontrolled dash.

“My lady...careful...watch out!” A woman wearing a blue day dress screamed.

Instinctively, he tensed. A young woman with fiery copper hair stood alone in the center of the road, cradling a tiny kitten, blissfully unaware of the runaway carriage hurtling straight toward her.

Jonathan exploded into motion, sprinting toward that vivid red hair like a man

possessed. In one fluid movement, he scooped her into his arms, muscles straining as he pushed them both toward safety. The thunder of hooves bore down on them, closer with every heartbeat, every desperate step. Just as they reached the edge of the street, he twisted, shielding her as they tumbled hard onto the cobblestone. His body absorbed the impact, jarring pain shooting through him, but there was no time to think. The runaway carriage roared past, a dark blur missing them by mere inches.

Are you alright?" he asked, his heart still thundering in his chest. He hoped the young woman was uninjured. Her deep coppery hair had tumbled forward in a shimmery curtain, covering her face. He gently swept the silky strands back, and his breath caught as he beheld the beauty he held in his arms. Creamy skin with a sprinkling of freckles. Full rosy lips opened in surprise. But it was her eyes that mesmerized him. Big velvety brown doe eyes framed with thick black lashes. She blinked in confusion at him, her breath coming in short gasps.

A wave of recognition washed over him. "Kitten?" he breathed, astonished. "Kitten...it is you."

"M-my name is Lady Melanie Stenson! This is a kitten!" she huffed, her chest heaving as she lifted the meowing creature who seemed to be none the worse for wear.

"My apologies," his lips twitched. "Lady Melanie Stenson." He hadn't seen Melanie in years. He couldn't recall the last time he'd seen her. But he'd known her since she was a child—she was his sisters', Lydia and Lillian, best friend, and the little sister of his best friend, Gavin Stenson, the Earl of Rochester.

He'd always thought of her as a little girl. But the gorgeous young woman who was still wrapped in his arms was no child. "He gazed down at her in disbelief, compelled to acknowledge the woman she had become—a woman who had practically grown up in front of him. But for the first time in his life, Jonathan truly noticed her.

Melanie blinked and stared into the face of the man she'd dreamed about since she was a young girl. Part of her felt like she was still dreaming as she inhaled the scent that enveloped her. His scent. Amber and sandalwood. Oh God, did she actually just inhale his scent? Worse, he saw her do it! "Jonathan...I mean, Lord DeLacey...w-what are you doing?"

"I just saved your life," he said, his lips twitching again.

"Y-yes. Yes. Quite right. You did just save my life... Oh dear. Where are my manners?" She'd been shocked at first at quite literally being swept off her feet, not knowing what was happening. And then she realized someone had saved her from being run down by a runaway carriage. "Forgive my strident reaction to your calling me Kitten." She swallowed as she tried to calm down. She couldn't believe he'd called her that. His nickname for her. No one else had called her that except Jonathan.

"F-forgive me," she said again. "First, I should thank you, my lord, for saving my life." Her tone sounded stiff to her ears. Well, how else was she supposed to react? Should she have thrown her arms around his neck! Of course not! They were in a public setting and fast attracting a crowd of curious onlookers, buzzing with gossip. "Er, could you...please...kindly roll off my person," she demanded, clutching a small, mewling black and white kitten to her chest. I must see to the welfare of this tiny creature."

Jonathan helped her up just as the short woman who had screamed warnings came hurrying up to them, crying.

"Milady! Milady! Are you alright? I saw it coming straight for you," Melanie's maid, was out of breath, tears streaming down her eyes. "Oh, I simply froze in fright. That carriage seemed to come out of nowhere! It pulled out at the end of the street and looked as if it aimed at you. I screamed but couldn't get your attention. I thought you would be killed for sure! Thank goodness for this kindly gentleman. He saved your

life!”

Melanie felt her cheeks flame and cleared her throat. “Er, yes, I am quite alright, Rachel. Lord DeLacey was kind enough to save my life. I saw this poor kitten...hurt and lying in the road. I needed to save it from further injury. I hadn’t realized the danger.”

“I do recall you have a habit of doing that. But this time, perhaps you should have looked before you left the curb,” Jonathan chided. Was that a humorous gleam in those striking blue eyes?

Surely this isn’t happening to me . Melanie studied the man who’d just saved her life. He looked gorgeous and suave and debonair. Like he’d just stepped out of Whites. The only thing out of place was the lock of wavy dark hair that fell over his brow, which only served to make him look rakish!

Meanwhile, she looked like something the cat dragged in. Her hair had come loose from its chignon and no doubt resembled a bird’s nest. Her cloak was muddied, and her gown was torn along the hem and good Lord, her knees were showing! She quickly whipped her cloak tightly about her, feeling embarrassed by her flustered, unkempt state in front of Jonathan. Not to mention the crowd of curious onlookers who had gathered around them.

“Do not admonish me, my lord. It was an accident. Besides...who would wish to run me over with a carriage? she said in a huffy voice. “I do not have a habit of doing anything, my lord. I am usually quite aware of my surroundings. Isn’t that so, Rachel?”

The maid cleared her throat and looked down “Uh, yes, milady. If you say so.”

A tremor shook Melanie as she realized her folly and how close she had come to



being maimed or worse by that runaway carriage. She took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to calm her racing heart, and at the same time petting the mewling kitten, trying to calm it. She recalled how this man—the man she had loved since she was a little girl—had broken her heart. She'd dreamed of waltzing with him beneath a chandelier of crystal and candlelight, at the Calvin's ball—during her first (and only) London Season. Instead, in front of everyone in attendance, Jonathan DeLacey had made an announcement, introducing all in attendance to the woman he'd planned to marry. Pain gripped her heart, just as it had in that moment four years ago.

"Melanie, are injured? Nothing hurts, does it?" Jonathan persisted. This time, his voice was full of concern, his brow furrowed.

It's my heart that hurts and you're the one who hurt me when I trusted you. "My pride," she said with a self-deprecating chuckle. She didn't think she was bleeding and the only thing that seemed to be causing her pain was her derriere. She'd no doubt bruised it in the fall. But she certainly wasn't going to admit that to him. "Otherwise, I am quite unharmed. Thank you for your concern."

"Good." He insisted on checking her hands and arms, his touch burning through her sleeves and causing butterflies in her stomach to swirl. "I don't see any bleeding, and nothing seems to be sprained or broken. Can you walk?"

She was having trouble thinking because he was still holding her hand and standing so close. Looking at her with those sky-blue eyes.

What was he doing back in London? She'd only just returned herself. She had his sisters to thank for that. They'd written to her in Scotland begging her to come for a visit. She finally decided to return. Besides, her dear grandmother's 70th birthday was coming up. After that debacle of her first Season, her mother decided to take her back to Scotland—to her family. Her mother had passed away two years ago, leaving Melanie with only her brother, Gavin. But she'd remained in Scotland, because it was

peaceful and quiet, and she could concentrate on her writing. Melanie had found solace in books and writing in the past few years. Until Gavin insisted she return to England and reinsert herself into London Society.

Melanie had known all about Lady Diana Thurston leaving Jonathan at the altar and eloping with a wealthy old duke. Evidently, he was so heartbroken he'd left England and became an agent for the Crown. Of course, given his nature, he no doubt spent the past four years being heroic.

Rumor was that he had had many mistresses since Lady Thurston had jilted him. Melanie had tried not to think about that. After all, she had carved out a new life for herself. One that did not include Jonathan DeLacey, hero, and Lothario! Her aspirations had nothing to do with Jonathan DeLacey or marriage.

"You're still rescuing kittens, I see."

She blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"How many times have I rescued you over the years?"

"I'm afraid I don't remember," she said. Now, that was a bald-faced lie because she remembered every single time he'd saved her life.

"And while we're at it...when have you ever called me my lord?" Jonathan said lightly.

"We aren't having that discussion. It has been many years since we have seen each other, and I am no longer a child," she said. "I was merely being polite."

"Well, then I give you leave to call me Jonathan. Given that I am certain we shall be seeing more of each other soon."

“Oh really? And you are certain of that?”

“Quite certain.” He grinned.

Lord, I need to leave now.

She'd been on her way to the bookstore to purchase a book she needed for her research and possibly pick up some Christmas gifts for her friends before returning to her brother's townhouse in Mayfair. She'd never expected to quite literally run into the one man she'd worked so hard to try to forget. Of course, she couldn't go there now. She should return home.

“If I were a betting man, I might think you were on your way to King Street Books and Curiosities . Perhaps you will allow me to accompany you to the bookstore tomorrow?”

Her mouth opened to answer him; instead, she closed it. Why was she hesitating? The man she had dreamed about for years was standing here...asking her to accompany him to look for books...tomorrow. She nodded. “Yes. Tomorrow.” Surprised by his invitation. Unable to think of a reason to decline, she had agreed to join Jonathan DeLacey for an outing the next day.

## Page 4

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### Chapter Three

#### Curzon Street, Mayfair ~ The Next Day

The bright sunshine filtering through her pale-yellow drapes woke Melanie, and she stared at the lovely white crocheted canopy above her. Her maid, anticipating her awakening, had already opened the drapes. That would explain why her head was under her pillow when she awoke. Rachel had already been in the room. She suspected the woman had stoked the fire. She could hear the crackling sound of the fire and smelled the scent of wood as it warmed her room. Feeling heat emanating through the room made it easier to contemplate stepping from the bed onto the cold floor. This was the same bedroom she'd had before leaving for Scotland.

"Meow," the small kitten cried out, and Melanie realized the little rascal she'd rescued yesterday had tucked himself under her arm.

"Hello, little fellow. You seem no worse for wear." She smoothed the kitten's soft head with her finger. "That black carriage almost flattened us, my little friend." An involuntary shudder shook her as she recalled the near brush with death. If it hadn't been for Jonathan swooping in, her life would have come to a screeching end in that street yesterday.

Four years ago, Melanie had been only two balls into a Season—her first Season and was attending with her best friends, Lady Lydia Yarstone and Lady Lilian Harlow—twin sisters to Viscount Jonathan DeLacey. Since she had been a young girl, Jonathan DeLacey had been her hero, the man of her dreams. But as he clutched the hand of the woman he had just declared himself betrothed to, Melanie's heart

shattered.

And now, she had agreed to go to a bookstore with him. For all these years, she had focused on forgetting him. She had always been chatty, almost giddy when she was around him. How would she act around him? And worse...what would she say? Confusion, sadness—and if she was honest, a small amount of thrill were all feelings she wrestled. She had moved on. But here he is, still a bachelor and back in London. It didn't mean a thing. Closing her eyes, she shook her head, summoning her resolve. She had her own life and purpose, and he was happy with his, at least according to rumors. Jonathan was a man with many mistresses.

Scotland was arrestingly beautiful, but nothing made much of a difference to Melanie. Sure. It had given her solace and a renewed sense of family—but that faded after the death of her mother. Except for her brother, she felt alone. How had it all happened? Her mother's death had been unexpected. A woman who had never been sick became deathly ill. And not even the doctors understood what happened to her. She missed her mother. She would do anything to have one more day—one more conversation with her mother. Shrouded in loneliness, Melanie burrowed herself in books, transported by different authors to a different time and a different world. Best of all, she had discovered her talent as a writer. And even better, Gavin supported it. Her mother had never seen anything she'd written, but she knew wherever she was, she was happy for her.

"Mewww," the kitten cried, stretching his legs playfully around her long curls. Rachel would be in here any moment with her morning chocolate, toast, and raspberry jam. She had shared the same "breakfast" with her mother in Scotland every morning. Melanie began to tear up as she remembered how encouraging her mother had been of her writing, always encouraging her to try. "Melanie, darling. You can tell a story much better than many people. You should try," she'd say. Even though her first Season had been a disaster, Melanie didn't regret moving to Scotland with her mother and spending those last years of her mother's life with her.

If given the chance to do it all again, Melanie would have been more biddable for her mother. She would have forced herself to enjoy that Season. They had been in Scotland for a year when her mother suddenly became ill. The countess died within months. The only thing she could not fulfill was her mother's wish of settling down—which to her parents, meant marriage and having children. She wished she'd been able to give that to her mother, but she hadn't, and suddenly there was no time. Even though she hadn't found someone to share her life with, her parents had put their faith in their daughter's sensible approach to life. Her parents had ensured she had the option to have her dowry accessible to her if she married or when she reached the age of twenty-five, whichever came first.

At twenty-one, Melanie was content to pursue her passion for writing her gothic mysteries under her assumed pen name, M. R. Stephens, and continue to read her mysteries and gothic novels. Women authoring books was frowned upon by Society. He kept her secret, telling her it was her secret to tell.

Melanie smiled as she gazed down at the adorable kitten now sleeping next to her, tangled in her hair.

Even with a cheery blaze crackling in the fireplace, she knew that once she emerged from her warm cocoon, her room would be frosty. Needing to start her day, Melanie spent a few moments more absorbing the warmth of the sheets and blankets, as she mentally prepared herself for her day.

A light knock on her door brought a light sigh to her lips. Her day was about to start. She looked up when Rachel entered her room with her silver breakfast tray. "Good morning, milady," Rachel said, setting a small bowl of milk on the floor, accompanied by a plate with two rashers of bacon.

"Morning, Rachel," Melanie said, stifling a yawn.

The kitten's ears perked up and his nose wiggled as he rolled over and sat up. "Good morning, Smoot." She'd named the kitten yesterday when she introduced him to Shep. "I see the only thing that could tempt you from this warm haven is your belly, eh, little one?" She giggled, tapping the little fur ball's nose.

A sharp bark retorted from behind her pillow letting her know that her white, fluffy puppy had always slept on her pillow and was no fan of the intruder. She had her work cut out for her. Melanie blew out a breath. "Shep, you need to get along with your new brother. Smoot needs your guidance, especially since he wandered onto a busy road and almost got himself killed," she admonished in a gentle but firm voice.

Shep's huff of resignation, along with the jingle of his collar and name tag, was his answer. She glanced at her beautiful puppy and burst into laughter. Shep lay with one paw over his head—a clear sign of his exasperation.

Smoot waved a splinted paw as if challenging the dog. On three legs, the kitten hobbled from his warm spot next to her pillow to the floor and began lapping the milk.

"I didn't even have to ask."

"He's a smart little one," Rachel said. "Knows where the goodies are, he does."

"Can you ask one of the footmen to take both of them to the fenced area behind the kitchen to do their business?"

"Yes, of course, milady," Rachel said. "I will see it done. Do you think the puppy and the kitten will get along?"

"I do." Melanie was determined they would be friends. Her dog—still a puppy at a few months shy of one—was an offspring of the adorable dog that the Earl and

Countess of Worsley had rescued years before they married. Having met the puppy's sire, Melanie had instantly fallen in love and had asked if they should decide to breed Shep, if could she have one of the pups. As it happened, Shep Senior did sire a litter and Gavin delivered it to Scotland on one of his visits. Shep Junior, who was only a year old, helped Melanie heal through her grief over the passing of their mother. Melanie and Shep adored each other.

He was loyal, happy, and her constant companion. And having witnessed a few potentially dangerous stand-offs with feral dogs during her time in Scotland, Melanie was in awe of her puppy's willingness to put himself in harm's way to protect her. Just as Melanie would always look out for Shep. Even Sable, the horse she'd raised from birth, loved the puppy, and they frequently played in the horse pen. Shep Junior was a tribute to his sire who'd saved the Countess of Worsley several times.

Melanie spent hours each day training Shep in Scotland, she was certain that with kindness and patience, both animals would get along. She'd make sure of it. Right now, her only obstacle was convincing her grandmother that the kitten should stay.

"Milady, your grandmother asked me to invite you to join her and break your fast. I've brought your chocolate but left off the biscuits. And your water is ready behind the screen for your bath," Rachel said, placing the tray on a table next to the bed.

"Very good. I'll hurry, Rachel." Melanie sat up in bed and gave a wan smile. "Goodness! I fear I slept like the dead, Rachel. I never heard you dragging in the water."

"Several maids helped, milady. Lord DeLacey will be here soon to take you to the bookshop this morning. The Dowager Countess would like to have a word before you depart, she said."

"He said he'd pick me up at eleven." Oh, drat! Why did I accept? She knew better.



“What time is it now?”

“Milady, it’s half past eight,” Rachel said.

Melanie took a slow, deep breath to temper the wild beating of her heart. Just the thought of Jonathan created anxiety—a reason she’d tried to forget him. Why had she not told him no? It was impossible to politely refuse his invitation now, so she pushed herself to get up and padded behind the screen. “I’ll have my bath and then my chocolate, Rachel.”

“I’ll move it by the fire, and it’ll stay warm, milady,” Rachel said. “I’ll return in twenty minutes to help you dress and do your hair. “

As Melanie leaned against the back of the tub, she reflected on the spirited dialogue between her and Jonathan. He remembered how she couldn’t resist rescuing kittens. He remembered her nickname. The one he gave her. She caught herself smiling at the memory. And then admonished herself. Her gaze fell on the basket on the floor in the room’s corner where Smoot slept, snoring. The empty small bowl beside him confirmed that the warm milk had relaxed him.

As if I might rescue another kitten. An unladylike snort escaped, and she threw her hand over her mouth. “I guess he knows me better than I realized.” Despite her nerves, about seeing him again, she had to admit she was curious over what he had been doing for four years.

Her mind wandered back to yesterday. Her driver had approached Jonathan just as he’d escorted her and Rachel to his carriage... Melanie had assured him that she would be fine taking her carriage home, but Jonathan would have none of it. Instead, he told her driver he would bring her home and sent her carriage on ahead. Maybe it was the feeling of being in his company again, the warmth of his presence, that made her heart flutter. She didn’t know—but at this moment, part of her was excited and

part of her was nervous or anxious. Suddenly, she realized she looked forward to seeing him. Melanie hurried through her bath and was already dressing when Rachel returned.

Thirty minutes later, she entered the morning room and greeted her grandmother.

“Melanie, darling. I’m glad to see you’ve decided to join me,” the Dowager Countess of Rochester said as she buttered her toast. The dowager countess took her cane and tapped the seat next to her.

Melanie knew what that meant. Her grandmother was directing her to a seat. She would bet her biscuits that Grandmama knew Lord Jonathan DeLacey had walked her to the front door, she thought irritably as she filled her plate with eggs, bacon, and toast. She had thought herself lucky to find her grandmama visiting one of her friends at the time. Melanie had a feeling Rachel had been talking.

As soon as she sat down, a footman served her a second cup of chocolate for the day.

The dowager laid down her toast and, wearing a smile, turned towards Melanie. “My girl, tell me about the accident. As I understand it, you were nearly run over by a carriage, and we have Viscount Jonathan DeLacey to thank for saving your life. I had no idea he was even back in London. No wonder he was such a successful spy for the Crown. He comes and goes like a ghost. Not that I am advocating the existence of spirits. It was merely an expression. Although I have heard a few strange noises at night, I assume it’s just dear Rodney, your late grandfather, who’s come for a visit. How I miss that dear man. She took a sip of her tea. “Have you named the kitten yet?”

That was fast. “I’ve named him Smoot. I considered other names...”

“That’s perfect,” The dowager countess said. “I understand he’s black and white.

Have I ever mentioned the little black and white kitten I had when I was younger?"

"No, Grandmama," Melanie said.

She picked up her toast and took another bite, washing it down with a sip of tea. "My girl. You already have a dog. What are you going to do with a cat? Will you even have time for both?"

Melanie coughed and gulped down a mouthful of her chocolate. "I haven't forgotten, Grandmama. I will do my best to care for them both."

The Dowager Countess of Rochester smiled. "See that you do, my dear. However, if you need me to, I would be happy to be a surrogate for you with the kitten, particularly since it's black and white. As I mentioned, I had one many years ago...and named it Salem." A look of pain crossed her face. "I loved that cat. I had him for almost twenty years. Even though your grandfather always sneezed when he was around him. Bless that dear man."

"Grandmama, I would be happy to gift Smoot to you," Melanie said, rising from her chair to kiss the dowager countess on the cheek.

"Oh, my goodness, I don't think?—"

"Would you consider watching over him today while I am on my outing?" Melanie interrupted. "Given your experience with cats in the past, you are a perfect choice to watch over Smoot while I am out."

The dowager countess gave a regal nod. "Very well, that is a reasonable proposal. While you are out with Lord DeLacey today, I shall get to know young Smoot. And we shall see if we are compatible."

“I am certain Smoot will enjoy spending time with you, Grandmama.” Melanie was hoping her grandmother would fall in love with the kitten and want him around permanently.

A knock preceded the butler’s entry into the dining room. “My ladies, Lord DeLacey, is here to see Lady Melanie.”

“Have him join us, Duckett. He can join us for breakfast. Surely, he isn’t in too much of a hurry to take you on this outing,” the dowager countess said.

A moment later, Jonathan DeLacey entered the room. “Good morning, Countess, Lady Melanie. Isn’t it a fine day for an outing?”

“Pish! It’s a wonderful day because of you, my lord. You saved my granddaughter from certain doom. And I thank you so much. Would you join us?”

“I would be delighted.” Jonathan poured himself a cup of coffee and filled his plate with bacon and eggs before taking a seat. “As for saving Melanie, I had no idea it was Melanie at the time. I was quite surprised that it was her. But then again, perhaps not all that surprised, since I have a history of saving her in the past,” he said with a wink in Melanie’s direction.

Melanie could feel her cheeks blazing.

“Yes, well, I do recall a few of those incidents, including one with Melanie atop a runaway horse.” Her grandmother shook her head. “Dearest, what is it about your penchant for getting into trouble?”

Melanie picked up her chocolate and drank deeply. Luckily, the chocolate had cooled.

“I haven’t been in that kind of trouble in years,” Melanie mumbled.

“I think in future you must be more careful. Particularly when you are rushing headlong into danger to save one of your creatures.”

“I don’t make it a habit of rushing into danger,” Melanie added.

“Thank goodness Jonathan was there. And thank goodness he will be escorting you to that dusty bookshop you love so much.”

Melanie sipped her chocolate and avoided looking at either of them.

“Now then, Jonathan, Melanie, and I plan to go to Gunter’s tomorrow, and your company would be most welcome. I know you have not been back long and must have much to do with all that spying business?—”

“I accept, my lady,” Jonathan said with a smile. “I would be pleased to escort you ladies tomorrow to assure your safety, of course.” He turned to look at Melanie, his sky-blue eyes almost daring her to argue.

Melanie refused to rise to his challenge. Assure their safety? She wasn’t a child anymore and certainly didn’t need someone watching over her. Yesterday had been a complete fluke. She had spent the past four years living a completely placid existence. What did he think she was going to do—turn somersaults in the middle of the street?

“Very good. Then it’s settled.” The dowager countess gave a satisfied smile as she took another sip of tea. “By the by, in one week, I shall be turning seventy years old.

“Congratulations, my lady,” Jonathan said, his eyes gleaming with humor.

“Pshaw! I hate growing old. But I do enjoy a good party. We will have a house party at our family’s manor house near Bath. I would like it very much if you’d join us.”

Melanie gaped. She hadn’t expected this. But she could do nothing about it. Grandmama had invited him, she certainly couldn’t interfere and uninvite him. Although she wanted to. Instead, she waited for his reply, hoping against hope he had a reason to decline.

“I would be delighted. My sisters mentioned they would be attending your celebration along with their husbands. It will be an enjoyable way to spend the early part of the holiday season,” Jonathan said.

“Excellent. That’s what I was hoping you might say. It’s a week-long party. It will be mostly family—people that I adore—and, of course, friends. And now I must see to the kitten that I shall be watching over while you and Melanie are on your outing.” With twinkling eyes, she smiled at Melanie. “Lord DeLacey, I look forward to our Gunter’s outing tomorrow.”

“As will I.” Jonathan smiled, standing and bowing as the footman helped the dowager countess from her chair.

Melanie couldn’t help but wonder if her grandmother had just hoodwinked her. The question was, was Jonathan attending because he could not refuse the invitation, or was there another reason why he was going? Melanie filed her questions away for now. She would have to ponder what was going on when she was alone and could sort out her thoughts. She had gone four years without seeing Jonathan; suddenly, she was not only being escorted by him on not one but two outings, but she would be in his presence for an entire week. How in the world would she be able to manage being around the man she’d dreamed of her entire life until he broke her heart? It was going to be a challenging couple of weeks!

### Chapter Four

“ I trust you are recovered from yesterday?” Jonathan asked, his lips curved up in a smile.

“Yes, all is well,” Melanie replied, trying not to look directly at that smile. That smile that had practically been emblazoned in her memory. Melanie was seated across from Jonathan on the comfortable brown leather seat in his elegant carriage while her maid Rachel sat on the same side as Melanie but at the other end, gazing out the window, giving them a semblance of privacy.

“And the kitten, how does he fare?”

Melanie couldn't help but smile as she remembered Smoot's antics that morning. “I think I know why they say cats have nine lives.” She glanced up and her eyes met his and she suddenly forgot what else she was about to say. Drat! Why does he have to be so gorgeous?

“Cats may well have nine lives, but people do not,” Jonathan said. “You would do well to remember that, Melanie.”

“While I am grateful to you for your assistance yesterday, I do not need to be scolded like a naughty child.”

“If you behave like one, that's how you will be treated.”

“So much for my hero worship,” she mumbled under her breath.

“I beg your pardon?”

She attempted to school her features into a placid smile and make her voice the epitome of calm. “I was surprised to see that you are back in London.” She chanced a peek at him and noted his eyes continued to regard her with an intensity that she could scarcely interpret. Nevertheless, it left her feeling quite discombobulated.

“Well, you needn’t be surprised any longer. For I am here to stay.”

“You are?”

“Yes, why? Does that surprise you?”

“Er, no. I had just assumed you were set on your top-secret work.”

He grinned. “I wasn’t aware you were so interested in my occupation. Nor was I aware that you had returned from Scotland. Then again, I have not been in touch with your brother since my return. But I hope to remedy that soon.”

“I’m certain Gavin will be happy to see you. You always were two peas in a pod.”  
Melanie glanced to her right and noticed that Rachel had nodded off.

“How so?” he asked.

“My brother is the same as he has always been—enjoying the company of widows and breaking hearts all over England. Anything to avoid settling down.”

“And you think I am the same? A heartbreaker?”

You broke my heart. “As you know, I have been out of the country, so I haven’t been as attuned to The Town Tattler . I couldn’t say for sure.”



He gave a wry smile. “Ah. I see. I’ve been out of the country, as we’ve both acknowledged. And now, I’m back with the hope of setting down roots.”

Does that mean he plans to marry? Melanie was dying to ask, but bit her tongue, lest she find out something she’d rather not know. Or did she want to know? Four years ago, she had been surprised. Maybe she should ask. She schooled her face to appear as noncommittal as possible, as she pulled at a stray thread on her sleeve. “Does that mean you plan to marry? Or maybe I should offer you congratulations?”

He laughed. “Not so fast. I meant that I plan to stay in England and have completed my last assignment for the Crown. My father wants me to become more involved in the estate business. He and my mother intend to travel the continent, once I am in control of more of the business.”

Strangely, she felt better and glanced up at him. “So, you plan to spend more time in London?”

He gazed at her. “Yes, I do. What are your plans?”

“Gavin insisted I return to London with him for a while. Well, maybe because Lydia and Lilian had written to him, requesting that I spend time with them during the upcoming Season.” She was twenty-one, and with no prospects, Gavin found the idea had merit. Her brother’s conversation came back to her. “He never married Lady Diana Thurston,” Gavin had said out of the blue, as they pulled away from Rochester Castle. Her brother had an uncanny way of understanding her when others could not.

“I hardly care about that,” she had replied.

“It’s me, Melanie. I find your response evasive and avoids much of the actual issue. I’m your brother. I know you better than that. However, I’m not promoting a match. But I wanted to ensure you knew so his presence wouldn’t surprise you.” Truthfully,

it shocked her to learn that anyone would leave Jonathan at the altar.

“I was very sorry to hear of your mother’s unexpected passing,” Jonathan said, jolting her back to the present.

She swallowed the huge lump in her throat. Her mother’s illness and subsequent passing had been a shock. “Yes, that has been difficult. However, I am slowly adjusting. My parents made provisions that will allow me access to my dowry in four more years, providing I’ve not married. I plan to use that to create a quiet life for myself.”

He leaned forward and tipped her chin up to meet his gaze. “You plan a future alone, then.”

It was more of a statement than a question. Something fluttered in her stomach and the skin on her chin heated from his touch. “I...I am not sure. As you can well imagine, I’m clearly on the shelf and eligible men are more interested in debutantes that...”

“On the shelf? Who says?” he whispered, with eyes blazing into hers.

She was not the spinster type, and he couldn’t imagine her being on the shelf. It was a stupid saying. As far as he was concerned, she seemed perfect. He wanted desperately to kiss her, and it took all his reserve to ease back into his seat. But they were getting close to their destination. And her maid was in the carriage— even if she had fallen asleep . And he reminded himself, she was his best friend’s little sister.

When they stopped, Jonathan helped Melanie alight from the carriage. She was behaving rather prickly toward him, and he couldn’t fathom why. He thought back over what they had talked about. He felt sure he should know but couldn’t think of anything that would cause her to be out of sorts with him. What was he missing?

Melanie was beautiful. She had grown from a girl into a beautiful woman in the four years he'd been away, and he couldn't help being helplessly drawn to her since rescuing her in front of this very spot only yesterday.

"I appreciate you accompanying me today, she said as they entered the shop. I meant to go yesterday before Smoot and the whole er—carriage incident."

Jonathan's chest tightened at Melanie's calling it an incident. She'd almost died, for God's sake! He'd almost lost his temper earlier when she'd talked about cats and their blasted nine lives. He couldn't let himself think what would most certainly have happened if he hadn't been there. Honestly, she was the most stubborn woman. He'd known Melanie all his life, she was his best friend's little sister. Hell, she was the dearest friend of Lydia and Lilian. He'd always had a soft spot in his heart for Melanie. As a child, she had a habit of rushing headlong into rescuing various wounded creatures. The problem was she never seemed to be aware of the danger to herself. Luckily, Jonathan had been nearby whenever Melanie had gotten herself into one scrape or another.

But Melanie was no longer a little girl. He became painfully aware of that fact yesterday as he'd held her in his arms. Her lush beauty had taken him completely by surprise. When had she grown up? He couldn't recall the last time he'd seen her...and then he remembered the ball four years ago when he'd announced his engagement to Diana. He tried never to think about that woman. Besides, he was far more concerned with how he could make Melanie see that she needed to be more careful.

As they stepped into the warm, inviting atmosphere of the bookstore, the manager stepped forward to give them a friendly greeting and offer his assistance.

"I'm Mr. Conners. Please let me know if I can be of help," the man said.

Jonathan thanked him and told him they were browsing at the moment, discreetly offering a slight nod to the older man. The manager was the informant who'd sent Jonathan a note while he was at Slade's office. As Jonathan bravely rushed into the road to aid the woman, the manager took advantage of the commotion, slipping silently into the darkness of the alley and escaping through the inconspicuous back door of the bookstore. The unpredictable twists of yesterday's events had caught everyone off guard, leaving echoes of surprise and uncertainty hanging in the air, and he'd been unable to speak to the informant.

He noticed Melanie's maid had found a quiet corner near the entrance and pulled a frame of needlepoint from her basket.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" Jonathan asked Melanie. "Perhaps I can help you find it." Gavin had mentioned to Jonathan the last time he'd been in England for a brief visit that Melanie was pursuing a writing career. Interestingly, Jonathan got the impression that Gavin was trying to gauge his reaction to the news. He'd made a point of telling Jonathan not to mention Melanie's pursuit to become a published author. Jonathan was pleased to hear she had found something she was passionate about—especially, having lost her mother, to whom she was very close. He admired women who sought to break free from traditional roles. As an agent, he recognized the strength that women displayed—both in his colleagues and in his informants.

"Nothing and everything. It's been such a long time since I've been here, I wanted to experience it again," she replied, looking around the shop with eyes aglow and filled with excitement. He couldn't help but smile.

He had the feeling she was evading his question, perhaps because she was worried about his reaction. "It's been my experience that women who push the boundaries of what Society dictates for them are worthy of admiration," he said, chancing her reaction.

Her velvety-brown eyes widened in surprise, and she opened those full rosy lips as though she were about to say something. But then the bell above the door jingled as an older couple stepped into the shop. Jonathan saw a flicker of hesitation on Melanie's lovely face, and she looked away as she perused the leather-bound tomes on the shelf in front of her.

“What section do you want to peruse first?” While the shop offered an array of books, it was a treasure, specializing in antiquated finds, and fit well with the ambiance of the quaint, historic London street.

The store manager walked past them returning a book to the shelf and slid a note into Jonathan's palm. While he was ready for it, he was a little surprised. The man had expected he would return. Jonathan itched to read it, but that would have to wait for a private moment.

“I'm interested in the new book by Sir Walter Scott— *Ivanhoe* . I heard that there might be some signed copies here. I had planned to look for them yesterday,” she said.

“Let me inquire,” Jonathan said. Walking toward the desk where the manager, Mr. Tom Connors, was unpacking several books, Jonathan quickly scanned the note.

DL ~

Be wary. Noise of insurgent partner already in London.

Has integrated into Society.

X

Johnathan nodded at Connors and touched the side of his nose. Thankfully, the

initials DL were used. Had the note passed into the wrong hands, he doubted anyone would have known it had been meant for him. “The lady would like to pick up copies of *Ivanhoe* for friends and had heard you might have signed copies.”

“My lord, most of them sold out yesterday. I have only two or three copies left. I also have a first-edition copy of *Frankenstein* if the lady is interested. It’s used, but it’s quite rare to find a first edition for a book so popular. Part of the charm of our establishment. We have both rare books and unique treasures.”

“How wonderful,” Melanie exclaimed.” She’d followed him to the desk and now stood by his side, her slender frame vibrating with excitement.

“I never imagined I’d find an original... I mean first edition. Lydia and Lilian will love them. By chance, do you also have some books by Austen that might also be original copies?”

“I believe the lady is interested in seeing many of your fine books,” Jonathan said, amusement lacing his voice.

“I may have a couple of Austen’s first editions. I was rearranging stock and was surprised to find them the other day. They were hidden behind a small stand of books on the shelves.”

“Oh! My best friend, Lady Angela Wilde, would love a copy of *Sense and Sensibility*. She still laments not having found an original edition,” Melanie whispered. “I wish we had known who “By a Lady” was before her death. When she died, her brother Henry Austen revealed her identity. It seems unfair that she had to keep her name quiet to sell her books.”

Jonathan nodded, choosing not to comment further about the pseudonym Austen had taken. It was unfortunate that women’s skills were not valued in Society as they

ought to be.

An hour later, they walked out of the shop. Jonathan was carrying a stack of books neatly wrapped. Melanie's maid walked a few steps behind them. "There's a tea shop across the street. I don't know about you, but they have the best strawberry tarts and sticky buns." Her eyes lit up and he recalled how much she loved strawberries, biscuits, and sweets in general.

"Shall we go?" she asked.

He realized he was hedging. He had had such a wonderful time at the bookshop, seeing things through Melanie's eyes, and realized he wanted to spend more time with her. She had changed so much since the days she and his sisters followed him and Gavin around the estates, spying on them and listening in on their conversations.

She beamed at him. "I'd love some tea," she coaxed.

"Then, by all means, let's enjoy a hot cup before we return home. Besides, I'd like to see if you have the same sweet tooth you always had," he said with a wink.

"Thank you for accompanying me today," Melanie said as she poured cream into her tea. Your advice was most helpful. I am so pleased to have found the most perfect Christmas gifts for Lillian and Lydia."

"I suspect my sisters will be thrilled. But what is it about Frankenstein that makes the book so appealing?" Jonathan asked, sincerely interested. He hadn't read it but knew of the book's popularity.

"Besides being very entertaining, I think it makes the reader think about the dangers of playing God," Melanie said, biting into the sticky bun. "This is delicious, by the way," she added, chasing the sweet treat with her hot tea.

“I didn’t realize what it was about,” he admitted.

“Then you must read it! She perused the stack of wrapped purchases and set one on the table next to Jonathan.

“No...this is a present for your family and friends. I would rather read your copy,” he said, giving her a lopsided grin. He couldn’t help but be fascinated by Melanie. Her mind was like quicksilver, and he wanted to know more about the books she’d read. She got such excitement from stories; it was no wonder she wanted to write them.

Melanie blushed but seemed to warm to the idea. “Well...all right. I think I may have my copy at Grandmama’s. I’ll look for it.”

He nodded. As they sat together, the warm steam rising from their fragrant tea mingled with the sweet smell of freshly baked biscuits and sticky buns. He would forever associate this mix of glorious scents with the beautiful young woman sitting across from him. Their laughter filled the cozy room as they discussed their favorite books.

“I cannot recall the last time I’ve had such a good time talking about books,” Jonathan said, looking at the empty plate in front of him. “It appears there are no more biscuits and sticky buns. Shall I order a refill of hot tea and biscuits?”

“Goodness! I have talked so much, I don’t even recall eating the last biscuit,” Melanie said.

“You didn’t. I did.” He flashed a smile. “The orange biscuits and strawberry tarts were especially delicious.”

Melanie smiled, a pretty blush suffusing her cheeks. “They were delicious. Truly.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “But we should probably make our way back to



Grandmama's."

Jonathan felt warmed by her smile. He nodded to the server, who came with the bill.

"And can you give us a dozen of those delicious biscuits?"

"Yes, milord," the server said, disappearing into the kitchen.

He winked at Melanie. "I think the dowager countess will enjoy them."

Melanie giggled, and Jonathan thought it was the prettiest sound he'd ever heard.

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:18 am*

### Chapter Five

#### The Next Day

Jonathan leaned back against the plush brown leather chair, sinking into its embrace as he enjoyed the gentle crackling of the fire in the expansive fireplace that dominated the wall across from him. The flickering flames cast a warming glow that filled the room with a cozy ambiance. He relished the soothing heat that enveloped him, perfectly balanced to feel comforted rather than scorched. With its rich, inviting atmosphere, this sanctuary was his favorite spot at White's, especially during the chilly months when the world outside could be cold and uninviting.

"Would you like a refill on that brandy, milord?" a footman asked.

"Yes, I would. And if you see Lord Rochester, please direct him here.

"Will it only be the two of you, milord? If you like, I can position the chair to the right of you to give you a little more separation and privacy from the rest of the gathering," the footman said.

"Yes. We would appreciate that," Jonathan said.

The footman adjusted a second leather chair at an angle before quietly slipping out of the room.

Jonathan stared into the flames, reflecting on the events of yesterday. He and Melanie spent most of the day together, and he found himself wishing for more time with her.

He'd always perceived her as his best friend's little sister, who was always getting into mischief...until two days ago...

"I'm sorry I'm late," Rochester said, sitting next to Jonathan and waving the footman over to them. "I'll take a brandy—your best—and if you still have those fine cigars you had the other day, we'll take two."

"Yes, milord. I believe we still have a small quantity of the cigars you are referring to; I'll return in a moment."

"Where are these cigars from?" Jonathan asked as the footman walked away.

"I believe the Spanish colony of Cuba. They're exceptional. My grandmother insisted on trying one as well."

Jonathan and Rochester were still chuckling about Rochester's outrageous grandmother when the footman returned with brandy and cigars. He set the snifter down on the side table next to Rochester and, snipped the tips of the cigars and lit them.

Jonathan leaned back and took a puff of his cigar. "Ah, smooth. I can see why your grandmother loves them."

"Grandmother is a true original," Rochester said. "Speaking of Grandmother, she's been mum about what happened to Melanie the other day with that runaway carriage."

"It wasn't a runaway carriage," Jonathan said, his anger rushing back.

"What are you saying, man? That someone tried to kill my sister on purpose?" Rochester leaned forward, and his eyes had gone steely. "Why in the blazes didn't

you let me know?”

“I haven’t had a chance to do so. Your sister was intent on returning to King Street to visit the bookshop yesterday. I went with her to see to her protection.”

His friend gave him a speculative look. “Really...strictly for protection, you say... Tell me everything.”

Jonathan nodded and exhaled a deep breath. “I received a note from an informant while meeting with Slade, asking to meet with me as I’d just left Slade’s office when I heard the carriage careening around the corner and bearing down on a woman standing in the middle of the road holding a kitten. I flew into action. At the time, I had no idea it was your sister, I only realized it afterward.” Jonathan blew out another breath.

“Thank you for being there. For saving her.” Rochester combed his fingers through his hair in agitation. “God, you know how single-minded my sister can be when she gets it into her head to do something. She becomes completely oblivious to danger—if anything had happened to her... Dammit! ” Rochester gulped down his brandy and called to a footman for another.

“Your sister has a kind heart, especially for wounded creatures,” Jonathan said softly. “I apologize for not contacting you right away.” His thoughts had been about protecting Melanie. Since the moment he held her in his arms, he’d not been able to think of anything but her.

“I understand, and I’m grateful you were there.” Rochester ran his fingers through his hair again. “Tell me why you think she was the target. Did you see who was in the carriage?”

“I happened to look up for a moment. When I saw someone in the carriage, I couldn’t

see them clearly, just a shadowy figure. And the driver was masked. That alone made me think it was intentional.”

“Damn and blast!” Rochester exclaimed. “I know my sister is stubborn, but I’m not aware of her having enemies of this magnitude. Tell me, could the near miss with the mysterious carriage have anything to do with your case? Maybe the carriage was aiming for you.”

Lord Gavin Rochester had ties of his own to the Crown and knew what Jonathan had been working on while in Paris. “I’ve been giving a lot of thought to that,” Jonathan said. “And I don’t think they were aiming at me. Melanie was standing in the road, and it appeared she was the target, although I cannot fathom why.”

“She’s only just returned to England, for God’s sake. She was living in Scotland with our mother.” Rochester shook his head. “Could it have something to do with one of your cases?” he repeated.

“I don’t know.”

“This is my little sister, and if someone has placed her in their crosshairs, I’ll go after them myself.”

“We’ll both go after them.” Jonathan’s chest tightened. Could Melanie have become someone’s target because of him—either one of his past cases or his latest capture of Talbot? “This was to be my last case, but I cannot stop until I find who is behind this. It feels personal to me, and I cannot shake that.”

“Speaking of personal, I heard Lady Diana Thurston—I mean the Duchess of Aumale—is back in town. You know the poor sod she married died two weeks ago, and she’s already prowling around Bath like a cat in heat,” Rochester said.

“Bath?”

“Yes. I heard the son of the late duke kicked her out. She’s banned from all the properties...every single one of them. The son, who recently married, did well to listen to his bride. Evidently, the new duchess caught Diana trying to seduce the newly minted duke in the study. She nearly tore her hair out. Diana was tossed out with whatever possessions she could fit in her carriage. She’s staying in the hotel in Bath, currently on the hunt for a protector. She may have her sights set on you,” Rochester said.

Jonathan coughed—nearly choking on his brandy.

“Went down the wrong way?” Rochester said in a dry tone.

“Indeed,” Jonathan said, clearing his throat. “That woman can forget any hope on that front. That ship sailed four years ago. I am relieved I was not on it. I was a fool to have fallen for her. Since then, I have learned to see through the facade of a pretty face.”

“Agreed. I’ve heard rumors the late duke died under suspicious circumstances. He was almost sixty when they married, but the man seemed in peak health for his age—even the last time I saw him in Parliament,” Rochester said.

“Did you look into your suspicions?” Jonathan asked.

“I’ve been making a few discreet inquiries,” Rochester replied.

“Good, keep me posted on that.”

“I will. But we still need to figure out who is behind this attempt on Melanie’s life. If anything happened to her...” Rochester didn’t finish his sentence, but Jonathan felt

the same way.

“Was there a gentleman whose interest was spurned by Melanie at some point?”

Rochester arched a dark brow. “Are you daft? She never had an interest in ton social events after leaving England. And now, declares she intends to write mysteries. But I’ve already mentioned that to you.” She’s always been an avid reader. Every available shelf is packed with books. The woman has a voracious appetite for knowledge. While she was in Scotland, she lived a quiet life with our mother. When our mother fell ill, Melanie was by her bedside day and night. That was when she took up writing. She’d read everything else she could get her hands on. By the time Mother died, writing had become a true passion for Melanie.”

“That is a commendable pursuit,” Jonathan said, a warmth flowing through him at the thought. He pictured her sitting at her desk gazing out an open window, her copper-colored hair glowing in the sunlight as she let her imagination take flight...

“DeLacey, did you hear what I said?” Rochester frowned.

“Apologies, my friend I was, er, contemplating my case.”

“I was just saying, I think we need to keep a close guard on Melanie.”

“Yes, I agree,” Jonathan said. “I suspect something happened after her return to London.”

“The question is, what?” Rochester said.

“That is, indeed, the question,” Jonathan said. The information about Diana didn’t sit well with him. The woman’s presence in Bath put him on edge. “Your grandmother’s birthday party is at Rock Springs Manor, which is just outside of Bath.”

“Yes. Are you still planning to attend? We leave in a few days.”

“I am. And I’m looking forward to it. It’ll give me a chance to ease back into Society, and this is a perfect opportunity. And I can also keep an eye on Melanie—that is, we can keep an eye on her.”

Rochester sat back, a shrewd gleam in his dark eyes. “Is there anything else I should know about regarding you and my sister? How did your visit to the bookshop go? Grandmother mentioned you went for tea afterward. You know, you were always my sister’s knight in shining armor—rescuing her from one calamity or another. Are you still?”

Jonathan took another sip of brandy. Luckily, he didn’t choke on it this time. He’d only just met Melanie again after many years. He hoped to spend more time with her on a different level than when she was the young girl who shimmied up trees to rescue kittens. He was interested in the woman she had become and wanted to know more but was not yet prepared to discuss that with Rochester. “I’m your best friend; I was around during many of those mishaps, I was only trying to keep her safe, as you would have done.”

“We were and are best friends. But Melanie is my little sister, and I love her. I don’t want her heart broken. So, don’t go sniffing around her unless your intentions are noble. I know your reputation...”

“That’s low, considering your reputation. Last I heard, you were keeping three mistresses,” Jonathan said, anger lacing his voice.

“This is my sister, Jonathan. This is Melanie.”

Jonathan sat in silence, grappling with Rochester’s challenge. His heart raced at the thought of Melanie, her laughter echoing in his mind, her smile lighting up his day.



Everything had shifted since that moment. The moment he gazed down and beheld the face of the woman he'd saved. Captivated by her lush beauty, her rich auburn hair, her doe-brown eyes, those full rosy lips... He knew he had to be honest with his best friend; the truth was too important to ignore. "What if my intentions are honorable?" he asked, his voice steady despite the turmoil inside him. "What do you think about that?"

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:18 am*

### Chapter Six

Rock Springs Manor ~ Bath, England ~ Four days later ~ December 1821

Viscount Jonathan DeLacey rode down the long driveway that would take him to the front of Rochester's country estate. Jonathan was anxious to speak to Rochester and determined to protect Melanie. He'd spent a couple more days to follow up on the whole carriage incident, unable to leave it be. The problem was that the more time he spent investigating, the more Jonathan was convinced that Melanie had been the target and the more worried he was about her safety.

Melanie was first and foremost on his mind—just as she had been since he saved her life from the rampaging carriage on King Street in London just days ago. But his thoughts of Melanie were not solely relegated to her safety and well-being. No, his thoughts were significantly complicated by his attraction to her beauty, spirit, and heart. Holding her in his arms, recognizing who she was, he was awestruck by her beauty. Indeed, she was easily the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He was not used to having such an immediate and all-encompassing connection to an investigation or to a woman. Melanie consumed his thoughts day and night. Spending time with her only deepened his attachment. And then his meeting with Rochester at Whites, and Rochester's subsequent warning challenged him to tell Melanie how he felt. But he couldn't do it. Not just yet. Not until his final assignment was completed and he uncovered the identity of Talbot's partner in crime. And not until he was able to find who had tried to kill Melanie and why.

Reaching the manor house, Jonathan handed Phantom's reins over to the footman, who rushed out to greet him.

“Welcome to Rock Springs Manor, milord,” the footman said.

“Thank you.” He nodded. “I trust that my valet, Harold, arrived yesterday?”

“He did, my lord, and everything has been unpacked and settled in your room.”

“Very good. Please see that Phantom is fed and brushed down, I’d appreciate it.”

The footman nodded. “I’ll see it done.”

As for himself, Jonathan would have liked nothing more than a warm bath and a snifter of brandy. The ride from London had taken longer than usual as he’d stopped along the way to assist a family whose carriage had gotten stuck in a ditch.

“Good to see you again, Rupert,” Jonathan said, warmly greeting the butler whom he’d known almost his entire life.

“Thank you, my lord. It’s been too long. We’re pleased to have you for a visit. Rupert showed Jonathan to the study.

He entered Rochester’s study and saw his friend, Maxwell Wilde, the Earl of Worsley, leaning against the fireplace, staring into the flames, sipping a drink. “Worsley. It’s good to see you. I’m glad you and your lovely countess could make it.”

“We’re hiding in here, escaping the ‘Can you do this for me’ requests from Maggie and Melanie and the dowager countess.” Worsley chuckled.

“We arrived last evening. What kept you?” Worsley asked. “Rochester said you had things to work out.”

“Let’s wait for Rochester, and I’ll update the both of you.” He walked to the liquor cart and poured himself a brandy. “How was your travel?”

“Thankfully, it was uneventful,” Worsley said just as Rochester reentered the room.

“Did I miss anything?” Rochester asked.

“No. I thought I’d update the two of you at the same time,”

“You look like you haven’t slept much,” Worsley observed.

Jonathan wiped his hand against the growth of stubble on his chin. “I haven’t. But it has to do with that whole...” He waved his hand in a circle. “Incident. I got up early and threw a few things into the bag to get underway. I didn’t want to miss too much.”

“Except for the dinner last evening—which we served as a buffet so people could come and go as they pleased and have a chance to eat when they arrived. Other than that, nothing much has gone on.”

“Perhaps it would be good to start with this incident. I’ve heard from Rochester, but I’d like to hear from you if you don’t mind reviewing it again with me,” Worsley said.

Jonathan nodded and began when he received the missive in Slade’s office. He talked about his investigation and why he was concerned the target was Melanie.

“I asked my informant, the owner of the bookshop on King Street, to make some discreet inquiries of the various shop owners around the area where Melanie was almost hurt.”

“I know the man... Conners, right?” Worsley said. “Had dealings with him in the

past. Sharp fellow.”

“He is. I was determined to turn up something—anything that could lead me to whoever was inside that carriage.” He had cursed himself many times over for not being more observant, a futile exercise. Self-recrimination changed nothing. It had happened so fast that most people wouldn’t have seen anything worthwhile. Except, someone did. He was sure of it. “Conners put me on to a boy, George, who works at Anderson Stables.” Jonathan filled in the details of what the boy had seen.

“That sounds promising,” Rochester said.

“He said several things that for me, confirmed Melanie was the target.”

Both men went silent.

“The first—George could see the gold crest on the side of the carriage had been painted over. He can’t read or write but he recognized the letter he saw where the paint had been smudged off. The boy pointed to the A on the Anderson’s Stable sign.

“That’s solid,” Worsley prompted. “What else did he say?”

“George described seeing the carriage that day, saying it was parked alongside the road in front of the stable. It seemed to be sitting there longer than was usual for a carriage, which drew his attention. It wasn’t as though they were waiting for someone. Then the carriage suddenly lurched forward, barreling onto the road, the driver whipping the horses into a frenzy, as it screeched onto King Street. George also noted the driver wore a mask. Which I’d witnessed as well. But the most crucial bit was the boy was certain he saw a woman in the carriage.”

For a moment, the three men remained quiet.

“There is only one person I can think of who is capable of this,” Rochester bit out. “The Duchess of Aumale.”

“While the woman is a viper of the first order, what would be her motivation for doing so?” Worsley asked. “She had everything she could possibly want as his wife. I heard it was his heart that did him in.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” Rochester said. “Last time I saw the duke, he was hale and hearty. His sudden death seems suspicious to me. Losing a peer of Aumale’s standing upset the King. They were good friends—something new wives may not have been aware of.”

“Worsley, you more than anyone should know what an evil mind is capable of,” Jonathan countered.

Worsley blew out a breath. “Aye, I do. But you cannot simply throw out an accusation without proof.”

“As I mentioned, I’m looking into the demise of the Duke of Aumale,” Rochester said. Making inquiries. I’ll hopefully hear from my contact soon.”

“In the meantime, what are you going to do,” Worsley asked Jonathan.

“For now, wait. Connors is still looking into things. One of the shopkeepers was out of town and he was waiting to speak with him. When he does, he’ll send me a missive. In the meantime, let’s keep a close eye on Melanie.”

“What about Talbot?” Rochester asked.

“As of yesterday, he is still in the Tower. Under interrogation.” Jonathan took another sip of brandy. “Connors’ note indicated that Talbot’s partner was already in London.

We need to find out who that is. You would think the partner would have gone into hiding after Talbot's arrest. The fact that he's in London, means there could be a plan in the works for Talbot's escape. And before you ask, yes I already alerted my superior and he assured me they would keep a careful eye on things."

Worsley blew out a long breath. "Anything I can do to assist you both, I am here..."

Jonathan shook his head. "Normally, I'd thank you and refuse, but I could use all eyes on it. Talbot's capture is my final assignment. But with Melanie's life in danger, I feel the need to stay connected with my informants and my superior. I feel like we're missing a piece of the puzzle here. And until we do, I must protect Melanie."

Rochester and Worsley shared a look. Jonathan started to say something, but why bother? They're right. I care about her. But was he ready to admit that to her?

Let me have someone alert your valet, and he can have a bath readied for you. I'll return in a few minutes."

"Grandmama, this is Shep's first visit to Rock Springs Manor. I'm leery of letting him just run. There's no telling what he'll get into."

"Nonsense, girl," her grandmother tutted." The dog knows where to find its next meal, and we all know he adores you. He won't lose you ."

"And I adore him just as much."

"Speaking of adoration," Grandmama said, wearing a sly grin.

Melanie looked up to see Jonathan walking their way with her brother and blushed. "Grandmama!" Her heart seemed to do a thousand somersaults. Jonathan looked so handsome... She wished she could tell him how she felt, but having felt his rejection

once, she couldn't risk it again.

"I may be old, but I'm not blind, child," she said with a dismissive flick of her wrist. "So do not try to tell an old woman that what she sees isn't there."

"What do you see that's not there?" Jonathan asked. He'd rushed through his bath in record time when his valet had told him Melanie was in the garden with her grandmother.

"Nothing and that is the point." Grandmama chuckled.

"If you're taking a walk, would you mind if we joined you? I could use the fresh air." Jonathan said casually, glancing at Rochester, who subtly raised his brows.

"I have a few things to tend to," Rochester said with a pointed look at his grandmother.

"Quite right. I need to see to Smoot. He's in the kitchen enjoying a bowl of cream. But you children go right ahead. It's a balmy day for December, a lovely day for a walk."

"I'd love to," Melanie said, giving Jonathan a shy smile as she took his arm. "Would you mind if Shep accompanied us?"

Her grandmother cleared her throat. "A capital idea! Besides, Shep needs to do his business."

Melanie's face flushed. "Grandmama!"

"Oh, pish-posh," she said. "He's a dog, for goodness' sake."



“I should ask Rachel...” Melanie started.

“My dear, you won’t need Rachel to accompany you,” her grandmother said with a wave of her hand. “You’re at home. Besides, Shep is a fine chaperone.

“Shep is a fine guard dog. Very possessive.” Rochester chuckled. “Even when I give my sister a peck on the cheek, he growls at me.”

Jonathan laughed. “I see nothing’s changed—and I must say I’ve missed visiting Rock Springs Manor.” He leaned down and kissed Grandmama on the cheek. “You used to call me your adoptive grandson. I have to admit, I’ve always felt that way.”

Grandmama gently swatted him. “Pish! You boys were always a joy. I always thought of you as part of the family. You and Gavin have always been brothers in friendship, if not in blood. The two of you were inseparable as children.”

“Thank you, Grandmama.” Smiling, Jonathan turned to Melanie. “Shall we?”

Shep barked.

“I think that’s a ‘yes,’” Melanie said, smiling at him.

“Whew,” Jonathan said when they were a short distance away. “I’m glad I passed muster as far as Shep is concerned.”

“Shep is a stalwart protector.” Melanie giggled.

“And I cannot blame him. I feel as protective of you as Shep is.”

“You do? But you’re not my...” Melanie blew out a breath. “I’m not sure what you are. My friend? My rescuer?”

Jonathan couldn't help staring at her, wanting to say exactly what he felt. He kept turning words over in his mind...kind, clever, spirited, independent...how he couldn't stop thinking about her...how he wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her... She was his best friend's little sister, he reminded himself for the umpteenth time.

"You're staring at me—do I have something on my face?" she asked, touching her cheek, which was blushing. She was even prettier when she blushed.

He chuckled. "No, I'm just thinking about how lovely you are." Why had it been so hard to tell her how lovely she was? Smiling up at him with her bow-shaped pink lips, wearing a rose-pink day dress, matching pelisse, bonnet, and kid gloves. Her eyes looked the color of rich brandy under the glow of the warm afternoon sun.

What he wanted to do was find a secluded area and kiss her senseless. But if he did, would he be ready to declare his feelings? Given his conversation with Rochester a few days ago at Whites, he would have to wait. He wouldn't toy with her affections, and he didn't want to confuse Melanie or hurt her in any way. There was still a lot he had to resolve—the Talbot case, for one. He hadn't planned on Talbot already having an instigator in England. And he needed definitive proof about who was behind the attempt on Melanie's life. Was it Diana? If so, why?

Shep tugged at his leash, and Melanie glanced down at her dog. "I think he wants to visit the boxwood over there. I imagine he's wanting to get to know the grounds."

Accommodating both, Jonathan walked them to the boxwoods, where Shep finally found a spot he liked after turning in a complete circle twice.

A few minutes later, Shep tugged again at his leash. This time, Melanie unhooked him, letting him run. "Stay nearby, Shep." He trotted ahead but never left their sight. Then, a couple of minutes later, he ran back and tugged on the hem of Melanie's

dress.

“I think he wants us to follow,” Jonathan said, curious about what could be so important that the dog needed them to see it. Frankly, the only time he’d seen a dog act this way was with the hunting dog his father had given him as a child.

“There’s an apple orchard and a pond up ahead. Perhaps he’s trying to show us the geese. They seem to live for the apples that fall from the trees. Although, as I recall, they aren’t the friendliest of creatures,” Melanie said.

As they crested the small hill, they found Shep nudging a baby deer that had fallen into the pond. The poor creature couldn’t swim, and the doe, clearly frustrated, stood a safe distance away. Fortunately, the geese were on the other side of the pond.

“Oh, dear,” Melanie said. “The poor thing needs our help.” She let go of Jonathan’s arm and began to unbutton her pelisse.

“Melanie,” Jonathan said firmly. “What do you think you’re about?”

“I’m going to wade in to rescue the fawn.”

“No, you’re not.” Jonathan took hold of her shoulders. “You will stay here where it’s safe. I’ll rescue the deer.”

“But I can help you.”

“I recall your history with ponds,” he teased, glancing over his shoulder as he approached the flailing animal. “And one never knows how a wild animal will react, especially considering its mother is standing nearby and might perceive us as hurting her baby instead of helping it. “Stand here where it’s safe, and don’t budge.”

“Very well, but please be careful. I’m not sure I could pull you out of the pond without finding myself in the water with you.”

“That might be fun,” he said, winking at her. “Let me see if I can do this without toppling in.” Leaning forward, he couldn’t quite reach the fawn, whose anxious cries and flailing had caused it to slip farther away from shore. “If I remember correctly, the depth of the pond drops off.” I need something to loop around the fawn. Do you mind if I borrow your scarf?”

“Not at all,” she said, already removing it and handing it to him. “But you are right. The pond drops off quickly. Please be careful.”

“Thank you for worrying about me,” he said with a grin as he knotted a loop at one end of the scarf. He noted the sweet blush tinting Melanie’s cheeks and once again wished he could take her in his arms and kiss her. Focus man! Jonathan tossed out the looped end of the scarf, and it caught perfectly around the fawn’s neck. Gently, he tugged it closer to shore. When it was close enough, he pulled it to him, picking it out of the shallow end. As soon as he laid the fawn on the ground, the mother deer approached, sniffing and finally nuzzling her baby about the ears and neck. The doe nudged her offspring, and with Shep’s gentle prodding with his nose, the fawn finally stood on its shaky legs.

“I believe I’ll have to fight to reclaim my hero status with you,” Jonathan said, laughing. “That dog is amazing. Not scared in the least.”

“Just like his father. Lord Worsley and Maggie saved him when he was a puppy, as I recall, the puppy eventually saved her.”

“Now that you mention it, I do remember,” Jonathan said. “He’s certainly done his namesake proud.” He squatted and patted Shep on the head. “Good boy, Shep.”

The white dog gave a small whoof and wagged his tail.

They watched the mother and her baby disappear into the woods. Melanie gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

“I shouldn’t have teased you. But it struck me while I was trying to get the fawn from the pond that this was the very pond I recall rescuing you from. And that,” Jonathan said, pointing to the large apple tree near them, “is the tree you climbed.”

“Guilty,” she said with a smile, her eyes shyly sliding away from his.

Once again, he fought the impulse to kiss this beautiful, amazing woman. He wished with every fiber of his being that he was able to declare himself. But he could not...not yet. He couldn’t risk hurting her. Instead, he took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Shall we head back?”

### Chapter Seven

#### Midnight

Jonathan tossed and turned over and over in his bed—until he finally rolled and opened his pocket watch. The watch showed it was midnight. “Great,” he muttered, placing it back on the nightstand. He glared at the ceiling. “Another night when I can’t sleep.” It never failed. When something stressful plagued his thoughts, sleep evaded him. He thought that once he turned in Talbot and was no longer taking on missions for the Crown, these sleepless nights would end. But this time, it wasn’t a mission that had him restless, it was Melanie. He couldn’t shake the eerie feeling that something more was amiss. If something happened to her, he’d never forgive himself.

When he was a child, his mama made him warm milk when he couldn’t sleep. Maybe that would work. He wasn’t in an inn or other temporary lodging where gaining access to milk in the middle of the night would be a challenge. He was at Rochester’s manor home. A grin spread across his face as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and slipped into his slippers. He figured there might be other treats in the kitchen to enjoy along with his milk. After throwing on his banyan, he headed downstairs.

He saw a light glowing from the kitchen as he approached, along with the clinking of pots and pans. Could Cook be up late preparing for Lady Rochester’s birthday celebration? He slowed as he approached the door. Since he was here, he might as well get a cup of warm milk.

As he stepped into the room, the sight before him took him by surprise. Melanie was leaning over the wooden table, her hands industriously working a ball of dough, flour

dusting her cheeks and hair like a whimsical mask. She glanced up, a surprised look breaking through the white cloud that enveloped her. She looked adorable.

“Have you secretly taken over the kitchen?” he asked, his voice thick with laughter. He never expected to find her here, immersed in such a domestic task. “Should we be concerned that you’re endeavoring to compete with Cook’s culinary prowess?”

“I wouldn’t dream of competing with Cook.” She giggled. “What are you doing here?”

“You first,” he said, momentarily distracted by the warmth in her velvety brown eyes and the sweetness of her smile.

“I just had an urge to bake. When I lived in Scotland, I learned how to cook. At first, it was just a distraction, but I found I enjoyed it—especially baking.”

“You...bake?” he asked, surprised.

“I do,” she said, smiling at him. “Nothing elaborate, mind you. But our cook in Scotland thought every woman should know how to make a few basic things. I loved making biscuits.”

He nodded thoughtfully at the lump of dough resting on the countertop. “Is that what you’re making?” he asked.

She looked down at the dough with a hint of pride and anticipation. “This? I hope it’ll taste like shortbread. It was the very first recipe Cook taught me,” she said, gently tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear and leaving another puff of flour on her cheek. “I thought it would be the easiest thing to make. After all, there are only a few ingredients...flour, butter, sugar, and salt.”

“Salt...in biscuits? That seems counterintuitive,” he remarked, arching an eyebrow in playful skepticism. Of course, he understood the reasoning behind it, but in this quiet moment, without anyone else around, he wanted to draw her out, to see her light up with her knowledge and enthusiasm.

As she smiled up at him, he felt a rush of joy. He had longed to spend time with her alone, savoring the intimacy of a stolen moment—knowing there was no one watching from a window or even a dog to worry about.

His gaze lingered on her appearance—her long, auburn braid cascading over her shoulder, with soft curls escaping to frame her face. Her large, doe-like eyes sparkled with mirth, crinkling at the corners in a way that made his heart do a series of somersaults. At that moment, he found it hard to concentrate on anything other than the warmth of her smile and the fullness of her rosy lips that beckoned to be kissed...

“Arf!” A sharp, look-at-me bark sounded.

Surprised, Jonathan looked down and spied Shep’s fluffy white head peeking from beneath her robe.

“Hello, Shep,” he said, reaching down and petting the small white dog. “So, we don’t have to fear anyone accusing you of being with me unchaperoned.” He laughed.

A pretty blush stained her cheeks. “No, I think Grandmama would approve.”

Her tinkling laughter danced through the air, reminding him of the delicate notes of his mother’s favorite windchime, each sound soft and enticing, lovely. It was a sound that conjured images of sparkling fairies, their joyous giggles floating on the breeze—a reminder of the warmth and comfort of his mother.

“Salt helps the biscuits brown and balances out the sweetness,” she said. “But you



still haven't told me."

"Told you what?" he asked, trying to focus on what she was saying instead of how much he wanted to kiss her.

"Why you're down here. At midnight," she persisted, smiling.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I couldn't sleep, and my mother used to give me a cup of warm milk when I was a boy when I couldn't sleep. It always worked. Thought I'd give it a try."

"That sounds like a good idea. Maybe I'll have some, too. I'll warm up some milk and finish this batch of shortbread."

"So, why couldn't you sleep?" she asked, realizing she was pressing for a response. She'd had trouble sleeping as well. Because of him. Thoughts of Jonathan had invaded her dreams. She'd lain in bed, staring up at the canopy for hours while Shep cuddled on her pillow and Smoot rolled up in his basket and were both snoring away. Everyone was asleep...except her.

Frustrated, she headed to the kitchen to bake. She was beyond curious as to why he couldn't sleep.

"Truthfully," he started, his voice barely above a whisper. "You were on my mind."

Had she heard correctly? "You said you had me on your mind? What were you thinking about?" She felt breathless as she anticipated his answer.

"About you...our walk. And whether I would have the opportunity to be alone with you again...because if I did, I wouldn't waste it."

“Wouldn’t waste it? What do you mean?” she asked, her voice betraying both hope and disbelief.

“That I wouldn’t waste the opportunity to kiss you,” he finally said.

“Really?”

“Really.”

It felt like a thousand butterflies were fluttering around in her stomach. How did they both get here? She’d so wanted him to kiss her at the pond after he rescued the fawn. But instead, he reached for her hand. At the time, she couldn’t help but wonder if he still saw her as the girl that he’d rescued time and time again but who could never be anything more than his best friend’s little sister.

That night, she couldn’t sleep. She’d been restless, and with sleep eluding her, Melanie had decided to do some baking. Baking always relaxed her and soothed her nerves. But then, just as she was in the middle of mixing the shortbread, Jonathan surprised her by strolling into the kitchen and telling her he couldn’t sleep and then admitting he’d wanted to kiss her by the pond.

Kiss her! By the pond!

Knowing he wanted to kiss her—something that had driven him to a cold kitchen in the middle of the night was a complete surprise.

What should she do now?

Should she wipe her hands on her apron?

Oh, goodness, what must she look like? She must have flour on her face. Her hair had

begun to become loose from her braid. What if Shep barked...or something ? She glanced to the side of the room and watched Shep lift his head and then trot over to the fireplace. A second later, he was curled up in front of the cozy fire that she'd lit to warm up the kitchen.

"You w...wanted to kiss me?"

"Yes. I still do," he said, closing the distance between them.

He still does. Oh goodness.

She wanted him to kiss her. So much. She'd dreamed about Jonathan kissing her. So many times. And here he was telling her the same thing. Should she let this happen? What if this was her only chance to kiss him? Would she ever get another chance again?

"Melanie..." he said softly.

"Yes?" Oh my! The intensity in his gaze mesmerized her. She was certain another thousand butterflies just joined their friends fluttering in her stomach.

"You look so adorable; I don't think I can help myself." He drew a breath. "Would you mind if I kissed you?" His voice was low and tentative.

A kiss. It was what she'd dreamed about for years. Forever. Her first kiss. With Jonathan... Would he realize that it was her first kiss? Would it be as she had imagined a million different times?

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

"Yes, you would mind?" he asked, his lips curving up in a crooked grin.

“No, I mean, yes, I would like that,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper as she nodded, feeling her breath hitch in her throat . Should I stand up on my tiptoes? Close my eyes? Pucker? Take deep breaths to steady my nerves. Then, a memory sparked in her mind—a scene from a gothic book where the dashing hero instructed his lady to relax and simply follow his lead. Yes, that was the key . Relaxing was crucial. She would be mortified if she ruined her first kiss. Her heart hammered so loudly that she was certain he could hear it echoing in the silence that surrounded them.

She felt beads of perspiration begin to form on her forehead, glistening in the dim candlelight as she wrestled with her swirling thoughts and emotions.

Candlelight glowed around them, casting the room in a magical light as he leaned down to kiss her. It was slow and unhurried—as if they had the entire night ahead of them. Her eyes fluttered closed. And she breathed a deep sigh as he kissed her nose and then the lids of her eyes, warm caresses that made her tingle down to her toes. The feel of his warm breath on her cheek made her shiver. How could warmth make her shiver? His hand slid to her waist, steadying her, while the other cupped her cheek. She sighed as she leaned into his featherlight touch, nuzzling her cheek against his hand, she heard his intake of breath.

“Melanie,” he said in a raspy voice.

Was he feeling the same feelings that she was?

When their lips finally met, it was soft and gentle, sending another tingle of heat through her. And then the kiss changed. His tongue began coaxing her lips open. And she did open for him like a flower opened its petals toward the sun, allowing him to explore the depths of her mouth, his tongue dancing with hers. Nothing else mattered. Nothing but this moment. Jonathan’s sensual lips were on hers. His tongue teasing hers, making her want so much more... When he finally pulled back and broke the

kiss, she felt dizzy with wonder. Melanie knew she would remember this kiss for the rest of her life.

### Chapter Eight

#### The Next Morning

Jonathan greeted the morning with a smile, his first thought about his encounter with Melanie in the kitchen at midnight. He tugged on the velvet cord next to his bed to summon the valet. Leaning back on his pillow, he thought about that kiss. She was enchanting. Touching his bottom lip, he recalled the feel of her lips touching his. And how she had wanted his kiss. Every time he spoke to Melanie, he found out something new about her. And there was so much more he wanted to know, including her favorite flower, her favorite color—he wanted to know all of her favorite things. She had always enjoyed life and just being around her made him happy.

The door to his room opened, and a short, red-haired young man stepped inside. “You’re up early, my lord.”

Jonathan smiled. “Good morning to you, too, Harold.”

“Yes, milord.” His valet pulled open the dark green drapes, instantly brightening the room. “Your bath is ready, and I’ve laid out your clothing. The last couple expected for the house party arrived last evening, and everyone is supposed to meet this morning for breakfast. However, Lord Rochester has asked that you stop by his study on your way. I had the impression it was urgent.”

“Thank you, Harold. I will make haste,” Jonathan said, swinging his legs to the side of the bed, slipped into the banyan his valet had selected for him, and hurried with his bath.

“This arrived for you, my lord,” the valet said, handing him a sealed missive before he dressed. “It came last evening after you’d turned in for the night.”

Too bad he didn’t know I couldn’t sleep, Jonathan thought, opening the sealed letter.

LDL ~

X is in Bath. Talbot has a high fever.

If I find out more, I’ll send it.

C

Jonathan’s brow furrowed in frustration as his valet helped him into his waistcoat and he pondered the situation. I wonder if Rochester has any informants in Bath that we could tap into. Perhaps they have contacts we can use. He realized his patience was wearing thin as he fastened the last button on his waistcoat. The days had grown increasingly perplexing; each message received felt like a riddle, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that he might face an unwelcome surprise if he stumbled upon this mysterious figure in Bath. But at least he’s here and can watch over Melanie. And he was thankful his friends were with him.

Harold, his ever-dutiful valet, approached with a cravat. “I learned a new knot, my lord—at least, new for me. Lord Rochester’s valet showed it to me. It is understated yet refined. Not fussy. The way you prefer your cravats knotted,” Harold said, his fingers deftly working the cravat in practiced precision.

Jonathan turned slightly to regard the knotted tie in the mirror, taking in the careful work of his valet. “Crisp and neat, I like it,” Jonathan said with a firm nod. “I’ve seen this before but haven’t worn it.”

“Yes, my lord. It’s the Sentimentale,” Harold said with a touch of pride.

“Harold, I appreciate your attention to detail,” Jonathan said. Harold was the son of an informant who died in the line of duty while in Paris, killed by one of Talbot’s men. Jonathan had taken him under his wing, determined the young man would have a job and a place to live. Since Harold aspired to be a valet, Jonathan made arrangements to have him trained properly and subsequently hired him.

The young man beamed at the praise. Sometimes Jonathan forgot how very young Harold was.

He gave a final check in the mirror and opened the door to his room. “I’m off. If I get any other missives, please find me immediately. It’s important ,” Jonathan said, planting firm emphasis on that last word as he left the room to find Rochester.

In the dimly lit study of the opulent manor house, Rochester leaned forward and spoke in a low voice to Jonathan and Worsley. “A footman informed me there’s a carriage idling outside the gate. It’s been there for a half-hour,” he remarked, with a frown.

“How curious,” Worsley replied, arching his brow as he exchanged a glance with Jonathan. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I think we’ve all arrived at the same conclusion,” Jonathan said, irritation creeping into his voice as his temper began to simmer. “Why are we sitting here like three old ladies waiting for our tea?” Jonathan growled. “She tried to kill Melanie!”

Rochester shook his head and blew out a breath. “You are letting your emotions cloud your judgment. Let’s bide our time and wait for her to reveal herself. We suspect she did it, but we have nothing to tie her to it. Melanie’s my sister. I want to get her as bad as you do. If what I suspect is true, she’s a murderer. Except for the tip



from the stable hand about the carriage markings, we have nothing. She's a peer and if that's all we have, that's not enough."

"What do you suppose she's after? This is a very bold move. She's after something so important, she's willing to face scandal and embarrassment," Worsley said, his tone one of concern. "Surely she's not after a simple chat. I think she's after another chance with you, Jonathan. Think about it."

"Ridiculous," Jonathan interjected, an edge of frustration in his voice. "I have no interest in the woman. And if the rumors regarding her late husband hold any truth, I'd want to keep her at arm's length. I wouldn't want her in my presence." Despite his irritation, a wave of relief washed over Jonathan as he recalled his narrow escape from her grasp. The memory of receiving her note of an impending marriage to the duke had initially filled him with dread, compelling him to track her down for a face-to-face conversation. Only to discover, through her father, that she had married two days earlier in a quiet ceremony on the duke's estate. "Our personal business was concluded four years ago. If the widow thinks there's unfinished business between us, the only thing left unresolved is that I received her 'farewell' in a letter. If she insists on showing up in person, perhaps she should be gifted a proper send-off."

"If she knocks on the door, my grandmother will relish the opportunity to greet her," Rochester said, his tone light. "What a fine birthday present that would be for Grandmama."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Jonathan replied, as he stretched his neck to relieve the tension in his upper body, considering the formidable presence of the dowager countess. He drew a long breath and, withdrew the note from the pocket of his waistcoat and passed it to his friends.

"I received another missive this morning from Connors. It says X is in Bath and our friend Talbot is ill," he said, his voice tense as he passed the note to Rochester.

Jonathan blew out a frustrated breath. “I thought I was done with that bastard,” Jonathan muttered. “We didn’t even find out about X until after we captured Talbot.”

“Strange. About Talbot,” Worsley said. “Do you find it suspicious?”

“Everything about Talbot is suspicious,” Jonathan replied. “I’ll send a missive to my contact to inquire after Talbot’s condition.”

“Also strange about X being in Bath,” Worsley added. “Perhaps there’s a meeting being set up with another traitor?”

“I’ll look into it,” Rochester said. “I have some strong contacts in Bath with the authorities. I’ve already put the word out to find out where Aumale’s widow is keeping a perch. That bitch will pay for what she tried to do to Melanie.”

Jonathan nodded. “I would rather we took matters into our own hands. We could search ourselves.”

“Let’s leave after breakfast,” Worsley suggested.

“One of us should remain here,” Rochester said. “We shouldn’t leave the women on their own. Even though I have very capable footmen and hired guards patrolling the property and the manor house.”

“Don’t let the ladies hear you. Maggie is more than capable of handling herself.” Worsley chuckled.

Jonathan agreed. Maggie was a strong woman. But Melanie, on the other hand, was headstrong, and that worried Jonathan. “I think Rochester makes a good point.”

“Then we agree,” Rochester said.

“That would be tidy, of course. Often, it is incomplete information because it’s all they have,” Worsley said. “It is frustrating, to say the least.”

“Aye, it is,” Rochester agreed.

Jonathan grumbled. Foremost in his mind was finding who tried to run over Melanie. “Conners is a good informant. He’s still looking.”

Hearing the rumble of a coach on the crushed oyster drive, their attention riveted to the window.

The now Dowager Duchess of Aumale sat outside the estate of the Earl of Rochester. She was hidden from view on this dark and foggy morning. Nevertheless, she’d taken additional precautions in having her driver pull onto a dirt path behind a stand of trees. Her ice-blue eyes were focused on the large white stone manor house on the hill in the distance. Its entrance was shrouded protectively by mature hardwood trees and wild rosebushes, along with the high stone wall. But light from various windows cast a glow around the elegant home.

It’s time I looked after myself.

She’d grown tired of doing Talbot’s bidding.

The cause needed money, according to her erstwhile lover, Monsieur Pierre Talbot. Honestly, she didn’t care a whit about the cause.

She’d met Talbot while in France on her honeymoon with the late Duke. Talbot had suited her needs. But despite how skilled Talbot was, she’d never stopped wanting Jonathan.

If only Jonathan weren’t so noble. She could have had him as a lover and Aumale as

her husband, but she'd known from the beginning that Jonathan would never have accepted that. He was far too honorable.

Her engagement to Jonathan had been completely pre-meditated and expertly executed by her. She'd compromised him, essentially trapping him into marriage by manipulating him into seducing her. Her lips curved up in a feline grin as she recalled how she'd drugged his brandy and tempted him beyond the point of even the most stalwart resistance he could summon. But eventually, he succumbed. Men always succumbed to her charms. Jonathan had been smitten. And her performance as the naïve virgin had ensnared him completely. And so, he'd proposed.

He'd been the catch of the Season. Everywhere they went, she could feel the other debutantes stare daggers at her. She'd known about all the young ladies who'd pined after him. Especially Lady Melanie Stenson, a truly naïve little thing who only had eyes for Jonathan. That was most evident the night Jonathan announced their engagement. She heaved a breathy sigh. Jonathan had been an agile lover. She'd always yearned for him above all the others.

Jonathan was never greedy about anything. But Talbot was. Especially for that Godforsaken cause. And she'd grown tired of his constant demands for money. Their intimate moments had turned into discussions about his cause and about what she could provide—information and money—rather than about what he could offer her. And Diana had begun to feel more like his servant—which did not please her at all, and she was tired of it. It was time for her to focus on herself.

She'd been thrilled when she'd heard that Jonathan had captured Talbot. Not because she'd wished to see her lover in a London prison, but because of the excitement of knowing it had been Jonathan. Perhaps she could do away with Talbot and then turn her attention to Jonathan again. She'd become very adept at the use of drugs and poisons over the years. But now that she had been cast out by the new duke's harpy of a wife, Diana was in dire need of a protector.

Which was why she'd decided to stop by Rock Springs Manor with a gift for the dowager countess's birthday. Her goal was to prevail on their hospitality, as a lonely widow, and be invited to stay. Then, she could begin to implement her plans for Jonathan.

Though this was not an ideal way to reunite with Jonathan, he hadn't been in London long enough for her to arrange for an accidental encounter with him. Discovering he was here among the high elites of London society gathered for the house party, she had decided to seize the opportunity for what could prove a delicious diversion. She would flirt boldly with Jonathan, intent on ensnaring him in the alluring web of her charms and reigniting the embers of the connection they'd once shared.

She knew Talbot would discard her soon as his mistress, once he found out she'd been cast out on her own and no longer had a flow of funds. For her own survival, Diana would have to be resourceful and find a new protector. Eventually, she would have to remarry to remain an esteemed member of Society. But it would be a struggle in the meantime. The pittance her father had called a dowery would never support her—even though the duke had invested it for her. Her parents had bluntly told her four years ago it was all they'd be giving her. Nor had there ever been any love lost between her and her brother, who was now the new Earl of Biggerly, inheriting the title last year after their father died. She didn't bother visiting him, for she knew he'd spare her nary a copper.

Reflecting on how she had been expelled from the ducal mansion—and not given so much as a dowager dwelling, filled her with anger. “First things first,” she said to herself. “Once I secure a husband, I will respond to them in kind.” Her thoughts drifted to her competition. “Stay out of my way, Lady Melanie,” she muttered, tapping the ceiling of her coach with her parasol and urging it forward.

Making sure the dowager countess was behind him, Rupert opened the door to find the Dowager Duchess of Aumale standing there. He stepped aside to reveal the

Dowager Countess of Rochester, and the duchess held out a wrapped package in front of her.

“Happy Birthday, Lady Rochester. I hope you won’t mind my last-minute decision to attend. Your footman refused to take my trunk, so I fear there’s been some sort of mistake.”

Jonathan edged his way to a darkened corner behind the dowager countess. He glanced over his shoulder and noted his friends had disappeared into the sitting room and were doubtless listening in like schoolboys.

Seeming to understand the situation, the dowager countess cleared her throat. “Mistake, dear? I confess this has never happened. I’ve never had a house party guest show up...without an invitation. Most unusual.”

The duchess’ face turned a dark shade of pink. “I am stranded. My driver says he thinks he heard a wheel crack, and since we knew of your manor house close by, we thought we might seek help here. I had been on my way to my brother’s home for a visit, but we were too afraid to go any farther—for my safety. Luckily, I’d been planning to stop by and leave a gift for your birthday on my way. But now, it seems I find myself unexpectedly stranded.” She offered the wrapped parcel to the dowager countess, who accepted it with a cool disdain.

“That is very gracious, my dear. Unfortunately, we have no room for you. It is my birthday, and we have filled the house with my dearest friends and family.”

The dowager duchess’ face darkened.

“Besides, I don’t believe your reason for stopping by. Not one whit.”

The dowager duchess sputtered at the intended insult. “You...you realize you are

speaking to a duchess do you not?"

"Pish, posh! Let's not get into the subject of titles and expectations. Facts can be so tedious. As you pointed out, it's my birthday. Why don't you tell me the real reason for your sudden arrival, my dear?" The dowager countess tapped her brass cane, something she did when she was getting ready to make a point.

"I have only the best intentions..."

"I know all about your intentions," the dowager countess said, tapping her cane once more. "I understand you've been roaming about Bath for a new conquest after the sudden demise of your husband. I do wish you luck, but you'll have to continue your prowling elsewhere. We already have an adopted kitten. We have no room here for alley cats."

Judging from the crimson shade of her face and neck, Jonathan was certain Diana's head would explode any moment.

"Allow me to see you to your carriage, your Grace," Jonathan said, stepping forward from the shadowed corner where he'd been observing the dowager countess berate Diana. Despite his desire to arrest her on the spot, his instinct told him to proceed with caution.

Diana could only sputter as he offered her his arm and walked her to the carriage. He paused briefly while she whispered to him.

"Jonathan, I am completely offended and mortified by that woman's treatment of me. But I am so very grateful that you gallantly stepped in to rescue me. I've thought of only you these past many months. I realized what a fool I was to have listened to my parents. They all but forced me to leave you and marry Aumale," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears.

“You truly missed your calling, Diana. You would have been perfect for the stage,” he said in a cold voice. Diana gasped and proceeded to act the role of a poor, victimized woman.

He pretended to listen to her as he glanced at the wheels of her carriage but paid more attention to the freshly painted doors. He could see what the stable boy had described. There seemed to be remnants of a gilded letter A beneath the black lacquer.

“I don’t see any problems with the wheels of your carriage,” he said. “But I would suggest you find some lodging for yourself, just in case.”

“Please, Jonathan. You must listen to me...” she pleaded.

He laughed harshly. “That’s rich. You were a gold digger then, and you are still digging now. I’m only glad I realized it before it was too late.”

“How dare you! You were the one who seduced me, if you recall.”

His eyes narrowed. “Yes, I do recall. I also recall how strange I felt the next morning. As though I’d had far too much to drink when I’d only consumed one glass of brandy.”

Diana tossed her head, her eyes flashing with fury. “It’s that simpering Lady Melanie Stenson,” she snapped, her voice filled with fury. “She is after you. She was after you then four years ago. But you were too besotted with me to notice her back then. Of course, she looked like a child. Gazing up at you as though you were her knight in shining armor. You must have broken her heart when you didn’t even ask her to dance. It was her first Season. How insensitive of you. I’m surprised she even deigns to speak to you after you treated her with such inconsiderate disdain. Then again, she could never compete with me. And back then, you only had eyes for me.”



“Did the duke leave you this carriage?” he asked simply.

“No,” she shot back. “It’s always been my carriage.”

“Well, take your carriage back to where you came from. I’d make haste...in case the make-believe break in the wheel worsens.”

Jonathan watched as Diana screamed at her driver to make haste. He blew out a breath. He’d kept her talking long enough so that Rochester could instruct two of his footmen to follow Diana’s carriage.

The last thing Jonathan wanted was to confront Diana about attempting to run over Melanie. He’d needed to make certain by looking over the carriage himself. With Rochester’s footmen following her, he and his friends could confront her properly and deal with her later.

He blew out a frustrated breath. It angered him that he had to let her go. But for Melanie’s sake, he did. Catching a movement from the corner of his eye, he glimpsed Melanie turn from the window in the drawing room where she must have been watching. Had he seen tears in her eyes? Damn! What she must be thinking. He needed to speak to her, but he didn’t have time at the moment.

Right now, he needed to speak to Rochester and Worsley first. He turned back to watch the carriage disappear down the crushed oyster drive, leaving a trail of crushed shell and dust as it lumbered away from the manor house.

### Chapter Nine

#### The Next Day

Melanie stirred awake, the remnants of yesterday's visit from the widowed dowager duchess lingering in her mind like a heavy fog. The widowed duchess looked even more beautiful than the last time Melanie had seen her the night of the engagement. Yes, Melanie had been peeking from the window in the front parlor, but when she'd heard that the duchess had stopped by, she had to see for herself. Diana and Jonathan had been conversing most intently along the curved driveway. Melanie thought Jonathan may have caught her at the window. But she'd hurried up to her room, claiming to have a megrim and avoiding him the rest of the day.

Just when she thought Jonathan might have feelings for her, Diana arrived and turned everything upside down. Melanie was once again an awkward seventeen-year-old girl in her first Season.

And yet, she could not stop going over every detail of her late-night culinary adventure with Jonathan, laughing and sharing secrets in the dim light of the toasty kitchen. It was as if they were the only two people in the world. It had brought warmth to her heart. She had sensed a shift between them, a budding trust that felt both thrilling and frightening. The memory of their kiss kept flitting through her thoughts, gentle at first and then more passionate. She could scarcely contain her excitement. Even now, she could feel the imprint of his lips on hers, but the feelings his kiss evoked, and the look in his eyes conveyed a promise of something deeper. Jonathan had always seemed flirtatious, but she felt he was somewhat reserved in his deeper emotional expressions. However, in the kitchen, he had unexpectedly revealed

his longing—a confession that had surprised her.

He'd admitted to having wanted to kiss her for some time. She sensed a change from when he had always rescued her as a child to now and admittedly had been a little frosty toward him. But gradually she had thawed out. How could she not? He was charming and friendly, and yet she felt he'd held himself back in some way. But that night...two nights ago, it was as if he couldn't stop himself from kissing her. And that had made her heart sing. He had always been more of a man of action, and she couldn't help but smile thinking of the countless narrow escapes he'd managed.

The morning light streamed through the curtains, and a sigh escaped Melanie as she reached for the velvet cord by her bed to summon Rachel.

The door opened a minute later, and the petite, dark-haired young maid bustled into the room. "You're up early, milady. The sun just came out."

Melanie gave a weak smile. "Good morning to you, too, Rachel. I had a rather restless sleep last night, unfortunately, and thus, I am up to greet the dawn."

"I'm sorry to hear that, milady. If I'd have known, I could've brought you a tisane. Please do not hesitate to ring for me should it happen again," Rachel said, laying out Melanie's dressing gown on her bed.

"Rachel, whatever would I do without you?"

Her maid pulled open the royal blue drapes, instantly brightening the room. "I'm not sure, milady, but I reckon you'd muddle through," she said, tossing a wink over her shoulder.

Melanie chuckled as she sat up and donned her wrap.

“Your bath is ready, and I’m putting the finishing touches on your ball gown so it will be ready for the night of the ball. Honestly, I knew the house party was for one week, but I still packed for two.”

Melanie smiled. “Yes. And I realize this sounds unusual, but I’m genuinely happy to be at this house party. After spending so much time in Scotland, it’s good to be home and among friends again.” She meant that. Even if things were beyond murky and muddled with Jonathan. Not only was she happy to have joined her brother and Grandmama for the holidays, but she’d felt more hopeful than she had in a long time. Losing her father had broken her heart, losing her mother had shattered her spirit. Her mother had been everything to her. It had taken a long time for her grief to not be so all-consuming. And over time, Melanie had changed and matured.

Melanie thought about how worried Jonathan had been with her...he was protective. It was his nature with women he cared about. But she wondered if, even though Diana was recently widowed, he would forgive her for leaving him to marry the duke four years ago. She shook her head, unwilling to allow that thought to take root. Jonathan was a changed man as well—and Melanie had changed too...she’d matured into full womanhood. Even though seeing Diana with Jonathan had left her feeling like that awkward seventeen-year-old with a history of getting into scrapes, she was wiser now. Things weren’t always as they appeared...especially from a distance. Perhaps she should learn to trust her instincts more and have faith that Jonathan did care for her, more than just a friend.

Although her reaction upon seeing the Dowager Duchess of Aumale yesterday had been too quick and misguided? She’d walked away after seeing the woman attempt an intimate moment with Jonathan, reacting like the seventeen-year-old young woman she had been four years ago. Instead of approaching him, she withdrew and leaned into her feelings of distrust.

She recalled all the precious moments she’d had with her mother, trying to fit a

lifetime of mother-daughter conversations into months. She'd confided in her mother about what had taken place at the ball four years ago. And even though her mother had been sick and bedridden, she'd risen from her pillow, took Melanie's hand, and squeezed it. "Always fight for what and who you want, daughter. I won't always be here, but I will always be with you. Trust those you love. And if they hurt you, tell them. Give them a chance to change." That had been one of the last things her mother had told her before she passed away. Although Melanie had never forgotten those words, it wasn't until yesterday that she truly understood their meaning. Today, she planned to follow her mother's advice and seek Jonathan out. She'd give him a chance to explain. Gavin had mentioned they would be looking for the Yule log today. Hopefully, she'd have an opportunity to speak to Jonathan then.

After hurriedly breaking his fast, Jonathan met Rochester and Worsley at the stables. "It's early, and I'm hopeful we will find the dowager duchess at the hotel before she leaves to stir up more trouble. She targeted Melanie. After seeing her carriage for myself, I'm certain of it." Newgate Prison will be her new home if I have anything to say. Mounting their horses, the three took off in the direction of town.

He hadn't slept much, as his mind spiraled into a chaotic turmoil of the danger surrounding Melanie. Images of her face had haunted him in his dreams, only adding to his need to see her and speak to her. She'd avoided him after seeing him speaking to Diana. She'd kept to her room. But today, he intended to speak with her. Even if she stayed locked in her room. He would climb the damn tree outside her window. The urgency to reach her and make her understand what she truly meant to him gnawed at his insides. A relentless ache in his gut accompanied his mounting fear that something wasn't right. Something didn't fit. Something was going to happen. And Melanie's life could hang in the balance. Even the thought of losing her felt like a pile of bricks crushing his chest.

"I've thought about everything Connors and the stable lad told you. That, together with what you've told me, I agree that she is guilty," Rochester said after being silent

for a few minutes. “We need to make sure she never targets my sister again.”

“The woman is pure evil,” Worsley said. “She demonstrates no loyalty to anyone but herself. If rumors are true, she tried to seduce her stepson for his title—after dispensing with her husband. You truly escaped a life of misery with that one, Jonathan.”

“It would have been a short life, by all accounts, based on what we know about Diana,” Rochester added grimly.

Jonathan muttered in agreement. “The hotel is at the edge of town—just ahead.” He was anxious to get this over with.

A few minutes later, they strode into the lobby, and Jonathan inquired about Diana’s room. Passing the gentleman at the counter several pounds, the man turned and gave him the spare key off the wall.

“She’s been popular today,” the man murmured.

“She’s had visitors. Are they gone?” Rochester said.

“One visitor. He’d been here a few times. I cannot recall exactly when he departed, but it must have been a couple of hours ago. A gentleman,” the clerk said, extending his hand expectantly.

Rochester arched a brow and slipped another note into his palm. “Thank you for your help,” he said.

As they made their way down the dimly lit corridor, the men were caught off guard by the sight of the door slightly ajar. It seemed someone had left in haste.

Jonathan cautiously pushed the door open and stepped inside, his heart racing. Across the room, just beyond the far end of the bed, a delicate foot adorned with a red satin slipper peeked from the shadows. “It’s Diana,” he gasped as he rushed over.

Worsley, quick to assess the situation, felt for a pulse. “Gone,” he confirmed. “But what could have happened? Was she poisoned?”

Jonathan’s gaze swept over the scene, taking note of the wine glasses carelessly left on the bedside tables. His eyes landed on the half-empty bottle of wine sitting next to one of the glasses. Why was the bottle so familiar? “Could she have been poisoned?” His mind raced as he attempted to piece together what had taken place.

“Perhaps, given that I don’t see any other tell-tale signs of murder—” Worsley said. “No blood, no visible wounds, no strangulation marks around her neck, no bumps or swelling on the back of her head. The way she died would have been quiet. If she’d screamed it would have alerted someone in a neighboring room or a maid,” Worsley added. He picked up each glass and sniffed. “Hmm... Can’t detect any poison.” He leaned down and sniffed the dowager duchess’s face.

“What are you doing?” Jonathan asked.

“Not what it looks like, I assure you,” Worsley said. He gave another sniff. “I think arsenic. I smell garlic on her—a telltale sign of arsenic, I’ve learned. And as far as I can see, there’s no garlic around. Just a trick or two that I picked up from Shep, Sr.

A sudden chill ran down his spine as he recalled where he’d seen an identical bottle of the same wine. “Rochester, Worsley—that’s the same wine Talbot had been drinking when I confronted him at the French tavern in Paris. He mentioned how he’d favored it.”

“Talbot?” Rochester said, his eyes widening. “Damn and blast!”

“We need to get back to the manor house. Now!” Jonathan seethed.

Fool! How could I have been so stupid not to have seen it?

Diana was X. And Talbot had escaped and was in Bath. Melanie’s life was in danger.



### Chapter Ten

The entire ride back was in silence, except for the sound of horses' hooves pounding the road. When they turned into the drive, the three men handed the reins of their horses to the footmen and rushed up the steps.

"Where's Melanie?" Jonathan asked as Rupert opened the door.

"My lord, the ladies and Shep decided to scour the woods for the Yule log and asked that you join them when you returned," Rupert replied.

"Thank you, Rupert," Jonathan said. "Do you recall the direction they went?" His heart hammered with uneasiness. He needed to see her and make sure she was safe. Logically, he knew with Diana gone, the danger had passed. But still couldn't shake the feeling of impending danger. Was he simply overreacting in light of Diana's murder? Who knew? But he wasn't taking any chances.

"We talked about looking behind the stables this year," Rochester said. "It's heavily wooded, and with the storms we've had of late, we thought there would be felled trees to choose from."

"Lord DeLacey," Rupert said, holding out a silver salver. "Your valet handed this missive to me. He said it came shortly after you left this morning, and he seemed most anxious that you receive it as soon as possible."

Jonathan nodded and took the note, tucking it into his waistcoat pocket. He'd look at it after he made sure Melanie was safe.

They found the women exactly where Rochester said they'd be. "Melanie," Jonathan called out to her, relieved to see her. Melanie stood and waved, beaming at him. She was a vision in red. Wearing a red and gray pelisse, her head was adorned with a red woolen hat tilted at a jaunty angle, a matching red woolen scarf was wrapped around her neck, and her hands were sheathed in matching red woolen mittens.

His first instinct was to enfold her in his embrace, but he couldn't allow himself to do that just yet. Make such a public declaration. Not until Talbot was caught. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that Talbot had killed Diana. But realizing that Talbot was on the loose made Jonathan even more worried.

He had to deal with the issue of Talbot, but he owed Melanie an explanation about Diana. He needed to tell her everything, but was there time to do that today?

Melanie stood and smiled, waving, and gestured that he join her. "I'm glad you made it back so quickly," she said as he reached her side.

"It appears you've picked out the Yule log," Jonathan said as Worsley and Rochester perused a huge log with numerous branches sticking out from its core. "That didn't take long."

"There were a lot of good prospects, but that one was clearly the winner," piped up Lady Angela Wilde, Worsley's younger sister.

"And what made you determine that?" Rochester asked with an arched brow.

"It's the biggest and, therefore, clearly superior over the others," the lovely brunette said.

"Really, biggest is best then?" Rochester said.

Jonathan bit back a laugh. Rochester's meaning was lost on Lady Angela, who gazed up at the tall earl with bright blue guileless eyes. Jonathan had observed his friend over the past few days looking decidedly at odds whenever Lady Angela was nearby. Poor Rochester. Known for his quick temper, his constant cursing, and his preference for buxom widows, Rochester had had several vociferous exchanges with the outspoken yet naïve beauty over the past few days. If he'd noticed the sparks between the two, he wondered if Worsley had noticed."

Jonathan glanced at Melanie, who'd stopped to pick up evergreen branches for the mantel. Melanie was just as innocent as Angela.

"I think the Yule log is perfect, and once we finish decorating, it will look very festive," Maggie said. "You could probably use one more man to help with that, dear. I don't want you complaining of back pain over Christmas." The countess's voice was gentle but teasing.

"I promise I won't complain," Max said, kissing his wife on the cheek. "If you promise to save me all the gingerbread."

Melanie gazed up at the striking features of the man beside her, captivated by how effortlessly he could coax a smile from her with just the slightest lift of his lips. It was a warmth that no one else had ever managed to evoke within her. "Would it help to reposition the log among the three of you? It might feel more secure that way," her voice gentle and encouraging. The path ahead stretched long and unyielding, and she could see the strain in their postures. She noticed relief washed over Worsley and Rochester when they repositioned the heavy log. Besides, this gave her a way to speak with him at the rear of the log. With Angela and Rochester engaging in cheerful banter further ahead of them, she couldn't help but wonder if her brother was beginning to feel something deeper.

She had been so relieved when the men had returned. She'd had an eerie feeling all

morning. As though someone was watching her. But every time she turned around, she felt as though she'd just missed seeing a movement in the forest bordering the estate. Perhaps it was her mind playing tricks. Perhaps it was the fact that she'd had a restless night of poor sleep. Even so, she was happy that Jonathan was with her.

Jonathan had been helping her sort through boughs of ivy and garland. They were some distance away from the others. It was a good opportunity for her to speak her mind while they had a semblance of privacy.

"Arf!" Shep barked playfully, his tail wagging to make his presence known as he looked up at them with a smile on his face. Privacy, not counting Shep, of course, she thought as she bent down to pet Shep.

"Goodness! I had forgotten Shep was with you." Jonathan grinned. "He's a very intuitive dog. It's impressive how he seems to read the atmosphere around him."

"You're fortunate he likes you," Melanie said. She dug a treat from her pocket. "Shep, lie down. Lie down, Shep. The small white dog obeyed and slid down on his stomach, looking up at her expectantly.

"Good boy, Shep! Good boy!" Melanie fed him a treat.

"How clever." Jonathan chuckled, squatting down to pet Shep, who wagged his tail with enthusiasm.

"I've watched him carefully observe everyone, but he has a soft spot for you," Melanie said. "Don't think I didn't see you spoil him with crumbs from the shortbread the other night. I've never known him to be such an easy mark."

"He's just an astute judge of character," Jonathan said, his grin widening.

“If there’s a stranger or a gentleman he doesn’t know or trust getting too close to me, Shep goes on high alert, giving them his famous side-eye.”

Jonathan laughed. “He gives the side eye?”

“Oh yes! But you won him over with hardly any effort. Even Gavin—who spoils Shep with treats, occasionally gets a growl.”

“In Rochester’s case, I don’t blame Shep. Rochester generally growls at everyone, too.”

Their shared laughter at her brother’s notorious temperament made her realize one more thing about Jonathan that she appreciated—their history. The fact that he had always been a part of their lives. Part of the family. Melanie took a deep breath and decided to plunge ahead with what she had to say. “May I speak with you on a matter of some importance?”

Jonathan inclined his head, a faint smile playing at his lips. “Certainly. I had hoped to speak with you as well, but pray, do go on.”

Melanie nodded. The sooner she did this, the better. “Jonathan, yesterday I behaved rather poorly, and I need to apologize. I’m sure you saw me standing at the window of the parlor yesterday when you were speaking with the Dowager Duchess of Aumale. I apologize for spying on you.” She rolled her eyes. “Poor choice of words given your work. In any case, I knew you had wanted to speak with me. Rachel told me. But I remained in my room for the rest of the day.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Melanie,” Jonathan said softly.

“No, I need to because I behaved foolishly, dare I say, like a silly little girl.” She sighed. “You see, when I saw Diana making moon eyes at you and whispering in

your ear, I went a little... I became a little..."

"Jealous?" he asked, his lips twitching.

"Well...yes. Darn it, Jonathan, I've loved you my whole life, but I realized it was a foolish girl's fancy, but then it changed into something more and..." Her words faded away as she realized what she'd said in a frustrated burst. She could feel the flush of embarrassment creeping up her neck and was grateful for the knitted scarf and the cool bite in the air that had already pinkened her cheeks. Melanie watched his eyes widen. He opened his mouth. Then closed it. Then cleared his throat.

Oh Lord, why oh, why did I say the L word? She wished she could go back in time and un-say what she'd just blurted out. What if he didn't feel the same way? What if he only cared about her? What if she'd read too much into their late-night kiss in the kitchen? Why won't he say something?

"Melanie..." he said finally. "Melanie," he said again. "I am involved in a final case. A serious case. The very last one," he began. "Please trust that while I have always cared for you, my feelings for you now are different. Something more to use your words..." He hesitated. "This is probably not the best place to have a discussion. Your brother keeps shooting me dirty looks. I believe he thinks I'm shirking my log-carrying duties. So, after we bring the Yule log in, why don't you say that you lost your hat." He reached up and gently removed her hat, looking about to make sure no one had noticed, before stuffing it in his coat pocket. "I'll go with you to find it."

Melanie smiled. Small waves of butterflies did somersaults in her stomach. "I will if you promise to kiss me," she said boldly. "Like you did the other night." Oh Lord, there was no turning back now. Mama, I'm taking your advice and fighting for what I want. It felt good to do that. To act. Even if it meant risking a broken heart. Because what was the use of being in love if you didn't take a chance?

“That is an excellent suggestion,” he said, winking at her. “I can’t think of anything I’d like more at this moment.”

They hauled the log into the parlor, and as the women were decorating it, Jonathan remembered the note in his pocket. “Rochester, Worsley, may I have a moment with you in the study?”

“Oh dear! I’ve discovered my hat is gone. I’ll need to go back to look for it,” Melanie said with a glance at Jonathan.

“If you can give me ten minutes to show the men something important, I’ll be happy to escort you back over the path to look for it,” Jonathan said, tucking her red woolen hat further into his pocket.

“Thank you,” she replied with a smile. “I’ll be waiting.”

Jonathan wasted no time showing the missive to his friends. “This note confirms what we already suspected. We need to plan what to do next. If he killed Diana, and it does appear that way, he’s become even more dangerous. I suspect that they were lovers...or even partners.”

“Perhaps she was X,” Rochester suggested. “I wouldn’t have put it past her.”

“She was certainly some sort of contact...I don’t know if she was the contact,” Jonathan said. “If it hadn’t been for that bottle of wine, I wouldn’t have put Talbot and Diana together.”

“You could be right,” Worsley said. “I am familiar with several cases connected to him where he used arsenic to kill a foe.”

“Yes. Exactly. I avoided sharing his bottle of wine when he offered it to me until I

saw him drink from it just before we arrested him in Paris,” Jonathan said.

“It was an unusually colorful label on the bottle. Sometimes, it’s the small, seemingly insignificant details that trip them up,” Rochester said.

“Unless he wanted us to know,” Jonathan said. “I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Whatever his reasoning, the man is a fiend and needs to be stopped,” Worsley said. I will speak to Maggie and let her know I’ll be assisting you. I cannot in good conscience let you go on your own. That’s a recipe for disaster.”

“I’ll speak with Grandmama,” Rochester added. “She’ll understand?—”

“No,” Jonathan interrupted. “The women will need someone here to watch over them. Worsley and I will go. Besides, this is my case, and I need to end this.” Jonathan was anxious to leave, but he had to speak with Melanie before they left. He would not have time for their walk or their talk, and most importantly, that kiss he promised her.

Rochester nodded grimly. “Very well, I’ll stay and keep watch here. But be careful, Talbot is as slippery as an eel.”

They discussed what they had planned, and then, as they began to make their way back to the drawing room, they heard a woman’s scream.

Jonathan’s heart leaped to his throat as they rushed into the drawing room just as Angela burst in from another door. Her face was pale, and her eyes were frantic as she cradled an unconscious Shep in her arms. “Help! Melanie has been abducted!” Her voice shook with urgency, her eyes wide with fear.

“Tell us everything that happened,” Jonathan said calmly but urgently, not wanting to upset the girl any more than she already was.



Angela was trembling, but she quickly told them everything. She'd suggested to Melanie that they look for a few more of the large pinecones, and she had been standing a few yards away when a masked stranger suddenly attacked Melanie. Shep, brave as ever, had bolted after the mysterious man, managing to tear a piece of the man's clothing in his desperate attempt to stop him. He'd also bitten through the dark wool pants, his teeth sinking into the man's leg. The assailant had howled in pain, picked Shep up, and hurled him against the cold, unforgiving stone wall of the house, leaving the little dog limp and in distress. Then he pressed a cloth to Melanie's face, and she fainted straight away. He hauled her over his shoulder and turned to run for the woods.

The color drained from Jonathan's face, and his heart pounded with fear. "Where exactly were you?"

"Out back—behind the kitchen," wailed Angela, trembling as she cuddled Shep.

"Oh, dear God! You've got to find my darling granddaughter," Grandmama cried out, her voice filled with desperation. She and several of the older guests were laden with vibrant, satin ribbons. Their eyes were wide with shock.

"This is all my fault," Angela lamented, her eyes glistening with tears.

"No, it's not your fault, Angela," Rochester said in an uncharacteristically gentle voice as he took the unconscious dog in his arms. He seemed as though he'd wanted to say more just as Maggie moved forward to wrap her arm around her sister-in-law's shoulders.

"Do you remember anything else?" Worsley asked, taking his sister's hand in his. "Anything the assailant may have said?"

Her eyes widened. "He-he told her he had been waiting a long time to have her."

“It’s Talbot. It must be,” Jonathan ground out.

“I’ve sent for Doctor Jones,” Rupert said, rushing into the parlor.

Jonathan turned to Rupert, his expression serious and focused. “Also, can you round up as many footmen as possible? We need to search the grounds thoroughly.

Without wasting a moment, the servant nodded and rushed from the room, moving with speed seldom seen from him, even in his younger days. Jonathan noted how it contrasted sharply with the household staff’s measured pace. He turned to the dowager countess, who stood tall despite the tears streaming down her cheeks. His gaze steady, he spoke with compassion and resolve, “I promise...we will find her.”

And he would make Talbot pay.

### Chapter Eleven

#### Rock Springs Manor ~ Later That Night

“Diana wasn’t supposed to run over you with that carriage, my dear. Or rather attempt to run you over. It was an indiscretion—one of many which she paid dearly for,” the man in black said, his tone angry. He’d sat her in a straight-back chair in an old cabin.

Melanie had no idea where the cabin was located. She’d only just woken up and was feeling both groggy and dizzy. “Who are you?” she asked, her tongue still feeling thick.

“Ah...you do not know me. That isn’t fair, is it? Especially since I know you, my dear Melanie. Allow me to rectify this faux pas. My name is Monsieur Pierre Talbot,” he said, with a flourish and a mock bow. “I see the effects of the drug haven’t quite worn off, my dear. Don’t worry, you’ll be right as rain soon enough. I need to add wood to this wood stove. I’ll light it tonight, after dark, so that we can have a nice cozy fire. I don’t want you to freeze out here—but nor do I want to give away our location, either.” The man gave a harsh, wicked laugh.

A moment later, he shut the door to the wood stove and turned to regard her. His intense stare unnerved her. “You aren’t a disappointment, my dear Melanie. You certainly improve these dreary surroundings...”

Melanie remained silent as she watched him warily. Talbot was tall, as tall as Jonathan but not as broad. And he was older. His hair was dark, but he had salt and

pepper at his temples. His eyes were a pale gray and his features elegant, patrician. He was handsome but in a cold and austere way. She could see why Diana might have fallen for someone like him.

“I have certainly improved my circumstances. Diana was lovely, of course, but there was nothing unique about her. She was a great disappointment to me. You, on the other hand, are a rare and refreshing jewel. So unspoiled. So pure. You are striking in your appearance...striking is a word I rarely use because there are so few I feel meet that definition. But you drew my eye immediately. I am hopeful our liaison will prove to be a great pleasure for us both...”

“I find nothing to like about you. Nothing. I will fight you, even if it means I could die. I will never enjoy your touch,” Melanie spat at him.

“Ah. Well, if I am the only one to benefit, so be it, but that would be a terrible shame.” He walked slowly toward her and reached out, grasping her chin in his hand. She tried to pull away, but his grip was too tight. “Even now, as you fight me, it only makes me want you more. He leaned down and his mouth was mere inches from hers. She trembled, fearful of what he might do next.

“You cannot imagine how I have fantasized about you. I was enchanted by your beauty when I first noticed you—four years ago, if you can believe it. At a London soiree. Lord Jonathan DeLacey was my target, but I noticed you immediately.

As he spoke, her heart began to pound and her head still swam, but she could feel the dizziness retreating. She had to regain her composure if she wanted to survive this.

“I’m always in it for the long game and I knew that one day, I would find you again and make you mine. You were exquisite. Young, innocent, untouched. I could not believe what a fool DeLacey was to choose Diana over you. But then again, she did entrap him.”

Melanie gasped.

“Ah, of course you would not have known that.” He smiled. “She drugged him and seduced him. She was very clever, Diana was. Of course, I taught her everything she knew. Mind you, I still thought DeLacey was an idiot for letting himself be duped by her. Diana was loyal to the cause, initially. I made sure of that when I recruited her many years ago. She manipulated DeLacey so easily into asking for her hand in marriage. The plan was for her to funnel funds from her wealthy husband to me, to support my important work.

“You mean in fomenting unrest in England?” Melanie said.

“Such a clever girl, Melanie. One of the many qualities I so admire about you.”

“But Diana ended up marrying the Duke of Aumale.”

“Yes, she did. That was my doing as well. My paths crossed with the duke at a gaming hell in London a few days later, and I found out he was a widower of many years and was seeking to remarry. Given his enormous wealth and that he was older, it made it a better fit for my purposes.”

“And Jonathan became your enemy when he went to work for the Crown.”

“Indeed. Ironic, don’t you think?” He sighed as if bored with the tedium of the story. “So, there you have it. The gist of our little fairytale.”

“This is no fairytale,” Melanie hissed.

“Oh, but it is, my sweet Melanie. According to Diana—who was quite adept at eavesdropping—DeLacey had always cared about you. And she saw that you were very smitten with him. So even though he was a fool not to have seen what I saw in

you, knowing that he cared about you and that you were so in love with him...well, that made you even more valuable to me.” He smiled. “You saw him as a gallant knight, rescuing you time and again from your girlhood misadventures. And that’s what makes this such a romantic fairytale. Except the happy ending will be reserved for you and me.” He bent down and brushed his lips against her temple.

Melanie froze at his touch.

“Do not worry, my dear. I would never take you here in this crude and filthy abode. No, you were meant to be ravished on silk sheets in a chateau in France. Which is where we will be traveling to, once I’ve dealt with DeLacey.”

Melanie began to tremble again. Did he mean to kill Jonathan and force her...?

“Ah, I see you are beginning to understand our future...yours and mine.” He chuckled.

Melanie ignored his comment about their supposed future together. “You keep saying “was” when you speak about Diana? What did you do to her?”

“I suppose it’s all right to tell you.” He sighed. “My actions were partly to repay her for your suffering, you understand. Diana was never supposed to hurt you. I warned her many times about that. She could be so spiteful and vindictive. Needless to say, she has been dealt with. You never have to worry again about her attempting to run you over with her carriage. He trailed his roughened fingers along the side of her face, and she flinched away.

“You will come to enjoy my touch, my dear.”

“I’m not your dear ,” she hissed.

“That will soon be remedied. And you won’t find it so...insufferable. I have so much to teach you about pleasure.”

It was all Melanie could do to keep the bile from rising in her throat.

The man continued to rant. Melanie tried to listen, but she was more interested in freeing herself. Whenever his back was turned, she would sneak glances around the room, searching for something she could grab and use as a weapon.

“Diana was loyal to me, and a passable bed partner,” he said, pausing. “But she became too careless and too greedy. She was besotted with DeLacey and stopped being useful to me. She thought me a fool, but I saw through her scheme.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” she cried out. “I was just living a quiet life. Diana was glamorous and suited your world. What do you want with me?”

“Haven’t you been listening to what I’ve been telling you?” he interrupted. “That is precisely why I want you. Diana was a conniving harpy. She may have been beautiful on the outside but on the inside she was putrid. Whereas you, my fair Melanie, are the epitome of grace. Your purity is what I crave.”

As she sat there, memories began to peek through the fog as Melanie struggled to remember what happened. She was grabbed from behind, and a foul rag was shoved over her face. Then, she remembered hearing Shep attack and was able to force her arms free to see her small dog thrown up against the side of the house, limp. The man holding her grabbed her tighter and placed a foul-smelling, damp rag over her nose, holding it tight. Dizziness began to take over, and she fought against her energy waning as she was being trussed up and tossed into the back of a flatbed wagon that had been waiting somewhere on the estate. Her head throbbed from where it slammed against something hard, maybe the floor of the wagon, and she could feel a wet, sticky sensation on her head, but with her hands bound, was unable to reach it.

“Why,” she cried out in frustration. “What do you want with me?”

“Haven’t you been listening to what I’m telling you? You are to be my...concubine. I love that word—it implies a level of warmth and tenderness. Don’t you think?”

“Never! You hurt my dog. Why did you do that?” Melanie could hear her heart pounding in her ears while her hands and feet strained against the bonds. She tried to stay calm, but so much had taken place. What had become of Shep? Her heart...her head...everything hurt. “Why did you do this to us?” she screamed. “My dog was little...”

“The damn dog bit me—through my pants, he bit me. It’s a deep cut, but I’ll have to take care of it later,” he yelled back before pausing. “Now, do calm yourself, my dear. You’ll need to be quiet,” he said more calmly. He retrieved the dirty cloth he had used earlier from his pocket and poured something from a dark blue bottle on it, and stuffed it in her mouth.

Tears streamed from her eyes as she gagged on the rag, shaking her head in denial. “Mmmmf,” she struggled to say something as she tasted a familiar, sickening, sweet substance on the oily cloth. She hated laudanum. It always made her sick. Her head hurt, and she was nauseous...but she needed to stay awake.

“I hate to leave you when we are just getting to know each other, but there are a few things I need to take care of outside before your gallant knight arrives to try to save you. So, as much as it pains me, you’ll have to remain tied up and gagged, my dear.”

He bent and pressed his lips to her cheek, and she growled through the gag, pulling away from his touch. “My sweet, beautiful Melanie, how I love your fire. I shall return.” He shut the door firmly behind him, the sound echoing in the sparsely furnished cabin.



She sat bound to the chair, her hands useless unless she could break through the ropes. Her heart raced as she felt around the back of the chair with her fingers, looking for anything that could help. The tips of her fingers brushed against a sharp edge on the side of the chair, and a spark of hope ignited within her. Every second counted. She leaned forward and moved her bound hands to the edge, rubbing an exposed part of the rope against it, straining against the bind, and praying she could wear down enough of the rope to tear through it.

As she worked, a wave of dizziness threatened to pull her under, the effects of the laudanum beginning to swirl through her mind like a thick fog. She struggled against the pull of the drug, but it was difficult. Still, she must not have put as much on the rag this time because at least she was still awake. Unless she broke through the rope her hands were bound with, she wouldn't have much time to get the rag out of her mouth, and time was slipping away. Squeezing her eyes closed, she focused on the task at hand, mustering all her strength, both mental and physical.

Melanie silently prayed, more fervently than she had in a long time. She whispered a silent plea for Shep's survival and one for Jonathan, hoping against hope that when Jonathan arrived to rescue her, he wouldn't fall victim to the madman who'd abducted her.

Melanie scanned the interior of the cabin, and something began to shift, a memory...an unsettling sense of familiarity tickled the back of her mind. The place appeared to have been abandoned years ago, shrouded in dust and neglect. Thick layers of cobwebs hung from the corners of the ceilings, and shadows loomed in the corners of the dimly lit room. The bedsheets were stained and torn, while the meager furnishings—a rickety table and a couple of mismatched chairs—looked as though they had been left to the ravages of time. As she contemplated the decaying surroundings, a thought struck her. Could this be the gamekeeper's cabin she had heard about?

Were they still on her brother's estate? Each creak of the old plank wood floors beneath her feet reminded her of childhood stories whispered by her grandmama about how the gamekeeper's cabin was said to be haunted by restless spirits. A gamekeeper died almost a hundred years ago in the cabin—and no one was ever able to explain what happened.

With her heart pounding, Melanie continued to try to untie herself. She felt the power of the laudanum pulling her down into darkness as the old eerie stories about the haunted cabin began to shape and swirl around her. Please, Jonathan. Please hurry... She envisioned his beloved face and clung to the belief that they would be together again.

### Chapter Twelve

Jonathan, Worsley, Rochester, and several footmen were on horseback, riding just behind a pack of experienced hunting dogs. Jonathan hoped Melanie could hear the dogs barking and find comfort in the knowledge that they were looking for her. They had also placed additional footmen at the entrance as well as the perimeter of Rochester's estate. A group of riders were also patrolling both the main and side roads. Unfortunately, they had miles of forest to cover—the greatest challenge. But his instincts told him that Talbot was still on the estate, somewhere in the woods with Melanie.

“He has Melanie out there, somewhere,” Rochester growled as they rode toward the woods.

“Aye,” Worsley agreed. “Nightfall is fast approaching, and Talbot will need a place to hole up for the night. After night falls, the search will be even more challenging.”

“I don't care how challenging or how long it takes,” Jonathan said grimly. “We have lanterns. And plenty of men. And the dogs have her scent.” Jonathan had used Melanie's woolen hat that he'd remembered was in his pocket for the dogs to sniff. It had saved them time from running up to her room.

“The bastard planned carefully, I'll give him that,” Rochester said. “He thought to throw us off by driving a wagon in several directions. He must have been disguised as a tinker or an old farmer so as not to arouse suspicion of the men guarding the estate.”

“There are hunting cabins miles downstream,” Rochester said. “They should be

empty. The gamekeeper left to visit his family, so his cabin should be empty, as well.”

“Aye, I remember exactly where those three hunting cabins are,” Jonathan said. “Let’s send a small contingent of men and dogs to check the hunting cabins.”

“Good,” Rochester said.

Many of their boyhood adventures had taken place in these woods. Like Rochester, Jonathan and Worsley knew the land like the back of their hands.

“Jonathan—recall there’s also an older gamekeeper’s cabin—it’s the one further back in the woods, behind the newer one. Remember those?” Rochester asked.

“The older one is not far beyond. With a full moon, we should have some natural light, which is good. We’ll take ten of the dogs and three men. The rest of you men spread out but stay with a partner. As I said earlier, the man is dangerous. Stay alert,” Jonathan said.

The groups of men spread out, and Jonathan, Worsley, and Rochester headed with their group toward the empty gamekeeper’s cabins—old and new, which were in the back of the estate. The wagon tracks they followed continued that way long after they had turned away several other times. The bastard had certainly done his work to make this difficult.

Jonathan had felt a constant pressure in his chest since Melanie had been abducted. He knew what Talbot was capable of. The man was depraved; he didn’t care who he hurt. He sent up a silent petition that Shep would be wagging his tail in greeting when they brought Melanie home. They’d set out on their search before the doctor had arrived. But Shep was a sturdy dog with a warrior spirit.

“I hear the dogs barking, but it doesn’t sound like they are finding anything,” Rochester commented.

“That can only be good news, I suppose. He didn’t leave the wagon. My gut tells me we are heading in the right direction,” Jonathan said.

“Mine, too. I think we should go to the furthest cabin first. Talbot would have gone for that one, I think. Thinking the gamekeeper might be in residence—Talbot wouldn’t have chosen to fight for the cabin if he knew of an easier one,” Rochester said. “Although the furthest cabin is abandoned and is said to be haunted.”

Jonathan agreed. Rochester’s idea made sense. As the three men rode in the direction of the cabin, Jonathan recalled the stories about the old hunting cabin being haunted. It had certainly fueled their explorations when they were boys. But he didn’t put much stock in it.

The men fell silent as the gamekeeper’s cabin came into view. There was no sign of any activity there. And there were no signs of wagon tracks turning towards it, so they continued to the abandoned cabin. The abandoned cabin was tucked closer to the perimeter of the property, an acre or so behind the newer gamekeeper’s cabin.

“I smell smoke,” Jonathan said as they drew closer.

“Yes. Remember, the cabins all have wood stoves. And it’s damn cold outside.”

“He’s in the old cabin. That’s where he has to be,” Jonathan said in a low, tense voice. “He would have held off lighting the stove until night so it couldn’t be seen. But he would need it for warmth.”

“Aye,” Rochester said. “And none of my men would be out hunting here without my knowledge.” He ordered the remaining men with the dogs to cover the woods that

surrounded the cabin.

They picked up the pace as they neared the cabin. Jonathan's heart thundered in his chest as he thought about Melanie and all the things he'd wished he'd told her. He prayed he'd still have the chance. I'm coming, Melanie. I'll be there soon. Stay strong, my love. Stay strong...

"I'll take the back of the cabin...you two take the front," Jonathan whispered as they looped their horses' reins around a sturdy tree a few yards away. "He has a reputation for setting traps, so be wary of wires or thin ropes."

"Got it," Rochester said.

"There's a very dim light in there—you can barely see it. But it means the stove is fired up. We've got the bloody bastard," Worsley said.

Even though Talbot was most likely working alone, he was a formidable foe. He'd escaped many times, including his most recent daring escape from the Tower. Once the other men completed searching the other cabins, they would set out to join them, thus making it harder for Talbot to slither away.

Jonathan searched around the back of the cabin, and as he predicted, Talbot had rigged a very thin wire that would have triggered a pistol to fire. He carefully disarmed the trap and checked for more. When he could get close enough, he tried to see in, certain Melanie was inside. He could hear the dogs barking in the distance and momentarily wondered if this cabin had been set up as a decoy.

"Nothing at the windows," Worsley said. "What about you, Jonathan?"

"Yes. I disarmed a pistol that was primed and ready." He handed the pistol to Rochester.

“He’s in there...and I saw Melanie,” Rochester said with a growl. “She’s passed out in a chair—tied and gagged. I saw something wired at the front, but it looked complicated.”

We should probably look at it together,” Jonathan suggested. “If he’s touched her...I’ll kill him,” he muttered, his jaw clenched.

“He’ll die,” Rochester agreed.

“I’ll signal to the men checking the other cabins. They should be here soon. I’ll ask them to hold up by the empty gamekeeper’s cabin,” Worsley said.

“When you return, signal me, and we’ll rush the entrances, front and back,” Jonathan said.

Worsley nodded as he left on silent feet.

“Let’s look at the front again.” After ten minutes, he and Rochester had disarmed the front traps that Rochester had seen. This almost seemed too easy, Jonathan thought. He glanced around for any other traps that might wound or kill as they approached. He found his attention drawn to a tree at the corner of the house and studied it. Another wire!

“Be careful, Rochester. I just spotted another wire,” he said, pointing it out to his friend.

It was hard to follow where the wire was threaded, but he finally saw it threaded around several branches where a rifle had been set up, again, readied to fire at the slightest tug of the wire. He swiftly and carefully disengaged it, slinging the rifle over his shoulder in case it might come in handy.

The two of them discovered several more traps as well.

“Let me take a look at the back once more,” Rochester said. “The man seems to have been very thorough.”

“Good idea. A second set of eyes won’t hurt.” Jonathan walked around the cabin and found a large enough crack in the wood to peer through. Talbot had his back to him and was staring at Melanie. He watched as Talbot seemed to say something to Melanie, who was clearly unconscious, and then reached out and caressed her face. Jonathan’s blood boiled. It infuriated him to see her at the mercy of that fiend. He wanted to storm in there right now.

But he had to wait for the other men.

There was no telling what Talbot would do to Melanie if Jonathan burst in by himself.

He heard footsteps and was relieved to see his two friends walking toward him.

“They cleared the other cabins,” Worsley said. “We secured the dogs. We can assign two men to go through the front door and one man to guard each window. I’ll go in the back with you. “Did you find any other traps?”

“We did. Several. Rochester and I have checked the entire perimeter of the cabin. I think we are clear to attack,” Jonathan whispered.

“Can this be so easy?” Rochester said.

“No. There are trip wires located at each entrance and on the two windows. We couldn’t disarm them without alerting Talbot, but we must assume they are tied to weapons. So, when we enter the cabin, we need to step over them and under them.



We discovered a house of horrors like this when we captured some of his men in France. Talbot escaped us that time as well. Unfortunately, we hadn't anticipated the wires. Several men were stabbed and shot."

"Understood," Worsley said. "I'll get the men in formation and let them know to watch their step as they enter and guard the windows."

When Worsley returned, Jonathan signaled to attack, and the men burst into the cabin. He and Rochester rushed in through the back, and Worsley and two men rushed the front. Jonathan got to Talbot first while Rochester checked on Melanie. Jonathan and Talbot struggled and fought as Talbot pulled out a knife and aimed for Jonathan's jugular. Jonathan managed to get a grip on the knife and hurl it away, punching Talbot in the face and kneeling him in the gut. Talbot groaned as he fell to the floor.

"You surprise me, DeLacey," Talbot grunted as he sat up. "I would welcome you with wine, but I'm afraid I just polished off the last glass. However, the fair Melanie helped me finish it off," he taunted, pointing to an empty glass by her chair.

"If you've harmed her, I promise you won't live to see prison," Jonathan swore.

"Let us handle him, Jonathan," Rochester suggested.

Jonathan found that the rope that had bound her wrists had been shredded through, and her hands and arms had several cuts and abrasions. But her arms were still behind her as if she were still bound. He swallowed the lump in his throat as he lifted her hands and kissed the cuts. Had Melanie managed to free herself but then had been drugged by Talbot before she could attempt an escape? His chest constricted as he realized how brave Melanie had been to try to free herself. He was certain Talbot hadn't noticed, or he would have done something drastic.

Perhaps Rochester was right about the spirits. Maybe there had been some spirits watching over Melanie. He leaned down, untied the binding at her feet, and wrapped his arms around her to keep her from falling from the chair.

“Kitten...wake up,” Jonathan said, smoothing her hair back from her face. He felt a sticky wetness on her scalp. Seeing the blood, his temper seethed, and he wanted to beat Talbot to a bloody pulp. Instead, he pulled her close. “Kitten, it’s me...Jonathan. We have you. You’re safe,” he murmured into her hair, his voice hoarse. “You’re safe, my sweet darling.”

She stirred and opened her eyes. “You came for me, just as Mama said you would.” She looked around. “Is anyone hurt?”

“Only you, darling,” Jonathan said. “You have a cut on the side of your head.”

“I think my head hit something when he threw me onto the wagon.”

Jonathan kissed her head and helped her stand. He turned to Talbot. “It’s over, Talbot. We found Diana. You will be arrested for murder, on top of everything else. Good luck evading the noose this time.”

“Like hell!” he spat. “Diana was useless. And a murderess. I did the government of England a favor. She killed her husband, you know. A peer. But I have connections I can galvanize—no matter where you put me. The cause will prevail,” he yelled. “And sweet Melanie, I’m sure I’ll see you again one day.”

“Not bloody likely...not where you’re going. Tie him up and gag him so he cannot move a muscle,” Jonathan ordered, lifting Melanie into his arms and carrying her from the cabin.

The footmen had tied Talbot to the wagon they found covered in brush behind the old

cabin. Carefully, they made their way back to the manor house. They would hold Talbot in a guarded cell in the basement of the manor house until the King's men could transport him to the Tower of London.

Jonathan tightened his hold around Melanie, who sat in front of him on his horse, and turned to his friends, who rode beside them. "Thank you both for helping me. I don't know how we would have found Melanie so quickly without both of you."

"How is Shep?" Melanie asked, her voice full of emotion.

"I cannot say for sure, but Doctor Jones is very good. I'm willing to bet the little fellow will recover nicely," Jonathan said.

"I pray he'll be all right," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I-I tried to get away from Talbot and would have fought until my last breath against him," she said, her voice trembling. "He said horrible things to me—and he admitted to killing Diana. He said he did it because she tried to run me over with that carriage."

Jonathan felt a fierce shudder run down her body, and he hugged her closer. "She did. We were going to arrest her but found her dead." He kissed her tenderly on the lips. When he pulled away, he noticed Rochester and Worsley grinning. Clearing his throat, he said, "I'm afraid my intentions can no longer wait until we arrive back at the house. I've waited too long to express my feelings, as it is. Rochester, may I have the honor of asking Melanie to become my wife?"

Melanie looked up at him, her eyes sparkling with joy. "Really?" she said, leaning in for another quick kiss on Jonathan's lips.

A rush of warmth rushed through him.

Her brother grinned and chimed in. "I believe that is my line, dear sister. I was

curious how long it might take Jonathan to finally pop the question. If you wish to share your life with him...and since he won't be taking those dangerous Crown assignments anymore, I have no reason to object. You deserve the best. And I don't think Grandmama will mind sharing her birthday ball with the announcement of your engagement," Rochester quipped.

Worsley chuckled. "You won't regret joining the matrimonial club. Life becomes very pleasant and a little more predictable."

Melanie raised an eyebrow playfully. "Does Maggie know you call her predictable?"

"She is predictably unpredictable," Worsley replied with a smirk, earning a laugh.

Turning to Melanie, Jonathan said earnestly, "Kitten, will you honor me by becoming my wife?"

"I will if you will promise to always be my gallant knight," she replied, her eyes shining.

Relief washed over him. "That's an easy promise to make, especially considering how you often land in delightful mischief." He leaned in, softly kissing the tip of her nose before drawing her into a tender embrace, their lips meeting once more in a warm, lingering kiss that felt like home.

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King Street Books and Curiosities ~ London, England ~ December 1822

“ I ’m so proud of you, Melanie,” Jonathan said, hugging his wife close. “You dedicated yourself to this book, and I think it’ll be a great success.”

“Not many men would have supported their wives in writing a book. Most authors are men,” she said, looking up at him, her eyes shining with happy tears.

“Perhaps that will change,” Jonathan said.

“My story is a mystery with a bit of a happily-ever-after,” Melanie said excitedly. “Of course, I created all of the characters and the story itself, but I wanted to show other women that gallant knights do exist...and they do marry ordinary women. So, I started the story using my own experience, when you saved me from a runaway carriage, sweeping me and my kitten, Smoot, from certain danger. That’s the only scene I used from our real life. But you approved it.” She looked around. “I cannot believe all of this. When you told me to bring Shep, I couldn’t think of where you were taking me. Not many places allow dogs.”

“Shep is such a well-behaved dog, most people won’t even realize he’s here. Besides, Connors said it was fine to bring him. I know how you don’t like to leave him since he’s barely healed from all the injuries he sustained a year ago.”

“Thank you, my darling, for understanding.”

“Ah, Rochester has arrived with your grandmama,” Jonathan said, pointing to the front of the bookshop. “We should greet them.”

“This is all...for me?” she asked, awestruck.

“It is, my lady. Your husband has done more than you might realize, Lady DeLacey,” Conners remarked with a hint of admiration in his voice. “There’s quite a line forming in the back of the shop—an eager crowd of women, all waiting patiently for a chance to have you sign copies of your book.” He gestured toward the throng, their faces lit with excitement. “It seems your work has taken the literary world by storm, rivaling even the timeless appeal of *Pride and Prejudice* .

And they are most excited to meet a real woman author.”

Melanie smiled thoughtfully. “More women could follow suit if women authors were accepted in Society. Here I am, a viscountess, with the particular advantage that my livelihood doesn’t rely on the sales of this book,” she said, her gaze drifting to her husband. Her voice became tender. “Your support has made this moment possible.”

“Congratulations, dear sister,” Rochester said. He leaned down and kissed Melanie on the cheek. “I am very proud of you, Melanie. Worsley, Maggie, and Angela couldn’t be here, but I promised to get signed copies for them.”

“You are lucky to have a brother and a husband who supports your dreams, my dear,” Grandmama said, kissing Melanie on the cheek. “I couldn’t be prouder of London’s newest author.” The dowager countess turned to Jonathan, “And I realize that you had a lot to do with encouraging Melanie to publish her book and bring her dream to life. Thank you.”

“I didn’t use the pen name, M.L. Stephens, which I had initially conjured up, as it would only confuse people since they would know me as Lady Melanie DeLacey.”

“Yes, my dear. One day, you’ll have to tell me how you thought of that name,” Grandmama said, smiling. “I’m glad you didn’t use it after all.” She hugged her granddaughter tightly, and Melanie heard an angry meow.

“Oh, dear! I forgot Smoot was in my pocket. I told him he was a featured character in a book, and he insisted on being here,” Grandmama said.

Everyone laughed as the old woman extracted the small cat from her pocket. He mewed at Melanie, who took him from her grandmother and kissed him on the head. “Thank you for coming, Smoot. It looks like I have to sign a few books, so I’ll give you back to Grandmama.”

Shep bumped Grandmama’s knee, a soft, affectionate gesture that always made her laugh. “He’s telling me to let him see Smoot,” she said and held the fluffy kitten down so the two pets could nudge each other with their noses, a charming ritual they performed whenever they reunited.

A sense of warmth filled the air as the two animals toyed with each other.

“I should go back and secure a spot in line,” Grandmama declared with an eager gleam in her eye. “I want the full experience...complete with a signed book to treasure!” With a tender movement, she picked up the small cat, cradling him under her arm.

Jonathan chuckled, observing the scene with fondness. “I never would have thought I’d take to having animals,” Jonathan said. He leaned down to plant a playful kiss on Melanie’s nose, a gesture that always made her smile. “I think Shep misses her terribly.” He gently brushed a strand of hair from the front of her face before reaching down and picking up Shep.

Melanie nodded and smiled up at him. “You’re probably right. Grandmama rarely goes anywhere without Smoot.”

At that moment, Connors approached with an air of polished professionalism. “It’s time to get started, Lady DeLacey. Your admirers are eagerly awaiting your arrival,” Connors said. “I’ll have a pitcher of water and a glass brought to your table for you.”

Melanie brightened. “Thank you so much, Mr. Connors. I’m ready.”

Jonathan smiled at his wife, noticing the spark of anticipation that seemed to ignite within her as she prepared to meet those who admired her work. He could hear Grandmama telling someone that she was the author’s grandmother and smiled.

As Melanie and Jonathan walked back to the table of books with the line in front of it, she looked up at her husband. Thank you for everything you’ve done. There’s something I want to tell you.”

“Yes, is everything alright?”

“Yes, everything is wonderful. As you know, I’ve begun writing a second novel...but I think I’ll need to take a year off before it’s published.”

“What? You’re just getting started...why would you be taking a break? Jonathan asked, his brow furrowed in concern. “You’re doing so well, look at all the readers you have here.

“I’m taking time off because our family is about to grow by one...and it won’t be a furry kitten or an energetic puppy. What would you say if I told you that you’re going to be a Papa come spring?”

Jonathan paused, trying to process his wife’s words. Then he wrapped his arms around his wife, pulling her close, and planted a passionate kiss on her lips. “I’d say, next to you marrying me, that that’s the best news I’ve ever heard. I love you so much, Melanie.”

“And I love you, Jonathan,” she replied, her eyes sparkling with joy.

He leaned down and whispered something in her ear, and her face pinkened.



“Thank you for all of this,” she said meaningfully.

Jonathan picked up Shep, and Melanie leaned down to give the dog an affectionate kiss on the top of his head. As Melanie settled into her seat, Jonathan gently placed Shep down next to her. He watched as the dog immediately curled up beside her, his tail thumping lightly, content to savor this joyful adventure together.

~Maybe... not The End~

I hope you enjoyed

A Wallflower Never Forgets

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