



Drawn to the Duke (Hearts in Hiding #6)

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Category: Historical

Description: Talented artist Selina Boothe has a secret: shes the real genius behind her brothers celebrated portraits.

When the rakishly handsome Duke of Chauncy commissions a likeness, Selina knows its her chance to secure her familys future. But she never expected to lose her heart in the process. Forced to hide her true identity, Selina finds herself drawn into a dangerous web of deception, desire, and a plot that threatens the very man shes come to love.

Angus Conway, the Duke of Chauncy, is captivated by the mysterious Mrs. Boothe from the moment he lays eyes on her. Her wit, passion, and undeniable talent stir something within him he thought long dead.

But as secrets unravel and danger lurks in the shadows, Chauncy must decide if he can trust the woman whos captured his heart.

Total Pages (Source): 25

CHAPTER 1

“Why, Chauncy, you said it was extreme vanity to have your portrait painted, and now you have succumbed!” Catherine, Lady Saunders smiled coyly from her seat in the Blue Drawing Room, before turning to her husband. “Saunders, why did you not tell me before that Chauncy was looking for a portrait painter?” she asked, patting his knee as if she and he were a couple who enjoyed great harmony.

“A likeness, not a portrait.” Angus Conway, Duke of Chauncy corrected her with a distant smile.

He’d not expected his old friend, Saunders, to have brought his wife to dinner tonight when he thought he’d made it quite clear that the invitation was on account of a matter of diplomatic delicacy.

But now Catherine had sunk her sharp little teeth into the idea that Chauncy wanted a portrait of himself—a lie he’d been forced to come up with on the spot because he hadn’t thought of an excuse as to why he wanted the expertise of someone who could render a rapid likeness under duress.

He hadn’t, in fact, even yet secured someone with such particular talents which was why he’d invited Saunders to dinner: to discuss this troubling security issue involving the Prince Regent that needed an artist of speed and accuracy to identify three potential plotters.

Of course, it was not a matter he could discuss in front of Catherine, a woman not known for her discretion. So, the evening had been something of a tedious waste of

time.

Catherine, however, seemed happily oblivious to the mood in the room. She'd also appeared exceedingly pleased to see Chauncy, despite her tears and words of recrimination when he'd given her her congé three months earlier.

Now, it appeared, all had been forgiven. Perhaps she thought he'd invited her with an idea to rekindling the affair. If she had, she must certainly have been disabused by his lack of response to her warm looks.

He sighed and forced a smile. The dinner had been excellent, the table-talk mundane, and now he and Saunders had joined Catherine in the drawing room to conclude the evening with a glass of sherry. Chancy couldn't wait to see them on their way.

Catherine was like a little terrier: insistent and merciless when she wanted entertainment.

"What a shame the very excellent Mr George Romney is no longer with us to render your likeness, Chauncy," Catherine went on. "Now there was a man born with a paint brush in his hand. How I'd have loved to have watched him paint you as he painted Emma, Lady Hamilton, your dear friend Lord Nelson's paramour."

Was she suggesting there was a correlation between Lord Nelson's mistress, Lady Hamilton, and herself with regard to Chauncy?

Lord, what had Chauncy been thinking when he'd succumbed to her lures the previous year? It was all Saunders' doing. He'd pushed his wife into Chauncy's path having formed an interest in an opera dancer. And Chauncy, at the time had been unattached and bored.

He still was.

He took a sip of the amber liquid and reflected gloomily on the current state of affairs. Affairs of the heart should be the last thing on his mind with matters of State as troubling as they were.

“I’m not having my portrait painted,” Chauncy muttered. “You should know I haven’t the patience to stand about for hours on end. No, I’m looking for someone who is quick to render a likeness. Speed and accuracy are his most important requirements.”

“A likeness?” Catherine put her beautiful head on one side and regarded him with sudden speculation. “Why, you’re not contemplating marriage, are you, Chauncy? Is that what you meant, earlier? Some deserving little innocent? No, it must be someone who hasn’t seen you? A marriage of convenience?” There was a barbed edge to her words that did not escape Chauncy.

“Yes, a marriage of convenience, Catherine,” Chauncy agreed because it was easier.

“Yes, well, I’m sure a marriage of convenience would suit you, Chauncy, being someone who’s so unable to settle,” Catherine said, tartly, “though there was a time I suspected you had a particular fondness for your cousin, Beth, the way you did talk about her.”

“Beth keeps house for me and I’ve known her since we were children. Of course I talk about her,” Chauncy said more sharply than he’d intended.

“Well now, back to this artist you need to secure,” said Saunders diplomatically. “Perhaps, Catherine, someone springs to mind?”

“As long as it’s not that Sir Edward Boothe who’s making a name for himself,” said Catherine, crinkling her nose. “People say his abilities are extraordinary. But his wife is mad. Locked up for five years, you know. Beautiful and blue-blooded but a

millstone around his neck. You wouldn't want her to burn the house down, would you?" She sighed. "Like that cousin of yours, Beth's sister, didn't you once tell me?"

"I did not, on any occasion, say Gwyneth was mad and nor did she ever come close to burning the house down," Chauncy said with a sudden fuelling of ire. "I was exceedingly fond of Cousin Gwyneth whose keen intellect and free spirit did not accord with the fashion of keeping women in their place."

"It sounds like you'd like to keep me in my place," said Catherine, clearly offended as she put down her sherry and turned to her husband.

"Now, now, Catherine, I'm sure Chauncy didn't mean it like that." Saunders put up his hands and appealed to his old friend.

"Forgive me. I'm tired and I really do need to settle upon a painter." Chauncy leaned back and closed his eyes. "Or, rather, a sketcher. Some kind of artist who can render a good likeness, quickly. This is not for a portrait."

"And the lady? Your intended? You haven't said." Catherine tried to smile. Chauncy always knew what was real and what was not, and right now her mouth was stretched in a tight line, marring her lovely features. Catherine was never at her best when she was displeased.

"Miss Harriet Blenkinthorpe," Chauncy said, struggling for a name that might serve him.

"Never heard of her," said Saunders.

"Though I haven't seen her for ten years, we knew one another as children. Her father owns the estate alongside ours near the Scottish border. She dislikes leaving the country."

“Then you’ll be coming to London often on your own,” said Catherine sounding pleased; as if she truly thought she and Chauncy might rekindle the embers of their doomed and, really, quite unsatisfactory affair.

“And now this artist you mentioned. Sir Edward Boothe,” Chauncy said, ignoring her. “What can you tell me of him?”

“Some lowly baronet’s seventh son. He married Miss Anna Dixon,” said Saunders. “That’s all I know.”

“A dull fellow who was entranced by the mad woman’s beauty but soon rued the day.”

“Dull?” Saunders quizzed her. “How would you know he’s dull if you’ve never met him?”

“Gossip,” said Catherine. “My sister was telling me about him just recently and a commission he did for Lord Glendenning who was mightily satisfied with the likeness. He told Caroline he’d never come across an artist of such speed and ability.” She fixed Chauncy with another of her self-satisfied little smiles.

“There’s not much your sister doesn’t know about what’s going on, is there?” Chauncy had never taken to Catherine’s sister, however Mrs Piggott was married to Saunders’ other great friend, Rear Admiral Rowley so he’d had to suffer her company through a great many dinners over the years.

“Between us there isn’t anything going on that we don’t know,” Catherine agreed. “So be careful what you get up to, Chauncy.” She wagged a finger playfully at him and he smiled weakly.

He just had to hope Catherine didn’t get wind of the real reason he needed that

likeness.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:19 am

CHAPTER 2

“Anna, you look sad. Tell me what’s wrong, dearest?”

Spying her sister-in-law seated with her head in her hands as she passed the drawing room, Selina deviated from her intention of going upstairs after her ride and instead took a seat beside Anna. “Edward hasn’t been unkind?” she asked, gently.

“Unkind?” Anna looked up at Selina, her eyes wide. “Of course not. Edward is never unkind.”

“Indeed, when has Edward ever been unkind?” It was her brother who spoke, throwing himself into a chair opposite and putting his feet on the ottoman as he added, combatively, “But if you keep putting ideas into Anna’s head, I might have to start acting unkindly and you won’t get to visit Chauncy Manor which I’m sure you’ve always wanted to do, sister dearest.”

“Chauncy Manor!” the girls echoed in excitement. For the grand country pile belonged to the handsome war hero Lord Chauncy who’d enthralled the citizens of England with his bravery alongside Nelson several years prior.

“Lord Chauncy has invited us all to stay?” asked Anna, her previously unfocussed expression now bright. Selina often wondered if boredom was her chief affliction. Edward called her mad but Selina thought her one of the most intelligent women she’d met.

“Lord Chauncy has commissioned me to draw his likeness,” Edward said, puffing

himself up with importance, Selina noted. For he would not speak the obvious truth in front of his wife: that only Selina had the skill to do what Lord Chauncy wished.

“Oh, Edward! You are so clever!” Anna cried, clapping her hands together. “Why, when I saw your watercolour of the lake, I did think it was better than Selina’s whereas I had not thought you skilled, as your sister is, in sketching a likeness. But if Lord Chauncy wishes you to draw his likeness then you must have improved considerably.”

Selina hid her smile. It would be best not to rile Edward on top of his obvious ire at Anna’s ingenuous comments. Edward had no skill in sketching a likeness and she wondered when, and how, he’d couch his request to have Selina accompany him to Chauncy Manor.

Well, if he’d been commissioned to draw Lord Chauncy he had no option but to bring Selina. Edward could not do as Lord Chauncy required and he knew that.

Oh, but she would make the most of this wonderful opportunity!

She looked down at her riding habit. Although five seasons old, she knew she nevertheless cut a dashing figure. But would she take her riding habit? Would there be an opportunity to go out riding?

And what of the rest of her wardrobe?

Did ladies still study the roulades and feathers and frills and furbelows so that they could date another’s evening gown to the latest season and then make snide remarks amongst their friends?

She glanced over at Anna who, though small-boned like Selina, had no fashionable wardrobe. Selina wondered if it was convenient for Edward to declare his sweet

young wife too unstable to take into society merely so he wouldn't have to admit his inability to provide her with the wardrobe a lady of her standing required.

She realised Edward was admonishing Anna for the last occasion they'd stepped out together which he was using as an excuse not to take her to Chauncy Manor on this occasion.

“”Why Anna, you didn't know when to hold your tongue and when to answer when you were being spoken to,” he said. “I've never been more embarrassed. Of course I can't risk you scandalising the duke and his guests if I take you. No, Selina will go in your stead. She can tell you all about it when she returns.”

Selina bit her lip as she sent an anguished look at her sister-in-law. Poor Anna was not mad but she could not go to Chauncy Manor. Not when Edward could only hope to get away with bringing one female—and certainly not a sister unless the invitation specified, which it did not.

“I'll tell you so many wonderful stories, Anna,” she said, in the hopes of banishing Anna's justified disappointment. “And I'll make sure you're invited to the next wonderful event to which Edward is invited.”

Anna nodded sadly. “But Edward is only ever invited to paint these days. No one ever invites us to be their guests.”

Selina wasn't sure how to respond for what Anna said was true.

And Selina had certainly played a large part in the family's fall from grace.

But now was not the time to dwell on the mistakes of the past.

Soon she would draw the Duke of Chauncy's likeness and who knew what other

opportunities would arise as a result?

CHAPTER 3

“Sir Edward and Lady Boothe.”

Chauncy rose from his seat, hiding his reservations as he welcomed Sir Edward to his grand ancestral home.

The artist whose ability to render an exceptional likeness underpinned Chauncy’s plan to protect the Prince Regent was not very prepossessing. Though he came here in the capacity of a menial, Chauncy had decided to accord him the status of a guest on account of his birth, despite the family’s fall from grace.

It seemed everyone from the baronet’s father to sister had besmirched the family lineage. As a result, so Chauncy had heard, they were on nobody’s guest lists until word had begun to spread that there was no one to rival Sir Edward for speed and accuracy when it came to a likeness.

But the fact that Sir Edward had brought his wife, when no such invitation had been extended, riled him.

He offered the fellow a frosty smile, lest the young man presume too much, and said, “Sir Edward, your reputation as an artist of exceptional accuracy is the reason you are here, so let me be brief?—”

“You are too kind, Your Grace, but it is indeed true that my skill is without equal, certainly according to the Duchess of Wentworth.”

Chauncy narrowed his eyes. Not only did he like being taken advantage of, he disliked being interrupted.

“But speed is as important as accuracy,” he went on grimly as two footmen carried Sir Edward and Lady Boothe’s trunk upstairs, “and as long as you prove efficient in both departments, that is all I require. So, let us waste no more time in idle chatter when I don’t doubt you are keen to rest after your long journey.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” replied the young man, his pale face flushing at the implied rebuke.

Chauncy inclined his head. When Catherine had said Sir Edward was dull, Chauncy had disregarded her. Most of what came out of Catherine’s mouth were lies but, while he’d not expected a vibrant, energetic young man, Sir Edward’s myopic blue eyes, straw-colored curls in need of barbering, and weak chin seemed just the physical manifestations of a lackluster spirit when what Chauncy needed was acuity and action.

First impressions certainly filled Chauncy with foreboding. In two weeks, he and the nation, would depend upon this Edward Boothe—with his ability to wield his pencil like a saber—to identify three plotters suspected of the recent failed assassination attempt upon the future king George IV.

Hopefully, the identification could be done in time to foil the villains’ next possible outrage.

“And Lady Boothe, I hope you will be comfortable. Please don’t feel the need to stay amongst us if you—er—feel the need to retire at any time.” Chauncy’s frown deepened. What had his cousin Beth told him? That Lady Boothe had not been seen in public for some years due to an affliction that kept her confined to her chambers.

Locked up, Beth had said, her kind-heartedness preventing her from calling the woman a lunatic.

And Boothe had brought his mad wife to Chauncy House when such important work was to be done?

“You are kind, Your Grace,” Lady Boothe murmured. With her head lowered demurely, it was impossible to see her face. Chauncy imagined she was trying to conceal the glint of madness in her eyes and hoped he would not encounter her wandering the corridors at odd times.

He wondered if he should charge one of the servants with keeping her under surveillance.

“When would you like the first sitting, Your Grace?”

“Midday tomorrow.”

Sir Edward nodded. “Where will I set up my easel?”

“In the long saloon. Delves, my butler, will show you.”

“Perhaps the conservatory would offer better light.”

Chauncy jerked his head to the right. The little wife was offering an opinion on a matter that did not concern her? He sent her a quelling look, which was wasted, for she barely raised her head. All he could see was her chin and mouth. Not deformed, by any means, but there must be some reason she would not look at him. He was about to respond when Sir Edward said hurriedly, “The better the light, the better the likeness, Your Grace.”

Chauncy raised his shoulders in a gesture of concession. "I wish the likeness to be as truthful as possible. If you wish to draw in the conservatory, I have no objection, though before the next three days I hope you will have proved your ability to create several likenesses. I am curious to see how fast you can draw for you have been commended on your speed."

Let the man begin in a good light, he thought, reconciling himself to several days of tedium, either in front of an easel or having to make small talk.

At least Saunders and Rowley would be on hand to entertain him while he was in captivity, so to speak.

Alas, he reflected, their wives would be too.

However, at least that meant he could leave Lady Boothe up to them.

As soon as the door of the suite to which they'd been escorted closed behind them, Selina allowed herself a sigh and a smile.

"We've done it, Edward. I am through the doors of Chauncy Manor and the Duke has not barred my way." She threw her arms wide and breathed out, all the tension that had built up over the six hours of their carriage journey through the flat Norfolk fens draining away. "All will be well, now, for with the duke's patronage, our future is assured."

Edward turned on his sister. "Why must you always speak out of turn, Selina?" he demanded. "The duke did not like having his plans altered. Certainly not by a woman."

Selina ignored him, placing her reticule on the single iron bed in the antechamber before turning back to her brother. Edward would, of course, occupy the sumptuous

canopied four-poster in the adjoining room.

“And why must you always look so hangdog, Edward?” she returned, her enthusiasm dented. “I thought you might be a little more charming to His Grace than you are at home with me and poor Anna. Lord Chauncy’s commission could be the first of a string of requests for likenesses from wealthy patrons.”

“Freedom from financial worry... Wouldn’t that be a blessing?” Edward muttered before returning his glower to her. “But, Selina, it was clear Lord Chauncy did not take kindly to being told where he was to be painted. I’m sure there’s just as much light in the saloon as will be needed.”

“Possibly, Edward. But not the opportunity for me to observe the duke at close quarters from the other side of the conservatory glass if something goes amiss.” Selina bent to pull from their trunk her single fine evening gown. “If I cannot be by your side for some reason, of course, there has to be an alternative plan.” Holding the beaded pink overdress against herself, she did a twirl. “And, if all does go to plan and you find yourself more rich patrons amongst the company tonight, perhaps I’ll find a rich husband.” She smiled, anticipating her brother’s lack of humor as she added, “I’m not yet quite beyond the pale, Edward, even if you like to pretend I am.”

Edward merely harrumphed as he set out his painting equipment. “You damned any chance of a respectable marriage, my dear Selina, when you ran away with the gamekeeper and disgraced the family name. No one will marry a widow with that kind of scandal hanging about her. A penniless widow, at that.”

“The footman, Edward,” Selina corrected him, folding her gown carefully and putting it in the wardrobe. “Samuel was a footman, as you well know, God rest his sinning soul. And, as you also know, it is the talent of this penniless widow that kept a roof over his head, and now yours, Edward.” Selina stood beside her brother to examine the paints and brushes he’d laid out on the bed. She would need just pencil and paper

to render the initial sketch while Edward pretended to do the preliminary work on the likeness. While Edward was an adept painter, and his watercolors and landscapes were sought after, it was Selina's quick likenesses, done on paper with pencil or graphite, that had started to bring in the real money.

And that had led to the Duke of Chauncy's invitation.

“Who do you suppose is the recipient of this likeness of our handsome duke? Do you think he is negotiating a magnificent marriage with a foreign princess?” Selina contemplated the duke's handsome, saturnine features, adding with a suggestive smile as she did another twirl, “Or do you think he's in the market for a wife here on English soil?”

Her brother sent her a narrow look. “You forget yourself, Selina. You are decidedly out of the market. Since everyone believes you are Anna, not only are you supposedly mad, you are also supposedly married.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:19 am

CHAPTER 4

Chauncy hadn't realized he'd been day-dreaming until he was jerked back to the present by his cousin, Beth, who suddenly declared from her position by the fireplace, "I have tatted nearly one half of a collar, Chauncy, while you've been staring into the coals. If you're having second thoughts about going ahead with this marriage contract, then just say so."

His marriage?

Of course, Beth thought the entire reason for commissioning his portrait was to send it to Miss Harriet Blenkinthorpe.

Chauncy straightened. "It makes sense. Our northern estates lie side by side. And in thirty-two years, I've not found someone I'd rather wed."

"But has she? Could that be why Miss Blenkinthorpe is prevaricating, asking for your likeness instead of leaping at the chance of a title though, no doubt, that's what her mama is angling for."

"Miss Blenkinthorpe's request is entirely reasonable since we've not seen one another since we were ten years old."

Beth laid down her handiwork and looked at her cousin. "If Miss Blenkinthorpe's mama is pushing her into something she's unsure about, it will prove most impractical when you fall madly in love with some other worthy?"

“Enough, Beth.” Chauncy ameliorated the interruption with a smile. “I’m more than ready to wed some nice, respectable young lady like Miss Blenkinthorpe, considering the number of times I’ve thought myself in love with damsels I could not marry. Now that was impractical.” He raised an eyebrow. “Not that I should hint at such things to you.”

“No, not to poor on-the-shelf-Beth who, at twenty-eight, knows nothing of life.” There was a surprisingly defensive edge to Beth’s tone as she went on, “And...it certainly is impractical to fall in love with women one is unable to marry.” Looking at him from above her handiwork, she went on, more urgently, “Oh, Chauncy, I do wonder if it was wise of you to invite Lord and Lady Saunders to this house party.”

Chauncy’s mouth dropped open. Beth was the sweetest, most demure and obedient young lady he knew. Could she really be hinting that she understood the relationship between himself and Catherine, Lady Saunders?

Past relationship, he amended.

He swallowed and said, carefully, “Lord Saunders has been my friend for more than a decade. He... knows everything there is to know about me, for I would keep no secrets from him.” He hesitated, then added brusquely, “Let us talk no more about the complicated relationships between men and women of which you clearly have no knowledge, Beth.”

Beth lowered her eyes. “Of course, Chauncy. I had no wish to overstep the bounds of propriety. It’s just?—”

Chauncy didn’t want to encourage her so said nothing, until his cousin whispered, “It’s just that Lady Saunders asked me to give this to you.”

Reluctantly, Chauncy took the wax-sealed paper Beth held out.

Another request to pay Catherine's gambling debts? Chauncy had studiously avoided being alone with Catherine since she and Saunders had arrived the previous day.

"So, perhaps there are merits to marriage with Miss Blenkinthorpe," Beth said, more brightly this time, but with an incisive look at Chauncy. "Though I do wish you'd marry someone on the basis of love. However, since your mind is clearly made up, no doubt you'd rather talk of matters other than marriage."

Chauncy offered his cousin a bland smile.

As he'd been considering whether to divulge to Saunders the extent of his wife's gambling addiction, which Chauncy had financed for more than a year, talk of marriage was a welcome diversion.

It was certainly a diversion from his preoccupation these past weeks to thwart a feared upcoming attempt on the Prince Regent's life.

Requesting a supposed request from Miss Harriet Blenkinthorpe for a likeness had been an inspiration but he knew he'd have to be careful not to let slip it was not the real reason he wished Sir Edward to draw his visage.

Chauncy's colleague, Sir Simeon, had despaired of any chance of positively identifying three primary suspects he'd learned had been invited to Lady Rushworth's August Ball.

A ball which the Prince Regent was also attending several weeks hence and at which it was feared he'd be in mortal jeopardy.

If Mr. Boothe proved quick and accurate in drawing Chauncy's likeness, the young artist would also be included on the guest list.

If he could draw Chauncy to his satisfaction during this house party, then he could draw the three suspects. Quickly and discreetly. That was all that was required.

Chauncy stirred himself for Beth had spoken once more and he'd only just caught the last of her words, causing him to say with great affection, if not complete truth, "Why, Beth, of course someone will want your portrait painted. I think you're the most beautiful woman in all of East Anglia."

"Well, I've caught you out in a lie, my dear Chauncy, since that is what you used to tell Gwyneth."

"I did?" Chauncy paused to reflect on Beth's late older sister. Gwyneth had not been a beauty, but her sweet eccentricity had endeared her to him. While she'd scandalized her family for speaking without thought, Chauncy had admired his unconventional cousin's candor. "Poor Gwyneth. If the gentlemen had only been able to see past her birthmark?—"

"Her dowry compensated for that, and you know it, Chauncy!" Beth retorted. "It was the fact she spoke her mind. That's what the gentlemen couldn't see past. Anyway, it's too late now." She sighed. "But it's not too late for you to reconsider this marriage to Miss Blenkinthorpe. No, Chauncy, Miss Blenkinthorpe is too bland for you." She regarded her cousin thoughtfully. "You need to find a wife who will keep you on your toes. Someone who is sufficiently beautiful to please your discerning eye, but who is quick-witted and who won't allow themselves to be dictated to."

"A recalcitrant wife? Oh, I don't think so, Beth."

His cousin grinned. "Semantics, Chauncy! Recalcitrant? Disobedient? It doesn't matter what she is or isn't. Just as long as she isn't dull. For I can assure you that's my greatest fear regarding you taking Miss Blenkinthorpe as your wife. That she will obediently keep her mouth shut and, quite frankly, bore you to death."

CHAPTER 5

S lowly Selina circumnavigated the light-filled conservatory as if she were admiring the exotic fruits and flowers.

“A little to the right, Edward,” she murmured. “Yes, two inches more. And angle the easel. That’s right. When I am at your side, pretending interest, His Grace mustn’t see my hands. Then, if anyone else enters, I can leave and observe from outside.” She pointed to a tree behind which she could conceal herself. At the very worst, she could stand and peer through the fork between two branches while she sketched.

Not that that was likely to happen, but one had to be prepared. Selina had always pretended to mix Edward’s paints at his side—and Samuel’s when he’d been alive and parading, also, as an artist—while quickly drawing, but the only reason the men in Selina’s life had prospered was because she factored in all contingencies.

“And is there anything else I can do that would satisfy madam?”

“No need for the sarcasm. I was not the one who got themselves into hot water by promising something I could not deliver. You just assumed I’d come to your rescue when you accepted this commission.”

Edward glared. “You want commissions as much as I do. And my reputation as a painter does not depend on you, Selina.”

“As a landscape painter, Edward; no, it does not. But as a portraitist, you cannot capture a likeness as I can, and that is why I am here. No need to snap. Oh, Your

Grace!”

Caught by surprise, Selina dipped a curtsy, wishing she’d left a few minutes earlier, as planned. She hoped the duke had heard nothing of their exchange.

Besides which, the less the duke observed her, the better. With Edward’s real wife not having been seen in public in five years, there was bound to be speculation over what Lady Boothe was like.

How mad she really was.

Edward had tried to persuade Selina not to attend the small dinner party the duke was holding tonight. He’d begged her to plead a megrim. If people saw that Selina, his supposed wife, was adept at table talk, he said, then Edward would be criticized for continuing to keep his real wife supposedly under lock and key. Not that Anna really was under lock and key, though her freedom was limited.

As was Selina’s. But this visit to Lord Chauncy was going to change all that. Selina wasn’t going to squander her one opportunity to wear the lovely gown she’d been refashioning each of these last three years since her widowhood. She intended to ensure Edward’s commission was the first of many. Edward would realize her worth and Selina would no longer be forced to molder away in the country like poor Anna.

Of course, Selina would also be wise to balance expectations and appear ‘just sufficiently mad enough’ that she’d not be considered an outright threat but could still go out and about with Edward. Still, that shouldn’t be hard. Being a little outspoken was enough to concern society. Ladies who spoke their minds were—quite frankly, Selina had realized to her cost—a danger to themselves.

“Lady. Boothe.”

She rose slowly. Lord Chauncy eyed her cautiously. As if she were a creature as strange and exotic as the pineapple he was attempting to cultivate in his hothouse. Despite his striking looks, the breadth of his shoulders, and his disconcerting magnetism, Selina supposed he was little different from her late husband and her brother. He would tolerate an opinionated, outspoken woman as little as they.

“Your Grace.” She held his gaze because he was, to her surprise, still looking at her, a small furrow between his eyes, as if she did not match what he was expecting.

And Selina responded with a small thrill at his interest. Not interest that suggested he perhaps found her comely. But that he found her interesting.

Interesting, she supposed, because he thought her mad.

She felt Edward’s concerned stare and wavered between doing something that poor Anna might have done before Edward decided to entirely deny her any involvement in society—or whether to keep her head down.

She chose the latter, but not before matching his Grace’s stare with a long, hard look of her own.

Why not? If he could stare, so could she, and he’d not think anything of it other than that he was looking into the eyes of a woman whose mind was with the fairies.

But, as she lowered her gaze, she could not resist a remark that not only came surprisingly from the heart but was indeed something poor Anna would have said.

“You have eyes I could drown in, Your Grace,” Selina murmured, staring pointedly now at the ground so that she could hide her smile as she felt Edward’s horror and embarrassment scorch her from a full three feet away.

CHAPTER 6

“ If I am to be seated opposite a mad woman and must make small talk, at least suggest how I might begin,” Beth said as they waited for their guests to gather in the drawing room prior to going in to dinner.

They were to be a table of eight, including Lord Saunders, Catherine, and Catherine’s sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Piggott.

Chauncy frowned. “I cannot say, Beth, since she spoke barely ten words to me.”

“Ten? So more than simply, “Your Grace”? What exactly did she say?”

Chauncy’s mouth turned up as he told her, and Beth repeated the odd compliment with a giggle before saying, “I do think your eyes are your best feature, Chauncy, so I would hope Sir Edward does them justice. I think it must be very difficult to produce a likeness quite so true that one can recognize it as the person being drawn. Painters always have to flatter the subject.”

“Sir Edward’s honesty and accuracy is, apparently, what sets him apart. While I find him not particularly prepossessing, I am told that, as a portraitist, he is a master.”

“I daresay he doesn’t feel like smiling very often with a mad wife who says embarrassing things in public,” replied Beth. “He’d not know what she was going to come out with next, which is why I’m so interested in seeing how she conducts herself at dinner.”

“She’s not one of the Prince Regent’s menagerie to gawk at, Beth.”

“That is usually the caution I would make, Chauncy.” Beth’s eyes danced. “Don’t tell me you are not as intrigued as I to know what she will say when she is not ruled by convention like the rest of us. She will say what she thinks, I daresay. And does that make her mad? Or honest?”

It didn’t take long to find out.

Seated between Edward and Mr. Piggott, Selina was conscious of all eyes upon her. There was a nervous anticipation, as if word had gone around that she was some strange, wild creature who might say or do something to bring down the sky.

She was also conscious of Edward’s seething anger, which had not abated since her impulsive words of earlier. He’d taken her to task when they’d dressed for dinner. In fact, he’d tried outright to forbid her from making an appearance until she reminded him that her opportunities of observing the duke close up were rare enough. At the table, he’d be only three seats away.

“I promise I will speak only when spoken to, Edward, and I will use my few snatched opportunities to study the duke’s interesting physiognomy to commit to the paper you know I carry at all times, which I will hide beneath the table,” she’d assured him.

“Meaning, you will be looking down; demure and compliant?”

“Whenever I am not being directly addressed, Edward. Yes! Now, I’m perfectly respectable, but I will need your help with the buttons at the back.”

Her earlier frustration with her brother was now replaced by sheer pleasure at feeling the weight and soft, silken texture of her exquisite gown as she stroked the pale pink overdress. It was the gown she was to have worn for her debut. Running away with

Samuel had put paid to any opportunity to ever wear it.

By the time Samuel's fortunes had been at their zenith—thanks to Selina's efforts—he'd started to gamble away any of the funds his hardworking wife might have used to clothe herself in the manner to which she'd been born: the eighth child of a viscount of modest fortune but good social standing.

Samuel had not an artistic bone in his body, but he had charm. He knew how to draw the customers—vain women who desired a likeness. And Selina could whip up that likeness in an instant as she pretended to mix the paints at Samuel's side. What Selina hadn't realized for quite some time was the extent of Samuel's charm, and how many of these women came back for 'touch-ups' when Selina was out.

Or perhaps Selina had been willfully blind. Yes, Selina had given up too much to accept that Samuel was straying, so it was only when she returned home one day to find screaming Mrs. Wylie half dressed, and Samuel dead in the bed of what the physician put down as apoplexy, that Selina accepted the extent of his philandering.

So, while Selina was now determined to do a marvelous job of the duke's likeness, which meant sufficient close observations, she did concede Edward's concerns. And, although she wouldn't admit it to Edward's face, she knew she had been too bold to have spoken to their host as she had. What woman would speak their admiration on a first acquaintance?

But Selina had always found it easier to speak the truth. Easier, certainly, than to lie.

And the Duke of Chauncy truly was a magnificent specimen.

Nevertheless, tonight she would please her brother. She'd keep her head down, her eyes lowered, and her mouth shut.

“Lady Boothe, what do you think of Chauncy House?”

Selina blinked in surprise. They’d barely begun the first course and hard-eyed Lady Saunders was quizzing her in a surprisingly direct manner. Although well past her first flush of youth, the woman was still a beauty. But a scornful one with a hard mouth.

Selina raised her head and sent a serene smile around the table. “It is a magnificent testament to the many generations that have transformed a draughty castle into an impressive ancestral home.” She caught Edward’s look of relief before she lowered her eyes once more. Yes, she’d executed her duties, as promised. The tense expectation that had gripped the company had not been lost on her. Perhaps fame of her uncertain temperament had preceded her and they were eagerly waiting for her to disgrace her ‘husband’. Well, she would not do that. Lady Saunders would be disappointed if she’d hoped for a colorful response.

Conversation resumed with various topics being discussed before Selina heard herself being addressed once again.

“Lady Boothe, might I compliment you on your evening dress? I’d love to know your opinion on mine? It was made for me in London for this season though, like you, I am fond of the flounces of five seasons ago.” Mrs. Piggott, a pale, freckled, though not entirely unattractive redhead, sent a pointed look at Selina’s clearly outmoded gown.

Selina frowned at the veiled insult. Mrs. Piggott was Lady Saunders’ sister; and Lord Saunders was a friend of the duke. Selina must temper her responses so as not to offend their host; despite Selina being highly offended by Mrs. Piggott’s unkind remark.

And it was prompted by malice, she knew. Selina had seen Mrs. Piggott and Lady

Saunders sniggering in the corner of the drawing room earlier, in between glancing at Selina. At the time, Selina had dismissed the idea that they'd been gossiping about her, but now she knew they'd not only been talking behind her back, they'd been disparaging her.

Selina glanced at Edward, but he did not even appear to notice that Mrs. Piggott had blatantly insulted her by insinuating that her gown was five seasons old. Which it was.

Taking a deep breath, she smiled as she murmured, "You are very kind, Mrs. Piggott. And as for your lovely gown, rose sarsenet will compliment most women," before she lowered her head, adding as she carefully carved a piece of beef, "unless they are a redhead."

CHAPTER 7

The silence was immediate. Selina pretended not to notice, finishing her mouthful and then murmuring to Edward, “With all the compliments flying about the table, I think His Grace’s cook deserves special congratulations, don’t you?”

Edward stared at her, not replying, as if he wished to obliterate her. Then the silence was broken by Lady Saunders, clearing her throat and saying, as the pudding was brought in, “Lady Boothe, you must be honored that Lord Chauncy has chosen your husband to paint his portrait. And I applaud you for your bravery in accompanying him when I believe you have left your home on but a handful of occasions in five years. You must find the world a strange place.”

Selina caught the look of concern Lord Saunders directed at his wife, as if wishing to caution her against playing with something dangerous. She noticed, also, that a rather manic smile was playing about Mrs. Piggott’s lips.

Selina shook her head and widened her eyes. “Not the world,” she said, slowly, “but the people in it.”

“And I believe you rarely step outside your?—”

“Caroline, that’s enough.”

Mr. Piggott muttered the admonition to his wife before quiet Miss White, His Grace’s cousin, changed the subject in a bright tone of voice, saying, “Sir Edward, Chauncy has been painted by better-known painters but had heard you are especially gifted. I

wonder if I might observe you at work. I believe you will paint Chauncy tomorrow in the conservatory. Would you consider me a terrible burden if I sit quietly in a corner? I promise I'll not say a word to distract you."

What could Edward do but accept?

Meaning Selina would have to do her best at rendering His Grace's likeness from outside the conservatory.

But she would manage. Yes, Selina always found a way around every difficulty.

"Sir Edward, I believe you are not the only painter in the family. Your sister's late husband was a painter, was he not?" Mrs. Piggott was at it again.

Selina put down her knife and fork and sent her brother a considered look. How would he answer this one? How would he refer to the sister who'd caused the family such scandal?

And did Mrs. Piggott mean to cause Edward embarrassment?

Oh, Selina was not embarrassed by her poor adolescent judgement for what was done was done.

"He did paint, that is true, Mrs. Piggott." Edward bent his head to concentrate on his food, but Lady Saunders asked, "Was he a painter of likenesses, like you?"

"I taught him what I knew when he showed promise."

Selina cleared her throat. "But Samuel had no real talent," she cut in. "Not like my husband. What delicious syllabub!"

Her efforts to deflect the conversation were unsuccessful, for Mrs. Piggott remarked, “Samuel? Ah, yes, that was his name. The footman.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. Selina glanced up to see His Grace regarding Mrs. Piggott with fascination before focusing his stare upon Edward.

Her indignation rose. Edward came of aristocratic stock, but their saturnine host clearly did not see fit to spare the embarrassment of someone she considered subordinate, no doubt on account of the family’s many scandals. He was observing proceedings as if they were a sideshow.

Selina had to stifle the urge to hurl her plate at his handsome face.

Though that would probably amuse him even more.

However, since everyone considered Selina mad, she supposed she could do what she wished.

“Your sister, Miss Selina Boothe, was about to be presented, too, was she not?” Mrs. Piggott dabbed at her mouth with a smug little smile before adding, “But we should change the subject, shouldn’t we?”

She glanced around the table while Selina, seething, wondered how such a woman felt she could get away with saying such poisonous things.

She cleared her throat. If Edward wasn’t going to stand up for her, Selina had no choice but to do it herself. “My sister-in-law, Miss Selina Boothe, was such a gifted, winning young woman,” she said, sweetly, “that her parents quickly forgave her. And it was not long before her husband—yes, the footman—soon made his fortune,” she dipped her head, adding unwisely, “eclipsing the talent of Miss Selina’s brother.” Selina patted Edward’s hand, then said, “But he is dead, and your star has risen, my

love.”

Lord Saunders jerked forward. “Did you say this footman was a better painter than your husband?”

Selina heard the contempt in Lord Saunders’ tone and realized she’d miscalculated. He was challenging her. Why? Because she was supposedly addle-witted and baiting her was sport?

Or was she suddenly the one taking everything that was said too personally?

Glancing about the room, she said ingenuously, “Of course, they were both enormously gifted in their own way and my dear husband’s extraordinary ability to render a likeness is the reason he is here. What a lovely ruby necklace you are wearing, Mrs. Piggott.” Selina grasped at whatever she could to ameliorate her brother’s seething rage.

But a glance at Mrs. Piggott suggested she was the one who needed ameliorating. And, lowering her eyes to her lap, Selina realized why. Hastily she tucked beneath her napkin the excoriating likeness she’d sketched of the dreadful woman in between courses, but it was too late.

“Ladies, shall we retire to the drawing room and leave the gentlemen to their port?” It was Miss White who had risen and, with her characteristically sweet smile, was signaling to the other three women to follow her.

With trembling fingers, Selina surreptitiously turned Mrs. Piggott’s likeness face down upon the other drawing she’d effected during dinner: a very admirable likeness of the duke. She’d managed that, also, between courses, in case she’d encounter difficulty later. Selina had developed a cunning ability to use any opportunity to draw when the subject did not know he was being observed.

Avoiding eye contact with anyone, she followed the group up the corridor, alert for any opportunity to conceal the drawings somewhere she could retrieve them later.

But then Miss White was at her side, talking to Selina in a tone that suggested overdone calm, and Selina wondered if she'd gone too far in pretending to be the madwoman they all thought her.

Little wonder that Beth was now treating Selina with kid gloves.

Or perhaps that was because she sensed the bully in Mrs. Piggott who kept sending Selina glances of pure vitriol from her protuberant blue eyes.

For if Selina had a gift for committing a likeness, she also had a gift for a savage parody of a likeness, honing in on a large mouth or, in Mrs. Piggott's case, eyes like a confused sheep.

The few seconds of satisfaction Selina had felt when she'd executed the sketch were now swept away by concern. What if Mrs. Piggott demanded that Selina brandish the likeness for all to see?

Having Mrs. Piggott's likeness bandied about might be bearable. Embarrassing, certainly, but not a catastrophe. However, it would be disastrous if Selina's likeness of His Grace was put on public display amongst the ladies. Then the game really would be up, as Edward would phrase it.

"Lady Boothe, I hear you are gifted on the pianoforte. Would you be so kind as to play something for us?"

Selina was not as gifted as Anna, but her playing was passable.

With a smile, she nodded. In the few seconds that she'd been preparing to seat herself

in a commodious chair with a cushion, she'd found the ideal hiding place to tuck away her three precious pieces of paper.

Hopefully, her playing would deflect the attention of Mrs. Piggott and Lady Saunders.

Selina enjoyed playing the pianoforte and could play from memory, which meant she could look out into the audience to check that her drawings were safe.

Music also calmed her—which she sorely needed right now. So she ignored Lady Saunders and Mrs. Piggott's impoliteness and instead focused on Schubert's lyrical, romantic melodies.

They transported her to a time when she'd been happy.

She hadn't regretted running away with Samuel in the beginning. Despite being barred from Boothe Hall, she and Samuel found a cottage and, thanks to Selina, he soon got painting commissions. That had made Edward jealous.

And, as news of 'Samuel's' talent had spread, a carriage had followed.

But Selina was only a woman, so the talent had to be advertised as Samuel's.

After Samuel died, having squandered the money Selina had earned, Selina had been forced to move in with Edward and Anna.

Edward had quickly advertised to the local neighborhood his 'charity' towards his sister in taking her in when she had nothing.

He had, just as quickly, taken advantage of both Selina's business mind as well as her talent.

But even though he relied on Selina, Selina was still dependent upon his goodwill.

Just as they were now both dependent upon the duke's goodwill.

So, would Edward forgive her for embarrassing him in front of so important and influential a person as His Grace? Edward was hoping for many more commissions to result from his work here and if word went around that his wife was a liability, then Selina's plan to accompany her brother on future commissions might not come to fruition.

By the time the final notes of her piece died away, the room was silent and Selina looked up.

Miss White was clapping politely, a smile of appreciation upon her pretty countenance.

Lady Saunders and Mrs. Piggott were also clapping politely.

A smile of satisfaction upon theirs.

And it took only a shift of perspective as Selina's gaze encompassed the smoking fireplace for her to understand why.

With a gasp she rose, her hand to her breast, causing Miss White to ask in concern, "Lady Boothe, are you all right?"

Selina forced her gaze away from the sight of her sketches now smoldering in the drawing room fireplace and managed a shaky smile.

"Music always touches me deeply," she replied, taking a seat, determined not to look at the evil sisters who'd managed to slip under their hostess's gaze. Not only had they

destroyed her wickedly good sketch of Mrs. Piggott, they'd also destroyed Selina's preliminary sketch of the duke.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Boothe, I understand the sentiment only too well," said Miss White with touching sincerity before adding with concern, "Why, Lady Boothe, you're crying!"

CHAPTER 8

The tears were real, but they did not signify weakness.

Indeed, they'd proved a useful excuse for Selina to slip out of the room to compose herself. If she could locate His Grace's library, perhaps she'd find more paper to furnish Edward with the drawing of His Grace that was needed to shore up Edward's reputation and consequently their fortunes.

With a rapidly beating heart, Selina quietly turned the doorknob to the second room on the right. This, she had gleaned in casual conversation, was an annexe that led off the library.

Raising her candle high, she surveyed the room. All she needed was one sheet. Two would be preferable, but if Lord Chauncy had writing implements laid out on his desk, he'd surely not notice the absence of one sheet?

To her relief, not only had his lordship laid out writing implements, he'd set aside four sheets of paper for the correspondence he'd just begun.

Selina hurried across to the desk and glanced at the letter.

"Dear Sir Simeon,

I write to you with regard to Lady Rushworth's ball on August 14.

Rest assured that the plan to identify the three men currently under suspicion?—"

Selina felt a momentary pang. How wonderful it would be to attend an event such as Lady Rushworth's ball. Had Selina not been so impetuous and instead married a man of whom her parents approved, she might well have.

She could have made a fine marriage with 'Lady' prefixing her name without having to pretend. She could have had a wardrobe finer than Lady Saunders' or Mrs. Piggott's.

But it was too late for regrets. She'd made her bed... And right now, time was of the essence.

So, taking the two sheets of paper below the letter in progress, Selina carefully rolled them up and tucked them into her reticule before turning back to the door.

She would have been gone less than three minutes. No one would remark upon her absence or, hopefully, miss the paper.

Tomorrow, she would hide herself in the shrubs beside the conservatory, execute a hasty sketch of Lord Chauncy, finish the finer details that evening, and then the following morning, Edward could present his perfect likeness to his Grace.

Lord Chauncy would be delighted, Edward would be mollified—though of course he should be delighted, also—and Selina would be...

Well, Selina would simply return home to take up the mantle of scandalous widow, pestering Edward to take her with him whenever he had a sketch to execute.

"Is anyone there?"

Horried to see the doorknob turn, Selina blew out the candle and froze in the center of the room.

Although the curtains had not been fully drawn, the moon was under a cloud and in the inky darkness she could not see whoever approached, though she could hear the stealthy tread across the carpet and the faint protest of a floorboard.

But she had been in this situation before. Hiding. She knew what to do.

So, she regulated her breathing as best she could. Soft and shallow. He wouldn't hear her; for she knew it was a man.

And she knew exactly which man it was. She could smell the sandalwood and citrus overtones unique to Lord Chauncy and which she'd noted when she first met him. Selina's senses were highly attuned to a handsome man.

Just as Lord Chauncy's senses seemed attuned to a foreign presence in the room.

Yet he said nothing as he advanced slowly, stopping when he was within a hair's breadth of Selina. She could hear his breathing now. Louder than hers. She could feel the faint tickle of his breath against the top of her head.

Selina swallowed. She would not run and she would not declare herself. Perhaps His Grace would simply turn about and leave the room.

It was possible.

But of course, it was improbable. He knew someone was in his study and he would investigate.

In a moment, she would be exposed. Embarrassed, humiliated, and no doubt lambasted when he learned that she'd stolen from their host. He might even order Edward to leave his home, with Selina in tow.

Selina had heard that his Lordship had a volatile temper on occasion.

But he would decide.

So she waited.

Tensing, she felt his hand brush across the top of her head before it contoured her cheek.

Slowly.

Exploring.

With interest.

She drew in her breath, about to swat his hand away in indignation.

Until it touched her breast.

Now she did gasp.

But she did not move.

In the inky darkness, he had no more idea what part of her he was touching than she had of anything.

She only knew that the brush of his hand upon the swell of flesh above her bodice created an extraordinary sensory delight that communicated itself to the core of her being.

Why, she hadn't been touched since Samuel had died; and their last exchanges had

not been full of loving anticipation.

She bent slightly to increase the contact, not caring that her breathing was louder and more labored. That it communicated her enjoyment.

But despite her slight shift in position, she remained still.

And he remained standing slightly away from her. An alien being in the darkness with a touch that seemed to infuse her parched soul with the lifeblood it had lacked these long years of widowhood.

And then suddenly she was alone.

His hands no longer roamed, and she felt his withdrawal like an icy chill across her skin, leaving her yearning for an intimacy that was now a distant memory.

He stepped back; the floorboard registering his shift in weight.

Selina didn't move. She barely dared breathe.

But she felt devastation as his soft tread towards the door indicated that his exploration was at an end.

When the door clicked shut, Selina slowly exhaled.

After another minute had passed, she drew in one long, sustaining lungful of air, pushed her shoulders back, and forced courage into her return to the drawing room.

The warmth and chatter hit her like something physical as she entered, but no one registered her return.

She wove amongst the furniture, past Lord Chauncy's chair, to find her own.

He did not look up from his conversation with Lord Saunders.

And as Selina joined a desultory conversation between her brother and Mr. and Mrs. Piggott, she noted that Lord Chauncy did not glance in her direction for even a moment.

It was as if the episode in his study had been a mere figment of her imagination.

CHAPTER 9

S elina spent a restless night tormented by fears of failure.

If she failed to create a perfect likeness of Lord Chauncy there may be no more commissions.

But chiefly, her restlessness was over what Lord Chauncy might do about the woman who had breached his private sanctuary.

Would he demand to know her intentions?

Cast her from his house?

However, nothing in his look at breakfast the following morning suggested Lord Chauncy had wasted a moment thinking about Selina or what her presence in his study might mean.

Until.

One split second across a platter of steaming haddock was all it took.

One fleeting, barely intercepted look of smoldering interest before His Grace responded to Lord Saunders' question regarding their expedition later that day.

Had Selina really been gazing at him, and if so, what might have been written on her features?

She was not a lovelorn miss out for adventure.

But how strange that since that brush of his hand upon her breast, her body had felt so full of longing.

Selina hadn't felt longing in years. Oh yes, she'd longed to leave Boothe House which felt more like a prison.

But Selina had felt little physical yearning since she'd been seventeen and her body had been on fire for handsome Samuel. He'd eagerly encouraged her interest by suggesting the wicked assignations behind the stables that had led to her ruin.

After Edward had caught them and threatened to tell their father, Selina had agreed—against her better judgement—to run away with Samuel the following night.

However, during her widowhood, Selina's conduct had been impeccable.

Samuel had died with a reputation as a man of great talent who'd squandered his wealth, but since many in the district had benefited from his profligacy, Selina had been accorded a modicum of respect she worked hard to safeguard.

And she was not about to risk that by throwing either herself—or longing looks—at any handsome eligible gentleman who crossed her orbit.

Not that Lord Chauncy was eligible. He was an aristocrat far above her on the social ladder. Selina was a daughter of a mere baronet. And a somewhat scandalous widow, at that.

Besides, Lord Chauncy was in the midst of contracting a match. The likeness he'd commissioned was for that very purpose.

But the look he sent her over that plate of steaming haddock made her throat dry and her breath race as she held it for just a split second longer than she ought.

And then Miss White was rising, pushing back her chair, and saying brightly to the ladies, “Shall we take a turn about the gardens?”

Selina thought this an excellent idea. Not only would it quell her agitation, it would afford her the opportunity to solidify her plan of concealment for when her brother set up his easel in the conservatory to paint His Grace.

Though perhaps it would be sensible to plead a megrim so she could slip away with her purloined paper and pencil and leave the ladies to their walk.

Selina would be less constrained if she was alone.

Smiling at Miss White, she offered her excuses and headed toward her bedchamber.

A little later, glad of the good weather, Selina nestled against the trunk of a plane tree and a border of shrubs.

His Grace sat upon a bench inside the glass walled conservatory with Edward angled to the left, affording Selina clear access to do her work.

Not just to run her pencil over the paper, but to really observe his lordship in repose with him none the wiser.

Starting from the faintly curling dark hair at his crown, following the line of his forehead above clear, intelligent eyes, and then his straight, Roman nose, and his slightly full lips, Selina felt the intimacy of her project like she never had before.

Now she was the one exploring Lord Chauncy, as he had explored Selina the night

before. But she could do it at leisure and in depth.

She swallowed as her pencil shadowed the hollows of his cheeks, tracing the delicacy of his mouth.

He carried himself with an air of entitlement. His look communicated the same.

And she reminded herself that he was a man who would be denied nothing.

And that men like that were dangerous, for they took with impunity, and what had occurred last night was nothing more than a duke's passing whim.

And that's all Selina was. The duke's passing fancy.

Selina paused, her pencil just above the firm jawline she'd sketched. She had to cast aside thoughts like that to focus on the task at hand which was to render as realistic a likeness of their host in as short a time frame as possible so that she could slip back to her room and then re-emerge for luncheon as someone who really had been suffering an indisposition.

As her eyes returned to the scene in the conservatory, she caught Edward's stern look and remembered her duty. Speed was of the essence.

There was no time for daydreaming. The duke was to be married. He had no more real interest in her than if she'd been some wild creature from the menagerie at the Tower of London. She had to remind herself of this. Again.

Quickly, Selina communicated what she saw through the glass to the paper that was resting flat and steady on a book of poetry she'd brought along for the task.

Then she held it away from herself to compare the real man with the picture she'd

drawn.

And was satisfied.

Lord Chauncy looked every bit the handsome nobleman.

Yes, she would need to make slight alterations when under less duress, but she was satisfied.

Carefully, she rolled up the drawing, securing it with a stone exactly where she and Edward had agreed. He could access it with an arm stretched through the partly open conservatory window, which was much safer than if Selina was detained with it in her possession on her return to the house.

Selina must have been successful at convincing everyone that her absence was due to a megrim, for as she made her way along a corridor towards the guest wing, Lord Chauncy himself questioned Selina on the state of her health with a look of sympathy.

But her suspicions were on alert.

Was he afraid she might fly into a bout of insanity if his cousin had communicated the fact Selina had pleaded a megrim?

She stopped, while Mrs. Piggott and her sister passed by, noses in the air, obviously believing they had put her firmly in her place by burning her drawings. They halted a little distance away, pretending to talk while darting barbed looks in her direction.

“My bed was the restorative I needed,” Selina told Lord Chauncy. “Other than a short bout of pain in my head, I have never felt better and am greatly looking forward to this evening.”

She sent a suspicious look at Mrs. Piggott, who was, no doubt, eager to point out any suggestion of insanity displayed by Selina. However, Selina suspected Mrs. Piggott's pride would prevent her telling His Grace explicitly about the offensive likeness she'd drawn of her.

Lord Chauncy smiled, his eyes raking her appreciatively from the top of her head to the tips of her slippers. "In that case," he said, "we are in for some lively conversation. I gather what while your brother's talent lies in his art, yours lies in other areas. What do you care for, Lady Boothe?"

Selina drew back, surprised at the question but more surprised by the interest in his tone.

She narrowed her eyes, her suspicions on alert. What was he about? Was he preying on the vulnerabilities of a supposedly mad woman whom he found pleasing to the eye? Did he hope to flatter her so that he merely need crook his little finger and she'd go to him? Was that how he entertained himself?

Or was he the one who entertained suspicions about Selina and her real identity and intentions? After all, he'd discovered her prowling about his study in the dark.

She smiled. It would be best to pretend to play the game.

"I care for gaiety and amusement, Your Grace. There is little more to me than what you see." She indicated her body with a careless flick of her wrist. "An empty-headed woman is what my husband calls me." She hesitated. "You know already that I speak before I think which is not considered attractive in a woman. To some, it suggests a touch of madness." Her lips turned up just a little suggestively. Boldly, she added, "Or wantonness."

"Indeed, Lady Boothe."

He'd closed the distance between them ever so fractionally. Little matter that Lady Saunders and her sister were staring, goggle-eyed from the end of the corridor. Let them look. Selina was a far more appealing prospect than either of them for a duke wanting diversion.

She didn't care a jot that Edward might be humiliated by her behaviour. He took advantage of her accomplishments and treated her as if she should be grateful to him when it was only due to Selina that they had managed to retain the family home.

"My husband looks down his nose at frivolity." Selina sighed. "He is a very serious minded man who, alas, struggles to find the pleasure in life that I long for." She sent the duke a fulsome look, as she added, "And I do so rail against the chains in which he has bound me. Thank you for including me in your invitation when you asked Sir Edward to draw your likeness. It is so liberating to find myself, unfettered, in such an environment."

"Unfettered?"

Selina shrugged. "I've discovered that while a reputation—albeit unfairly earned, in my opinion—could be a millstone around my neck, it does free me from exercising the restraint I might otherwise." Briefly, she touched his shoulder as she lowered her voice and said, "But here, knowing what everyone already thinks of me, I feel no restraint."

She heard his breathing, and observed the darkening of his pupils, with a thrill.

"No restraint, eh, Lady Boothe?" he repeated. "Well, we might just have to put that to the test, eh?"

CHAPTER 10

S elina's heart was full of happy expectation as she dressed for dinner that evening in her one beautiful evening gown, which she'd artfully trimmed with pink and cream bows.

Edward would have collected the likeness she had drawn of Lord Chauncy from the agreed hiding place. He might even smile and compliment her work. That would be a welcome change.

At least he, like Selina, must be feeling similarly light-hearted with relief, she thought.

Until Edward entered the room.

Focusing a troubled gaze upon her, her brother asked, "Where is the drawing of Lord Chauncy, Selina? I asked you to leave it for me beneath the stone we agreed upon in the shrubbery so I could set my mind at rest that you had indeed done what was asked of you."

Edward always used that accusatory tone when he was anxious.

"I put it exactly where I said I would, so you could collect it when you finished your sketching session."

"It was not there."

Selina frowned, not yet worried. Edward had obviously not conducted a proper search.

“No, Selina, it was not there. I scoured the area. Were you careless? Could the wind have carried it away?”

Selina stared at her brother. Her breath came faster and then she had to support herself with a hand on the back of the chair by the little writing desk as she whispered, “We agreed on the spot, Edward. I put it just beyond the partly open conservatory window. I put a rock on it to hold it, but it was exactly where we both agreed I would leave it.”

“Well, I do not have my drawing of Lord Chauncy.” His nostrils flared, and he closed his eyes a moment as he said, “A foraging animal or the wind has carried it away. Without this commission we are done for, Selina.”

Selina hurried back to the conservatory. It was madness to be outdoors in her evening gown, but nothing mattered except finding her sketch.

Edward couldn't have looked properly. He must have mistaken her instructions.

She was confident of finding it where she'd left it.

Except it wasn't there.

A thorough search of the shrubbery and the near location yielded nothing, and now she would have to return to her brother empty-handed.

“Lady Boothe, you look distressed.”

Selina jerked her head up at the mellifluous tones of her host.

“Your Grace,” she said, inclining her head. “I...I needed a little air before spending the evening indoors. It’s a lovely evening.”

It was not, in fact, a lovely evening, as a spatter of fine rain drops gave the lie to her incautious statement.

Lord Chauncy took her elbow and shepherded her to shelter beneath a large oak tree.

“A lovely evening, indeed,” he remarked, a smile playing about his lips. “And you chafe at being indoors, I take it. Even when dressed for dinner.”

“It is a chore to remain seated for very long.”

“I noticed you had a restless disposition. So this is what you call a lack of restraint? Roaming the outdoors in your evening gown even when you might ruin your dancing slippers?”

Selina blinked. For a moment she thought she saw something like sympathy cross his features, then supposed she must have imagined it. He’d shown he liked to flirt with her. But what was she—really—to a man like this?

A man who believed she was nothing more than his servant’s mad wife.

But he had not made his excuses to move on. He seemed to wait for an answer.

“Restless?” Her mind shifted from the sketch to her need for activity. Always. She smiled suddenly. “It is true. For as long as I can remember, I was the one who wanted to be out of doors, running across the lawn and climbing trees and exploring the woods. My brother was the quiet one. We used to wish we could swap places.”

He considered this. “No doubt you were forever being punished for your

exuberance.”

“Oh yes, I was considered wild—” She paused. She was speaking of herself, but the same could have been applied to her sister-in-law. Poor Anna, while perfectly charming and delightful, was completely unable to filter her thoughts or desires.

Naturally, though, the duke thought he was speaking to Anna. And he assumed, of course, that Edward had offered her some reprieve. Selina wondered fleetingly if Anna would ever be reprieved. She might be unpredictable, but sweetly so; and never dangerous.

But she must stop reviewing the past. Selina would be wise to remember that Edward was the one who decided if her conduct warranted her being allowed out of Boothe Hall again.

So, talking to the duke, she was careful with her words. This man’s charm might encourage her to speak a little too unwisely.

And if he caught her out in her lie, Edward’s reputation—and his pride—would be irrevocably damaged.

“Wild?” He quirked a brow.

Selina really should not have taken his silence as encouragement. However, it was so rare to have the attention of someone even mildly interested, much less the attention of a handsome man. A handsome, titled, influential man.

Despite her best intentions, her tongue had a habit of running away with her, as did her impulses.

“I suppose my first really defiant act was when I ran away when I was ten.”

“Ran away? From home?”

“Yes, I’d been chastised by my governess one too many times. A very charming guest of my parents visited with his mother, so I hid in their carriage when I was supposed to be locked up in my room.”

“How did you escape the confines of your room?”

“I climbed out of my window and when I saw the carriage, it seemed like providence.” Selina smiled. “I was discovered when these people had reached home, and it was nearly midnight. I received quite a hiding when I was returned. I suppose I deserved it.”

“Yes, your parents would have been concerned, I imagine. When I ran away from home, I was praised for my bravado. I, too, was objecting to authority—in my case, my tutor. But my parents disliked the man, and they used my rebellion as an excuse for why he could not exert necessary control, so he was dismissed. I remember feeling bad about that. To be truthful, I didn’t mind my tutor. I was just responding to a surge of childish pique at being told what to do. You, Lady Boothe, clearly don’t enjoy having to conform.”

Selina shrugged. “I’m not very good at it, no. And I don’t suffer fools gladly.”

The moment the words were out, she clapped her hand to her mouth, for the inference didn’t reflect well on Edward. “Of course, my husband is another matter. His talent is prodigious, and I would do whatever I could to see it recognized.”

“How many times have you trotted out that line, Lady Boothe?”

“I am very dutiful when I remember to be,” she replied with a smile.

“And...do you chafe at being dutiful?”

Selina was prevented from answering by a voice from the house, calling his name, which brought them back to the present. She put her hand to her mouth to stifle a surprised laugh as she felt a spattering of raindrops breach the leaves of the plane tree.

“I certainly shouldn’t be out here,” she said, holding out her hands, palms upwards. “Edward will be horrified when I walk in covered in droplets of water. I’ll have to concoct a plausible excuse that I was doing something to further his interests. He nearly wouldn’t allow me to come, you know.”

The duke chuckled. “I shall tell him I elicited your help when my sister’s pug ran out through the door and into the rain.”

“Oh, would you?!” Selina clasped her hands together. “You clearly are a man of action who can think on your feet. Very admirable traits, Your Grace.”

“You think so?” He raised an eyebrow then took her by the elbows to draw her a little closer against the tree trunk where there was greater protection from the rain.

Selina swallowed. He was so close—his coat of burgundy superfine brushing against her exposed flesh—that she could smell the sandalwood soap he used, and a faint overlay of some spice. Nutmeg, she thought. She sniffed appreciatively then looked up to find him frowning at her.

“You smell very nice, Your Grace,” she explained. “At first I thought the rain had released the scent of some glorious flower but then I realised it was you.”

“Me?!?”

“Yes. Distinct overtones of sandalwood and nutmeg.” She closed her eyes and sniffed again, adding, “And leather and brandy. Yes, I smell all those things.”

“Good lord, Lady Boothe. Your senses are finely attuned.”

“So I’ve been told. It helps when painting—” She stopped suddenly and he asked, “You paint too?”

“Just water colors. I’m not terribly good,” she said, surprised that he’d continued to detain her in conversation. How could she really be of interest to a man like him?

Though, of course, he had seemed interested during thirty seconds of darkness the night before when she had allowed him to run his hands over her body.

Not that there would be any acknowledgement of that, though of course the recollection should have made her convulse with shame under his gaze.

Or, she reflected, he should have been shamed and full of apology.

Instead, the look in his eye, and his next words, suggested that the reminiscence of this was front of mind. “When I entered my study last night, it was the faint scent of orange water that alerted me to the fact that my inner sanctum had been breached.” Watching her carefully, he extended his hand and gently ran his forefinger along her flesh, from where her short sleeve ended, to her wrist.

It was impossible not to tremble at his touch.

“You are being modest now, Lady Boothe.” There was an odd look in his eye, Selina noted. As an artist, she was attuned to the mood of a subject. Right now, she was certainly attuned to the interest of a very interesting man. “And,” he went on, “you remind me very much of someone of whom I was once very fond.”

“Chauncy!” Miss White’s voice floated from the open French doors that led into the study and Lord Chancy bowed. “I must not detain you, Lady Boothe, when you are expected for dinner shortly and ladies like plenty of time to make the most of their natural attributes....though you, perhaps, need less time for that than most.”

CHAPTER 11

With his compliment ringing in her ears, Selina returned to her bedchamber, determined to keep from Edward the fact that she still did not have the sketch. Edward would fly into an incoherent fever of despair.

It was a tragedy, for it had been an excellent likeness. Still, she must have been careless. The wind must indeed have carried it away.

But Selina was confident she could do another in a fraction of the time now that she had committed His Grace's features to memory. She just needed access to their handsome host for a few minutes when he was not aware that she was observing him.

Surely she could manage that?

Edward was already in the drawing room when she arrived.

"Did you find it?" he asked in a low, anxious voice.

"Yes, I found it," she lied, smiling at him and at the rest of the party over his shoulder as she left his side to answer a question Miss White directed at her.

She noticed His Grace's eyes on her. They lingered, and she returned his interest for a brief second longer than she should have.

Immediately, she caught herself up. Was she wrong to flirt and give him encouragement?

Encouragement for what?

Just the thought made her quiver. Lord Chauncy was unmarried. So was Selina. Why should she not indulge an opportunity for whatever His Grace was in the mood for? A kiss beneath the plane trees was hardly so reprehensible. Yes, she'd try and repeat the encounter tomorrow and perhaps he'd be out there in the garden, waiting for her.

His interest and the sympathy he had shown during their brief conversation made her feel understood in a way that was rare.

She thought of Samuel.

She'd sacrificed everything to run away with him. Why, she'd thought herself so in love, even though he knew their respective stations in life put him well out of bounds.

Or rather, she, a baronet's daughter, should have been impossibly out of bounds for a man of his rank.

Yet, thanks to Selina—or rather her rashness coupled with Edward's loose tongue—the mere footman had been elevated.

Rather than be grateful, however, Samuel had soon come to behave as the men of the circles to which he'd always wished to belong.

A woman was expected to be quiet and obedient.

Unless she was mad.

Throughout dinner, and the conversation and cards that followed, Selina continued to feel His Grace's attention upon her. Occasionally, she would raise her head and meet his eye.

Boldly.

Edward didn't notice, of course. Edward noticed little about Selina unless she actively embarrassed him.

Or did not do as he stipulated.

And there was Selina's difficulty. She did not have a sketch of the duke to give to her brother.

So, when she rose from the card table at the conclusion of a rubber of whist, saying she wished for an early night, she was not surprised that Edward followed her to the drawing-room door.

"I need that sketch, Selina. His Grace is asking for it." There was the glint of desperation in his eye. "Where is it so I can see you have done something that won't embarrass me?"

Selina bridled. Her work was far superior to Edward's, and he knew it.

"When have I ever produced something inferior?" she asked. "I have a mind not to give it to you at all if you speak to me like that." And with a toss of her head, she turned and swept from the room, uncaring whether their altercation might have been witnessed by others.

Back in her own chamber, she considered her prospects as she looked at the quick sketch she'd just done on the flyleaf of her book of poetry. She had managed what she felt was a fair likeness of the duke, purely from memory. But memory was fallible.

No, she needed to draw the duke when he was directly in front of her.

And all she had was tonight.

She contemplated going outside the hide in the dark and look through the drawing-room window, except that the shrubbery was ill suited, as was the window angle. She'd already dismissed this option the day before.

As she changed into her night rail, her mind swirled with her ever-decreasing options.

She glanced at the clock. Edward would be another couple of hours if she knew him. After a third brandy, it would be well after midnight before he stumbled into their room.

He'd not even miss her if she wasn't in her own bed.

Because...

Selina now knew what she had to do.

If the only way to sketch the duke was when he was unaware, then the only option to do this was when he was in his bedchamber.

Asleep.

And the best way of accessing his bedchamber without him realizing his defenses had been breached was if she was already there.

She rose, drew her shawl about her, and, picking up her candle, went to the door.

But as she half opened it, she saw Mrs. Piggott in the corridor returning to her room.

Selina and Edward had been accommodated in a busy guest wing, replete with

serving staff traipsing up and down the stairs with copper jugs of steaming water. And who knew when Lady Saunders was going to appear?

She thought quickly.

The best place to access His Grace's room from the least likely place to be observed would be through his window, in the dark.

And there was a large climbable tree outside his window. Selina had noted this when returning from the conservatory.

A sound in the corridor by her room halted Selina in her tracks as she made her way to the window.

This was madness. What was she thinking?

And then she thought of having no drawing for Edward to present to His Grace in the morning.

The consequences were unthinkable.

He would be embarrassed. Publicly. Possibly ruined if word got about that he was unable to sketch a fair likeness. Commissions would dry up and then Edward, Anna and Selina would have nothing.

No, there was no alternative. Selina simply had to gain access to the duke's room for literally five minutes so she could capture the quirks of His Grace's face. It would have been better if he was not sleeping, so she could imbue the likeness with character.

But it would be better than nothing, she told herself as she opened the sash window of

her chamber and contemplated how she might find her way safely to the ground.

It was a chilly night, and rain had made the tree trunk slippery. But it hadn't been so long before since Selina had climbed a tree. And it was easier to do it in a nightgown that afforded ease of movement than a morning gown, which was what she'd worn the last time she'd climbed a tree to rescue a kitten.

Soon, she was safely on the dew-laden grass and hurrying across the lawn.

Just the feeling of the fresh, icy air against her skin, and the sense of liberty—even though her heart was racing with fear and her mind was alert to the dangers of her mission—made her feel alive.

She couldn't remember feeling this infused with purpose. It wasn't just that she was doing what she ought not—and Selina had forever been chastised for her unladylike choices—but she was courting danger as their very future hinged upon Selina successfully executing her mission.

For the first time since she'd finished her first drawing for Samuel, to replace his inferior effort, she felt filled with pride and purpose.

She was not just the useless hanger-on her menfolk painted her.

She was important.

However, a short while later, shivering beneath Lord Chauncy's bed, she felt more cold and doubtful than important and purposeful.

For what if her plan went horribly wrong? What if Lord Chauncy slept with his face buried in his pillow?

What if he locked his bedroom door and window?

Was she really mad? Were her unchecked impulses as unladylike and beyond the pale as Anna's?

Selina's initial hopes were that Lord Chauncy would be delayed long enough for her to get her breathing and teeth chattering under control. But as more time went by, she feared she might drift off to sleep—even cold and damp as she was on a hard, albeit rug-strew floor.

Had Lord Chauncy been detained by another game of whist? Had he fallen asleep over his brandy as Edward was wont to do?

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CHAPTER 12

In fact, Selina did drift off to sleep. But voices in the corridor just outside the door woke her.

She tensed, gripping her drawing implements, praying there were no telltale signs of her presence as she heard Lord Chauncy's soft tread upon the floorboards as he prepared for bed.

After a quick knock, his valet entered the room, and Selina heard the desultory male chatter as the man, Stevens, undressed his master, and folded his clothing.

Just the usual exchange between master and servant.

Until Stevens asked, "The drawing will be ready for the courier tomorrow, my lord? Is it a fair likeness?"

"I have not seen it, but I trust it will be. I wanted it tonight."

Selina held her breath. Lord Chauncy must be very anxious to prove to his intended bride he was every bit as handsome as renowned. Perhaps his future wife was a lady of sceptical tendencies?

Stevens was speaking again. "This portraitist? Can he be trusted?"

This made her tense, frowning as she tried to make sense of the words. Trusted?

“He is hardly heroic material, but his speed with a pencil is all that’s required. Tomorrow I shall see what he is capable of, though I am a little concerned that he is perhaps not as quick as I’d been led to believe.”

Selina tensed even more. Surely His Grace would not be looking over Edward’s shoulder? And why was speed important? Good art took time.

Though not when the pencil was in Selina’s hands.

The valet was speaking once more. “You have it on good authority that he can render a perfect likeness in seconds. Remember, he is likely to be daunted when in the presence of such a great man as you, Your Grace. He’ll be striving for perfection over speed.”

Lord Chauncy grunted. “I need both. Well, it was always going to be an imperfect solution, but the idea was as good as I could come up with, given the situation.”

Selina was still puzzling over his words as the valet departed and she heard Lord Chauncy climb into the large four-poster.

She was wide awake now, fully alert to the sounds that would indicate sleep.

No, fully alert to what Lord Chauncy might look like in repose.

For the last two days, she’d studied his every expression. She was familiar with the dilation of his eyes when he was curious or animated, though he kept his other responses contained. She’d learned to decipher the subtle cues of his expressions. A faint lift of the right corner of his mouth denoted amusement, while the slight flattening of his lips revealed his contemplative state.

But what about the rest of him?

What might he feel like if she ran her hands down him, just as he'd done to her the previous night?

She cut the thought off at the root and might have berated herself for her unmaidenly thinking had another noise not intruded.

The soft opening of the door.

Not preceded by any knock.

“Chauncy?”

The breathy voice was difficult to place, but it was not a servant, as no servant would address their master in such a manner, and the tone was well bred.

“Catherine.”

She heard His Grace sit up, and then something like a sigh before he murmured, “Not tonight.”

“If it's my husband, he?—”

“No, Catherine. It's over.” His tone gentled before he added, “Go back to your husband. He loves you, don't you know?”

“But not as I love you . How can you deny all that we have shared?”

“I deny none of it, Catherine. But our time together is at an end.”

“Then why did you invite me here?”

“I invited you to Chauncy Manor because your husband is my friend and we had business. Not because we were once lovers, Catherine. That was a long time ago.”

Lady Saunders . Selina stifled her shock. How could she have missed the clandestine looks that would have indicated such a relationship when she prided herself on being so observant?

She heard a soft sob, then the sound of Lord Chauncy getting out of bed, gently reminding Lady Saunders of her proposed dawn ride with her husband in just a few hours as he escorted his visitor to the door.

When it clicked behind him, his soft footsteps indicated he was returning to the bed.

Selina could see the faint halo of light from his candlestick, which illuminated his ankles beneath his banyan. She studied the elegant feet, the well-muscled calves lightly covered with dark hair, and her heart did strange things as she tried to ward off the accompanying wicked thoughts.

She should have realized that the legs remained too long where they were.

That the fact he didn't climb into bed indicated something had alerted his senses.

“You can come out now, whoever you are,” came his voice, soft but harsh. “I have a pistol pointed at the floor, so do not think you can surprise me. I am prepared.”

Selina gasped, immediately affirming her presence.

What else could she do?

Dry-mouthed, she inched her way from beneath the bed. How could she explain being here? If he squeezed the truth out of her, Edward would be exposed. He would

never forgive Selina for revealing their ruse. He would never?—

“Good God! Lady Boothe?”

Sheepishly, Selina straightened before him.

“You are bold. Were you planning to insinuate yourself into my bed but were frightened away by my former lover?”

There was amusement in his tone as he placed the pistol on the side table together with the candlestick, which bathed the bed in a soft light. He chuckled when he saw her horror.

“For all I knew, you could have been intending to do me harm.” He regarded her in silence for a moment, as if deciding what to do. Then his smile broadened. “I hope no one saw you, for you are courting danger in this household on a night where the corridors are overrun with visitors and servants. I don’t worry for myself, but I do for?—”

“I climbed in through the window,” whispered Selina, her teeth chattering from the chill wind blowing against her damp night rail.

“Not just bold, but determined, I see. You insinuated as much during our conversation earlier.” He took a step towards her and rested his hands on her shoulders. “Why, you’re as cold as ice. Your nightrail is damp. You need to get warm.”

He smiled down at her with a nod to indicate the bed, and a suggestive note crept into his voice as he added, “That is, I presume, why you are here.”

Selina was struck dumb. The thought had never occurred to her... But what other

possible reason could she have for hiding in His Grace's room?

Of course, she couldn't tell him the truth. That was the last thing she could tell him.

Yet she also couldn't possibly accede to his invitation to climb into his bed.

Or agree that she was here to...

Seduce him?

What kind of woman would that make her? Why, he'd think her wanton. Insane?—?

Thoughtfully, she nodded slightly.

He did think her insane.

And now Selina was Anna. At least, in the eyes and mind of the duke who considered that 'Anna's' wild impulses were the reason she was here.

And Anna was, as Selina had already told him—even he didn't already know it—a woman who spoke her mind and took her pleasures as she wished.

“You are wavering, Lady Boothe. Have you changed your mind?”

“No...” Selina drew out the word the moment it appeared he was about to offer her a reprieve. “No, I was prepared to wait for you as long as it took, Your Grace.” She shivered even more as she added, “I just didn't think I would get quite so cold waiting.”

“Then, as a gentleman, let me warm you while you gather yourself.” He chuckled suggestively. “And can tell me what wild impulses you were acting on that brought

you here, madam.”

“You’re very welcome to call me?—”

“Anna?”

Lord, she’d almost said Selina. But Anna would do. Lady Boothe was cold and wrong.

“First, let us remove your night rail. I’d not have you die of a chill if I can prevent it. Allow me.”

Selina swallowed. Gazing up at him, she saw the duke’s mouth quirk at her apparent show of modesty.

But he said nothing as she obediently raised her arms, and he drew the linen garment up and over her head.

Revealing Selina from head to foot with not a stitch of clothing.

He took a step back to admire her.

At least, the look in his eye suggested that was what he was doing.

Then he reached forward and gently stroked her nipple.

Selina gasped as a rush of desire overwhelmed her, as thoroughly as a bucket of warm water might have in her current cold but needy state.

For she was being reminded of what she had missed for so many years.

Of what she had missed forever.

Before her thoughts could crystalize, the duke's mouth was on hers as he pulled her closer. His hands roamed over her sensitive skin, their warmth sparking tendrils of desire when they cupped her breasts, kneading them gently before contouring her curves; then, when reaching the heated moisture at the juncture of her thigh, finding the true extent of her longing.

It was all the encouragement he needed, it seemed, for with a soft chuckle he whisked Selina up into his arms and dropped her onto his bed.

As she heard the soft sound of his banyan slithering to the floor, Selina was enfolded by the large, soft, comfortable feather mattress, already warmed by the duke's body from earlier.

And now that lean, muscled body was fitting very nicely into her curves as he tucked her against him with what sounded like a sigh of satisfaction.

“And now, dear Anna, reassure me that your bravado has not been misplaced and you're not already regretting your wild impulses?” He drew back to look at her while his hands gently caressed her skin.

Selina smiled. She'd already thrown caution to the wind. She'd already lied and taken on the persona of her sister-in-law to?—?

She stopped as guilt tugged at her before the justification came to her rescue.

Selina was doing this so that Edward could help keep a roof over not just his and Selina's head, but so that Anna could be housed in comfort rather than being sent away to the lunatic asylum, as Edward had threatened on more than one occasion.

“Why, you, of course, Your Grace.” She sent an appreciative look at his chest.

“I am not in the habit of taking other men’s wives into my bed, madam, and your husband may not take too kindly to being cuckolded.”

“Pah!” Selina made the derisive noise as her expression kindled. “A husband who has shown no husbandly attention in years has no right to take exception to his wife seeking husbandly attention where she can.”

My, that was bold, but suddenly Selina was fired up by the excitement of being someone other than herself.

Poor Anna was hardly going to be affected, and Selina could enjoy one small exploratory foray for both of them.

“You do realize the world believes I am mad, Your Grace? Are you not afraid you will be tainted by me?”

He considered this as he leaned on one elbow, his face above hers, before he gently touched her nose with his forefinger. “My definition of mad is perhaps a little more lenient than most. I once had a cousin called Gwyneth. You remind me of her. She chafed at being constrained and was called mad. Or have you tried to burn the house down?”

“No.” Selina considered whether either she or Anna had committed violence. “Beyond cutting up a letter in anger that my husband received cautioning him to restrain me from offering my unwanted opinion on certain matters, I have wielded no sharp instruments nor lit any fires. I have a temper, on occasion, and an opinion. These, apparently, can constitute madness.”

“But right now, as you lie in my bed, I can see no signs of madness.” Leaning over

her with a smile, he kissed her brow. “What is it you want from me, Anna?” His mouth curved. “I am your host. Your husband’s host. We could lie here, skin against skin, and you could drive me wild, but we could do no more than talk. I am an honorable man. Your husband is my guest. In fact, I depend upon your husband for something I want very much. Something I need very much. I would not alienate him.”

“You ask what I want from you? What brought me here?” Selina snuggled against him. She should have recoiled and accepted the reprieve he offered. But when her fingers were drawn, as if by an invisible chord, to explore the warmth and hardness of him, the discovery that he was tense and clearly ready for action was thrilling. She trailed her hand down his flank to cup his manhood and when it sprang to attention, she whispered, “I want excitement, though perhaps I should not be here in deference to your future wife.”

“Ah, yes, my future wife.” His voice was hoarse.

Selina raised her head a little. She saw his eyes shift evasively and wondered at the conversation she’d overheard as she prompted, “That is the reason you wish this likeness, is it not?”

But his thoughts appeared to be elsewhere as he murmured, “It is not a love match. Not a match based on desire.” He shivered and his breath caught as he caressed her breast, murmuring, “Not, I think, like this, which is very much rooted in desire.”

CHAPTER 13

Chauncy didn't question Lady Boothe's arrival in his bed. What had she invited him to call her?

Anna. That's right.

It wasn't unusual for beautiful women to throw themselves at him.

And this one was particularly intriguing.

Her honesty was refreshing. And she was undeniably lovely. The line of her nose was charming, as was the curl of her chestnut hair and the sweep of her neck to that luscious bosom he was now enjoying. Pert but still soft and full, it was just the kind of bosom—like the rest of her—that drove him wild.

She'd obviously been obedient enough—for long enough—to have been granted a reprieve.

And she'd taken a great risk to be here. He would never forget that his beloved cousin Gwyneth, with whom he'd grown up and whose capacity for devilish plans had awed him as a child, had met her premature death by climbing out of a window.

But Gwyneth had been trying to escape the man her father had insisted she wed.

Anna had been escaping her husband to come to the man who fired her senses.

Yes, Anna had been hiding beneath his bed, waiting to seduce him.

But should Chauncy take advantage of her desire? Of her impulsiveness in throwing herself at him?

Edward Boothe was not the kind to run him through with a rapier, but he was painting his likeness. Chauncy relied upon him more than he would ever know. It would be disastrous—and idiocy—for Chauncy to lose the man’s expertise merely because Chauncy had been unable to resist the tasty morsel in his arms right now.

Boothe’s wife.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t send you right back to your own bedchamber? The bedchamber you share with your husband?” He stiffened with resolve and shifted as he tried to temper his lascivious desires with a more temperate approach. “I think I should.”

She shrugged as she ran her hands up and down his flanks, skimming his buttocks with her soft, elegant hands.

He swallowed again.

Cupping his manhood, making him groan once more, she whispered, “My husband hasn’t shared my bed in years. Right now, he is sleeping in the dressing room. Edward has no interest in the wife he took six years ago. And I am lonely. That is why I am here.” She arched against him, exhaling on a soft, ecstatic sigh as his fingers tickled the top of her thighs before plunging, gently, deeply inside her.

For as her hands had gently squeezed his shaft once more, any good intentions he’d had finally dissolved.

“Oh, yes!” she whispered, opening up to him. “That is exactly why I am here. Because it has been years since my husband made any attempt to make me feel a woman.” She shivered as his fingers began to stroke the nub of her desire, then whispered, “I do like that. Please don’t stop.”

Chauncy didn’t need to be invited twice.

“If you promise not to stop what you are doing,” he managed. “Then I think, madam, we have a bargain.”

He moved to cage her body, staring down at her lovely face, all light and shadows in the flickering candlelight. She looked like an elfin creature with her hair framing her pale skin, her eyes luminous as they gazed up at him. The desire in their depths hit a chord, and he responded with a surge of longing.

He wanted a woman whose actions came unfiltered from the heart. This woman’s reputation was tainted because she didn’t conform to society’s requirement that she conduct herself with ladylike restraint.

But if that lack of restraint was the reason she was in Chauncy’s bed, then that was exactly why he wanted her.

And it was why he wanted to extend her pleasure rather than taking his own pleasure right now.

Shifting down the bed, he took her right nipple in his mouth, grinning up at her as she squeaked with surprise, though she clearly enjoyed the sensation.

“Your Grace?—!”

“I can stop any time you wish.”

“Oh, please don’t.”

Chauncy chuckled, as he trailed kisses down her smooth, soft belly, delighted by the response, as if he were the first to introduce her to such sensations.

He was glad that the breeze from the window had failed to extinguish the flickering candlelight.

He wanted to see every part of this lovely woman.

Of course, it was one thing to enjoy a night of stolen passion. That had been deeply satisfying, and Selina regretted nothing.

She had been careful, mitigating the risks of a child just as she had done during her years as Samuel’s wife. Having realised she’d made an error of judgement in her choice of husband, and not wanting his children when he’d slid so quickly into vice and profligacy, Selina had consulted a wise woman on the subject.

She knew what herbs and other precautions to take.

And now, not only was Selina’s body thrumming from satisfaction thanks to Lord Chauncy’s expert lovemaking, that gorgeous gentleman had slipped into a deep sleep, affording her the opportunity to do exactly what she’d come here to do.

Draw his handsome visage.

Beneath the bed was paper and a pencil, while through the curtains streamed just enough moonlight which, in addition to the flickering candlelight, allowed Selina to do her work.

It took only a few moments. During their energetic lovemaking, Selina had traced the

contours of his face, giving her an advantage she'd not realized would be so beneficial when it came to communicating his features to the page.

As Selina looked from her handiwork to the handsome, sleeping duke, her nipples and her fingers tingling, she'd never felt more satisfied.

CHAPTER 14

Edward was snoring loudly when Selina crept into her own bed that night, and he was still asleep when dawn broke.

At first Selina had restlessly tossed and turned, her heart almost bursting with excitement as she relived her sensuous adventure with surely the most handsome man in all England. Certainly, he was the most handsome duke in all England.

But as dawn broke, other thoughts pushed away her shivers of delicious euphoria.

What was the truth behind the disappearance of her drawing?

Did she have an enemy? Had someone been watching her?

For there was no doubt that someone had taken the duke's likeness from beneath the rock where she had left it outside the conservatory. She was certain of it. It hadn't been the work of the wind. Someone had been watching her and had known of its importance.

And, Selina suspected, that someone was Lady Saunders or her sister, Mrs. Pigott, though what motivation they had, she could only surmise.

Had Lady Saunders registered the interested looks exchanged between Selina and His Grace.

Or, perhaps there was another marital contender in the wings they wished to push, so

were bent on thwarting the duke's marriage to his intended.

Or perhaps they had simply been waiting for an opportunity to thwart Edward in an act of petty malice for Selina's unkind drawing of Mrs. Piggott.

More likely, though, it had simply been blown away by the wind, and discovered.

Another fear intruded. Did whoever took it know that it was Selina's work, and not that of her supposed husband?

As sleep continued to elude her, and remembering mention of Lord and Lady Saunders's dawn ride, Selina decided that perhaps she should use their absence to search their bedchamber.

That is, if they had indeed gone riding which, fortuitously, she confirmed with a glance through the bedroom window.

After dressing quickly, she hurried from her chamber and down the corridor toward theirs which, she was relieved to discover, was unlocked.

Entering quietly, holding her candlestick aloft, she took stock of her surroundings.

It didn't take long to prove her suspicions correct. Whatever Lady Saunders' reason for snatching the drawing, she had tucked it away in the writing desk by the window.

Selina snatched it up in triumph. Of course, she now had two drawings, but at least she could brandish this original one in front of Edward and tell him that he had falsely accused his sister of carelessness.

However, as she was about to leave with the drawing, she hesitated. Was it wise to make it clear she'd been in Lady Saunders' chamber when Selina didn't know the

reason for the theft of the painting?

Selina had formed an instant dislike for the woman and her sister. Even more so, having discovered that Lady Saunders had been the duke's previous lover.

By the light from the window, she studied her work as she contemplated her options.

On the writing desk were more paper and a pencil. Selina could do another drawing that was identical, which would mean she could leave the stolen drawing in Lady Saunders' possession. Selina would then have not two, but three drawings: one she could leave here in Lady Saunders' writing desk, one she could give to Edward, and one she could keep for herself.

Yes, it would remind her of this night she'd treasure her entire life. Closing her eyes, she touched her heart. It was beneath her breast and perhaps it had been her breast, really, that had interested Lord Chauncy. But for Selina, it was her heart that had been touched. The sensations Lord Chauncy had evoked had, at first, been familiar: the lust-charged desire, the physical yearning followed by spectacular satisfaction, then satiation.

His Grace had shown kindness and consideration, both earlier and during their lovemaking.

He'd also spoken of his fondness for a cousin whose wildness had caused her downfall. He'd actually sympathized with this female cousin and, furthermore, now housed her unmarried sister who acted as his hostess and whom he treated with respect.

Not like Selina had been treated by the men in her life.

And their encounter hadn't only been based on lust and circumstance, even though

Selina had at the time thrown herself into it from a purely physical sense as an excuse to justify why she was in Lord Chauncy's room.

A slight wind stirred the papers on the desk and brought Selina back to the present.

Her ruminations should be on whether to leave the drawing in Lady Saunders' possession, not whether the duke had felt anything deeper for Selina than raw, transient desire—which he surely would not have, she told herself.

With a sigh, Selina replaced the drawing that had been stolen. Far better to let Lady Saunders assume she'd got away with her theft.

But, after drawing one identical for herself, Selina would mark the original drawing in some way to make it clear that Lady Saunders had falsely acquired the likeness. Yes, that would give Selina some satisfaction.

Quickly, she worked at her art, the pencil racing over the page as she again considered how much easier it was to do the likeness having felt the man's lovely contours in the flesh.

Her original drawing had been excellent, as had the one she'd whipped up by his bedside in her shaking, frenzied haste, but her new drawing brought to life something that had been missing. Some elusive quality in Lord Chauncy's gaze. In her new drawing, Selina had caught a certain thoughtfulness, a depth of intelligence that her original drawing lacked. The second, she now decided, was far too influenced by the physical delights that had just taken place.

She held the two up to the light, side by side. Yes, the first was good, but this latest one was excellent.

Footsteps sounded in the passage, and she tilted her head, alert. It was too early for

Lady Saunders and her husband to return in view of how recently they'd gone riding.

No doubt the voices were those of other guests or servants who would pass by in the corridor.

Her most important task, now, was to find a means of marking the drawing to distinguish it from the one she'd give to Lord Chauncy.

Or rather, that Edward would give to Lord Chauncy.

She frowned. Her drawing featured only his Grace's face and clothing. There was very little room to add further details.

Selina bent her head closer to the work. Of course, she could manage it. She was the best artist in the country. In all the galleries she'd visited, she'd never seen work that surpassed her attention to detail.

Until now, this reflection had compensated for the fact that she was relegated to the country, denied the freedom to do as she would like.

But now she'd tasted freedom.

And enjoyed pleasure like she never had before.

Selina squinted. There was the high collar. Amongst the shading and shadows beneath his Grace's neck, perhaps she could mark out in tiny lettering the words: Stolen by Lady Saunders.

Selina's eyesight was exceptional. She knew it was better than most people's and so was her ability to render the most minute details. In this case, without detection.

Smiling, as she bent to her work, she carefully drew in the words.

But perhaps the shadowing needed to be reflected on the other side of the collar. Perhaps it was an opportunity for Selina to claim her work. Not that anyone would know.

So, very carefully, she pencilled in: “ Original artist: Selina Boothe. ” She’d not take her husband’s name. And if any words could be deciphered, Boothe was, after all, the artist.

Not that it was likely anyone would seize up eyeglasses or magnifying glass to study the shadowed collar of the drawing, which was, as anyone could see, an excellent rendition of the man himself.

And it was stolen, besides. It would remain in Lady Saunders’ keeping, no doubt, for her to brandish to the marital hopeful she had lined up. For what other reason could she have for wanting to steal the portrait of the duke, supposedly done by Edward?

And which Edward would claim, no doubt, with little thanks, she thought resentfully.

But her satisfaction at claiming her own work—albeit in a way that was almost undecipherable—was quickly replaced by horror as she heard more voices approach, and then the sound of the doorknob being turned.

How had she been so careless? she berated herself as she dived for the only place she could hide, having hidden in a similar place not long before.

But before secreting herself beneath the four poster, its valance reaching the floor, she’d had the presence of mind to replace the drawing exactly where she’d found it, and to snatch up her new drawing.

Lady Saunders would not notice. And there'd be some satisfaction in hearing Lady Saunders crow over her supposed cleverness in acquiring a drawing she had no right to have. Selina might even hear what her intention had been in taking it.

“Help me with the back of my habit, Saunders. I told Jenny I didn't need assistance.”

As Selina listened to the clipped orders of Lady Saunders, she decided she liked the woman even less. Her poor, cuckolded husband. Selina felt outrage on the gentleman's behalf.

Then immediately she felt awash with guilt. Not three hours earlier, she'd insinuated herself beneath the bedcovers of a man who was soon to be married.

But Lord Saunders was Chauncy's friend. Chauncy had double reason to be ashamed of himself.

And yet, Selina couldn't help herself by offering complete exoneration as fingers of memory stroked her. Just as Chauncy's fingers had stroked her hours before.

She supposed men of high standing were used to taking whatever they liked and told herself it was a good thing she'd soon leave this house, and Lord Chauncy with his disreputable friends and tendencies. These were people whose morals took account of little more than satisfying themselves, whereas Selina could justify her actions in going to bed with the duke.

Her body flamed at the memory and her mind was drifting in this direction when something in Lord Saunders' tone made Selina pay attention.

“Did you ascertain from your erstwhile lover his intentions regarding the Rushworth visit?”

What? Lord Saunders knew that his wife had been having an affair with his friend?

“You know I was reluctant to go, Saunders. I told you matters had cooled between us.” Lady Saunders sighed. “No, he’s said nothing about attending Lady Rushworth’s August ball.”

Lady Rushworth’s ball? Selina tensed. She remembered Lord Chauncy had begun writing something about it. She recalled the unfinished sentence in the letter beneath which she’d stolen the paper.

“He has been maddeningly noncommittal.” Lord Saunders sounded peevish. “He promised me?—”

“Do stop, Saunders. I told you it was pushing it too far if I tried to petition him in his bed last night.”

Lord Saunders sighed again. “You should have pushed it when Chauncy was still mad for you and feeling guilty for cuckolding me.”

“Oh, do stop. He feels no guilt. He knows your proclivities, Saunders, and that his philandering is nothing compared with yours. But he is still good for a loan and I will approach him...” She hesitated, then added, “When the time is right.”

Selina could see Lord Saunders’ ankles as he walked to the desk. After a moment, he said in a tone of surprise, “Why have you got this? I say, Boothe has done a more than tolerable job. I could pick out the man in a crowd if I just had this.”

Craning her neck, Selina could see Lord Saunders holding the drawing up to the light while his wife said, “I found it in the shrubbery. It must have blown from his easel in the sharp wind yesterday. Lord knows how, but I saw that madwoman of a wife of his rushing about searching for it.”

“You must return it?—”

“Must I, Saunders?” Lady Saunders’ voice was smooth. “Boothe can make another. He’ll feel too foolish to do anything else.”

Lord Saunders chuckled. “So, you’re not going to forgive his wife for the drawing she did of your sister. I wish I could have seen it.”

“Best that it be destroyed, Saunders.”

Selina held her breath in the long silence before her husband answered thoughtfully, “Just as you will destroy anyone who thwarts you, Catherine, dearest.”

Selina’s mouth was dry and her breathing sharp by the time the pair left their bedchamber.

She felt indignant, concerned, and outraged.

Cautiously, she dragged herself out from under the bed and went to the desk.

What good fortune that Selina hadn’t, out of pique, taken the original.

Selina returned to her bedchamber to find Edward in a rage.

“Good God, I’ve been at my wits’ end, not knowing what had become of you and what we are to do!” he cried. “Where have you been...looking like that? You truly do look like a madwoman with your hair not even brushed.”

Selina put her hand to her hair, which had perhaps suffered in her tumbling with Lord Chauncy, followed by her lengthy waiting beneath Lord and Lady Saunders’ bed. It might be disordered, but not more than her thoughts.

She'd planned to tell Edward everything she'd overheard but when she saw that he was concerned only with his reputation, she realised her most important task was furnishing her brother with the object that had brought them here: the drawing of his patron.

"It's a fair enough likeness," Edward now said as he examined it. "He'll be satisfied with it, don't you think?"

Selina shrugged. She'd hoped for a little praise, at least. Or some acknowledgement that she'd been clever to have done such an excellent likeness.

Edward seemed to realize the reason for her lackluster spirits, for he said in a jolly tone, "Well done, old girl, your work is up to the mark, as usual. We shall be well rewarded, and I shall buy you a new dress from the proceeds."

Selina blinked and was about to offer the fiery retort she realized would be ill-advised at this juncture.

"That would be very generous, Edward," she murmured, then turning towards the window, said on a sigh while thinking longingly of Lady Rushworth's ball, "Though where would I wear it?"

With painful resignation, she realised she might never see Lord Chauncy again.

But at least she'd have something to remember him by: the drawing she'd whipped up on the flyleaf of her poetry book.

And the kindling look in his eye when he'd dismissed his future marriage before assuring Selina how much their unexpected coupling had been rooted in desire.

CHAPTER 15

LADY RUSHWORTH'S BALL

Two weeks later

Two weeks was too long, Chauncy decided as he turned to see Lady Anna Boothe smiling at him from across the room.

Of course, the only reason the Boothers had been invited was because of Sir Edward's skill with a pencil or charcoal. At least, that's what he told himself.

But how delightful that his wife provided such additional pleasure to their visit.

A cluster of newly arrived guests, and powdered footmen bringing in their trunks, criss-crossed the lobby, their chatter mingling with the string quartet tuning up in the distant ballroom, ready for this evening's event.

As he watched Anna and her husband divest themselves of their cloaks, Chauncy congratulated himself on his timing. Five minutes before, he'd been in the tower room with Sir Simeon, orchestrating a plan of action for the several scenarios they believed might play out tonight.

Anna Boothe provided the welcome distraction he needed. Not that he hadn't been distracted by thoughts of her for the past two weeks, when he really had more important matters with which to concern himself.

The intelligence he'd received from London weighed heavily on Chauncy.

Could the Prince Regent really be at risk from the three unlikely suspects named?

Chauncy couldn't see how any of these men, known vaguely to him, might pose a threat, but he was duty bound to follow instructions: Keep the three men under surveillance the entire evening, and have Boothe draw their likenesses.

It was now a pleasure to put aside weighty concerns and say, with complete sincerity, "Lady Boothe, you are a vision in Pomona green," just as her husband left her side.

Anna's smile was like a breath of sunshine as she replied, "It's not often I go about in society. Edward was most gratified to receive an invitation to Lady Rushworth's ball. It was...unexpected."

"I made sure of it." Chauncy felt himself grinning like a schoolboy. Let her think that he was entirely motivated by wishing for a repeat of the pleasures he'd experienced when she'd come to his bed two weeks ago. Since then, he'd been unable to get her out of his mind.

He brought her hand to his lips, surprising both himself, and clearly Anna, as he said, "Lady Rushworth wishes to sit for her likeness in her ballgown just before the ball, for of course your husband's speed in executing his skill is prodigious. I was mightily impressed with the likeness he produced of me... Anna." He lowered his voice so the familiarity would not be remarked upon. Anna . He would soon be calling her that, beneath the sheets, and he couldn't wait.

"Indeed?" Anna's raised eyebrow indicated that she understood the subtext. For when Edward was occupied with drawing Lady Rushworth, Anna would be free to indulge in an afternoon of sensual delights with Chauncy.

Desire radiated through him. It dispelled the nervousness with which he had approached tonight.

It could all go so horribly wrong.

Or it could pass off without incident.

In the meantime, a delightful hour of sensual delights would be just the tonic Chauncy needed to shore up his reserves before it was time to square his shoulders and face the night ahead.

Being responsible for the security of the Prince Regent was weighty indeed.

CHAPTER 16

“Selina, where are you going?”

Selina paused as she was about to leave the bedchamber sent her brother an enquiring look. “For a walk.”

“Lady Rushworth has her sitting in five minutes.”

“And you can do an admirable job on the preliminaries. You don’t need me for that.”

“I do.”

Selina tensed at the belligerence in his tone. Carefully, she said, “It will look odd if I am there when you begin. Far better that I pretend to pass by to see you at work. That way, while you and she are engaged in conversation during which she is more relaxed, I can rustle up a likeness. You know I work better when the subject is animated.”

Fortunately, her suggestion found fertile ground, and Selina managed to get away with a heavily beating heart and increasing excitement.

For soon she would be in bed with the duke. Yes, he was a handsome, commanding man who excited her senses but, she was increasingly discovering, there seemed so much more to him.

The sun was creeping through the window and dappling the rich Aubusson carpet

when Selina slipped into Lord Chauncy's lavish bedchamber.

Selina and Edward, by contrast, had been allotted a tiny room at the end of a dim corridor, which Selina suspected had belonged to the governess. The lowly Bothes had, after all, been invited only because of Lady Rushworth's sudden fancy to have her likeness drawn.

Not that Selina cared where they were accommodated. Edward had said he would carouse for most of the night as it was only chivalrous to allow his sister the bed. However, Selina knew she was just as likely to find him passed out and snoring on the uninviting iron bed, meaning she'd be allotted the chair. Well, what did that matter? She had a far more comfortable bed in which to spend the night.

And this afternoon was just the preliminary.

Selina had barely time to observe her surroundings before she was seized by the hand and jerked into Lord Chauncy's tight embrace.

"Do you know how much I've been looking forward to this?" he murmured against her lips before he rained kisses along her jawline.

"Careful of my hair," she whispered. She was unwilling to drag her mouth from his but needed to remind him that she had little time between their tryst to get herself ready for the grand ball.

And to do her sketch of Lady Rushworth. Not that he would ever know that.

"My tender—and respectful—ministrations shall imbue you with such a golden glow, my love, that no one will notice a hair out of place."

They both chuckled at his salacious tone as he worked quickly to undo the buttons at

the back of her pink net gown which he quickly and expertly whipped off her while she obediently raised her arms.

Selina already had her stays unlaced by the time he'd removed his breeches, bending to seize the hem of her chemise and raise that up and over her head.

"Oh my," he murmured, as his eyes raked her naked form from head to toe. "I carried about a vision of your loveliness during the past fortnight, but I have not done justice to the reality. No, don't move."

Selina hesitated. No man had ever looked at her with such raw desire. Her nipples tingled, and she closed her eyes in ecstasy as he kissed her, reverently at first, before his ardor brought them tumbling onto the bed in a tangle of limbs and hot desire.

"By God, you are a tasty morsel, my darling Anna." His mouth was against her ear as he held her tightly, his manhood pressed against her side.

The clock on the landing chimed the hour, and Selina tensed as she whispered, "And yours for but twenty minutes, Your Grace, before other considerations intrude."

She'd thought her words would spur him into a bout of much anticipated, heady lovemaking, but instead he stilled, regarding her thoughtfully as he bent his elbow and rested his head on one hand.

"Perhaps for now, Anna. But what about later?"

"Later?" The air seemed to disappear from her lungs. He wanted more of her? Not just the opportune pleasures he could snatch now?

Lord Chauncy nodded, a twist to his lips that did not make him look sardonic or assessing. No, he looked kind. And fond. And full of genuine wanting.

Selina's heart beat faster. Her mouth felt dry.

"I take it there is little affection between you and your husband, else you'd not be here now."

Selina nodded. "That is painfully true, Your Grace," she said, thinking not only of her own lonely life, but of the contempt with which Edward treated all the women of whom he was custodian.

"But your husband is in demand for his truly remarkable skill." The duke bit his lip, thinking. "I could secure him commissions to homes I frequent. You and I could see one another—" he drew out the words with relish—"quite frequently...if you should desire it, Anna."

"Oh, yes!" She wished she hadn't said it with so much yearning, but then was glad, for it seemed to resonate with this handsome, desirable, virile man.

He grinned suddenly as he snatched her up into his arms, before caging her body as he angled himself over her. "That is the best response I could have asked for, my dearest Anna," he whispered.

Selina arched up beneath him, inviting him with a thrust of her hips that he was at liberty to take what she offered him.

But he was clearly intent on ensuring she was well lubricated and close to climax before he entered her, his mouth on hers, as he murmured, "Lord, you feel divine! Next time, I'll give you the most earth-shattering climax you've ever experienced, but for now?—"

"I am well satisfied, Your Grace," Selina whispered, her words truncated with a gasp as his thrusts intensified and she felt her own body flowering with answering

sensation, while her heart sang at his reference to ‘next time’.

When their bout of heady lovemaking had come to an end, he held her against him as they lay side by side, Selina’s cheek resting against the soft, downy hair of his chest.

For a long time they snuggled, before Selina raised her head to ask, “Did your intended like the likeness?”

“The likeness?” He frowned. “Ah, yes, the drawing. Indeed, your husband did me such justice that my potential intended was suitably impressed.”

“So, the wedding will go ahead?”

He raised an eyebrow. “It changes nothing between us, Anna. I haven’t seen the lady in question for twenty years. This marriage is for expediency only. Not to enjoy such delights as this.”

“Remind me why you are marrying, your Grace?”

He stilled before he replied. “For the very same reason you married, I would imagine. Security. Practicality.” He shrugged. “Not for love.”

“Have you ever felt love, your Grace?” Lord, what had possessed Selina to ask the first question that came to mind? Obviously because he made her feel secure and desired—the very pre-conditions that made her forget to filter herself.

In the afternoon light, his face was half in shadow, but she saw his energy turn in on itself. Then he smiled as he took her right nipple into his mouth and gently sucked, murmuring, “I daresay this is as close as it comes.”

“This is lust, your Grace,” whispered Selina, nevertheless enjoying the sensation, and

surprised when he stopped and sat up, looking at her with a frown.

He scratched his stubbled jaw. "I'm not sure what it is. Lust is what I thought it, I'll admit. But then, I have found myself thinking about more than just your body." He smiled. "In fact, during these past two weeks, I thought of you rather a lot."

Selina was ridiculously gratified, though she told herself she shouldn't care. She'd seduced him accidentally so that Edward's reputation would not be imperiled by the missing painting.

If anything, she should feel even less than those feelings to which he admitted.

But right now, her heart felt very full.

She knew time was running out and she should go, but a niggling thought entered her consciousness and made her hesitate. "Your Grace, I should tell you I overheard something you should know about." She'd been putting it off, afraid of being quizzed, but concern had needled her since she'd farewelled the duke without having found an opportunity to relay Lord and Lady Saunders' conversation.

"And what is that, dear heart?"

It was as much the look in his eye as the endearment that made her insides feel warm and moist with pleasure.

"I don't know quite how to explain it, except that I heard Lady Saunders speak of you to her husband about tonight in a manner that sounded...concerning."

Chauncy stiffened amid stroking her. "Lady Saunders? She and her husband are good friends of mine."

“I know, which is why it’s hard for me to explain. But I just thought I should say something.”

“And where, exactly, were you when you overheard whatever it is that is so difficult for you to explain?”

Selina sensed the change in his mood and wished she’d not spoken.

“Where are you going?” His arm shot out to stop her as she flung her legs over the side of the bed.

He pulled her back to him, and Selina turned in his embrace. “Your Grace, you have a ball to attend. I would not be the reason you are late. And what I heard was nothing. Small talk, that’s all. Now, I really should go.”

Edward would be furious with her for not coming by, as promised, to help him with the preliminary sketch of Lady Rushworth, but Selina could do a far better one, on her own, from the shadows during an opportune couple of minutes.

“Not so quickly, Anna.” He ran his hand the length of her thigh before cupping her breast and Selina nearly acceded, her want for him was so great.

But there would be future opportunities. He’d said so.

She closed her eyes, smiling, her heart soaring with... she was going to put it down to lust, but it was more than that.

“We will be together again before we go our separate ways, Your Grace,” she whispered, feeling ridiculously pleased that this was true.

And ridiculously gratified by his smile as he said, softly, “You don’t know how

happy that makes me, Anna... dearest."

CHAPTER 17

Chauncy would have preferred to have spent the evening in bed with the delicious Anna. But duty called and he made his way towards the castle parapet where he'd arranged to meet Sir Simeon who was overseeing the security arrangements for the Prince Regent who would be arriving shortly.

"Lord Chauncy! You are here!"

"Sir Simeon." Chauncy turned at the harsh greeting, nodding, before he sent a quick glance down the corridor.

Sir Simeon advanced. A short-necked, stocky man, he resembled a bulldog. "Your Grace, the Prince Regent will enter from the eastern door within the hour, I am told. Meanwhile, the three suspects are currently in the ballroom."

Chauncy considered the battle-scarred man before him. Sir Simeon had seen action at Waterloo and was an able strategist. But the man was inclined to see trouble when there was none. There had been several other occasions when Sir Simeon had pointed the finger at a so-called would-be assassin only for Chauncy to learn that he was some innocent who bore only the slightest resemblance to their quarry.

That was why Sir Edward's skills tonight would be so necessary.

An attempt had, indeed, been made on the Prince Regent's life earlier in the year and three men identified.

These three men were on Lady Rushworth's guest list.

It would be a huge benefit to the safety of the prince if Sir Edward could whip up their likeness to be distributed to the other security personnel stationed around the castle.

Nevertheless, Chauncy was sceptical of the men identified and now said, "I highly doubt our three suspects are capable of an assassination attempt. Do you not think assassination extreme measures for a rear admiral, a country baron and a viscount who prefers his dogs to anyone else." Chauncy raised an eyebrow. "They've been mis-identified, don't you think? Still, if the real perpetrators look anything like these men, I daresay it will be helpful."

Sir Simeon's brow darkened. "It is always those we suspect the least who are capable of the vilest actions." He stroked his chin. No, we must not let down our guard. Take, for example, the mad creature that has been allowed here because her husband is painting Lady Rushworth."

Chauncy stiffened. "The mad creature? I'm not sure I understand you."

"Indeed, looking at her this evening, it is true that she seems quite unlike the stories that filtered through to us of the Lady Boothe who is kept under lock and key in a draughty house in Norfolk," Sir Simeon conceded.

Chauncy splayed his hands. "Is it not possible that she has been maligned merely for a forcefulness of spirit that prompts her to speak her mind?" Chauncy knew he defended her too hotly. But as he said the words, he also knew that Anna displayed no signs of madness. She was too like Gwyneth: misunderstood, and consequently mistreated and misdiagnosed by the men in her life. He suspected cruel treatment at the hands of Anna's husband, a far more likely explanation behind any rumors of her so-called madness.

Sir Simeon sent him a considered look. “But did our esteemed painter really marry the Lady Boothe we see here this evening? It seems Admiral Pocock and his wife made the acquaintance of Lady Boothe some years ago.”

“Did they, indeed?”

“Yes, and the Lady Boothe of their acquaintance was taller and slighter of build, with blonde, curling hair, and a mole on her right cheek.”

Chauncy hesitated. “I think they are mistaken.” What was Sir Simeon suggesting? That Anna was a spy? An assassin?

Sir Simeon shook his head. “I made enquiries and am satisfied by their insistence that the woman who calls herself Lady Boothe is not the painter’s wife.”

Chauncy stilled while his companion gave a derisive laugh. “Perhaps that obsequious little artist has bought himself a female companion to accompany him here, and is merely parading her as his wife.” He touched his nose and winked. “For she certainly isn’t that.”

Selina hesitated on the threshold to the ballroom, her hand upon Edward’s forearm.

The room was ablaze with light, from the glittering chandeliers overhead to the shimmering gowns of the ladies.

The sounds of the orchestra tuning their instruments mingled with the subdued chatter of the guests as they exchanged greetings and compliments.

Selina had never felt so excited—and daunted—in her life.

Sheathed in her favorite shade of Pomona Green, heron feathers mitigating the slight

disarray of her hair, she reminded herself that she was every bit as worthy and beautiful.

It's what Chauncy had called her, his eyes glowing with warmth as they'd lingered upon her when he'd passed her in the ballroom.

Now, as she and Edward paid their addresses to the host and hostess, Selina could see how much competition she really had, for the seemingly hundreds of women seemed so much better dressed and far more beautiful than Selina.

But she'd been gratified by Chauncy's words which had made her self-conscious in a way she couldn't remember since first noticing Samuel's sly admiration when she'd been an impressionable sixteen-year-old.

The moment they'd done their duty, Edward took her to task. "Where were you, Selina, when you were supposed to meet me to do your sketch of Lady Rushworth? Your organizational skills are deplorable. Why is it always me who has to?—"

The look Selina turned upon him had him closing his mouth. Lord Chauncy's admiration had made her confidence rebound.

But that aside, she was more than happy to be able to reinforce to her unappreciative brother just how much he depended upon her skills.

"I observed Lady Rushworth for just as long as it took me to rustle up this, Edward, dearest." In the shadows, she discreetly removed a rolled-up paper from her décolletage and handed it to him. "Yes, it is rushed, but it is a remarkable likeness, don't you think?" She was smiling now, for his shock was balm to her former irritation. "You just show this to Lord Chauncy before you give it to Lady Rushworth if just to reassure him that his confidence in inviting you here on behalf of our host was not misplaced. Now, shall we proceed?"

Just in the short walk across the room, Edward would be in no doubt as the the interest she garnered.

It was Selina who had the talent, together with a beauty and confidence that was certainly appreciated by the gentlemen here this evening. She could feel it and the knowledge strengthened her.

When Edward said nothing having glanced at her drawing, she asked, piqued, “Is it not good? If you cannot at least commend me, then perhaps I shall claim ownership.”

She made a move to take back the drawing, but he blocked her, saying, “Of course it’s good but you also have your reputation as my wife to maintain. What kept you so long, Selina?”

“Apologies, Edward, but Lord Chauncy detained me,” she said sweetly. “He was so taken with the drawing I did of him and ... one thing led to another.”

That seemed to put her brother in his place.

Or so she thought; until, after a moment of considered silence, he said, “Be wary of making a fool of yourself, Selina. Lord Chauncy, I fear, is toying with you.”

She was indignant. What did he know of the extent of Chauncy’s interest? But then he added, “You think Chauncy fancies you, but a man like that will take his pleasure wherever it is offered. I think you know what I mean? Do not repeat the mistake you made with Samuel. You could have been here, Selina, as a woman of standing, in your own right, and not as my substitute wife in subterfuge.”

Selina was silent, for what he said was too close to the truth.

A few minutes later, her excuse to repair to the ladies’ mending room offered little in

the way of comfort when she found herself locking eyes with Mrs. Piggott.

The flare of disdain her erstwhile fellow houseguest directed at her was replaced by what could only be termed the cut direct.

Mrs. Piggott was a nobody, Selina comforted herself. The sister of Lady Saunders, she was a commoner who looked like a costermonger dressed in silk and feathers. She had none of the address of her elegant sibling who, Selina now noticed, was standing near a doorway that opened into a rear saloon.

Lady Saunders was speaking to Lord Chauncy, and the intimacy of their brief exchange nearly took Selina's breath away.

He turned, and catching her eyes upon him, raised an eyebrow before crossing the room. Taking her by the elbow in a public display of ownership that was certain to make tongues wag, he drew Selina to an alcove hung with a fringed curtain where they were hidden from the rest of the guests.

Excitement skittered across her skin as, in the shadows, Chauncy encircled her waist with his hands.

"You are like a flower," he murmured as his lips touched her ear, making her wilt.

He tightened his embrace while he covered her lips with his. "Come to me tonight?" His hands roamed over her back, cupping her bottom, and Selina moaned softly as she moved against him.

She traced the planes of his cheeks with her thumbs, her eyes closed as she relived the frenzied moments when, with a pencil, she'd worked to shade and shadow the bones of his cheeks, contrasting the hollows and shadows.

She could have sketched his likeness blindfolded.

Which meant the intimacy of the real man was intoxicating.

Of course, she'd come to him tonight. Not the greatest calamity would keep her away; not even if Edward barged into Lord Chauncy's bedchamber in a fury.

"And you'll stay with me until the morning? I want to wake up beside you."

Selina blinked open her eyes and found that his look was dark, as if he really hung on her response.

She nodded.

"You are an enigma, Lady Boothe," he murmured, adding after a long pause, "if you are indeed Lady Boothe."

Was it her intake of breath that gave her away? Selina jerked her head up to find him studying her.

He sighed, though his look didn't register the rage or suspicion she might have feared. "You admit it then?"

He took her silence for affirmation before going on, "Yes, Anna, I was disappointed to learn from someone else that you are not the Lady Boothe they recall from some years ago. Very disappointed... at first."

"Please, your Grace, I can explain?—"

"Explain what? That you are not married to the gentleman whom you would have the world believe is your husband?"

Miserably, Selina shook her head. “Please, your Grace, I?—”

He cut her off. “But then I realized that if you were not respectably pledged to that little artist, why, you might be willing to come to an understanding with me.”

Selina gasped again as realization dawned.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “You are a remarkably competent actress, Anna, and I shall enjoy learning more about you in due course, my dear. But?—”

“Chauncy!”

Selina stepped back as a stocky, scarred gentleman intruded. “Excuse me, madam,” he said, bowing, “but I have something of importance to discuss with His Grace.”

CHAPTER 18

Deep in thought, Chauncy crossed the ballroom as he responded to Beth's smile.

He wasn't sure how he felt at having Sir Simeon's suspicions confirmed. For a start, Anna had not been truthful and that didn't sit well with him.

If she was not Sir Edward's wife but rather, his mistress, where did she come from? What were her origins?

An actress? She'd certainly managed to ape the manners and modulated tones of her betters.

And while that might be impressive, it was, nevertheless, a deception. Could she be trusted?

"I hope you have an invitation to dance, Beth. You certainly look lovely tonight," he told his cousin, even as his distracted glance flitted to the other side of the room where he was conscious of Anna standing near a vase of flowers on a plinth.

Was her name really Anna? And how did she come to be the mistress of so lacklustre a man as Sir Edward?

Well, she was lovely, and Chauncy would happily make her his mistress.

Certainly, it wasn't as if he'd considered her in any capacity other than as his mistress for he'd look to the great families of Great Britain when he felt it time to take a wife.

And as he was in no hurry, in the meantime he could enjoy the carnal pleasures of the woman pretending to be Lady Boothe.

Nevertheless, dismay continued to color his reflections. How could he have been so easily taken in? The woman to whom he'd been in danger of losing his heart was an imposter?

A woman who gave herself to men for money?

"I have been asked, Chauncy, though I hope you will dance with me," Beth said, smiling, before turning to answer her companion.

The orchestra was playing at the far end of the ballroom, but the dancing had not yet begun, though most of Lady Rushworth's guests appeared to be here.

Including the three men whom Sir Simeon considered of interest in the plot to harm their monarch-in-waiting.

Now Chauncy must seek out Sir Edward for the sole reason he'd summoned him here tonight. It was not an onerous task. Sir Edward simply had to do as he'd done the previous day for Chauncy: sketch his likeness.

He found him near the supper table in company with Anna, who sent him a troubled look; and a moment's distraction on Sir Edward's part as he accepted a glass of champagne from a passing footman, gave Chauncy the opportunity to whisper, "Your secret is safe with me, Anna. When the dancing is finished, we have much to discuss. But, please, will you leave us a moment as I have private business with your... husband?"

Once Anna had left, Sir Edward nodded at Chauncy, saying in his usual obsequious manner, "I trust your Grace's intended was happy with the likeness I drew last month.

And here is that of Lady Rushworth I sketched earlier this evening.”

Chauncy glanced at the paper Sir Edward handed him and nodded, impressed by the accuracy and reassured by the man’s speed. He’d been told by many that Sir Edward was quick, but the fellow had certainly taken his time when he’d been Chauncy’s guest at Chauncy Manor for the sole purpose of rendering a likeness.

He regarded Sir Edward with a frown. The man was a dark horse. But then, an impecunious painter, saddled with a mad wife, had his needs like any red-blooded man. That was, no doubt, why he’d taken Anna as his mistress.

And Anna, clearly bored, had set her sights on Chauncy when he’d shown interest. Indeed, she’d been very bold.

Chauncy supposed it did not matter that he’d failed to see through her ruse.

All that was important tonight was that Sir Edward could recreate a person’s facial characteristics in an instant—both as rumor had had it but fortunately, as his own skills tonight had proved when he’d shown him Lady Rushworth’s likeness.

And all that was important aside from that was that Anna—or whatever her name was—was available should Chauncy feel the need for feminine companionship.

Would Chauncy make her his mistress? Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed her in the shadows.

Yes, she was beautiful and beguiling.

And she was enthusiastic beneath the sheets. That’s all he wanted in a woman whose services he could hire on a whim.

Still, he had to admit to some disappointment.

She was not the lady he had thought.

He returned his attention to Sir Edward's question. "My intended was very pleased. And the quality of your work is the reason you have been asked here tonight." With a nod of his head, he indicated three gentlemen conversing nearby, but out of earshot. "You see those men? I want you to draw them as quickly and as unobtrusively as you can. It took you some time to complete a likeness of me but your reputation precedes you, and you have shown me with the drawing of Lady Rushworth, that you can execute result in an instant. That is what I need you to do. Tonight."

Chauncy was surprised at how shaken Sir Edward looked before acknowledging that the lack of character and, indeed, heroism in the painter, meant his response was hardly surprising.

He tried to moderate his tone. Perhaps Boothe did not work well under pressure though he could certainly produce the goods in quick time. So he said, as reassuringly as he could, "The materials are in the study. A servant will take you there so you can select what you need. Please understand that I could not give you advance notice of this commission due to its sensitive nature. I hope you understand me."

Still, Sir Edward could only stare at him while his Adam's Apple rose and dropped.

Trying to keep the irritation from his tone, Chauncy tried a different gambit. "You will be well recompensed and you will be in no danger. The men I wish you to draw without their knowledge are suspects only and under surveillance. But it will be safest if you do your drawings here in the ballroom, quickly, quietly. Discreetly."

"I...I don't understand."

“You don’t need to understand. This is a commission. A commission that’s been requested by His Majesty’s Government in the interests of safeguarding the crown.”

Sir Edward’s eyes were bulbous. “Who are these men?—?”

“It is of no account. Draw their likenesses this evening. That is all I ask of you. You’ve proved yourself up to the task and your reputation precedes you. As I said, you will be handsomely paid for your services.” Chauncy was losing patience. “You’ve proved an adept sketcher. Now prove your loyalty as a servant to the crown and you will be well rewarded.” He nodded at the door. “The earlier this can be done, the greater my peace of mind. I do not want those men leaving this house before you have committed their likenesses to paper.”

CHAPTER 19

S elina was sipping lemonade when her brother hurried over.

She'd watched the exchange from the shadows, her dismay growing as the shock on her brother's face had deepened while Chauncy spoke in an unusually serious fashion to him.

Nausea swept over her, and she closed her eyes.

The game was up. Not with Selina having been revealed as the artist.

But with her having been revealed as someone other than Edward's wife.

Oh dear Lord, had Chauncy called Selina out as Edward's mistress ?

Had he gone so far as to propose a financial transaction to secure Selina's 'attentions'?

Whatever he'd said, Edward had reacted with silent but palpable horror.

Selina tried not to let her terror show. Edward would lock her up. No, he'd disown her. Banish her. Her good name would be dragged through the mud. She'd never?—

“Selina! Come with me! Quickly!” Selina opened her eyes to find Edward gripping her elbow as he hissed his demands; and Selina had no choice but to follow him out of the drawing room and along the corridor.

A servant thrust open the door to what she saw was a library with floor-to-ceiling bookcases and a large desk near the window.

“The duke has just asked me to draw the likeness of three gentlemen in the ballroom.” He sounded panicked. “The drawings are to be executed without delay and we’re to find materials here.”

Selina nearly sagged against the wall with relief. “He...didn’t say anything else?”

“What’s more important than this?” Edward turned away to search for the necessary utensils before he thrust paper and pencil into her hands. “Discretion is everything. He cannot know the artist is not me. He named a figure that would astonish you. Selina! You cannot fail me this time.”

Selina’s hands closed over the artist’s materials while her mind revolted. “Why can he not know that it is me ?”

Edward’s mouth turned down. “Now is not the time for quibbling. I have an important job to do. On behalf of His Majesty’s Government. This is a matter of grave importance. The safety of the Prince Regent is at stake and that the three men I’m to draw are all under suspicion. Obey me this instant, Selina!”

There was little else she could do for Selina was already compromised. She needed to mitigate her guilt.

But she was resentful as she tucked the drawing tools into her reticule and followed her brother back into the stone passage of the draughty house.

They made their way towards the ballroom, the distant muted chatter of the guests a welcoming sound, Selina thought, shivering. She wanted to return to the light and warmth of the festivities with chandeliers of beeswax candles, and hundreds of

fabulously garbed bodies pressed together.

Behind them, the dark, unlit corridors led into oblivion.

Yet suddenly that's where Selina wanted to go. Not the ballroom. Not a public place where she was open to humiliation.

She didn't want to draw anyone—especially on Edward's behalf—ever again.

She'd taken a great risk, and she had miscalculated.

Just as she had miscalculated seven years ago when she'd let her heart rule her head and succumbed to Samuel's lures.

Ever since then she'd been used and abused by the men in her life. Now Edward wanted her to obediently do his bidding once again while he took all the credit, and continued to belittle her.

She hung back and Edward turned, his voice a snarl in the darkness as he took her wrist and pulled her after him to the ballroom.

The warmth, as she crossed the threshold, hit her forcibly.

“There are the men you are to draw.” Her brother pointed. “Now do as I say. I will not tolerate your intransigence! Do you realize how important this is? And if you don't start to draw quickly, I will?—”

But Selina didn't hear the rest of his threat, for it was cut short by a loud crack.

A sound like a pistol.

CHAPTER 20

TWENTY MINUTES EARLIER

Chauncy had just observed Sir Edward leave the ballroom in the wake of the servant who was to supply him with sketching supplies. As he turned to locate Anna, he was surprised to see Sir Edward beckon to her.

And now Anna was accompanying her ...lover?

He tensed. Sir Edward was not her husband, so why was he involving a woman who could be anyone?

“Chauncy, stay by the entrance in case the suspects try to leave before the artist has returned.” It was Sir Simeon, stepping into his path, as Chauncy headed towards the door. “I am off to take up position on the battlements ahead of the Prince Regent’s expected arrival. We must not be complacent for the perpetrators of the last assassination attempt could be hiding in the shadows and may not be these suspects at all.

Chauncy hesitated. Was Sir Edward trustworthy? Would he be sufficiently discreet?

Doubt beset him as he recalled the man’s patent fear when Chauncy had hinted at the reasons behind his commission.

If Sir Edward was a coward and loose-lipped, involving his mistress, then he only endangered their cause.

“I will be gone but a moment, Sir Simeon,” he said. “It’s a matter of urgency. Perhaps you could delay your departure until I return.”

Chauncy clapped a hand on Sir Simeon’s shoulder, noting the man’s sour look, before he wove his way through the knots of guests crowding the ballroom towards the door through which the pair had left. Perhaps the caveat had not been made clear enough: discretion at all costs.

Somehow he would have to make this clear to Sir Edward without involving his companion. Anna.

Near the door, he was halted by the syrupy tones of his former mistress. “Your Grace?”

Chauncy glanced into Catherine’s warm eyes, halting reluctantly. She smiled at him, then whispered, “I fear you will be lonely tonight.”

Chauncy shook his head. “We’ve had this conversation, Catherine.” She looked regal and beautiful in a gown of gold netting over an underdress of ivory, and a headdress of heron feathers. But her allure was nothing compared with Anna’s for all he’d heard Catherine and her sister remark upon the fact Anna’s ensemble was not up to the fashion of the day. That it had been fashionable, in fact, three years before. Was that why Anna wished to switch allegiance from Sir Edward to Chauncy? Because he could afford to be generous?

He knew he shouldn’t be distracted by thoughts of Anna when there was other matters so much more important to worry about this evening.

Nevertheless, he couldn’t help dwelling on the memory of their lovemaking. Surely she could not have pretended the feeling she had evinced for Chauncy? He had rarely felt so fulfilled and powerful. He did not want to think it was merely an act on her

part.

Just as he could not let Catherine labor under any misapprehension. So he said, firmly, as he turned away, “Our liaison, while delightful at the time, is over, Catherine. I do not want you back in my bed. I’m sorry.”

Only the tightening of her mouth indicated her anger.

He wished he had the time to spare that might ameliorate her sense of grievance, for, during the eight months she’d been his mistress, Chauncy had learned the nuances of her temper. Catherine did not like being thwarted and could cause trouble. It was one of the reasons he’d tired of her.

She nodded. “Very well, Chauncy. Then I wish you the very best.”

Chauncy was surprised by her apparent gracious acceptance. He watched as she disappeared into the crowd and was about to continue when one of the powdered footmen attending to the guests stopped before him.

“Your Grace, Lord Kenilworth has asked me to pass on a message that he wishes to speak to you,” he said, pointing through the doorway. “He is on the balcony at the end of the corridor if you turn left. Apparently, it’s a matter of some urgency.”

Chauncy stepped into the corridor, hesitating by the half open library door before staring into the darkness beyond. Lord Kenilworth was a friend of Sir Simeon and if it was a matter of some urgency, he presumed this should be his priority.

He would have to trust that Sir Edward would do what was asked of him with no one the wiser.

But Chauncy was troubled. He’d not known Kenilworth was associated with tonight’s

mission to safeguard the Prince who was due any moment. Was Sir Simeon being indiscreet by involving too many people whose loyalty might be questionable? Just like Sir Edward?

After traversing the darkened corridor, a pair of candle sconces in the far distance gave him enough light to see towards the end.

Beyond that, all was inky darkness, making the indistinct figure in the shadows in the distance impossible to identify.

“Lord Kenilworth?” he called softly when he reached the junction of two stone passages, his ears attuned to movement ahead of him. Here the corridor was brightly lit, but the figure he now saw standing on the balcony on the other side of an open doorway was impossible to identify.

Silhouetted against the night sky, Chauncy could not make him out, though he thought the man more portly than Lord Kenilworth.

“Lord Chauncy?” The voice was hoarse. “Is that you?” The figure put his hand to eyes. “Raise your candlestick so I can identify you.”

Chauncy did as he was bid. There was the faintest trace of an accent he could not place. Had Sir Simeon discovered something of which he needed to apprise Chauncy and he’d petitioned Lord Kenilworth, or some other man, to summon Chauncy? “Lord Kenilworth, I received the message that you wished to?—”

Still squinting, Chauncy watched the man in the distance appear to consult a piece of paper or parchment, before he raised his right arm, which he then appeared to point towards Chauncy.

And in that final horrifying moment, Chauncy realized what it was.

Just before he heard the explosion of a pistol.

CHAPTER 21

Chauncy put his hands to his ringing ears as he doubled over.

Had he been shot? He ran an experimental hand over himself as he became aware that the terrible screams were not his.

Then they must be?—

He recalled the portly silhouette, and horror swept over him.

Not the Prince Regent! thought Chauncy as he ran towards the figure writhing on the flagstones of the small balcony just beyond the open doors.

And not Lord Kenilworth, either, he soon realized as he found Sir Simeon, who had emerged from the darkness of the corridor to the right, now bending over the screaming unidentified man.

“Sir Simeon—” He truncated his words with a cry of pained surprise, jerking back his hand, which had been burned by the muzzle of the pistol Sir Simeon held.

“It was you ? You shot this man? Who is he?”

“I intend to find out,” replied Sir Simeon grimly, tucking away his pistol so he could grip the man’s lapels and haul him into a sitting position.

Suddenly, the corridor was very quiet. The man had stopped writhing. He’d also

stopped screaming.

And now, by the flickering light of the candle sconce by the doorway, his eyes stared blankly ahead.

“He’s dead!” Sir Simeon’s tone dripped with disgust. “Now he can’t talk, but this is what he had trained on you, Your Grace.” He extricated the pistol from the dead man’s fingers and thrust it at Chauncy. “You were lured here, weren’t you? This man, whoever he is, had you in his sights when I saw him raise his pistol and take aim.”

“Me? He wanted to shoot me ?” Chauncy shook his head in confusion. “I’ve never seen this man in my life. I thought the Prince Regent was his quarry.”

The sound had obviously caused some alarm and been heard as far afield as the ballroom, for when Chauncy glanced up, he found a small gathering exclaiming as they stared in horror at the dead man.

Ignoring them, Sir Simeon continued his investigation of the would-be assassin’s clothing.

“No pocket book. Nothing to identify him,” he muttered, before holding up a sheet of paper, which he brandished with an air of triumph. “See here!”

“Good God!” cried Chauncy as he took in what was now being displayed to the world for all to see. “My likeness.”

“Indeed,” replied Sir Simeon. He held the drawing up to the light above his head. “And apparently drawn by the artist himself.”

“Sir Edward?” Chauncy took the picture, frowning as he observed slight differences in the likeness from the one he had commissioned. Sir Edward had clearly done two

copies.

He put his hand to his throat and his hand shook as he continued to study the drawing. While Chauncy had received one, the other had obviously been given one to this man who'd been assigned to kill him. To kill Chauncy.

He stared over the heads of the cluster of guests. "Bring Sir Edward to me, now!" he demanded. Identifying one of the servants amongst the crowd, he barked, "You there! You'll find Sir Edward in the ballroom. Bring him here immediately! And make sure no one leaves the castle. All doors and windows must be closed this instant."

There were gasps but also the sound of footsteps as the servant ran to do Chauncy's bidding.

And chasing itself round Chauncy's head was the question of why?

Why would Sir Edward want Chauncy dead?

Had Chauncy jumped to conclusions about Anna? Had Sir Simeon been wrong and Anna really was his wife? Was this a crime of passion whereby Sir Edward would wreak vengeance on the man who had cuckolded him?

No, surely too extreme.

But not if Sir Edward was as insane as his wife was rumored to be.

Or perhaps sir Edward was not about to let a mistress as lovely as Anna be lured away?

A rise in the chatter from the encircling crowd that had gathered indicated that Chauncy's wishes had been expedited, for soon he heard the querulous tones of the

artist.

“Your Grace wishes to see me,” began Sir Edward before breaking off in terror when he beheld the dead man in a pool of blood at Chauncy’s feet.

Chauncy waved the likeness that had been sketched of him in front of Sir Edward’s face. “What can you tell me about this?” he demanded.

CHAPTER 22

TEN MINUTES EARLIER

“ T here are the men you are to draw.” Her brother pointed. “Now do as I say. I will not tolerate your intransigence! Do you realize how important this is? And if you don’t start to draw quickly, I will?—”

But Selina didn’t hear the rest of his threat, for it was cut short by a loud crack.

A sound like a pistol.

Several people looked up, their faces creased with concern, however, the orchestra continued to play.

“That sounded very odd,” Selina said, before dismissing it. Too much of today felt as if it had been a dream: her clandestine tryst with the duke, followed by his suspicion that she was not Edward’s wife, leading to his assumption she must therefore be Edward’s mistress.

Tears stung the back of her eyes. Now the duke insinuated he’d like to make her his mistress.

And now Edward wanted her to draw three men. No, he was demanding that she do so, and yet again, Selina was to simply obey, because she had no choice when a man wanted something from her.

Her brother gripped her elbow and pointed to the three gray-haired, ordinary looking guests in a quiet corner. “There they are. Be discreet, Selina. And be fast. I don’t know when the duke will return.”

Quickly, Selina began to sketch.

“Sir Edward Boothe!”

The cry from the doorway had everyone turning their heads to stare at the panting footman who’d clearly come running from the depths of the castle. Not even the music of the orchestra could drown the urgency in his voice.

Selina thrust the pencil and paper into her reticule as her brother jerked up his head at the sound of his name.

“Sir Edward Boothe, His Grace orders that you are to come with me.” The footman strode through the room, his gaze fixed on Edward.

Selina stepped aside. What was happening? Why was this man staring so angrily at her brother?

A myriad of fears crowded out her earlier worries.

Had her deception had greater ramifications than she could have imagined?

She watched Edward depart under what looked like the custody of the footman and another gentleman. A group of guests, curious and no doubt looking for scandal, followed them.

Selina didn’t know what to do? Was it better to stay away, or to follow her brother as a mark of solidarity? It seemed that whatever she did, it was the wrong thing.

Finally, familial loyalty won out and with a great sense of trepidation mixed with resignation, Selina stepped into the corridor, catching sight of the stragglers whom she saw had turned right at the end of the corridor.

Where was Edward being led? And why?

When she turned into a connecting passage, she saw the crowd gathered by the balcony, the open doors letting in the balmy summer night air.

“What has your husband done to have caused the duke such displeasure?”

Selina jerked her head up to see Mrs. Piggott’s sheep-like eyes regarding her with bulbous intensity. Ignoring the woman, she approached the gathering in time to see the duke brandishing a piece of paper on which something indistinguishable—from this distance—was drawn.

She took two more steps and as the crowd jostled a bit more, she saw through a gap the figure of a prone man on the flagstones.

Another step and she saw the pool of blood that surrounded him.

She gasped as she heard the duke’s accusing tones. “What was my likeness doing in this dead man’s possession, Sir Edward? Since he just tried to kill me, I shall find your answer very illuminating!”

Coming face to face with the portrait Selina had done of the duke was as confronting as facing the duke’s anger in person.

Lord Chauncy obviously didn’t see her in the crowd as he looked accusingly at brother who stammered, “I...don’t know, Your Grace.”

“Sir Simeon!” Lord Chauncy petitioned a stocky, scarred man to his right. “Explain to everyone what has happened. We need anyone who saw anything suspicious to speak up.”

“A terrible crime was about to take place. No, we’re not talking about this man’s death, for he is the would-be murderer.” Sir Simeon pointed first at the dead man before snatching the paper from the duke’s grasp and waving it before him.

His shadow wavered over the flagstones making him appear much taller than he was while his voice was loud and harsh.

Selina was still reeling when his next words cut through: “And His Grace was his quarry. You drew the likeness of the Duke of Chauncy, Sir Edward, and gave it to the man who has just tried to kill the duke. This drawing was to furnish the murderer with the means of identification.”

Selina gasped and brought her hands to her mouth.

So that was the reason the picture had been stolen? To furnish a would-be assassin with an accurate likeness of his target?

And the Duke of Chauncy was to be assassinated?

Well, for all Edward’s failings, her brother was not a murderer. And he certainly bore no grudge against His Grace.

Selina pushed her way through the crowd, not thinking as she hotly defended Edward.

“My brother knows nothing of all this, for it was Lady Saunders who stole the original drawing I made of His Grace because I found it on her desk!”

A second's silence was followed by a collective murmur as the crowd glared at Selina. They did not know her. She was not one of them, whereas Lady Saunders was?—

“Take her away! The woman is mad!”

Of course! It was Mrs. Piggott who squealed the accusation, backed up immediately by Lord and Lady Saunders, who materialized by the duke's side.

“Remove her!” barked Lord Saunders and Selina was only able to keep her balance because she thrust out her hands to grip Lord Chauncy's coat tail.

He regarded her a moment, clearly unsure. But there was no warmth in his expression as he murmured, “And why should I believe you now, Anna , when everything else you've told me is a lie? No, your brother drew and signed this copy which was used by this assassin to identity me in order to murder me!”

“Stop! I can prove I'm telling the truth!” Selina cried, swinging round to intervene as Lord Saunders and another man seized her brother. “There's proof on the drawing that I drew the picture and that Lady Saunders stole it! She was the one who gave it to the assassin. You can see it in the wording on Lord Chauncy's collar. Stolen by Lady Saunders , it says! Find a looking glass! Drawn by Selina Boothe! That's my name! Find a looking glass and see for yourself, Your Grace. I beg of you!”

But she managed no more before Lord Saunders clapped a hand over her mouth, saying, “Mad Lady Boothe is merely complicating matters with her ravings. I shall take her away!”

CHAPTER 23

Chauncy was deeply shaken.

Anna had nearly fooled him. First, by being convincing enough that he'd thought she was a neglected wife seeking pleasure in his bed for no return other than her attraction for him.

She'd satisfied him that her so-called madness had been overblown by a lackluster husband and he'd fallen for the alluring, elfin creature who'd reveled in his attentions.

But she was not Sir Edward's wife. She was doxy?

Nor was she mad, as Lady Saunders was now declaring loudly while she paced in front of the fire in the drawing room?

Lady Boothe, he'd been told by his friend, Saunders, had been locked in an antechamber.

Other claims filtered through to him as he sat, trying to appear alert, yet dazed at the incredible claims from Saunders and Sir Simeon that Sir Edward and Lady Boothe had tried to assassinate him.

Or rather, Lady Boothe had paid money to an assassin to murder Chauncy, furnishing him with the drawing he'd done of her.

But why? It didn't make sense, he told his friends and colleagues who'd gathered in the drawing room.

"Because she is insane," Lady Saunders told him. "It doesn't need to make sense."

"Bring the drawing to me," Chauncy now demanded of Sir Simeon, who'd just entered the room.

Obediently, the baron handed him the rolled paper.

"And a looking glass."

"Good lord, Chauncy! You surely don't believe that insane creature?" asked Saunders. "Why, of course, she'd say the first nonsense she could to deflect blame from her husband, who is clearly behind this terrible attempt upon your life."

"I recall her saying she was his sister. And why would this unknown woman—or the brother—wish me dead? I have nothing they want. They can have no motive." Chauncy frowned as he took the looking glass offered to him and held it over the drawing. He hoped Sir Simeon wasn't about to add his suspicions that Anna was in fact Sir Edward's mistress rather than his wife and further sully matters in public.

"Motive?" repeated Catherine. "Might Sir Edward have objected to the way you looked at his wife?"

She'd said it dismissively but Chauncy stiffened.

Could the lily-livered Sir Edward really have concocted a means to be rid of Chauncy through jealousy having discovered that his paramour had been in Chauncy's bed?

Why, that made Sir Edward the madman, not his wife.

“Give me that drawing!” snapped Catherine, trying to snatch it from his hands. “The pair of them have quite lost their minds. Surely there are dungeons in this draughty old castle. They can be thrown in there while the matter is dealt with.”

Chauncy, leaning over the drawing and now armed with a magnifying glass, looked up at Saunders and Catherine. “You are very quick to condemn the pair. I’m surprised. Surely there are other suspects?” He narrowed his eyes at his old friend. “Would not our three suspect plotters come to mind first?”

“Those three were in the drawing room, where we were, when the bullet was fired,” said Saunders. “And Sir Edward drew a second sketch of you. Why would he do that unless he wished to give it to someone else? He was jealous of you and his wife. Oh yes, he certainly had a motive to kill you.”

“And Lady Boothe’s defence is nothing but empty words,” said Catherine, pacing in front of the fire, having tried unsuccessfully several times to take the drawing away from Chauncy. “Lady Boothe is nothing but a liar.”

Slowly Chauncy moved closer, bending his head and squinting through the magnifying glass. Suddenly his body felt very cold and leaden as he asked, slowly, “Then why is she right in claiming the existence of the very words she said were there, in handwriting that is too small to discern with the naked eye?” He tapped the drawing and rose to confront his former lover. “ Stolen by Lady Saunders! That’s what it says.”

Catherine drew back, horror marring her lovely face before she said quickly, “She was trying to frame me ? So, it is not her husband—or brother—who was behind an attempt on your life.” She hesitated, searching Chauncy’s face. “This is proof that it was mad Lady Boothe. She has tried to get close to you, Chauncy, using whatever means she can. Clearly, she is...the instrument of someone who wishes you dead!”

Chauncy frowned.

Then he said to Sir Simeon, “I think that Lady Boothe should be brought here so that you and she, between you, can tell me what really are the facts behind why this drawing was found in the hands of the man who tried to kill me.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:19 am

CHAPTER 24

S elina shifted position on the small hard chair in what appeared to be a tiny storeroom.

No doubt the gossip was all over the castle that someone had tried to kill Lord Chauncy.

The whispers had already started as Selina had been escorted through the castle corridors by Lord Saunders before being thrust into the airless room she now occupied.

She'd heard this refuted by others along the way. "No! The artist did it!" And "No, it was the artist's wife!"

With time to think, in the darkness, Selina realized her plea of innocence may not hold up.

Lady Saunders was cunning. She'd claim that Selina had deliberately written the incriminating words on the likeness of Lord Chauncy before she'd given it to the assassin in order to deflect blame.

Selina presumed the dead man was the assassin.

As to his motive in wanting the duke dead, she had no idea.

Had Lord Chauncy really been the intended victim before Sir Simeon had shot the

man supposedly intending to kill him?

Who would want Lord Chauncy dead? And why?

Worse, His Grace now appeared to believe everything Lord and Lady Saunders said, while considering everything that came out of Selina's mouth to be a lie.

Once a liar, always a liar. It's what her governess used to say to her.

No one believed a liar and, clearly, Selina had lied to His Grace.

Her stomach roiled and her head hitched as she put her head in her hands and tried to think.

Lady Saunders accused Selina of hiring the assassin.

But surely it could only have been either Lord or Lady Saunders?

They had stolen the drawing of Lord Chauncy that had been found on the assassin's body because she had recognised it.

She tried to recall what else she'd heard of the couple's conversation when Selina been hiding in their bed chamber. Lady Saunders had said something about waiting until Lady Rushworth's ball to ask for a loan. Lady Saunders had also been rejected by Chauncy.

Bile rose up her throat. Who would believe Selina over Lady Saunders?

The door opened suddenly and Sir Simeon barked, "His Grace is asking for you."

He took Selina's arm as if suspecting she'd run and marched her down several

corridors and into the drawing room, where a cluster of people turned to stare at her as Sir Simeon pushed her in front of Lord Chauncy.

He seemed taller and broader than she remembered. But not as yielding. And there was no tenderness in his expression as he waved her to a seat while he stood with his back to the fireplace.

“This likeness,” he said, holding up the very first drawing Selina had done of Lord Chauncy, “was found on the person who tried to kill me tonight. With the aid of a looking glass, Lady Boothe, it does, indeed, bear the words you claim. Therefore, there were two likenesses—the other being the one given to me.” He stopped, sent her a long, considered look, then asked, “But, first of all, who is Lady Boothe? It is not you, madam. And, if you are not Lady Boothe...who are you?”

Selina shifted on her seat as she drew upon her courage.

“I am Selina Boothe,” she replied. “At least, that was the name I was born with.”

Lord Chauncy nodded. “Selina Boothe, eighth child of Sir Francis Boothe, Baronet. Widow of Samuel Martin. Footman.” He drew out the pause. “Sister of Sir Edward Boothe. The artist who drew my likeness. Supposedly.”

Selina said nothing.

“So, Selina Boothe, you claim to have done this drawing; an excellent likeness, I might add.” He glanced at Edward, who lowered his head.

“Then please prove it.” Lord Chauncy passed her pencil and paper.

“Whom shall I draw?” asked Selina.

Lord Chauncy shrugged. “I don’t care. I only want to see for myself how fast and accomplished—and accurate—you are.”

Lady Saunders, after a quick word to her sister, interjected. “Really, Chauncy, what does it matter who drew the likeness? The mere fact that it says in writing that I apparently stole it is clear evidence that I have been falsely maligned. There can be no other explanation other than that this woman is behind the attempt on your life. You insinuate that she is not Lady Boothe? Then she must be connected to one of your political enemies. And whoever that is needs to be teased out of her. For there you will find the motive for your would-be murder.”

Chauncy ignored her, watching intently as Lady Boothe’s pencil raced across the paper, outlining, drawing, shading.

“There!” She said finally when the sketch was drawn, as she thrust the paper at Lord Chauncy.

He stared at it a moment, a look of surprise dawning before he let out a short shout of laughter which he immediately quelled, saying in serious tones, “I think you have established that you are the artist though I think I also should have asked you to draw my likeness rather than that of Mrs. Piggott.”

A gasp of outrage shook Mrs. Piggott out of her seat as she declared, “Do I have to destroy another of this woman’s vile parodies? Why, she drew me the night she falsely claimed to be the wife of the so-called artist. Such malice in her rendition. So upsetting. I had no choice but to burn it.”

Selina threw wide her arms as she declared hotly, “But at the same time you also burned the drawing I’d done of His Grace, meaning I had to find another opportunity to draw him, which I did, looking through the conservatory glass from the outside. But when I hid the picture under a stone, Lady Saunders stole it. Of course, I didn’t

know it was Lady Saunders at the time, though I suspected it was one of you seeking revenge for the picture I'd drawn of you, Mrs. Piggott, and I was right, for I found my picture of His Grace on Lady Saunders' desk. I resolved to make another copy in a hurry, but to mark Lady Saunders' as stolen as indeed it was." Selina glared at the two women while Edward sat quietly on a chair, glowering at her as she told her side of the story.

But what could Selina do? She had to tell the truth. Right now, she was being accused of not just madness but of hiring an assassin.

Lord Chauncy considered her words.

Selina wished he would speak. Instead, it was Sir Simeon who said, "Petty revenge appears to be your motive... Miss Boothe? I've seen it before with your kind. Your drawing of Mrs. Piggott proves that you are quick to resort to petty revenge. Clearly, you wished revenge on Lord Chauncy, too. Why? Because he scorned you?"

Selina glanced at Lord Chauncy and, for the first time since Selina had been accused of murder, his expression was not harsh and unflinching. Instead, he looked thoughtful. No, perhaps that was doubtful.

She seized her moment. "I have been accused of many things in my life, but murder is not one of them. I did not hire an assassin to kill Lord Chauncy!" Selina said hotly. "Why would I? He has proved a ... a kind benefactor to my ... brother and me. He promised to help us find other painting commissions. Why would either of us have any desire to kill him? He's not scorned us. He's helped us." She hesitated, knowing she couldn't accuse Lady Saunders directly but needing to plant the seed of doubt in the minds of her interrogators as she suggested, "Perhaps Lord Chauncy scorned someone else who then hired an assassin to have their revenge? Perhaps Lord Chauncy scorned... Lady Saunders?"

Lady Saunders' mouth dropped open but Sir Simeon interjected, his tone surprised as if he were discovering something for the first time, "I now see, on the back of the likeness, that someone has written the words: This is the man I want— " He squinted as he deciphered the writing. "Is that sentence complete? Or is there a word missing? "This is the man I want —" Or, should it read: "This is the man I want dead ?" He looked about him. "Or do both sentiments hold true, and if that is the case, then whoever commissioned the assassin was someone who wanted Lord Chauncy; someone who—when he displeased her—wanted him dead. Miss Boothe, did you write this?"

Selina shook her head. "There was nothing written on the back when I found it in Lady Saunders' chamber."

"Perhaps someone recognizes the handwriting?" Sir Simeon handed the drawing to Lord Chauncy who studied it a moment, before he looked at Lady Saunders, though he said nothing as he handed it to her husband, asking, "Familiar?"

Lord Saunders thrust it away from him. "It means nothing!" he snarled. "Only that this is another attempt to smear my good wife's name."

Sir Simeon conceded this with a nod. "Indeed. For what possible motivation could Lady Saunders have had for wanting His Grace dead?"

Just as Selina expected Lord Chauncy to direct an appropriately accusatory look at Lady Saunders, the door was thrust open and a breathless footman announced, "His Royal Highness The Prince Regent has arrived."

The gathering rose as one, Sir Simeon leading the way towards the corridor before he turned and, indicating Selina and Edward, made a gesture as if to ask Lord Chauncy what he wanted done with them.

Chauncy, who had begun to follow, flanked by two footmen, stopped.

“I shall see to the matter. Please go ahead.”

Anna—for that’s the name he associated with her—remained by the fire with her brother.

She stepped forward. “Your Grace, I merely did what was asked of me. Neither Edward nor I had any desire or motive to have you harmed. Please believe me.”

Chauncy frowned. This evening’s events had him deeply rattled.

Could Catherine really have wanted him dead? That was his growing suspicion.

But at the core of his disappointment was the knowledge that Anna had hidden beneath his bed, not because she desired Chauncy but because she had been forced to capture his likeness after Catherine had stolen the original drawing.

Everything was now quite clear.

Anna had merely done what she had to save her skin.

“Please, Your Grace, I have what you wanted.”

Was she now finding a way to insinuate herself into Chauncy’s good graces, having made a fool of him?

He sent her a level look. “You don’t have anything I want... madam.”

Her trembling lip and damp lashes left him unmoved. She was clearly an adept actress.

“I have the drawing you asked for, Your Grace,” she persisted. He saw she was brandishing a piece of paper upon what he could now see was a drawing of the three suspects. Even from this distance, he could see the drawing was well executed.

Efficient.

That’s what Lady Boothe—no, Anna Boothe—was. Clever and efficient.

A woman who didn’t care what she had to do in order to get what she wanted—whether that was to lie with another man. Or lie to another man.

Chauncy took the drawing. He tried to keep the emotion from his voice, which meant he had to turn his head away from her gaze. “I’ll see you are properly remunerated.” He didn’t mean to sound so abrasive when she began to question him.

But it was the only way to wield the upper hand when he was so dangerously close to revealing the depth of his wounding.

How could he trust her after she had lied to him?

Catherine had tried to have him killed. He was not sure of it.

Catherine, who’d pretended to love him so long as he gave her what she wanted.

He stared at the beautiful, seductive, irresistible Anna—Selina—Boothe, hardening his resolve to resist the yearning in her large, pleading eyes.

“Is that... everything...you have to say to me, Your Grace?” she whispered. Her voice shook, and she really did look as if her heart was broken.

But, like Catherine, Selina knew how to play upon his emotions.

Oh, she was good. A beautiful temptress, a consummate seductress. A skilled actress.

And everything that came out of her mouth, including what she claimed was in her heart, was a lie.

He nodded. “That is everything I have to say to you...madam.”

No, Chauncy didn't need another Catherine in his life.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:19 am

FOUR MONTHS LATER

Chauncy tethered his horse to a tree a little way from the house rather than riding into the stable yard.

The short walk down the hill would enable him to observe his surroundings.

It would also give him the chance to change his mind, return to his mount, and ride back the way he'd come.

Even before he'd begun his journey, he told himself he was a fool to succumb to sentiment. Chauncy never did that.

But it was Beth who'd unwittingly instigated this madcap expedition. Three nights previously, she'd looked up from her tatting after dinner and said, "My dear Chauncy, I had not thought you were so attached to the idea of marrying Miss Blenkinthorpe. Ever since she decided not to go through with the arrangement, a dark cloud has been hanging over you."

Still staring at the book he was reading, of which he'd digested not one word, Chauncy had said flatly, "It was I who decided not to go ahead with it."

Beth's expression had revealed her surprise, and she'd asked without thinking, "So, there's someone else, then?" before blushing as if it were not her place to question her cousin.

He'd sent her a long, level stare, before muttering, "Am I such an ogre that you can't

say what you think, Beth?”

And then he'd thought briefly of dear, eccentric, misunderstood Gwyneth whose sad fate must surely have acted as a cautionary tale for Beth.

Now, three minutes' walk from Boothe House, he was once again questioning his motivation in coming here.

Selina was the same woman she'd been when she'd deceived him. She hadn't changed.

No, it was he who had changed.

For Selina had changed something in him .

With distance, he'd come to view what they'd had in a different light.

Or was he being a sentimental fool?

He was still deciding whether to turn back when a sweet, lilting voice hailed him.

“A visitor! Oh, my sir! Aren't you handsome?” The long pause that followed was truncated by a soft exclamation; then, “My, don't you have eyes I could drown in?” She giggled. “My dear sister by marriage told me about a man who had eyes she could drown in. Are you that man?”

Chauncy bowed. “Good afternoon, madam. You must be ... the real Mrs. Boothe.”

The young woman did a twirl before dropping into a deep curtsy. “How did you know? Why, of course! Because you must be Lord Chauncy! I do hope you've come to see my sister-in-law, who would so welcome you. My husband doesn't want to see anyone, and certainly not you. But Selina has been waiting for you, don't you know?”

Chauncy inclined his head. “Perhaps you would take me to her, then? And, while we walk, indulge me with some answers. How do you know she’s been waiting for me?”

Mrs. Boothe clapped her hands together, clearly delighted with his response, before indicating a path down a long, gentle incline. The landscape was calming, with just the house in the distance, and all around it, fields of green through which ran a bubbling stream. “This way, Your Grace,” said Anna. She seemed too much a wood sprite for him to think of her as Mrs. Boothe.

No, a fairy, he amended, as she raised her graceful, naked arms, and appeared to take flight, weaving about beside him as she chattered. “How do I know she’s been waiting for you?” Anna repeated, before she amended the statement. “She’s been hoping for you. I knew, though she didn’t say it. She didn’t have to. Indeed, Selina said your eyes were your best feature, Your Grace. Except for your smile. But then she said that—even nicer—was your whole expression when you looked at her. She said when you looked at her, she felt like you meant what you said—a most uncommon trait in a gentleman.” Anna, who’d now been skipping by his side, stopped by a gnarled apple tree and pointed into the distance. “See! There’s my sister-in-law over by the stream. She’s painting, though she’s not very good at painting. My husband is very good at painting but not at drawing. But Selina can draw a likeness so that it’s just like looking at a person. Though you know that. She drew your likeness when you wanted to get married to some other lady. But now that you’re here, I hope you’ve changed your mind about that . Follow me and I’ll take you to her.”

Chauncy hesitated. “Now that you’ve pointed her out, I won’t need your company, though I’d very much appreciate it a little later when it’s time to say goodbye, Anna.”

“You’re going to say goodbye when you’ve only just come to say good day?” Anna clapped her hand to her mouth and her look was tragic. “Perhaps you shouldn’t see Selina, after all, if you’ve already decided you’re going to say goodbye.”

Chauncy regarded her in silence. Anna Boothe was lovely. Not as lovely as Selina, but with her elfin features and her bubbling happiness interspersed with unfiltered dismay, she reminded him eerily of Gwyneth.

“I want to see your sister-in-law because I need to know if I really will want to say goodbye after we meet again,” he said.

“Ah.” Anna nodded sagely. “Then I think you are perhaps as wise and kind as Selina said you were. Now, go, Your Grace, and don’t let me detain you.”

Chauncy watched Anna skip and dance away in the pale sunlight.

When he returned his attention to the path, he found he was suddenly dry-mouthed, and his palms were sweating.

If this had begun as an undertaking to discover exactly what he really felt about the woman who had overtaken his senses in such a short time, and whose hold over his thoughts was both powerful and irrational, the physical manifestations were impossible to ignore.

Still, he hesitated. Selina was about a minute’s walk away, sitting on a stool with her back to him, a large canvas on an easel in front of her. Dressed in a white muslin gown, her chestnut hair tied loosely so that escaped ringlets cascaded down her back, Chauncy was overcome by emotion. Remorse, desire, and confusion were an odd combination.

What would be the culmination of their conversation? Anna indicated her sister-in-law spoke of him kindly, when the truth was that Chauncy had farewelled her the day following the ball with nothing more than a gruff apology for having had her unfairly detained, and thanking her for the quality of her work.

At the time, she’d merely offered a small curtsy and said, “And I apologise for lying

to you. We both have said and done things we regret, Your Grace.”

Their parting had felt final.

And he’d taken her words to indicate that she regretted not only deceiving him, but the intimacy between them.

Chauncy resumed his halting journey through the lush grass.

Reflecting on Lady Rushworth’s ball was to remember the deception displayed towards him by both Selina and Catherine.

But, the last month, sweeping away his anger, a new emotion had taken root, occasioned by memories of the sweetness that had infused his soul caused by Selina’s frank and unfettered enthusiasm for him.

Surely that could not have been feigned?

To Chauncy’s surprise, he found that the closer he got to the figure so thoroughly immersed in her painting, the more oddly his heart began to behave.

Quite erratically, in fact.

Like when he’d been a schoolboy; not yet in control of his manliness and unable to conceal his feelings.

A few yards away, he stopped and studied the back of her neck.

It was a very elegant neck. Graceful and swan-like before it reached her luscious bosom.

Not that he could see that from here, since he was behind her.

No, he was just remembering.

Like he did so often.

He remembered her smile, her laugh, her caresses, her honesty, and pleasure in him.

No, they had not been feigned, he told himself, even if she was pretending to be someone else.

Perhaps she was more like Anna—free and unfettered in her emotions—than she realized.

“Selina.”

She turned with a gasp, as if she knew immediately who had spoken.

“Your Grace,” she whispered, rising. Then, after an awkward pause, nodding towards the easel, added unnecessarily, “I was painting.”

He inclined his head. “I think you are more skillful at likenesses.”

She sighed. “Commissions have dried up. My brother’s landscapes pay the bills these days. He is hoping I will improve.”

“And why have commissions dried up when you are so adept at them?”

She slid her eyes towards the house as if afraid of her brother appearing before she whispered, “There was a scandal a few months ago in which I played a central role. I’m sure in time it will be forgotten. But not yet.”

Chauncy cleared his throat. “Sometimes it takes time for ... things to be forgotten and for ... rumors that were ill-founded to disappear.”

“And for the truth to be revealed?” She sent him an inquiring look.

Chauncy was uncomfortably aware of the roiling in his belly as she asked, suddenly, “Why are you here, Your Grace?”

He frowned. “I don’t know.” Holding her gaze, he said softly, “I suppose I wanted to know what it would feel like here,” he touched the left side of his chest, “when I saw you again.”

She nodded, unsmiling. “I wondered the same thing.” She put her hand to her breast.

He took a step forward, still uncertain. “You see,” he went on, “I wasn’t sure that—if I saw you again—I would want more to do with you.”

She nodded. “I wondered the same...” She hitched in a breath, then whispered, “You see, the man you were when you loved me did not accord with the man who accused me.”

He had to concede this was the truth. Slowly he reached out a hand as he said, “But when I couldn’t get you out of my mind, I thought seeing you would help determine if I wanted to?”

She was within an arm’s breadth, but she’d not stepped closer. It seemed Chauncy must make that decision.

He did so unconsciously, the need to touch her overpowering his natural caution.

And when her slight body nestled against him, memory and sensation sparked into life. Not the dramatic last few hours of their association when deception, drama, and her possible involvement in his attempted murder were at the forefront.

Yet that’s all he’d been able to think about for a long time.

These last few months had been grueling as Catherine's murderous intentions towards him had been revealed, dissected, and reflected back at him as a man who took with impunity, as Catherine had.

Catherine was not a woman whose pride could withstand rejection from the man she'd consciously seduced several years before; the man who then had not only ceased to love her, but who'd ceased to pay her gambling debts and those of her husband.

Oh, Lady Saunders had made sure the whole world knew every real and perceived failing of the Duke of Chauncy.

It had been a painful, humbling few months.

But that was the past. And Catherine's murderous intent had been thoroughly revealed—though without sufficient evidence to see her face justice.

Now it was time to live in the present.

“What did you want, Your Grace?”

“For you to stop calling me Your Grace.”

“But that wasn't all, was it...Chauncy?” Slowly she raised her arms and twined her hands behind his neck, but they remained there, exerting no pressure, as if she were waiting for what he had to say next.

Yes, she knew him. And maybe in years to come, she would know him more than he knew himself, for the curiously strong connection he felt with this woman had returned with a vengeance.

He shook his head, ever so slightly, for fear of breaking that connection: both of her

hands twined behind his neck, and that invisible chord between their hearts.

“No, that was not all,” he managed hoarsely, as he cupped her cheek with one hand, his other contouring her aching well-remembered curves. “I did have one very momentous question to ask you. But before that, I would like to kiss you.”

She didn’t reply, but her hands tightened behind his neck as she brought his face down to hers.

And as her mouth flowered beneath his, flooding him with memories of his happiest moments, Chauncy knew that of all the decisions he’d made, going after Selina was his best.

She felt as he did, he could tell, as he drank in her sweetness, and reveled in the feel of her, while she made so clear her delight in him.

A delight so transparent that he was quietly confident about her response to the question of which he’d forewarned her.

The most important question he would ever ask.

For if—when—Selina agreed to be his wife, he knew he’d never be bored again.

THE END