



First Comes Courtship (A Gentleman's Guide to Courtship #4)

Author: *Charlie Lane*

Category: Historical

Description: Shes naughty. Hes nice. But hes willing to change his ways.

It's his pleasure to please her.

Liam Fletcher, Viscount Norton didn't mean to ruin Miss Cora Eastwood. (He used to be a vicar, for goodness sake!) He'd meant to test the theory in the Duke of Clearford's Guide to Courtship that kissing reveals the heart. The theory—true. The outcome? Compromised. Not a good beginning, but he's determined to please the passionate lady he now calls wife in every way he can.

If he can find her.

It's her desire to desert him.

Who needs a husband when there's erotic poetry to write! Cora is determined to prove that sentiment true as she bounces from house party to house party, always fleeing before Liam catches up to her. But when he finally hunts her down, he makes an excellent argument for trying something new—a truce of passion, just her and him and an empty house in the country.

It takes two to heal a marriage, and if the pessimistic bluestocking and jolly former vicar can see eye to eye, they might also help each other heal their broken hearts.

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FROM MISS CORA EASTWOOD'S PERSONAL DIARY

April 30, 1820

I finally know how it feels to be one of the heroines in my poems—compromised and without hope. Viscount Norton would not have caught me had Prudence not gone missing. But she did. And I, of course, went looking for her. Our identical costumes and thick, black veils transformed us into shadows at home in the dark. I had wanted to go as Maid Marian, originally, but Prudence thought dressing as midnight an excellent idea for Bellingham's masquerade. And I thought so, too. Twin dark ladies who, beneath their thick disguises, look nothing alike. A diversion to heighten the drama of the poem I was to recite tonight. The room had been chosen, abandoned and far from the dancing crush. The select audience had been informed. They knew well how to keep a secret. I had my lines memorized, and I needed only Prudence to help set up the candles. I saw her rush into the garden and followed.

Norton cornered me in a grotto, ripped at my sleeve, and ravished me.

Worse yet, I allowed him. I won't deny it here. If my poems are all fantasy, these pages must remain all fact. I allowed Norton to catch me and kiss me breathless.

Only—and here is where a cliff to fling oneself off would be useful—he had no idea he was kissing me .

The veil I wore hid everything above my lips. To his mind, he'd been ravishing Prudence .

And Mother caught us. Mortification, thy name is Cora.

He acted the perfect gentleman and made a gallant request of my hand in marriage. I accepted. What other choice did I have?

Now I marry a man who would prefer to marry someone else.

I always thought that marriage, if I decided to enter into such a state, would provide a remedy to my habitual loneliness. I see now it will only drive me further into those cold, solitary shadows.

May 22, 1820

I married Lord Norton today. Liam. I am a viscountess. My mother is quite pleased. My father is quite foxed. And I am quite worried. At the breakfast, Liam leaned in close. I thought he might give me a kiss, but he patted my hand instead, assured me he would not push me for his marital rights until I was well and ready to give them.

Is it possible to be relieved and disappointed at once?

It must be because I am. Where is the Norton from the garden, needy and determined? He disappeared when he discovered I was not who he thought I was.

We travel to Norton Hall, his country seat, in one week's time to wait out the gossip caused by the scandal of our union. I am to invite a select group of my closest confidants. For my own comfort, Liam said with a pleasing smile.

It is very sweet of him to consider my needs, but... I always thought honeymoons were for two. I should never forget I was not made to be part of a two.

June 3, 1820

My mother instructed me to lie back and close my eyes, but I did not. I watched Liam's face in the dim moonlight as he finally came to my bed. He took me rowing on the lake this afternoon, and I told him I was ready. What good is being married, after all, if one cannot experience the amorous arts? I've often thought the conjugal act might... bond two bodies, two souls.

I never thought to have a wedding night, and even when I'd allowed myself to imagine marrying someone, sharing his bed, I had never been able to see his face. Now I see Liam. And I cannot think of the planes of his face without seeing moonlight and shadows playing there. He's not the most handsome man of my acquaintance, but there's something restless in his motions, in his eyes.

All restrained tonight. He was a perfect gentleman. Entering my room in the dark, caressing me and whispering polite words, assurances. Clearly, he thought me an innocent. And I am. Biologically speaking. But, oh the things I've read. What would he think if he knew that, instead of a polite exchange which left me yearning for more, I'd rather he fuck me hard, touch me everywhere. If I can't have the kind of... connection my friends speak of, at least give me this.

As always, I ask for too much, should expect less.

He was all restraint, all accommodation for a woman he thinks innocent in every manner.

But I wish that restless man behind his eyes would slip his cage. And ravish me as he did in the garden.

Perhaps I will tell him the next time he visits me. He is such a kind man. And in the garden, he showed such passion... I cannot think he will reject my request that we learn to please one another together.

There I go again—asking for much, expecting more... hoping.

June 6, 1820

He left.

He left .

I barely know how to write any words but those two. No, I can find three more.

He found out .

I can barely breathe. My heart gallops in my chest, and my mind races. See how my shaky hand trembles the ink across the page?

I did not wish to marry, did not wish to end up like my mother. But here I am, alone, as my husband runs off to a London brothel.

He found out about the books I read. Erotic books of all sorts, the kind I'm not even supposed to know exist, the kind that teach me words like fuck and how women's bodies can light up with pleasure if a man takes care to ignite her.

It is apparent Liam does not care. Now he knows I am no green girl.

Do I disgust him?

He disgusts me ! Wolf in sheep's clothing. Gentleman with a rogue's tattered soul. He will slip into Lady Circe's Nunnery, and no man will question him. They may, indeed, raise a glass in his honor. He might meet my father in the hallways. But I cannot read a book and know my body. I cannot feel desire and need without earning the world's censure.

Then I shall burn the world down.

Or at the very least, burn my husband to ashes. If he thinks I will accept his roving loins with the same equanimity my mother did my father's, he will soon learn otherwise.

I leave for London now, no matter how dim the moon.

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Chapter One

He'd made a mistake. Nothing new about that. What was new? The number of mistakes he'd made in such a short period of time. He'd stopped counting, in fact. Had to at some point, and apparently that point, for Liam Fletcher, Viscount Norton, was walking over the threshold of London's most exclusive brothel.

He paused in the gold and marble foyer, the brawny and bald butler who'd let him in, raking his gaze down his frame. And finding him wanting.

"Have you visited our establishment before, Lord...?"

"No." He should not be here now. He had a wife. A wife he rather... liked. A wife he wished to please. And wasn't that why he'd come here to begin with? Why he'd galloped away from his wife's house party in a rage of determination and... humiliation.

He ducked his head, hiding the heat spreading across his cheeks. More humiliation.

"I... I think I'm in the wrong place. Apologies." He nodded and stepped backward through the doorway.

A hand fluttered on the nape of his neck, and a whisper purred at his ear. "And who are you, good sir?" A woman curved around his side and slunk between him and the doorframe, stepping inside to face him. Red hair and painted lips. Kohl lining her large brown eyes. No way to tell how old or young she was. She grinned, flashing white teeth with a slight gap between the top front two.

Liam took another step backward and away from her. “I was just leaving.”

“But you’ve only just arrived. Do come in.” She stepped to the side, allowing him entrance. When he didn’t move, she grasped his wrist, tugged him in. “You look positively ill, good sir. Let me offer you refreshment.”

He felt rather ill, and he soon found himself in an elegant sitting room on the ground floor of the house.

The brothel.

Hell. His father must be spinning in his grave. If he were an apparition somewhere, he’d surely make haunting Liam his priority after this.

“I must leave,” he said, refusing to take the seat she gestured to. “I should not have come.”

She untied her bonnet and tilted her head to the side. “Then why did you? Come?” The way she said that last word, wrapping her lips around it, stretching it out. Left no doubt—she enjoyed saying it.

“I’m a virgin.” Damnation. He’d not meant to say it. Not even true. He and Cora had consummated the marriage. He strode for the door.

“My good, still-nameless sir.” The woman chuckled. “If that is true, then you are in the perfect place to rid yourself of such an affliction. Let me assign a lady to you. Do you have any preferences?”

He whipped around, panic lacing through him. “Yes. No! I mean no preferences I can satisfy here . Hell.” He ground his teeth together to stop the inane flood of words. “I am not a virgin. And I have a wife, and...” Well, why not have out with it? “I came

here for information, education. Not of the experiential sort, either. No touching. I simply wished to... speak to... an... expert. On matters of... pleasure.” Oh hell, why wouldn’t the ground open up and swallow him? Why couldn’t God strike him down on the spot? He deserved to be smote this very moment.

He had no idea how to pleasure a wife who possessed more knowledge of the amorous arts than he did. Men were supposed to know , supposed to have the sort of experience denied women. And he had none. Not that he hadn’t tried.

More humiliation, that.

Divine retribution would not save him.

Why had he thought a brothel would?

He should have asked the American, Mr. Bailey, for advice. He’d been sulking about Liam’s house the past week, courting a wife for himself. Surely the man would know how a husband should woo his wife in the bedchamber.

But that would mean admitting Liam’s own ignorance, reliving all three of his disastrous almosts .

He could have found one of those books Cora apparently enjoyed reading. Taught his own damned-to-hell self how to please a woman past simply driving into her and apologizing for any pain he’d given her.

His head fell back on his neck, and his lips emitted a groan likely heard across the channel.

The woman ignored it, stripped off her gloves, and slapped them onto a small pedestal table near a couch. One dangled over a porcelain figurine shaped like

a...Yes. Definitely shaped like a man's shaft. Who made drawing room decorations shaped like genitalia? And so elegantly, too. It appeared to have more manners than he did. Might bow and wish him a good day if he stared at it long enough.

"You are in luck," she said. "I happen to be just such an expert." She dipped a curtsy and faced him once more with a wicked grin. "Madame Juliet, proprietress of Lady Circe's Nunnery, at your service. Will you once more deny me your name?"

He couldn't be rude. "Viscount Norton." But perhaps giving his name was not...circumspect. He'd left London with gossip on his heels. If anyone discovered he'd been here, that gossip would rage louder. Another mistake. "I must return to my wife."

"Is she who you wish to please? With an education?"

"Yes."

"Most interesting." She meandered around the room, flicking curtain tassels and running fingertips down the length of tables, speaking without looking at him. "The men of my acquaintance wish only to please themselves. Are you in love with her?"

"I... want her to be happy." He stared at a pastel painting of a cow above the fireplace. Such a mundane subject to grace the walls of a brothel. A cow, a pastoral landscape, in the background a garden bench beneath some trees with a milkmaid sitting on it. She looked rather odd, though, didn't she? Face twisted as if in pain and her skirts all lumpy. Too many legs, and... oh. Oh . Not all her legs, were they? Two belonged to someone hiding beneath her skirts. Someone who likely caused that twist of pain on her face. Pain? Or pleasure. He should know the difference!

Considering her reading preferences, Cora probably knew the difference.

Liam turned toward the doorway. “It’s a husband’s duty to please his wife. And she’s...” What were the right words to describe Cora? She hid much. Clearly. He’d married her not knowing a thing about her. Had to find out from others that she not only read illicit books but borrowed them out to other women of the ton, ran an entire naughty lending library. She’d likely laughed at him after their one and only night together. He’d wanted to touch her everywhere, discover how she tasted, had wanted to make her eyes, gray and soft like a morning fog, glow with pleasure. But he’d reined in his own desire. He wouldn’t ravish her as he had in the garden. He wouldn’t be a beast with such a gentle soul as hers. That impulse had forced her to marry him.

“She is the sort of unknown I’d like to discover,” he finally said. So restrained yet so free. He wanted to see into her shadows, understand them as well as he understood his own.

“Interesting. Then perhaps, Lord Norton, you should ask your wife how she can be pleased.”

The simplest of answers. Hit him over the head like a falling brick and peeled in his head like a bell as he left the room, strode down the hallway, past the butler, and out the door. He should return to Norton Hall. He could tell Cora he’d been away on estate business. Hopefully, Mr. Bailey and Lady Templeton had not spilled the truth he’d spilled himself when he’d crashed out of the house and hopped onto his horse.

Who awaited him now, just around the corner.

“Hello, Tuck,” Liam said, stepping into the shadows and finding the large bay. “Let’s go home.” The London townhouse tonight, then back to the country tomorrow. He rode slowly, weaving through bustling streets, planning. First, he’d ask her about the books. Then he’d apologize for their first night together. Then he’d beg her to recommend her favorite book. Of a particular type, of course. He’d read it cover to

cover. Memorize it, then put its lessons to good use.

Cora's mother's words to him on their wedding day echoed with each clop of the bay's hooves. My daughter is a perfect innocent. Do not debauch her. Do not terrify her. Treat her like a lady. Her mother had not a single notion of who her daughter was, apparently.

He left the horse in the mews and entered the house, had a bath, and ate the first meal he'd had in, perhaps, twenty-four hours.

He could not sleep that night, and he rose with the sun, dressed, and wandered downstairs because no matter how tightly he closed his eyes, sleep laughed at him. Today, he would return to Norton Hall and have a difficult discussion with his wife.

What he should have done in the first place instead of fleeing like a nodcock.

First a pot of tea or two to boost his groggy brain. He sat at the breakfast table, heavy as a sinner on Sunday, and poured a cup, snagged a point of toast.

Then the front door banged open, and a voice rang out like a curse swinging on a violent wind. "You vile pisspot! I will crush your bones."

He froze, the cup lifted halfway to his lips, steam clouding his vision.

"Are you here? Of course you are. I saw Friar Tuck in the mews. Face me, you coward."

He snapped the cup to its saucer with a splash and a clatter. Drops of tea flicked across his face and cravat, and he stood on shaky legs, wiping his cheek with his sleeve. She'd come after him?

“Face me!” Her cries echoed off every wall and pulled him to her like a siren’s song. She stood in the entryway, her hands fisted at her sides, her face pale above a black gown that hugged delectable curves and hid a perfect bosom. She’d wound her raven-wing hair in a loose knot at her neck, and passion pinked her cheeks and sparked a storm in her gray eyes.

God, he’d married a stunning woman. He’d known it that night in the garden, felt a surge of satisfaction because of it, even though it muddled everything else. His grandmother had wanted him to marry well, had approved his suit of a duke’s sister. But a simple miss? A banker’s daughter, though rich, had not been what his grandmother had asked him to deliver.

He’d wanted Cora, though. From the moment he’d heard her voice behind the mask—rich and melancholy, strong and melodious. That voice had given her away in the garden—not Prudence, but Cora. Once he’d touched her, pressed her against a tree and felt her breath against his cheek, everything had disappeared except the deep floral fragrance of the night, the shadows that held them, the sound of their breathing, the velvet of her skin. The perfection of her lips.

Her. His veiled lady.

Miss Cora Eastwood—an impulse in his blood. And when he gave way to impulse—as he was wont eventually to do—it always ended badly.

Usually just for himself. This time, though, he’d dragged an innocent lady down with him. Into matrimony.

He must have stepped too loudly down the hall, memory pulling him closer to her, because her gaze swung to him, fierce and dangerous. This woman wore beauty like a blade. Every bit of her magnificent and cutting.

“You.” She stalked toward him, arm outstretched, a dagger of a finger aimed at his heart. “Explain yourself.”

He paled. Explain. Yes, he must. He looked to the sky for a lightning bolt to strike him down. Found a perfectly normal ceiling. No help from the divine, then. Unfortunate, that. He’d have to speak aloud the humiliating truth. Men weren’t supposed to be like him—untried and ignorant.

“I am going to reach into your coal-black heart”—she continued forward, her remaining fingers unfurling to join the first as she flipped her palm up and flat, then curled it into a fist—“and snatch away your soul to burn it.”

“Cora, I—”

“I will burn it in a low fire, so it has time to feel the pain, to scream for mercy.”

She meant to terrify him. Why did he find himself hard, then? She trembled with fury, a righteous indignation that would spear him through the gut if offered the opportunity, and he quaked with desire.

“Did you enjoy your evening, Husband ? I hear the beds at Lady Circe’s are quite comfortable.”

She knew . Whatever arousal her ferocity had pulsed through him fled. “Bailey should not have told you—” His friend Benjamin Bailey had tried to talk him out of running back to London. Liam should have listened to him.

“I am glad he did! Now I know exactly what sort of man you are. The kind who thinks he can do as he pleases but who disdains women for any and all similar desires. You wish me to... to lie back and be still so you can finish as quickly as can be and leave for other beds, other ladies. Just like my father.” She spat the last word.

And he ventured a step closer, buoyed by a surge of realization. “That is not true. I do not believe that. I do not wish that. And I hope not to be like your father at all if you so dislike him. As you clearly do.”

“I loathe him.”

“Very well. I’ll loathe him, too.”

“Ha!” In a sweep of fabric, she surged past him and shot up the stairs. “You will not return to that place.”

He followed her. “No, I will not.”

“And you will not keep a stable of mistresses.”

“No, I certainly will not.”

She reached the top of the stairs and made straight for the viscountess’s bedchamber. “And I will—” She stopped midstep, her skirts swinging around her frozen legs. Slowly, she faced him. “You will not?” Her eyes narrowed. “So agreeable? Are you lying to placate me?”

“I am not lying.” One foot on the landing and the other two steps lower, he held up his hands and said, “Let me explain. I am a fool but not a bounder. I merely wish to be a good and dutiful husband, a proper viscount, a passable man. I simply wish to please you.”

“Please me? By hying off to a brothel? You expect me to be fool enough to believe you?” She swung back into motion once more.

He ran after her. “It’s true. I was humiliated when I found out about the books. I

thought you..." What were the right words? "Ignorant of what happens between men and women. As ignorant as I." He mumbled the last bit.

"Pardon?" One shoulder jerked back, and she glanced at him over it.

Nothing for it. He must fess up. He stood tall, straightened his shoulders, and lifted his chin. "Our night together was my first. With any woman."

She tilted her head, her pink lips partly open. "But you're a man!"

"Thus, the humiliation." Heat had returned to his cheeks.

"It's not denied you."

"And yet I've been denied. Multiple times." Lord, he did not wish to relive those disastrous dalliances, those apocalyptic amorous encounters, those ill-fated almost fucks in a hallway in the middle of the day, in front of this woman. "That is not the point. The point is I may have overreacted. My first thought was how much more than me you must know. My second thought was that you must be laughing at my attempts to respect your innocence. My third thought—"

"My. So many thoughts, and here I believed you incapable of thinking at all."

He flinched but accepted the hit. A fair blow, all things considered. "I understand why you might think so." He scratched the back of his neck, finding a particularly interesting crack in the wallpaper shaped like a fish. "Only one desire drove me from Norton Hall so rapidly."

"That I am no better than a—"

"No. No." The repeated word offered in a softer tone. "I wanted to be able to please

you and had no idea how. A husband should know his way around his wife's body, should have gained experience before marriage that would benefit her during it. The best place to gain such an education was an establishment like Lady Circe's. You will not believe me, I know, but I had no notion of actually... practicing with a woman. I simply wanted to... to speak to one. As I learned from my professors and father to be a vicar. As I spoke to the estate manager when I became a viscount, as I sought out a duke to help me navigate the new world of the ton ." As evidenced by the last twenty-four hours, he was composed almost entirely of mistakes. He could not be trusted to perform any job well on his own. He needed expert help, or he'd bumble his way to disaster.

Silence as long as the hallway, then she laughed. "You wanted a lecture on the subject of making love?"

"I knew you'd laugh at me." The words clipped. She might as well have shoved him down the stairs.

"No." Said with a crashing step toward him. "No. A little right now, yes. It is so unusual, you see. But when we... when you came to me... not then. If you had come to me , told me , I would not have laughed."

He studied her face, though she would not look at him. He believed her. What was that unfurling slowly in his chest?

Hope?

"Cora." He took a tentative step toward her. "Can we begin again? Be truthful with one another about who we are and what we do. About the kind of marriage we wish to create with one another." He held out a hand toward her, waiting, hoping.

She swallowed, eyeing his outstretched hand like a strange dog she feared might snap

at her. Her arm flinched, and he thought she might reach out, take his hand. But she pulled it against her belly.

“No,” she said. “This is, I fear, a very clear sign about the sort of marriage we are meant to have.”

“And what sort is that?”

“The distant kind.” She pressed her back against her bedchamber door and wrapped her fingers around the doorknob. “There is no reason for us to bother one another until you need an heir. You may”—she cleared her throat—“let me know when that is, and I will accommodate you, my lord.” Her hand twisted the doorknob, the door gave way, and she stepped so quickly into her room that he could not catch her. The door slammed closed between them.

“Cora!” he cried, pressing his palms against the cool wood of the door, knocking his damned hard forehead against it. “We must talk more. We should not run. It’s not a sign of anything except for the fact we have not been open enough with one another. I—”

“Do you wish for an heir now?” Her voice was muffled but sharp still.

All he had to do was say he wanted an heir. Only that and she’d let him into the bedchamber by her side. But impulse overrode the voice of wisdom, yelling to give her nothing but the truth.

“If an heir comes, of course, but I’m not terribly worried about it at the moment.” A true viscount would be.

“Then we are done with one another until that time, Lord Norton.”

He lifted his fist to bang on the door, laid it down softly instead. If the woman wanted distance, he could give her that. He needed time, anyway, and a less groggy mind, to figure out what to do next.

He'd made few choices in his life for himself. From a young age, he'd known he would follow in his father's footsteps in the church and take the living in the parish near Norton Hall after his father's death. He'd done the best he could to follow that path—at Oxford, then working as a curate beneath his father, then replacing his father one spring day when he didn't wake up from a nap. Then death chose a different path for him once more—uncle and cousin dead within a year of each other, and Liam suddenly a viscount.

With a wife. Her, also not of his choosing.

Liam had always done his duty, listened to the voices of those who knew better. Because when he didn't, failure hit him with a hard fist and laid him flat, nose broken, likely sprawled across a pile of steaming horse dung.

Impulse had insisted he kiss her.

Impulse had driven him to the brothel.

And now his wife required distance.

He banged his forehead against the door, and it swung open, revealing Cora's pale, passionate face.

"You cannot stay here, my lord. Please find other accommodations until I do." She snapped the door shut again, and he set his heavy steps down the stairs and out the door.

He was a failure as a husband, as a viscount, and as a man.

Hardly surprising.

But he'd damn well figure out how to make things right.

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Chapter Two

August 1820

Cora wished she were still a virgin. Her poetry readings had felt so much more dramatic then, so much more dangerous. An unmarried lady standing before a room of women and reciting tragic love poetry, describing the hero's glistening muscles and the heroine's heaving bosom while her own bosom heaved with emotion? Exciting, that. Scandalous. She'd draped her every word in her own expectations—romance and heartbreak. And soul-shattering pleasure in between.

Reality had proved a different beast. Dull. Dutiful. Dreary.

Silence settled around the dark room, a fitting companion to the flickering candlelight in the crowded space. The audience waited for her next words, the final lines of the poem she'd written on the night of her husband's desertion. She needed to give those words to them because until she did, loneliness would shroud her like the cloak covering her from head to toe. Until she made them love her, she was in a dark room, alone.

She sighed, and they thought it because of the poem's tragic ending. But she sighed for her own tragic ending. Marriage. Separation.

She parted her lips to finish the poem, to give the audience their final moment of tragic delight, then bask in oh-so-fleeting moment during their applause when she would feel... connected. A part of. Wanted.

But parted lips did not bring sound, and good intentions did not produce words.

Tonight, she would fail them.

With numb fingers, she found the candle snuffer in her cloak pocket and extinguished the only candle placed near her. The light barely illuminating her hooded face flashed into a quick death, and after a pause of, no doubt, confusion, a smattering of soft applause filled the air.

The applause had always been soft. By necessity. The poetry recitations were secret and, due to the scandalous subject of her poems, must remain so. Even at these house parties where the hostess could organize them with great caution, inviting some guests, keeping others in the dark. But tonight, fewer women clapped. Instead, they leaned over and whispered near their friends' ears. Complaints. Because she had not finished the poem. Because the poem had been one she'd recited several times in the last month. Because she'd offered no new material for her followers during that time. Their applause spoke more of their disappointment than of their admiration.

Cora remained still, the folds of her cloak like marble, until every woman but one had slunk quietly from the room, heading off to the ballroom in another part of the house where those uninitiated in the delights of secret and scandalous poetry readings made merry. When the room buzzed with empty silence for several seconds, Cora finally moved, stepping into the hallway.

Her hostess, Lady Templeton, stood tall just outside the door, the single candle in the hallway wall sconce casting shadows on her face and glinting off the silver streaks in her brown hair. Her usually soft, round face had become a plane of unreadable emotion in the dark. Her blue eyes though... They held the beginnings of a lecture. Cora would take the lecture, whatever it was about. Though Lady Templeton was Cora's mother's age, she'd always been a good friend, a supporter of Cora's poetry, and a member of the lending library Cora and Prudence organized.

The secret, naughty lending library.

“Cora,” Lady Templeton said, “you are blocked.”

“I am.” She’d had one bout of inspiration right after she’d discovered her husband’s perfidy, his betrayal. The words had flowed like a raging, flooded river, and she’d denied sleep and food to master the torrent. In a frenzy, she’d performed the poem as soon as possible. And after the buzz from the applause drained away, she’d been left with nothing. Not a single word.

“Have you tried reading? Surely being swept away in an excellent story will help you write your own.”

“I can’t focus on words,” Cora admitted.

“None of them?”

“Not a single one. It’s no matter. I’ve other diversions to occupy my time.”

“I’m aware. Bouncing from house party to house party, like you’re a young buck with nothing to occupy your time, chasing frivolity.” Lady Templeton did not sound pleased. “Have you spoken to your husband of late?”

“Naturally not.”

“Nothing natural about it. Cora”—Lady Templeton put a hand on Cora’s wrist, squeezed—“I feel partially responsible for this separation between you and Norton. I thought he knew about the books, that you’d told him.”

“You have apologized before, my lady. No need to do so again.”

“There is every need. As a woman lucky enough to possess a doting husband, I want nothing more than for my young friends to have the same. Lottie, Andromeda, Prudence—they’ve all found their happy endings. I would like you to have one as well.”

Lottie, Andromeda, and Prudence, the Duke of Clearford’s sisters. They had introduced Cora to Lady Templeton and her like, married women who preferred books of an illicit nature. Before she’d become friends with Clearford’s sisters, she’d been alone in London society, leading a handful of women to secret poetry readings, the darkness of the rooms she read in separating her from the others, always. Now the eldest Merriweather sisters were married. But unlike Cora, they were happy in their marriages.

“Not every woman is destined for the sort of union you and Lord Templeton share.”

“But in the early days of your marriage, you seemed to have hope. And it is only my loose lips that ruined it all.”

“Not at all. It was Norton’s actions. You did not force him to run off to a brothel.”

“Foolish man.”

“Ridiculous man,” Cora mumbled because she knew why he’d run off. Not to make merry with another woman but to learn how to please his wife. A thrill tripped though her, and she cut it off like slamming a door shut against a strong summer wind. “I’m ridiculous, too.” She swerved around Lady Templeton and into the hallway.

Lady Templeton followed closely behind, her light footsteps echoing. “You should at least spend time with Lord Norton. To explore if what you have is worth saving.”

“I’m too busy.”

“Jumping from house party to house party.”

The best way to keep busy. And to avoid her husband who, when she'd remained in London, made the walk from Hotel Hestia where he currently resided to their townhome daily to see her. Who had sent letters when she refused to see him. He could not pin her down if she remained in constant motion.

“House parties,” Cora said, “are the best way to perform my poetry without getting caught. Much easier to organize with fewer people to manage. Besides, no one minds a bit of a scandal in the country. And my scandal is bound to be less interesting than some others a few bedchambers down from mine.”

“Oh?” Bright interest in that one sound. “And who sleeps a few bedchambers down? I can't remember where I put—” Lady Templeton shook her head. “No, no. You will not distract me with gossip. I have more than lectures to share with you today.”

“And that is?”

“There is someone I would like you to meet, and they are leaving now with all the other guests. You must hurry.”

Today, the last of Lady Templeton's house party. Both she and Cora would travel to Bluevale, Viscount Noble's estate, on the morrow and remain there for some weeks, months perhaps. However long Andromeda needed them once her babe decided to make an appearance.

“Who wishes to meet me?” She'd not been particularly sociable at the house parties she'd attended, choosing to keep to herself or stay close to the ladies she already knew.

“Have you heard of Viscountess Escher?”

“Her name is familiar.”

“She is, secretly, an authoress. Do you know the children’s books, Pollyanna’s Adventures or something of the like?”

Cora gasped. “Of course I do.”

Lady Templeton chuckled. “Well, the authoress of those tales wishes to speak with you. I’ve arranged a meeting. In my private drawing room. She awaits you there. Go now, quick. Before she tires of waiting.” She waved her hands down the hallway.

But Cora hesitated. “Why would she wish to speak with me? Even if she’s heard me recite, I cannot publish my poems. They are too risqué.” She scrunched her nose. “And she’s a children’s author.”

“You won’t know unless you speak with her. Sate your curiosity, Cora. And go!” More shooing motions down the hallway.

Cora went, but slowly, down the stairs and out of the servants’ quarters. Perhaps the viscountess merely wished to talk craft. Or art. Making a new acquaintance would not hurt. Nor would hearing admiration for her work. She walked with greater speed down the hall and stopped briefly before the correct door to rip her veil off and smooth back her hair. She took a deep breath and pushed through.

A woman stood before a looking glass, her head tilted as she studied her own reflection. She was rather plain with dark-blonde hair and gray eyes. She dressed simply, elegantly, and moved with a confidence that turned her plain looks striking.

“Lady Escher,” Cora said, proud to hear not a single waver or crack in her voice. She never used the deep rhythmic cadence she used to recite her poetry in her daytime life, but now she did to pronounce this woman’s name.

Lady Escher met Cora's gaze in the looking glass. "Do I know you? Your voice is familiar." Of course, the woman wouldn't recognize her. Cora only ever recited her poetry from behind a deep, black cloak in rooms dimly lit.

"I am Viscountess Norton. I have heard you are looking for me."

Lady Escher smiled as she faced Cora. "Do you, by any chance, possess a fondness for poetry?"

"I do." A library couch graced a wall near the looking glass, and Cora perched on one end of it, sat tall, and found her voice.

They hear the warring elements no more:

While I am doomed—by life's long storm oppressed,

To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest.

Lady Escher sat on the other end of the couch. "Charlotte Smith. An influence?" She peeked at Cora. They were conducting an entire, second conversation beneath the conversation.

"She is... quite influential. To many poets."

Lady Escher folded her hands in her lap and whispered, "You are brave, quite daring. Or foolish." A little laugh. "They tend to go hand in hand."

"You were asking for me?"

"I had the pleasure of"—Lady Escher glanced at the door as if expecting someone to burst through it at any moment, then leaned closer, still watching the exit—"hearing

you. At your last reading in London. And today. I am astonished you are so young. Your poetry is exquisite. And so brimming with emotion.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

“Does your husband know of your poetry? Does he care?”

“Does it matter?” No keeping the winter wind from Cora’s voice.

“It may. Husbands are not always accepting of a wife’s ambitions. Mine is quite accommodating.”

“Mine does not care. We live separate lives.”

Lady Escher lifted a single brow. “Do you know who I am?”

“I’ve heard rumors. Some say that if the identity of a certain popular authoress of charming children’s tales were to be discovered, she might look a bit like you.”

“Indeed. Your work is good. And I have the means to put it in print.” Another furtive glance at the door. “Tell me, have you ever considered publishing your work?”

Heavens. There it was—the one thing she could not do. “Never. If you have heard it, you are aware of why it can never be published. I do not wish to incite the censure of the general public. It is better if my audience remains... intimate. And approving.” She had enough censure from her father and her mother. She did not need it on a national level.

Lady Escher nodded. “It’s true. You cannot publish what you currently write, but... have you perhaps considered writing other types of literature?”

“I do not write for children, my lady, and I would not care to.”

“Then do not. There is a world between that and your poetry.” Lady Escher chuckled. “Consider Miss Austen. Consider Mrs. Radcliffe. Consider Charlotte Smith. None of these ladies include scenes of a scandalous nature as you do, but they keep the high feeling. They write, still of life, and in a way that allows their words access to a larger number of readers. You are talented. I should hate to see you fade into obscurity. Your words should be beloved by many, as you, and I, love the words of Mrs. Smith.”

Cora’s breath caught. Loved by many. Her soul ached for it. And this woman could make it happen. “I would, indeed, be interested, Lady Escher.”

“Even if you must modify a few elements, change your usual style?”

“Elements? More than one? More than the love making scenes?”

Lady Escher sighed. “Those scenes are lovely. Truly. I particularly enjoy your use of metaphor. But if you don’t wish to be shunned from society...”

“I do not, my lady.”

“Then they’ll have to go.” Lady Escher scowled into the air and tapped her toe. “There is an Ann Radcliffe quality to your work, and I can see the influence of Smith. A melancholy that charges the atmosphere.”

Cora’s indignation faded fast. To be compared to such greats! “Thank you.”

“But your endings...”

When Lady Escher provided no more information, Cora barked, “What of them?”

“Do they all end so tragically?”

“Ah... yes. I’m... afraid so.” Cora bit the side of her tongue, better her pain and a bit of copper blood than insult Lady Escher by stomping out of the room. After tossing something nearby—a paperweight?—at the lady’s head. “Is it a problem?”

“It is only that I am an author of happy endings. I had hoped you might be able to provide one as well, but in your own style. A dark, tragic middle and a happy end.” She beamed brightly as if she hadn’t asked Cora to strip her work of its two most crucial elements.

“A happy ending. Is that a necessity?”

“Yes, I’m afraid. Even Mrs. Radcliffe...” She shrugged, knowing Cora knew Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels inevitably ended in marriage. “It has been a pleasure to meet you. I do hope you’ll consider my offer. Think of how many you could please with your stories.” Then she left.

“A happy ending,” Cora muttered, falling into a nearby chair. “How... unlikely.” Romance rarely ended happily in real life. Why should it end happily in fiction?

The door swung open, and Lady Templeton appeared. “Well?”

“She wishes to help me publish something.”

“Oh!” Lady Templeton leaped at Cora, tugging her to her feet and gathering her into a warm hug. “Oh, brilliant girl, I am delighted.”

“Me as well.” And, truly, she grew more pleased by the moment. Her poems—out of the darkness and into the light, loved not by a handful of women in secret, but adored openly in drawing rooms, settled onto shelves with other beloved books.

Perhaps then she might not feel so damn alone. Perhaps then she might feel wanted. Because she would be.

“But,” Cora said, her voice sounding far away, “I cannot write love scenes. And the ending must be happy.”

“Hm. A disappointment to be sure, but it is bearable, isn’t it? For such an opportunity?”

“Yes.” It must be bearable. She’d bear it no matter what.

Lady Templeton wrapped an arm around Cora’s shoulders and guided her toward the guest rooms. “And the Merriweather sisters will be pleased, too.” She stopped before Cora’s bedchamber door. “Prepare to travel. Rest. I must make sure the other guests have everything they need upon leaving. And I... have correspondence to write.” With a turn on her toe, Lady Templeton sailed away.

Cora retired to her bedchamber, sat at the small writing desk there, and stared at its blank surface. Scratched and nicked and faded in spots. It had survived, perhaps, decades. Centuries? But still it stood, making itself useful despite its history.

She collapsed against it, folding her arms under her head. She could cut out the love scene. No difficulty there. She’d only have to fight against her own dissatisfaction. But... writing a happy ending? She could imagine a thousand things she’d never done before—most of a salacious nature. But two people living happily ever after—that was one fantasy her imagination could never conjure.

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Chapter Three

Madame Juliet flourished the wooden cock before her like a sword. She pinned Liam with a stare cold as death and pointed the cock at the book in his hands. “You are not listening, my lord.”

No, he wasn’t. He was thinking of Cora’s eyes when she’d cursed him from across the room the last time they’d spoken. Anger there, passion, too—a heady concoction. He was imagining her as the lady in the book he read, imagining the man as himself. Would she like to bend over a table for him?

Madame Juliet clasped the phallus behind her back and paced the length of his hotel room and back. “Sprawled across that chair, brooding.”

“Reading, you mean.”

“Brooding. That’s what you’re doing.” She sighed. “Lord, I tire of your brooding.”

“Then leave.” Elbow propped on the chair arm, he scratched his chin, lifted one booted ankle to rest on top of the opposite knee. “I did not invite you here.”

Madame Juliet stopped in front of him, hands (and wooden cock) on hips. “I educate you not for your sake, my lord, but for your wife’s. If you are as tepid in bed as you say you are, she needs all the help you can acquire.” She held the phallus out to him. “Take this and show me the proper rhythm you’d use to—”

He brushed the toy aside, snapped his book closed, tossed it onto the table, and stood.

“I’m off to Jackson’s.” Leaving seemed to be the only way he could avoid this woman. And he had to avoid her because she’d already caused trouble. More to the point, she’d caused rumors, gossip that made the men at Jackson’s slap him on the back and produced glares from the ladies he happened to pass on Bond Street or in Hyde Park.

He found his coat hanging on the top corner of the opened wardrobe and slung it on.

She tsked. “You’re going to wear your knuckles to bones.”

Boxing provided the only outlet for his energy these days. Fencing helped, too. Riding down Rotten Row in the early hours before everyone awoke helped. Most days he started with a ride, found Angelo’s by noon, and as the sun sank below the London skyline, he found himself at Jackson’s. But nothing fully doused the desire coursing through him. Desire to show his wife he could damn well do better.

“You have such nice hands,” Madam Juliet cooed. “I cannot abide your hurting them. Your wife will not like it. Put those hands to better use.”

“I’d like to,” he said, circling her as he strode for the door. “But my wife won’t let me.”

He didn’t even know where she was. He’d tried following her about the country, but she moved more quickly than he did, bouncing from country estate to country estate, from house party to house party like a leaf in the wind, whipped up and away from him before he could take a single step in her direction.

The proprietress of Mother Circe’s, however, had pinpointed his location at Hotel Hestia more quickly than a dog sniffs out a bone or a rake sniffs out a lady’s floundering virtue. He had, apparently, piqued her interest. Now he couldn’t get the woman to go away. She didn’t seem to care what rumors her presence here rippled

through the ton . She'd named him her little project and would not be persuaded to leave him be.

To be fair, though... he had learned from the madame. Much. All of it theoretical, intellectual, lessons without a single touch, without revealing even an inch of improper skin. Not even an arousal unless he happened to close his eyes and think of Cora taking the woman's place, Cora demonstrating first one position and then another.

He'd become a faithful dog, loyal but unwanted. Then whoever slapped his back would howl with laughter if they knew.

He dropped his forehead against the door with a thud . "I'm going to go mad."

Madame Juliet produced a commiserating hum. "Unfulfilled desire has been known to have that effect. You must figure a way back into your wife's good graces or risk losing every bit of common sense to the throbbing of your cock. Come, sit, my lord, and let me teach you about this." She waved the phallus between them.

"And what, besides its simply outrageous size, is notable about that?"

"It's diverting. And your lady might enjoy it if you use it on her. If she has, as you say, a particular literary taste, you will not shock her with such... toys."

Would Cora enjoy the use of such devices? He groaned and dropped back into his chair. What a green boy he must have seemed to her, meeting her in pitch dark to preserve her modesty, raising the hem of her shift and plowing into her with little foreplay but for innocent kisses about her mouth and neck.

What did he know about how viscounts bedded their brides? He'd studied! He'd worried. He'd tried his best to get it right. And in the end, he'd failed her. Because

even if he'd gotten the viscount part right, he'd gotten the Cora part wrong.

"Marriage is deuced confusing," he said. Wasn't marriage. It was him. Always had been. Some men could do no wrong. Liam could do no right.

"So I've heard, and so I am pleased I will never wed. But, my lord, if you can convince your lady to listen to you, if you can just speak with one another, then—"

"I can seduce her?"

"Hm." She slapped the phallus against her palm three times, thinking. "I cannot speak to your success in such an endeavor as you've never tried to seduce me." She twisted her mouth to the side. "But you can always bring her to me. I am sure I can educate the both of you together, and—"

"No." He rose once more, shaking his limbs. "Jackson's." A necessity. He steered Madame Juliet toward the door and out of the room. "You must leave."

She grinned. "Confidence. Dominance. You've got it. You must remember that's the true secret to a happy bedding. Do not hesitate. Know what you want, what she wants, and be ruthless in attaining both. Lady Norton will love it." She winked.

He slammed the door, and he should have felt guilty about it, but her muffled chuckle from the hallway alleviated him of any sort of pity for the brothel owner.

Perhaps she had the right of it. Perhaps Cora needed a confident husband to guide her in her new life as viscountess. One who tore ruthlessly toward what he wanted. He could do that. He felt ruthless, desire hard and tight within him, anger like lightning skittering across his skin. She was running from him. And hiding.

He was trying to make things right, and she was refusing to let him.

He'd spent his entire life doing things that didn't quite suit him. Every action and reaction an ill-fitting suit of clothes only just hiding the plague of a human being he couldn't help but be. God, wouldn't his father be livid if he were alive? To see his son take a wife and lose her within a month. If he'd been angry enough to lock Liam away in a windowless room for an entire week after discovering him with that girl from the village, what would he do now? Call down God's vengeance on Liam's head, that's what. But Liam was no longer a vicar, and he was no longer obliged to live by his father's rules.

No, he had to live by an entirely new set of rules. Those dictated by his grim grandmother, self-ordained defender of the Norton title from... well, from Liam. Or presumably anyone who'd not been raised in the proper ways of title having.

He stepped to the window and threw it open. Juliet always left a sweet scent behind. Not unpleasant, but not for him. Inhaling the not at all fresh London air did nothing to rid him of it. It clung to his shirt. So, he threw off everything and pulled new linen from his trunk. Arms full, he paused.

What did it mean to live out of a trunk, to live in a place meant for travelers, those going and coming but never staying? He had several homes. And he'd ceded them all to a wife he barely knew. He'd sacrificed his comfort for hers. What man would do such a thing, gentleman or not?

But she'd seemed such an unmoored little thing, and he hated that. For anyone. He rubbed an aching in his chest right beneath the eternal black ink he'd had etched there years ago. And more recently. Two small tokens of each of his life's commitments. Reminders, really, of who he was supposed to be.

Who was that? Not who he was —a man always one mistake away from absurdity. A man who bumbled along because he could never quite live up to who he was supposed to be.

Who was that? A holy man of God. A stern and noble viscount. A virile gentleman capable of making the ladies swoon with a wink.

He slammed the trunk closed and quickly dressed before stepping out the door. He could be those things. He would be those things. Well, but for the man of God bit. That he could happily leave in the past.

To do his duty, he had to win back his wife. By any means possible.

“Pardon me, Lord Norton.” A maid stepped between Liam and the door to the street. She bobbed a curtsy, her white cap crisp atop her head. “Mail for you.”

His heart almost leaped out of his chest to grab the bundle she held out to him. But it was not his wife’s tiny, meticulous handwriting that scrawled his name across the back of either letter. It was a handwriting he knew well.

The scrawl of Satan.

His grandmother.

He sighed as he stepped outside and opened the letter, setting off toward Bond Street. Grandmother wrote from an estate he owned near Bath, where she’d run off to during mourning for her son and grandson, the direct heirs of the Norton title and holdings. She’d been managing Liam from a distance ever since, and now she wanted to know when he’d return to Norton Hall, wanted to ensure he understood his duty as viscount, worried he had no idea how to go about running an estate.

But not in a hovering, doting, grandmotherly sort of way.

No, each of her words dripped with ire, phrases such as pallid pretender to the title and uncouth nefarious nodcock hit him like bullets to the gut. She had quite a way

with words. He'd chuckle if they weren't aimed at him. If they didn't poke at an already bruised bit of himself that needed no prodding.

Because he already knew these bloody things about himself, and he was trying to do better

Grandmother made only one mention of Cora: You should have chosen a wife from your social circle. Perhaps you would not be estranged. Perhaps an heir would be on the way. But considering her lack of pedigree, perhaps it is best not to further dilute the Fletcher bloodlines.

Really, what more did she need to say?

He flipped the other letter over with a sigh and froze. Stamped into the deep red wax holding the letter closed—the Marquess of Templeton's seal. Why would he write to Liam? They'd never met, but... Lady Templeton, his wife... Liam knew the marchioness much better. She'd been a guest at Norton Hall but a few months ago. She was the one who'd revealed Cora's reading preferences to him.

He ripped through the wax, unfolded the paper, and read.

Dear Lord Norton, you dunderhead,

Your wife is going to be at Viscount Noble's estate, Bluevale, for the next fortnight at least. I write to you against her wishes and without her knowledge. But I write to atone for my mistakes. Had you heard the truth from her, I believe events would have turned out quite differently between the two of you. You may not care, but your wife has been quite busy of late, flitting about from one place to another. She is not a butterfly, though, darting between blooms. She is more one with the moth, flying ever closer to her own extinction.

Her eyes seem tired, and a good husband would take care of that.

Are you a good husband?

Sarah Simmons, Marchioness of Templeton

He knew where Cora was. He finally knew where she was. He ran up the stairs. He must pack, set off for Bluevale as soon as could be. But he had books to pick up. Hell. Halfway up the stairs, he bolted back down.

“Is something amiss, my lord?” a maid asked.

“No, everything’s perfect. Could you inform my valet that we’re leaving this afternoon? I need everything packed.”

“Yes, my lord.” She bobbed a curtsy.

He tipped his hat and set off for Bond Street. He’d pick up his books first. Then enjoy a quick bout at Jackson’s to burn off this energy coursing through him.

He’d finally found her.

And by the time he finished his errands about Town, his valet Mr. Harte would have finished packing.

Bluevale. Less than a day’s ride from London. Too late to leave today. But he’d crow before the cock tomorrow, rise before the sun, and set his sights on winning back his wife.

Chapter Four

Clearford Castle was huge and gray and covered in greenery from the outside. It looked old and cold yet surprisingly comfortable, as if it had grown out of its surroundings, a welcome extension of the rolling green lawns, parterre gardens, and old trees. Inside, Clearford Castle was dark and warm and utterly chaotic. Surely the house relished the company of its daughters, the Merriweather sisters.

Cora certainly did, allowing herself to imagine she was not a guest here, but a ninth sister. Not a banker's daughter, but a duke's child, well loved and cared for.

The younger members of the family had taken over a large drawing room with windows that stretched the length of it and a massive white marble fireplace on one end. The room managed to seem open and inviting despite the dark, wood-paneled walls and low ceilings.

Cora sat near the windows with the youngest Merriweather sisters. Ten-year-old June bounced, watching Cora with rapt attention, her legs crossed before her beneath her skirts. Beside her on the floor, the fourteen-year-old Gertrude flopped on her belly, her chin supported in her hands, her body resting on her propped elbows.

"And then he put an arrow through her heart, didn't he?" June clutched her heart. "He's a villain. That's what villains do."

"Don't be absurd," Gertrude said. "He's not a real villain. Her love is softening him, and he will soon throw over his evil ways to live a life of virtue."

“It’s not your story to tell, Gerty.” Nearby, but not too close, the fifteen-year-old Earl of Avelford reclined in a chair, reading a book. Pretending to, perhaps. “Let Lady Norton finish it.”

Gertrude rolled over and sat up straight, her hands finding her hips. “I can have a guess. And it’s a good one.” She stuck her nose in the air. “Let’s see you do better, Rupy.”

June giggled. “He hates that name. Watch his eyes bulge out, Lady Norton.”

And the young earl’s eyes did bulge. He snapped his book shut. With dark hair and thick brows, he greatly resembled his older brother, Mr. Tristan Kingston, the bastard son of an earl who’d married one of the Duke of Clearford’s sisters. “My name is Rupert Edward Alexander, Earl of Avelford.” He pulled himself up tall and tugged his jacket straight. “You, Trudy, may call me Lord Avelford.”

Gertrude snorted. “I’ll call you dicked in the nob.”

“Gertrude!” A heavily pregnant Lady Andromeda Merriweather, now Mrs. Kingston, waddled over, her light-brown hair pulled back in a soft coiffure and her hazel eyes sparking. A soft woman with enough of an edge to make her the tiniest bit intimidating. “Where did you learn such words?”

The young girl scowled. “Rupy has quite the illuminating vocabulary.”

Andromeda aimed her scowl at her brother-in-law. “Alex. What have I said about your language around ladies? What has your brother told you?”

“To behave like a gentleman,” Avelford muttered.

“Precisely.”

“Shouldn’t you be resting, Annie?” the boy asked, eyeing her belly as if it might pop.

“Absolutely not.”

“I’m going to go tell King. He’ll make sure you stay off your feet.” Standing, he dropped his book in his chair, sent one final glare at Lady Gertrude, and left to find his brother.

Andromeda took his abandoned seat. “Dear Alex worries more than Tristan does. He’ll be an excellent uncle when the babe arrives.”

“We’ll be better aunts,” Gertrude insisted. “Just you see. Won’t we, June?”

June nodded, her previously amused face falling into utter seriousness. “The best.”

“I heard you were telling a story, Cora?” Andromeda said. “I thought I’d like to hear a bit.”

“Ah, well, Gertrude guessed the ending. It’s all over now.”

“I knew it!” Gertrude preened and jumped to her feet. “I’m going to find Rupy and let him know.”

“Me, too!” June scrambled after her sister, leaving Cora alone with her friend.

“They are adorable,” Cora said. “Avelford included. He’ll be a fine man someday.”

“Someday soon, I’m afraid. He’s almost as tall as Tristan and taller than me.” Andromeda sighed, the happiest of sounds.

“Are you really feeling well?” Cora asked.

Andromeda nodded. “Particularly with everyone crowded about me. Lottie is a dear for thinking of inviting you and Lady Templeton. If I cannot have my own mother nearby, Lady Templeton is a lovely substitute. She and my mother were quite close, and Lady Templeton’s arms were the first to hug me outside of the family after my parents’ deaths. I am glad you are here, too. Having everyone about is quite distracting me from this.” She rubbed her belly.

Prudence dropped into a chair next to Andromeda. She shared her sister’s hazel eyes and slim frame, but her hair was a bit lighter, more dark blonde than light brown. “The baby has clearly been speaking with her Uncle Ben. He’s always late. He just left to meet Samuel and the others at some cottages. He should have left half an hour ago.” A sly grin tipped the corner of her mouth upward. “I must admit, though... this time his lack of punctuality is not his fault.”

“You and Ben should have gone on a honeymoon,” Andromeda said. “It’s not right for newlyweds to be trapped with their family.”

Prudence shrugged. “You are here. The baby is soon to be here. So, we are here. And glad for it.”

Andromeda swallowed, her eyes glistening. “Thank you.”

“Don’t cry, Annie!” Their oldest sister Lottie plopped onto a nearby sofa, Lady Templeton sinking down beside her.

Andromeda swiped at the tears with the backs of her hands. “The baby is making me do it.”

“Naturally.” Lady Templeton reached out and patted Andromeda’s arm. “It is the way of things. When I was enceinte with Thurston, I cried every day. And I’m sure had I any more children, it would have been the same. Your mother certainly did. With

each one of you. Once because she'd put two different colored slippers on and couldn't reach her feet to change them."

"I will certainly not cry when I'm with child," Lottie said.

"That I don't doubt." Lady Templeton jerked her attention across the room. "Cora." Cora jumped, and Lady Templeton continued in a softer fashion. "I assume your words have returned since you were telling the children stories."

Cora sighed. "No, they are not. Lady Gertrude guessed the ending right away. I cannot write that one for Lady Escher."

"You will think of something," Andromeda said. "I'm not at all worried."

"Perhaps," Prudence offered, "you might use one of your more popular poems but change the ending from tragic to happy. Then you need to not create an entirely new narrative."

"I cannot. That would feel like cheating. Besides, those stories must end that way."

Andromeda wrinkled her nose. "Why?"

"Because there is no other ending."

"Then you must find a story where the only possible ending is happy," Lottie said.

"Do such things exist?" Cora couldn't think of one. Every story possessed a potential tragedy. Happy endings, on the other hand, were rare miracles doled out only to the fortunate few.

"Yes," all four women said together.

Cora pinched the bridge of her nose, her limbs feeling heavy. “I’m tired. I think I’ll return to Bluevale to rest before dinner.”

“Shall I accompany you?” Lottie asked.

“No. Please do not. You must be with your family, and I have an itch for solitude.”

Lottie nodded. “If you insist.”

As Cora left the happy chatter of the drawing room behind her, she felt no better than she had before. Alone in the hallway, she could not even pretend to be part of that family.

“Cora,” a voice hissed. “Cora.”

Cora looked up. Two identical countenances peered at her from behind a door across the hall. The duke’s twin sisters, Imogen and Isabella.

“Come,” one said, “We’ve something to tell you.”

“She has something to tell you,” the other corrected. “I am here to support you should you need it.”

Cora followed them into the room and closed the door behind her. The sisters were almost impossible to tell apart except they never wore the same gown. While some might capitalize on the exotic picture their identical countenances produced, Imogen and Isabella refused. Cora appreciated such practicality. Today, Imogen wore green, and Isabella wore white. Isabella usually wore white or variations thereof, and her twin wore every other color under the sun.

“Support?” Cora asked, “What do you mean?”

“It’s Lord Norton,” Isabella said.

“I care for no gossip surrounding him.” Cora made for the door. She put her hand on the handle, twisted, but could not bring herself to push. With a sigh, she said, “What is it, then? Tell me quickly.” Good to have all the details, even if she did not want them. Had her mother known her father’s hijinks, she would not have been constantly bludgeoned with them at gatherings, hearing first of his misdeeds as whispers on others’ lips.

“I am so sorry,” Imogen said, wringing her hands before her.

Isabella fortified herself with a heavy inhale, then smooshed all her words together in a rush. “Madame Juliet has been holding court in his chamber at Hotel Hestia.”

Madam Juliet. The proprietress of Mother Circe’s Nunnery. Cora should have been prepared for this. Liam may have gone to the brothel originally for an education. She believed him about that. But a man could not hold out indefinitely. And since she’d refused to warm his bed, it should be no shock he’d found a willing woman to replace her, to slake his lusts.

Should have come as no shock at all. She knew how men were. They needed release and didn’t care which woman gave it to them.

No. Shock. At all.

And yet the air had become difficult to breathe. Too thick. And she pressed a fist against her gut, needing something to hold her steady.

“Ah.” She pushed open the door. Perhaps the air would prove easier to breathe outside. “That’s all? Thank you for letting me know.”

“Are you upset?” Imogen asked. “I’d be terrifyingly angry.”

She wanted to feel anger bubble her blood. Because if she didn’t, another emotion would swamp her entirely so she might never escape. Loss could pull a person under as surely as a giant sea wave. But why feel loss? Of Liam? Ha. Of course, he would take comfort where he could. He’d seemed so very... truthful, so very willing to make things right the last time they’d seen one another in the hallway of the Norton townhouse. But she had sent him away after that conversation and ran from him since then. Of course he’d sought out other women.

Cora shook her head. “I cannot be angry. Once I have given him an heir, I... suppose I’ll do the same thing. Take a lover. Thank you for telling me. It is good to be armed with all the information.” Now she knew not to give him a second chance, not to let him through the door. Now she knew her decision to lock her heart fast away had been the right one.

She slipped from the room and made her way outside, tying her bonnet on tight against the golden autumn sun. The path between Clearford Castle, the duke’s country seat, and Bluevale, Lottie’s husband’s estate, had been well-worn years ago, and as Cora trudged down it, past narrow roads and through thin woods rustling with life, she tried her best not to feel so lonely. The duke and his sisters had lost their parents, but they had one another, and they had husbands and children and those who had been friends with their parents and still cared.

Cora’s parents lived still, yet Cora had not even seen them. She did not have the friends she’d grown up with, the daughters of cits , because they’d been abandoned once her father decided to find his daughter a titled husband. She had not the ton , either, because she was, after all, merely a banker’s daughter. Wealth, it seemed, could not buy everything.

The sisters would say she had them . And she would not deny their support, their

love. What an ungrateful thing that would be. But she could not feel part of the bustle of family life she'd just left.

If she must write a happy ending, she would make it like that—loud and bursting with mirth, more people bouncing about than a person could remember names for. A large family, a teasing and welcoming one. But she must create a heroine suited for it, one unlike herself. A lady alone from birth could never find a place in the chaos of family and friends.

Bluevale rose before her. Newer than Clearford Castle but less comfortable. It seemed to defy the landscape, its many windows reminding the viewer whose hands had shaped it—ambitious men with deep pockets. Grand and old, still, older than anywhere she'd ever lived. Not even her ancestry could provide a fellowship for her to belong to, and—

Cora stopped at the end of the drive riding up to Bluevale's courtyard. A coach idled there. But whose? No other guests were expected. Were they?

She started walking once more with slow steps that quickened once she'd moved close enough to see the crest on the coach's side.

The Norton crest.

"Liam," she whispered. Surely not. Surely not. She ran, her heart thumping, and as she rounded the conveyance, its door flew open.

A man stepped out, his chin tipping up as he took in the house before him. She skidded to a stop, and his gaze swung her way. "Cora."

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

“I’ve caught you.” The corner of his lips twitched up before he ruthlessly pressed them thin.

Irritation bristled along her skin. “How did you find me?”

“Why must you hide?” He stepped toward her.

“I’m not hiding. I’m enjoying what is left to me of life.”

He took another step toward her. He could touch her now if he extended his arms.

She scuttled sideways toward the house. “I need to freshen up. I’ve just walked a mile. And dinner is soon. Excuse me, my lord.”

The crunch of his boots behind her—the sound of a man giving chase. “When will we talk? May I come to your room and—”

“I’d rather be alone.”

A low growl, more crunching gravel. “We must talk.”

“Are you in need of an heir, then?” She tossed the words over her shoulder, not a hitch in her step, though her belly flipped over and over.

“An heir would be a nice consequence of other much wished-for occurrences, but that is not what we must speak of.”

“If you do not wish an heir in nine months, then we have nothing to speak of until you do.” She pushed through the large front doors and inhaled the cooler air inside the shadowed hall. She let the door slam behind her.

But not before he could snap half his body between it and the frame. With a grunt, he pushed the door back open and followed her up the stairs. “Talk to me.” He sounded breathless now.

She fisted her hands in her skirts, lifted them, then climbed each step with the precision of a queen marching to her coronation. “You’ve said all you need say with your actions, my lord. Tell me, how fares Madame Juliet?”

Silence, the cessation of the ringing of boots on stone. He’d stopped behind her. She did not stop, though. She smiled, though not a bit of anything like happiness could penetrate her defenses.

The slap of his boots on the steps started again, this time faster. “Madame Juliet is eager to see me reconnect with my wife.”

Cora made a smothered, guttural sound and finished the climb, raced down the hallway, came within reach of her door, and—

A hand caught her elbow. She whirled on him and had to tilt her head back to see into his face.

It had been more than a month since she’d seen this man, and he somehow discomposed her still. The familiar restless energy coursed through him, and he looked the same as ever with the forgettable good looks of a light-haired man. But he’d changed as well. He wore his clothes differently, somehow. The cravat loose and his hair mussed. His top waistcoat button undone, and a bit of scruff running across his cheeks. His shoulders seemed broader, too, his thighs thicker.

She licked her lips, an unconscious act as her gaze tried to gobble him up. He was the only man to touch her intimately, and he... Well, he made her feel... hungry .

No, no. Impossible. He looked like that—slightly undone and more beautiful for it—because he'd just spent hours in a coach traveling. Nothing about him had changed; nothing in her had craved him for weeks.

“Why do you haunt me so?” she asked, shaking loose his hold on her elbow. “Why cannot you leave me to lead my own life?”

“Because I am your husband. We are married, Cora! We cannot continue as we have been. It's not right.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Why not? Husbands and wives live as we have been living for ages. My own parents never see one another if it can be helped.”

“That is not how we will be.”

“And why not? It's convenient. Happiness can be found in this state of separation, Lord Norton. We need not be together to enjoy life. I have plans, you know. I do not mind what happened anymore. Not much. Your reaction was, perhaps, overly dramatic, but then”—she chuckled—“who am I to reprimand someone for dramatics? It's over, my lord. We are over. But for the matter of an heir. Eventually.”

His hand on her shoulder—fast and strong and spinning her around, pushing her against the wall. His other hand landed on the wall beside her head as he leaned over her, their noses almost touching. “Do you remember our first kiss, Cora?”

She poked her chin at her shoulder, refusing to look at him. Refusing, too, to admit the truth—she remembered that kiss every night and morning, every afternoon, too. That blasted kiss had given her hope.

“I remember it.” His voice dark. It sent a shiver through her. “I can do better.”

He closed the distance between them, his lips descending, the dark intention glittering in his eyes, stealing her breath.

But not her strength. She jerked out of his embrace. “No, I do not think I would like to see.” She picked up her skirts and made for her bedchamber. Not a run, but not a walk, either, and when she reached her room, she called for her maid, requested a bath. Soon, a line of maids were pouring pitchers of water into a large copper tub that two footmen had placed before a fire before stoking it into roaring life. Her maid, Miss Tarte, helped her undress, and then she was slipping into the warm water and washing away the sweat of her walk, the unexpected pain of seeing Liam again.

She leaned her head back against the tub’s edge and closed her eyes. Good thing she’d resisted the impulse to kiss him. Her father once had won her mother back with a kiss. A bad few months, that, when her mother had been as teary-eyed as she’d been starry-eyed.

A click across the room and footsteps brought Cora upright and alert. Liam was slipping through the door, his jacket gone, his hair pushed back in broad finger strokes from his forehead.

“What are you doing?” She ducked lower in the water, covering her breasts with her arms.

“Being ruthless.” He strode toward her, grabbed the back of a chair as he passed it, and pulled it to the very end of the tub. He straddled it as he sat and stared down at the tips of her toes where they peeked out of the water.

“You must leave,” she demanded.

His gaze roamed over the water, up the crisscross of her arms and the column of her neck, then stopped on her face. “We’ll speak now.”

She reached for the linen folded nearby. She'd get out of this tub is what she'd do. Then find something blunt to smash over this man's head.

He beat her to it, whipped the linen out long and settled it around his neck as she sank with a gasp back into the water.

"You can have this after we've talked," he said.

"You are going to force me to face you naked? You're a vicar!"

"I am not anymore, and I was never a good one to begin with. Now I'm a viscount with no moral imperative one way or another, and since I can't convince you to face me at all, I am not above holding your towel hostage to keep you in place." His lips were set in a grim line, and the fabric of his breeches stretched across his strong thighs on either side of the chair back. His shoulders strained the rumpled silk of his shirt.

"You... you are not dressed properly, and—"

"I'm dressed more properly than you. We're dressed well enough for this conversation. No more evasions. You're going to listen to me, Cora."

Humiliation raged red over every inch of her skin. He could not make her do this naked. She could discard modesty and rise from the tub, find her clothes, leave. Wrapping her hands around the tub edge, she pushed and—

His face shifted, the hard lines scrunching for a moment and then melting into softness. He groaned and said, "I'm going to regret this. Another impulse to explode my good intentions, but I can't seem to keep the words locked up."

Frozen halfway out of the tub, she sank slowly back into the water and cleared her

throat. “What words?”

“I owe you. And these too... I’ve spent many hours since last we spoke thinking of those words. I owe you. I embarrassed you when I tore out of Norton Hall. I made you feel ashamed of who you are. And it’s where my biggest sin lies. That is what I must make up to you.”

Despite knowing better, she let her curiosity guide her next words. “And how will you do that?”

“By sharing with you my three most embarrassing moments.”

Oh. She should continue yelling at him to leave, but... she wanted those moments more than this warm bath, more than her next meal, more than the air that kept her alive. She settled into the tub and flicked water at him.

“Very well. Proceed.” She kept her arms crossed over her chest. The water hid little, merely wavered her curves into abstractions. But he kept his gaze locked on her face, and somehow that rocked her toward comfort, trust.

“I was fifteen the first time my father caught me with a woman.”

“Oh!” She slapped a hand over her mouth. She’d not been expecting that, and when his gaze flicked downward for the briefest moment, she remembered. Entirely nude. She snapped her arms beneath the water’s surface once more. “Proceed.”

“It was in the graveyard. Atop some poor resting soul named Nelly Feely. Lived to a ripe old eighty years old. I’ll never forget the epitaph. May God grant her ecstasy .”

“Odd.”

“And perhaps ironic for no ecstasy was had on Madame Feely’s grave. My father discovered me and the local innkeeper’s daughter.” He dropped his head and cleared his throat. “It’s difficult to speak to a lady like this. We are taught to never speak to ladies like this. But I assume”—he lifted his head incrementally and peeked at her—“you do not mind?”

“Not in the least.” In fact, she wanted it, needed it. “Go ahead, then.”

“Right. Well, I’d just—erm—revealed myself to her, and she’d just taken me in hand, and I... Well, things were coming to a climax, and I was trying to come into her, and my father appeared over the top of Nelly Feely’s tombstone, scowling. Right as I...” He shivered. “May no other man on God’s earth know what it’s like to come, looking into his father’s scowling face.”

She hiccupped a laugh.

He narrowed his eyes.

She could not help it. She laughed harder.

“Fine, then.” He waved an arm at her. “Laugh. That’s what this is about, after all.”

She did, great belly-hurting guffaws. “Oh,” she said between gasps for breath and strangled cries of merriment. “That sounds so horrid.” Not at all the stuff of her poetry, not at all the stuff of books.

“Are you ready for the second embarrassment?”

“I do not think I can take it.” She still shook from the first revelation.

“I’ll go into less detail. The second time was at a pub near Oxford. My friends had

bought a lady for me. I was so nervous my father would pop up and catch us, I had an ale first. Then another, and so did the lady. By the time I was ready to forget my father even existed, she was ready to sleep. I kissed her, and she snored. And frankly, Cora, I gave up.”

She rolled her lips between her teeth, holding back her laughter.

“The third time I was caught,” he said, “it was by two children, in the stable of the village inn my first year as my father’s curate. I knew better. But this widow kept batting her lashes at me on Sundays, and I thought... why not? The hay was soft, the lady willing, my own desires... about damned desperate. I was so close, Cora. At the very portal to leaving behind what has for so long seemed my biggest flaw as a man—my virginity. And two children swung open the stall door and gaped at us. The widow’s children.”

“Oh.” A soft exclamation that blew a bubble in the water as she sank farther beneath its surface. She winced. “It sounds horrid.”

He nodded. “Frankly, after that, I realized it would be best if I waited until I could conduct such activities in the safety of my own bedchamber.”

“There are other ways. Hotels. Brothels.” She snapped the word in two, anger returning like a crack of thunder on a sunny day—unexpected and threatening. “You have spent the last month learning those ways.”

“I’ve spent the last month reading.”

“Reading?”

“An attempt to catch up with your breadth of knowledge. But I tire of such passive study. I’m ready to practice.” His gaze dragged down the length of the tub, probing

beneath the water's surface. It seemed to boil the water around, boil her blood, too.

“Th-there are plenty of ladies to practice with. You know well how to find them.”

“I don't want any lady but my wife.” He slid his hand down the towel, off the end of it, then traveled the short distance to the tub edge. He slipped his fingers into the water, and when they landed on her heel, she gasped. His hold on her tightened as he pulled her foot up and into the cool air. She slid lower in the water until only her nose and eyes poked out, letting him keep her foot.

He ran his knuckles lightly against that small bump of a bone on the outside of her ankle, then ran a curve under her heel to brush his thumb over the bone on the other side. “Delicate.”

She shivered despite the fire, despite the still-warm temperature of the water. She lifted her chin an inch, revealing her lips above the water. “You, sir, are confusing. You muddle my brain.”

This touch—his hands gentle and insistent on her foot, her ankle, higher—like the first time he'd touched her. But now he knew her identity. Knew and gave her the passion she'd longed for from him since that night.

“Let me clarify, then. I wish only for the chance to be a good husband to you, Cora. An attentive husband.”

Attentive. More meaning loaded into the word than its definition intended. She pulled her foot from his grasp.

“And what of Madame Juliet?”

He scowled. “What of her?”

“You expect me to accept that you will be a good, attentive husband after you’ve spent months in her bed, her in yours? I’ve heard the rumors. People have seen her at your hotel, slipping into your room.”

His head dropped back on his neck for a moment with a groan, and then he dropped his chin back down to his chest. “She has been in my chamber, but not with my invitation. And not with me . She”—he pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh—“invited herself. I met her once at that brothel, a brief introduction before I fled. But apparently, I triggered her amusement or interest or something like. Must have been how I introduced myself. Blurted out like a fool ‘I’m a virgin’ before even telling her my name. Then I spent a quarter hour muttering about how I wasn’t a virgin, not technically, but I might as well be and how my wife was probably laughing at me, and—” He growled, hands turning into bone-white fists. “After that she’s followed me about, offering advice.”

There was a lot to think through in that last speech. Was he lying? He did not appear to be. He seemed... embarrassed.

But still he pressed on, one hand reaching for and uncorking a small vial of scented oil nearby. He poured some into his other hand and massaged the stuff into the ball of her foot, trailing his thumb down her arch to her heel. “While I’m ripping open my soul for you, would you like to know another truth?”

She nodded, swallowing a moan, doing her best not to melt under his touch.

“The nights I came to your bed, I wanted to lick every inch of you.”

Her breath caught thick in her lungs, refused to move. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because I thought it would scare you. Your mother told me you would not welcome a hungry sort of man, and I believed her. More fool me.”

“Do you always do as others tell you?”

He winced. “All men and women must do their duty.”

“Not I,” she said. “I must do as I please, and I do not please to pretend to one and all I’m a dutiful wife.”

“Cora, I—”

She ripped her foot from his hold, curled her knees against her chest, wrapped her arms tightly around her shins. “We do not suit for a real marriage and let me tell you why.” This was it, her last secret, and she’d wield it like a weapon. “I am not simply a reader of erotic literature, Lord Norton. I write it. I’m a poet, and if you really wish to know what I want, what I desire, it is to be a published author, and I will soon have the chance. I want to write a happy ending that everyone adores, and you cannot help me do that.”

He opened his mouth, tongue frozen in hesitation, then snapped it shut again.

“Will you hand me the towel now, Lord Norton?”

His jaw twitching, he did as she asked.

“May I have privacy?” She stood, wrapped the linen around her, and stepped from the tub. “To dry myself and dress?”

Another twitch in his jaw, then he, too, stood, so slowly, the muscle beneath his trousers bunched and strained, and she could not control the spark of desire igniting between her legs.

He strode to the door, then faced her. “A happy ending? Yes, that’s exactly what I’d

like to help you with. Will you let me try?"

"You cannot mean that. Did you not hear me? I write—"

"I don't care. Last time I ran. This time I will not. I'll stand here next to you. If you wish it of me." He opened the door and stepped into the hallway. "I'll see you for dinner." Then he closed the door silently behind him, leaving her alone.

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Chapter Five

Liam had acquired more paper cuts in the last half hour than he'd had over the entirety of his life. He'd likely acquire a few more before they'd finished, too.

"How many of these damn rabbits must we make?" the Duke of Clearford grumbled. He sat in a low chair, legs sprawled out, black hair raked to the side, a pile of crisp white paper piled haphazardly beside him on a table.

"Enough to fill a nursery." Viscount Noble sat behind a large, dark wood desk, tongue poking out from the corner of his lips as he bent low over a square of paper he was folding. Even in the comfort of his home, he was fashionably clothed and well groomed, his jaw clean shaven, and his gold hair perfectly coiffed. But the hard edge of his gaze warned anyone who noticed that he was no fop. "Lottie said Andromeda is calling the baby Little Rabbit, so Lottie wants rabbits. So Lottie gets rabbits."

"Five hundred forty-eight thousand and sixty-two of them," Benjamin Bailey said. He sat in a seat across from the duke, muddy boots kicked up onto a table, dirty-blond hair tousled and a bit too long, the hint of scruff growing across his jaw. "Ouch." He sucked his thumb. "Bloody hell. How are your fingers not ribbons, Noble?"

Noble squinted at the paper, flipped it, straightened one side to a razor's sharpness. "They're not sledgehammers like yours, Bailey."

"Then why am I doing this if I'm so ill-suited to the task?" Bailey folded his paper, scowled at it, unfolded it. "Hell. I've left a smear of blood." He crumpled it up and tossed it. The man had not a single finished rabbit anywhere near him.

“Why does Andromeda call the baby Little Rabbit?” Clearford asked, setting a finished paper rabbit carefully on the table and picking up a new sliver of unfolded paper.

Tristan Kingston sprawled on a small sofa, folding with almost careless movements, finishing each paper rabbit quickly and efficiently and tossing it to the floor below him. “Because it hops.” He grinned, green eyes glowing. “And hops and hops. I’ve felt it. She’s looking forward to the baby hopping outside of her.”

“I’m not sure we should be discussing such things.” Clearford cleared his throat. “I don’t want to think of the inside of my sister.”

“You’re being too careless, Kingston.” Noble stood, stretched, then marched toward the other man. “Your rabbits look more like toads. Good God, it’s your child. You would think you’d take more care.”

“Toads hop, too.” Kingston shrugged.

“But someone has to make up for Bailey,” Noble cried. “He’s the worst I’ve ever seen.”

They all swung around to look at the American.

Who pointed an accusing finger at Liam. “He’s doing well enough for all of us. Look at those perfect ears.”

They all swung around to look at Liam, and they did not stop looking at him. In fact, each tick of the clock seemed to make them stare harder. And not at the folded rabbit in his hands.

“What are you doing here, Norton?” Clearford finally asked.

“My wife was invited.”

“But you were not,” Bailey said.

“Can’t a man go where his wife goes?” Liam continued folding.

“If that wife wants him there.” Bailey stretched an arm out to the duke. “Give me a knife, Clearford.”

The duke reached inside his jacket and produced a blade from... somewhere. One never knew exactly where he kept it. Perhaps some magical void deep inside his waistcoat.

Liam searched for something to defend himself with. “Don’t think I won’t fight back, Bailey.”

The American considered him over the blade’s edge briefly, then snapped the knife’s point into the paper. He carved something into it, then held out a bit of shaped paper to Noble. “Here. This look enough like a rabbit for you?”

Liam released a heavy breath. Bloody hell. He’d seen his life flash before his eyes.

“Crude,” Noble said, but he placed the carved rabbit with his own meticulously folded ones as Bailey handed the knife back to Clearford. “I would like to know, Norton, what brings you to my home without an invitation.”

“Should have kicked him out on his arse,” Bailey mumbled.

“My child’s birth is not an opportunity for you to atone for your sins.” Kingston spoke loud and clear and without bothering to even look at Liam.

Liam, clearly, was not welcome here. His own fault. These men took the safety of the women in their charge seriously. They'd meet all potential threats with muscle and murderous intention.

Noble leaned against his desk, crossing his arms over his chest. "Is it true you've welcomed company into your hotel room?"

"I see you've heard about Madame Juliet," Liam said.

"It is true, then." Clearford set his paper aside and pulled himself up taller. Where had the cursed knife gone to?

Liam put his own paper aside. "Truth depends on what they are saying. Does the lady come to my room? Yes. Do I want her there?" He scratched his chin. The woman had proved educational but had caused him too much trouble. Perhaps Cora would have been more amenable to him yesterday had such rumors not been raging like a house fire on a dry summer afternoon. "No. I've not touched the woman. She's made a project of me."

Bailey cocked his head to the side. "Project?"

"I'm not here to discuss that. I am here to win back my wife."

"Clearly, you don't know how." Noble smirked. "You've asked a prostitute for help."

"I didn't ask her," Liam clarified. "She volunteered."

Noble waved that truth away. "Better to listen to a husband currently in his wife's good graces."

"Or," Kingston drawled, still folding rabbits, "a duke with a courtship guide. You are,

essentially, courting your wife, are you not, Norton?"

Hm. He'd not thought of it that way, but the newspaperman had a point.

Clearford laughed, a low dark sort of sound. "I have quite given all that up."

"But why not consider it a courtship?" Liam asked. "Surely the concepts are similar. Winning the heart of an unmarried lady cannot be so different from winning the heart of a wife. Perhaps you could help me."

Clearford's mouth seemed a jagged line, a slash of anger. "I'm not in the business of guiding male hearts in the right direction any longer. I made a muck of it." He slumped in the chair, ran his thumb down the top sheet of paper from top to bottom. "For my sisters and for myself. My great experiment was a great failure."

"Wouldn't have been if you'd listened to people," Kingston said, swinging a foot that hung off the side of the sofa.

Bailey pointed at Clearford. "Listen to your lady. Write that one down. You'll find it useful."

The duke produced a small, stubby pencil from the same magical pocket which had provided a knife and wrote on one corner of a piece of folding paper.

Liam looked between the two men. The last time he'd been with them in a room together, Clearford had been giving Bailey advice. Now it seemed... turned around. "What's going on? Why is Clearford writing that down?"

Clearford made the pencil disappear, cleared his throat, then said, "I've begun to look for a wife. And after so many failures marrying off my sisters, I've decided to take counsel from their husbands."

“I’m not giving any counsel.” Noble drummed his fingers on the desk behind him. “I’m not fool enough to think myself an expert.”

Bailey chuckled. “I’m giving him bad advice mixed in with the good. To torture him a bit.”

“You’ve no need to torture me, Bailey.” Clearford had begun to tap the toe of his boot on the floor, its rapid tattoo muffled by the thick carpet. “The ladies are doing that well enough. I’m a duke for God’s sake. Young, relatively good-looking. I have all my teeth at least. They run from me like I’ve got the plague.”

“They’ve read those inane articles you published in *The Daily Current* .” Kingston grinned. “They know better than to trust you after two Seasons of posturing, pretending to know everything about something you’ve never done.”

“You published them,” Clearford growled.

Kingston shrugged. “Excellent for circulation numbers.”

Clearford rubbed his brow. “I seem to have ruined my prospects. The only ladies who will have me are pressed to do so by their title-mad mamas. I’m merely glad I did not ruin my sisters’ lives.” He glanced at Liam. “Apologies. I appear to have ruined your life instead. You were following my advice, after all, when you kissed Lady Norton in that garden.” His hand dropped to his lap like it had been yanked there, and his head snapped up to look one at a time at all the men assembled. “But the advice came from you! I originally said no kissing before marriage, and I let you convince me that was nonsense.”

Noble and Kingston discovered a renewed interest in the folding of paper bunnies.

“No apologies?” Clearford asked. When none came, he slumped back into his seat.

“Cowards.” His gaze rolled to Liam. “You appeared hopeful just after your wedding, Norton. As if you wished to make a happy match of a forced arrangement. What happened?”

Bailey and Liam exchanged a look, and Bailey shifted from side to side. To tell Clearford the truth would be to reveal a secret neither had any desire to reveal. The duke’s sisters and Liam’s wife read erotic books, organized a club to do just that. Everyone would be better off if the duke never discovered that fact.

Liam cleared his throat. “A misunderstanding. A mistake, several of them. Made mostly by me.” He peered into his glass, into the amber liquid, quite still in the crystal container. Light broke diamonds across its surface.

“Look at the man!” Bailey threw out an arm toward Liam. “Heartbroken. Talk to your wife. Make her listen, even if you have to stand outside her window and yell up at her or follow her about like a town crier.”

“Whatever it takes,” Liam said.

“Precisely.” Ben clapped him on the back.

“Are you sure you have no more advice for me, Clearford?” Liam leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“I’m not fit to give advice. But if you have any for me ...” He lifted a brow, waited.

Liam shook his head. “Ha. If I did, I’d use it myself.”

“I’ve advice for both of you.” Noble stared into the distance, scratching at his jaw.

“You are fool enough to offer advice, then,” Kingston said.

Noble grunted. “Call me what you like, but whatever you do, don’t listen to others. When it comes to your wife, listen only to her. And your own instinct. Everyone else is noise.”

Bailey’s mouth dropped, the duke’s brow raised to his hairline, and Kingston looked up, finally, from the paper that froze, half folded between his fingers.

“What?” Noble shrugged, picked up a folded rabbit, and tapped its ear against his chin. “I may be thickskulled, but the crucial lessons can pound their way through. Now and then. And I’m right about this, Norton. Know your own goddamn heart and wear it on your perfectly cuffed sleeve or don’t mess about with your wife at all. Let her be. She’ll be better off without you.”

“I’ve been very frank about what I feel. She does not care to hear it.”

“Then show her.”

“I hate saying it, but Noble has a point,” Bailey said. “If your actions drove her away, then your actions might be able to win her back. Be done with talk. Show the woman how you feel.”

“Difficult when she won’t let me near her.”

“Then you’re not trying hard enough,” Kingston said. “Find out what she likes, what she wants, what she needs. When you show her that you can provide her with those things, then you’ll have her. Or... not. The lady may simply lack romantic feelings for you, and then you must do as she requests and let her live a separate life.”

Easy for all of them to say, happy as they were with the women they chose. The woman Liam had chosen hated him.

“Are you going to kick me out, Noble?” Liam asked.

The viscount rounded his desk and flopped back into his chair. “You may stay as long as you like unless you upset my wife, which means you can’t upset your wife.”

Damn. Liam’s very presence here sent Cora into an indignant rage.

“I need a walk.” He needed to think. He’d been planning all month for when he finally found Cora, and now that he’d found her, he had no idea what to do with her. So much for planning.

“Remember,” the duke called as Liam slipped into the hallway, “dinner is at Clearford Castle.”

Liam halted midstep. “And I’m invited?”

“If your wife doesn’t poison your tea before then.”

“Even then,” Noble said, “you’d be invited. It’s more you wouldn’t be able to make it.”

“What with being dead and all,” Bailey said.

“A pity,” Kingston added. “Clearford’s cook is excellent. I’d hate to be dead and miss it.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, King,” Noble said. “Your wife likes you.”

Liam strode away from the maddening men. Maybe Cora would try to poison him, and those four would pick up the cup by mistake.

No, four accidental homicides would help no one. But if Cora were running from justice, Liam could help her, hide her, win her trust.

What stories he was spinning. All the fault of the books he'd been reading.

And Cora spun stories herself, erotic rhyming stories. Why had he felt no shock when she'd revealed the truth? It had merely seemed another puzzle piece required to understand her. Such a bold woman. She knew what she wanted and went after it.

Liam admired that, even though he possessed precious little experience with it himself.

But hadn't Madame Juliet said to be ruthless in his pursuit? And weren't these gentlemen telling him essentially the same?

Very well, then. He'd take a page from his wife's book. A verse from her poem. He'd go after what he wanted. He'd done so when he'd arrived, following her into her bedchamber, and there had been times he'd seen her soften toward him. Even his odd impulse to lay his three failed sexual encounters at her perfect toes had not gone as his impulses usually did—straight to hell.

In fact, that moment more than the others had seemed to soften her. An anomaly. Clearford and his cohorts thought action would speak louder than words, and recent experience taught Liam they were right.

But what action would be bold enough for a woman like Cora?

Chapter Six

Cora had never had a more attentive dinner partner, even though the man in question sat on the other end of an excessively long table from her. Liam watched her every move. She tried to ignore it, but when her wine glass never went empty, and a plate of venison—her least favorite food—had been whisked away from her before everyone else's plates, she'd been unable to ignore the heat of his gaze on her face, her neck, the décolletage visible above the edge of her bodice. How had he known about the venison? The mere smell of it made her stomach roil.

When she did chance to glance at him, he'd been watching and lifted his glass, gave a slight nod. As if he'd been waiting for her to look his way.

Twenty individuals sat at the absurd table, and he gave his attention, it seemed, only to her. She found it... shockingly adorable. The only other times she'd been so closely observed had been during her poetry readings, and then only for her poems, not for herself, only for what she could give onlookers, not for what they could give her.

"Cora," Lottie said from beside her, "is Norton annoying you? He keeps looking this way. I sat him far down the table so he could not do so. It seems the space of a dozen people between you will not subdue him. If you ask it, I will tell Noble to send him home."

An easy way out.

But the venison had softened her.

“He may stay if he wishes it. I have listened to his explanations.”

Laughter sounded at Liam’s end of the table. Lottie had placed him with the children. They’d been allowed to attend tonight, even little June, an unusual circumstance that created a lively, boisterous atmosphere. Liam did not seem to mind it. He’d fashioned his serviette into something resembling a... bunny? Gertrude and June giggled behind their glasses, and the young earl tried with serious eyebrows to fold his serviette similarly.

“Hm.” Lottie tapped a fingernail on the tabletop. “Do you think it safe for such a bounder to be so close to Alex?”

“Is serviette folding a new rakish skill I’ve not yet heard of?”

Lottie scoffed, took a sip of wine.

Cora sighed. “I do not think Liam a bounder, actually.”

On her other side, Prudence popped the remaining bit of her macaron into her mouth, chewed, swallowed, and said, “I would not have thought him one either. But what about”—she leaned closer, lowered her voice—“Madame Juliet?”

“The twins told you, too?” Cora asked.

Prudence and Lottie nodded.

“Well, why not. I’m sure all of London knows.”

“Have you asked him about her?” Prudence glanced at Liam.

“That the rumors are both true and false. He is not having an affair, but she has taken

an interest in him.”

Prudence gasped. “Do you believe him?”

“I’m not certain. The conversation seemed to make him uncomfortable.” And that could mean any number of things.

Lottie rubbed her thumb along the edge of her glass. “Should we do something about her, then? About Madame Juliet?”

“Like what?” Prudence leaned over the table, closer to her sister.

“Hm...” Lottie rolled her hand at the wrist. “Revenge of some sort, a warning for the woman not to flirt with other ladies’ husbands.”

“No,” Cora snapped. “No, no. None of that. I do not want revenge. I want peace and quiet enough to write my next poem.”

All three women froze, watching their dinner companions with quick movements of their eyes only. Had anyone heard? No one seemed to be paying them a bit of attention. The duke and his brothers-in-laws had their heads together at one end of the table. Andromeda sat near Lady Templeton, Lord Templeton, and their son. That particular young gentleman was talking animatedly with the twins. And—oh yes, there was Aunt Millicent, sitting right beside Liam at the end with the children. The duke’s great aunt, and Cora had no idea what her title was, how others addressed her. She’d only ever heard the woman referred to as Aunt Millicent. She seemed to be showing Liam something on her plate, had lifted it off the table just a bit, and Liam’s eyes flew wide open. He jerked a look at the children, then threw his serviette at the plate, hiding whatever Aunt Millicent had shared with him. That lady chuckled and tossed his serviette away, picked up a macaron, dipped it in a raspberry sauce and... began drawing on her plate with it.

“What is she doing?” Cora asked.

“Oh.” Prudence chuckled. “She draws naughty pictures sometimes.”

“At dinner? With her food?”

Lottie shrugged. “It makes her happy.”

The sound of chairs scooting across the floor swung their attention to the head of the table. Clearford stood, raising a glass he tapped with the edge of a butter knife.

When everyone had quieted, he said, “I have conferred with the gentlemen, and they do not wish to separate after dinner. I suggest everyone retire to the drawing room together.”

Kingston coughed. “I believe I suggested it, Clearford.”

The duke glared, likely no one noticed, busy as they were abandoning their plates and finding partners to leave the dining room arm in arm with.

The back of her neck prickled with heat, and Cora found Liam staring at her with a small, patient smile. It was an invitation to escort her to the drawing room. Should she allow it? She did not wish to cause a scene. And he now stood before her with that lopsided grin full of hope. She did not wish to give the man hope, fruitless as it would prove.

The children rushed past them, June running at the head of the queue, and Gertrude stomping after, the young earl swaggering with long steps behind them.

“They’re bickering again?” Cora played with the end of the ribbon at her waist.

“As they left the table,” Liam said, “there was a mad rush to grab as many macarons as possible. Lady June came out the winner, and Lady Gertrude only acquired two before Avelford swooped in and grabbed the final one. Her favorite flavor, as well, apparently. She promises never to forgive him.”

That word forgive . Had he aimed it at her?

He held out his elbow. “May I escort you to the drawing room?”

Why not? She took his arm with tentative fingers, remembering how he had moved his strong hands over her foot yesterday. No, no. Wrong memory. She did not want that fluttery feeling in her belly. Not with him. Not with any man.

The hallways possessed more shadows than the dining room. Only a few candles flickered on sconces down the hallway, and they strode through periods of light and dark. In a brief moment of shadows, she spoke, “I thank you, Lord Norton, for attending to my needs during dinner.”

“You noticed.”

“How could I not when the wine never stopped.”

“Foxed?”

“No.” But the wine had her in its hold, making her head light and her limbs heavy.

“Trying to get me drunk.”

“No. The venison did not bother you overmuch? As soon as I realized, I alerted a footman to take it away.”

So, it had been him. “How did you know?” The wool of his coat beneath her

fingertips where her hand rested gently on his forearm was so very soft, so very fine, and so very warm. She curled her fingers into her palm to stroke it with her fingertips, then uncurled her hand. Curled and uncurled until she realized she was stroking him. She stopped.

He placed his hand over the top of hers. “We had venison at Norton Hall our first night there. You said nothing, gave nothing away but for the slightest curl of your lip when the plate was placed before you. And you ate not a bite.”

“And you gathered from the lack of communication that I despise venison?”

“Am I wrong?”

“No.” She wanted to grumble about it, but... how very nice to be looked after. And without asking. “Thank you.”

“No need for thanks.” His hand tightened over hers as they stepped into the crowded drawing room. “Where should you like to go?”

The larger party had split into small groups, the youngest among them playing cards at one end, the eldest of them grouped near the fireplace, trading stories. There were smaller groups, too. Imogen and Lady Templeton’s son playing chess in a corner, and Andromeda and her husband slipping through a door into the garden beyond.

Where did Cora belong?

“I think...”

“Perhaps I might steal you away to that empty corner for a moment?”

An easy answer to her dilemma. “Yes.”

He settled her into a plump, pink chair and settled himself into a simpler thing beside her, his back as straight as the chair back but leaning in a sharp angle away from it. Toward her.

His hair waved perfectly away from his face, and he angled a look up at her, his elbows propped on his thighs and his hands hanging limp between his knees. “Did you enjoy dinner?”

“Yes.”

“You had much to discuss with Lady Prudence and Lady Charlotte?”

“Yes.”

“You possess other words in your vocabulary?”

She laughed, an unexpected bark that parted her lips and loosened her taut muscles, her clenched jaw. Why should she be so on edge with this man? He wanted something from her, but she would not give in.

“I do possess more words. But it has been some time since I’ve used them with you. I seem to have lost the knack of it.”

“Then we must practice .” That word he’d used yesterday with such... meaning .

“We did not speak much before...” Better to leave the messy past unsaid. “You seemed always busy with some errand or task or problem at Norton Hall.”

“Running an estate keeps me busier than I anticipated, busier than being a vicar kept me. But in truth, I was avoiding you. Just a little.”

“Because you wished I had been”—she dropped her voice—“Prudence?”

“No. That I told you immediately, and I mean it still. I am overjoyed she has found a partner in Mr. Bailey. I suppose what I did not tell you previously was why I courted her. I sought her out for my grandmother’s sake. She wished me to marry quite well, and I wished to prove to her that I could be a passable viscount.”

“You should have told me.”

“Yes, well, avoiding you and all that.”

“If not because of Prudence, then why were you avoiding me?”

He shifted, leaning away from her and into the chair back, tilting his head and folding his hands over his taut abdomen. For a long moment, he let his gaze wander around the room, and when it finally settled on her, it seemed to have stolen some of the heat from the fireplace.

“I avoided you,” he said, his voice low and deep and warmer than his eyes, “because I feared shocking you with the ferocity of my desire.”

A bolt of lust struck her low in her belly, so quick and powerful, her muscles clenched. “I-I cannot be so easily shocked.”

“I know that now. I wish I’d known it sooner. And I am glad no more secrets wall up the space between us.”

They spoke in whispers and had retreated so far from the raucous others that surely no one heard their conversation. Good thing. There were children present, and the words they spoke felt like intimate ones best shared behind locked doors, between body-warmed sheets.

Her entire body a tangle, every door in her unlocked to him, yet she feared to grant him entrance. Desperation grew thorny vines about her heart, and she retreated to the farthest corner of herself. Husband. Traitor. Unknown. Open book. Who was he to her? How could she ever untangle how he made her feel from the fear that grew like wildflowers in every inch of her?

Men could not be trusted.

Marriage would always fail.

And love was a wicked jest.

She shot to her feet, and he followed quickly after her, leaning toward her, over her, like a sheltering oak in a forest.

“Have I said something wrong?” he asked.

“No. I... I wish to join Lady Templeton now.” She crossed the room without looking back at her husband and took an empty seat across from Lady Templeton near the fire. Lord Noble’s mother sat in the partnering armchair, and Lord Templeton lounged on the sofa beside his wife. Their chatter stopped as Cora joined them.

“You were enjoying an evening conversation with your husband?” Lady Templeton asked, a smirk playing at her lips.

“Yes.” Back to that single syllable, then. No wonder she could not write a new poem with only yes at her disposal.

“I am glad I wrote to him.” Lady Templeton gave a curt nod.

And Cora sat up straighter. “You wrote to him? Did you... did you tell him where I

was?”

The marchioness shrugged. “He needed to know. He is your husband, and you cannot avoid him forever. Isn’t that right, Lady Noble, Lady Templeton?”

“Everything you say is right, dear.” Lord Templeton tweaked a curl at his wife’s temple.

Lady Noble tapped her chin. “I’m not sure I agree. Most husbands and wives are not in each other’s pockets. I rubbed along well enough with my husband, but we were not in love.”

Lord Templeton raised his wife’s hand to his mouth, kissed her knuckles. “A tragedy, that. I am sorry to hear it.”

Lady Noble shrugged. “Some bodies do not need passion. We were perfectly happy.”

“No offense, Lady Noble, but it’s not the sort of marriage I wish Cora to experience. That is not what I’d like my own child to experience.” Lady Templeton watched Lord Helston—the son Lady Templeton only ever called Thurston—sitting at a chess table. He had the floppy appeal of a puppy with chocolate brown hair and an affable grin. Across from him, Imogen scowled at the board. With her bright golden curls and serious blue eyes, she appeared his exact opposite. She chose a token and let it hover for a moment over the board before setting it down again with a look of victory. Thurston’s doggy smile faded, and he leaned closer, gaze darting over the board.

“Checkmate, I believe,” Imogen said, standing and leaving without waiting even a breath for her opponent’s response. She joined her twin Isabella in the opposite corner of the room, taking up a book.

“How very cheeky to defeat Thurston like that.” Lady Templeton tsked. “I don’t care

how well he plays games as long as he maneuvers the marriage mart with more finesse.”

“He’s not maneuvering at all,” Lord Templeton grumbled.

Lady Templeton returned her attention to Cora. “Are you quite angry with me? For revealing your location to Lord Norton?”

Cora checked every corner of her soul. “No, I do not think I am. I may not want a passionate marriage, but I would like it to be... amicable. And I believe we have been able to put our last few misunderstandings to rest since his arrival. Now we may move forward peaceably.”

“Peace is not what Lord Norton’s eyes are harboring at the moment,” Lady Templeton said, her gaze focused across the room at the spot where Cora had left her husband.

“No. I know what he wants.” But she’d been determined to resist him. She stood and wandered about the room, flitting from one group to another, trying to find where she fit best, feeling odd and out of place everywhere, like a field daisy in a hothouse bursting with exotic blooms.

She stopped, alone, at an open window. The night sky stretched out into forever, devoid of stars. Steady and cold, clouds had obscured the sun all day long, and now not even the moon peeked through their gray defenses. How did one discover happiness in a world cloaked each night in such darkness?

A solid warmth settled at her side. “You seem tired, Cora. Let me take you back to Bluevale and your bed.” Not surprised to hear Liam’s voice. She’d known without looking. Somehow.

She was tired, in so many ways. Halfway to giving up. Tonight at least, she'd wave a white flag.

"Yes," she said with a sigh, long and breathy. "I should like to go back."

He took her elbow without hesitation, and together they said their goodnights and took their leave. Knowing how late the dinner would go, the party from Bluevale had arrived in carriages that would trundle them back home, and Liam had brought his own. It waited now for them in the courtyard with the others, and he helped her into it, sat across from her on the well-sprung bench.

She bundled herself into a corner near a window. Beyond the glass, the darkness seemed opaque, never ending. Her skin tingled. He was watching her again, as he had done all night, the sensation of his gaze attempting to wake her while the wine she'd had at dinner nudged her toward sleep. Her eyelids grew heavy, her mind muddled.

Difficult to move her lips, but somehow, she said, "I have decided we should be friends."

"I have friends. I need a wife."

"But I do not understand. You can have a wife without having her good regard. Just as you can take Madame Juliet as your mistress while retaining a wife for society's sake."

"I do not have a mistress."

"It's perfectly fine, Liam." She yawned, her throat oddly tight.

His jaw twitched. "You're tired. We can speak on this later when you're in a mood to see truth."

She sighed and stopped trying to keep her eyes open. They fluttered closed immediately. “Some people are meant for happy endings. And some are not. Some are meant for grand passion. And some are meant for tragedy. Like Lady Templeton and Lady Noble. Different women, different endings.”

“What kind of ending do you think you are fit for?”

The pressing question. “Doesn’t matter what I’m fit for. Only that I write a heroine fit for a happy ending.”

“And could that heroine look like you?”

“No.”

A moonbeam fell across Cora’s face as the carriage jolted forward. Eyes closed, plump mouth slightly parted. Her temple rested against the window. Sleeping?

Liam sat next to her and whispered, “Cora?”

Not even a flicker of a lash or a twitch of a muscle.

Hell. How was he supposed to talk to her now? He would have to wake her up and... he didn’t want to. She’d seemed so heavy in the drawing room, almost defeated, the fragile skin beneath her eyes blue with exhaustion. He should not have kept her wine glass so full. He’d only been trying to show her, as the other men had said he should, that he could take care of her. Wanted to take care of her.

Right now, that meant letting her sleep. Not a bold or ruthless act, that.

Difficult to feel ruthless when the woman you pursued didn’t think herself capable of happiness. Worthy of happiness?

Either way, a tragedy.

Because when he silenced all the voices telling him to marry her for duty, bed her for an heir, when he let Liam witness Cora, one lonely soul to another, she left him in awe, a bit breathless, a bit speechless. Liam wanted to stand up and snuff out all the voices to hear only her.

But then she gave a tiny “no” just as she passed into sleep, and God, it killed him. Dagger to the heart. That no had awakened an impulse . A fierce one, too.

To protect her, to turn her no into a yes .

Yes , Liam? Or yes to a happy ever after?

Why couldn't they be the same?

Because she wanted to be friends .

“Oh!” Cora shot upright, her eyes flashing open for a second before closing slowly once more. “I forgot.” Her voice was drowsy as she leaned back into the corner of the carriage. “I must know.” Each word mumbled and jumbled together. “What did Aunt Millicent draw on her plate?” The word plate whispered so low he barely heard it.

“A buxom pair of breasts, Cora.”

She chuckled. “How shocking. But I assume you’ve seen better. Surely Madame Juliet’s are better.”

“Cora, I told you, I’ve not—”

She snored.

“Hell.” Liam sighed and snaked his arm behind her neck, pulled her out of the corner and against his own body, and rested her head on his shoulder. Her light snore gave way to a contented sigh.

Her hair tickled his ear, and her breath warmed the triangle of linen evident beneath his cravat and above his waistcoat. He stroked a hand down her hair and shoulder, up and down her arm. She softened, melting unconsciously into his embrace. Did this woman crave closeness, crave intimacy but refuse to take it while awake? She’d accepted his kisses in the garden with a bold passion that had left him wanting more, wanting her. But without her veil and the cover of darkness, she’d seemed colder, distant. One reason he’d believed her mother’s advice about Cora’s innocence, about the need to be careful with her.

He kissed the top of her head, waited for her to wake up and reprimand him for it.

She nuzzled closer with a soft sigh, and he held her more tightly.

Friends . What a cursed word. He’d never convince her to change it to wife as long as she didn’t trust him.

And that would never happen as long as she believed the rumors about Madam Juliet.

If only he could introduce the two women. Ridiculous, dangerous idea. Gentlewomen did not become acquainted with women of an entirely different sort. His father would be rotating once more. And the duke and his cohort would likely challenge him to duels to defend Cora’s honor, and his grandmother would offer great lectures on how viscounts should behave and...

Hadn’t Noble said to silence every voice but his own?

And Cora’s. And didn’t Cora write naughty poetry and read naughty books, and

perhaps... perhaps she was also the sort of woman who might find meeting a courtesan... interesting.

She'd sleep uninterrupted, too, and she needed the rest.

When the coach reached Bluevale, and the coachman opened the door, Liam gave in to impulse.

“Please tell my valet and Lady Norton’s maid to pack our trunks and head to London. They may follow in the morning, but my wife and I leave tonight.”

“All the way to London, my lord?” the coachman asked.

“Without stopping.”

With a slow shake of his head, the coachman closed the door, and in a quarter hour, they were rumbling down the road to London.

Liam may have just... kidnapped his wife. In order to take her to a brothel. To meet the woman all of London thought his mistress.

As impulses went, it was likely his most farcical. But it was bold, and the voice that had suggested it belonged to no one but him.

Chapter Seven

The rocking woke her. Odd. But she tried to slip back into sleep, nuzzled into the warmth of her blankets. They smelled nice. Different but... slightly familiar. A lovely, rich scent she could float away on.

But the bright light streaming warmth across her face made it an impossibility. Then the realization that her every muscle, particularly her neck, ached as if she'd slept in the most awkward of positions, sent her brain into a frenzy the very opposite of rest.

Rocking. Aches. Sunlight.

She was in a coach?

And the nice-smelling warmth she snuggled into? Not blankets, not a mattress.

She popped her eyes open.

Oh, God. She was in a coach. She scrambled to sit upright, lurching away from her cozy bed. Not a bed. Or even a coach bench. A man. And not just any man. Her husband.

Eyes closed, he scowled and wiggled, shifting now her weight no longer rested atop him.

What had he done? What had John the coachman done? Out the window, the world was green and rolling. Where had they taken her? She jumped to the other side of the

coach.

“You son of a pox-marked demon!” she cried, scrunching into the corner of the coach opposite him. “Wake up!”

Liam startled awake, head snapping back and forth. “What? Wh...” He saw her, and his expression eased into caution as he tugged on his mussed cravat with one hand and smoothed his hair back with the other. “Ah. You’re awake.”

“Where are we?”

He glanced out the window, and sun spilled in on him, making his hair glow and turning the light stubble scattered across his jaw into diamonds. He’d removed his jacket, unbuttoned his waistcoat, and loosened his cravat. He cracked his neck side to side with a groan. “Quite close to London now, I believe.”

What in heaven’s unfathomable reaches had happened last night? She’d had too much wine, that she knew, and beneath the fog of her brain, a pounding knocked at her skull. She lifted her hand to her head. “What did you do?”

He glanced at her, apprehension sewed into the tight seam of his lips.

A projectile. She needed something to throw to keep him at bay, but the coach floor remained empty, and she didn’t even possess her reticule to fling at his head.

She did, however, possess a man’s jacket. It was draped across one shoulder and covered her lap; it was warm and fragrant and smelled of Liam. She ripped it off, balled it up, and pelted her husband with it.

His scowl returned, and he met her gaze with clear defiance.

“You’ve kidnapped me!” she cried.

“A little bit, yes, but I had to.”

“Abduction is never a necessity, Liam!”

“You’re wrong about that. You still do not believe me about Madame Juliet, and we cannot move forward until you do.”

“I... you... you’re taking me to a brothel!”

“It is the only way I know how to find Madame Juliet. If you will not believe me, perhaps you will believe her.” His gaze wandered up and down her body from hair that must most closely resemble a bird’s nest to her wrinkled skirts. It stopped, snagged on her bosom, the low-cut bodice she’d deemed suitable for dinner last night.

She looked down, yelped. Her breasts were out. Almost entirely. A hint of red nipple peaked up from the bodice as if to give a saucy good morning. She twisted away from him, trying her best to shove everything back into safety without giving up too much of her dignity. That now wrinkled more than her skirts.

Her breasts as put away as they could be, she scowled. Liam’s lazy grin had gone wolfish, and it made her body... tingle. Had she fallen into one of her own gothic poems? Would he grow a mustache and begin to twirl it, laughing maniacally? Would her legs fall open tremblingly, giving away her desire despite her warnings for him to keep his distance?

No!

“You cannot take me to see your mistress,” she said.

“She is not my mistress. And this little conversation is exactly why I’m taking you to see her.” He yawned and rubbed his eye, somehow appearing boyish despite the scruff along his jaw, the width of his shoulders. “Desperate, that’s what I am. So”—he shrugged, gave another yawn—“here we are.”

“You are entirely ridiculous, Lord Norton.”

“You are entirely ridiculous, Liam .”

She growled.

He chuckled.

A villain. That’s what he was. She’d never thought they came grinning like that, looking for all the world like harmless viscounts. But they did. And it made them more devious.

“I’m going to leave. The first opportunity I get, I will escape from your clutches and—”

“No clutches.” He held his palms out flat for her to see. “Give me a chance, Cora.” He reached across the space between them and settled a large hand on her leg. “Let me at least prove my innocence to you. Besides, Madame Juliet has made no secret of her desire to meet you.”

His hand on her leg like wax on a fingertip—molded to her body with a bite of warmth almost too much to accept without a tiny inhalation of pain.

“Meet me?” She might have shrieked that. She took a breath and lowered her voice. “Why would she wish to meet me ? And why should I wish to meet her?”

“You can ask her that yourself. Come, Cora, won’t you like it? Won’t it be good research for your poetry? And I assumed a lady with your particular reading habits would look at this as an opportunity. To see what such places and such women are like.”

He had a point. A bit of her—a large bit of her—thrilled at the idea. If they could keep her presence there a secret, it would be an adventure like none other.

She shook her head. “You cannot truly care about my poetry. It’s too... nice of you.”

The corner of his lips hitched into a half smile. “Me? Nice? I’ve abducted you.”

“Yes, but without seeming evil at all. It’s rather frustrating. Kidnappers are devious fellows. It should be dark and stormy outside, the coach wheels careening through ruts and mud, lightning flashing in the sky, a scar slashing across your cheek, a wicked snarl on your lips, and—”

“I see the poet in you now.”

“And I see no villain in you. Yet”—she held her arms out wide—“here we are.”

They stared at one another, and the coach rocked to a stop. Outside, the buildings crowded closer together than before. Cora recognized the street, having been there once before. She’d been in such a fog of humiliation and rage then. She should not have remembered a single detail of her whereabouts, but instead, every detail had stuck painfully in her mind.

The buildings standing tall and straight, like her husband the day they wed.

The street wide and crowded, like the star-spotted sky the night he’d first kissed her.

The door to the nunnery painted yellow like the sour bite of shame that had twisted raw over every inch of her. She'd thought he'd reacted out of spite and disgust. He said he, too, had been driven by humiliation. A man well past boyhood who'd never found release inside a woman. Yes... she could see how he might feel that way. Every book she read placed the woman as the innocent and the man as the seducer. Every whisper between the older ladies of the ton circling round some rumored aspect of a man's virility. Every warning her mother had ever given her emphasizing the sexual voraciousness of men. Indeed, her own expectations of Liam had been that he would ravish her good and well.

But his expectations of her had quite ruined that.

Innocent and experienced. They'd both expected one thing and got another, and both had reacted out of fear, shame that they were not as every dictate of their society said they should be.

But what if they refused to play society's game? What if they chose a different path? One they forged... together. All misunderstandings, fear, and shame thrown off a cliff and into an ocean of apathy.

His hand... still it rested on her leg, hot and promising.

And then he removed it with a sigh and pressed both palms into the seat on either side of him, pushing more upright but leaning forward to brace his elbows on his knees and hang his head. His hair fell before his face, obstructing whatever expression he wore. "I merely wish to be a good husband to you, and I'm trying everything I can think of, no matter how... unconventional or scandalous. No matter how ridiculous. I will try it all to please you."

"Why?"

He looked out the window, his jaw moving back and forth “I like you, and you deserve it. But... I’ve always liked pleasing people. My earliest memory is wanting to be a good son. That became wanting to be a good vicar. Then needing to be a good viscount. And now... now I must be a good husband.”

“So much discussion of good when you drove me off to London without my permission.”

He scratched the back of his neck, managing to look a bit sheepish. “I’ve never been good at being good. Some wicked voice is always whispering in my ear, and no matter how long I defy it, eventually I listen. And give in. And do something disastrous.”

“I see that.” She swept the coach with her gaze before settling it back on him. “We barely know each other, Liam.”

“But I want to know you. Every inch of you. Like I know none other. And I want you to cut me open and peer inside my every corner. I’ll hand you the damn scalpel.”

“Why?” The word stuck in her throat, the only one she could let loose because it was the only word that made sense in the face of his claims. “Why me?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t... love me do you?” She repressed a shiver. Only barely.

“Don’t seem so disgusted at the prospect. I... don’t think so. Is love required for a viscount to do his duty to his wife?”

“No. But then what is the difference between your idea of a good husband and mine?”

“Respect. Friendship. Comfort. Perhaps something more one day. I would not be opposed to that. But to get there you have to believe me. You didn’t want to be at Bluevale and Clearford Castle anyway, Cora.”

She reared back against the squabs. “Why do you say that?”

“I watched you trudge from group to group last night. You never stayed long and always seemed hesitant to join. I know you wish to be there for Lady Andromeda, but—”

“They’ll be worried sick over me.” She had to say it. Or cry. And she would not do that.

“We stopped at Bluevale and left word with the butler. Your maid and trunk will be following along sometime today. You were so sound asleep you didn’t even grumble.”

No one would care if she left. No one would come careening after her. Why should they? Lady Andromeda, their primary concern and Liam, Cora’s husband. Liam had the right of it. She’d wanted to be there, but she’d not felt like she belonged. Because she hadn’t. Not truly.

This man wanted her to belong to him.

Could she?

Truthfully, she could not say. But the more they idled on the street, the more her curiosity grew. He’d brought her to meet Madame Juliet, and she rather... wanted to.

She took a deep breath and scooted closer to the door. “Let’s go, then.”

His eyebrow twitched, but he kept his voice calm. He seemed to be repressing some boundless energy. Or worse, some endless optimism. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I need to know for certain if Madame Juliet is your mistress, and meeting her will certainly tell me the truth of the matter.”

“She’s not.” He threw the door open and swooped her outside onto the street. “You’ll see soon enough.”

She gasped and clung to him before he set her on the ground and held tight for a moment longer than she would have liked to steady herself with her arms around his neck. He was a solid sort of man. The things we forget...

He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the yellow door, toward Madame Juliet. The door swung open before he could knock. No need for knuckles rapping on wood, though, her heart pounded loudly enough for all of London to hear.

She’d almost stepped through that door once before, but Prudence had saved her from the potential ruination of it. Now she would step over the threshold on her husband’s arm. She almost laughed. How absurd.

How exciting .

A man exited and strolled past them without giving her a single glance. Did he think her one of the ladies who worked here? She wrapped both arms around Liam’s arm, found in its taut, warm muscle enough strength for herself as well as enough courage.

A butler stood at the door and bowed low as Liam dragged her inside.

“We’re here to see Madame Juliet,” Liam said.

The butler raised an eyebrow. “I’m afraid she’s busy.”

“We’ll wait.”

The butler glanced at Cora. “You do not belong here.”

Liam squeezed Cora’s arm. “Tell that to Madame Juliet. I believe she will disagree with you. As I said, we’ll wait.” Liam pulled Cora toward the back of the house.

“Get back here!” the butler cried.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Cora whispered, looking over her shoulder. The butler seemed to have given up his chase and headed in some other direction. To find the lady of the house, perhaps?

“In here.” Liam opened a door at the end of the hallway and pulled her inside.

What had Cora expected? A room draped in red silk and gold tassels? Certainly not this. A drawing room like many others Cora’s mother had dragged her to on social visits. Comfortable, cozy, normal.

“Don’t look too closely at anything,” Liam said.

“What? Why?”

“Trust me.”

“Not yet.” What would she look closely at first? The rug appeared normal. Soft and thick, excellent quality. Ah, there—books. But... what could she find here that she’d not already enjoyed? What about—ooooh. The chandelier sparkled above them. Ornate and gold and... questionably shaped. “Fascinating. Do you know, girth and

length are often a topic of discussion during our little”—she glanced at Liam, who was looking at his feet—“book club.”

“Girth... and... length? Oh. Oh. Damn, what a way to make a man self-conscious. Do I want to know more?” He shook his head. “No, no. I don’t want to know more.”

“Yes, but what I am curious about is why we’ve never discussed... hm. How to put it?” She studied the graceful curves of the golden light fixture above. “Curvature.” She poked Liam’s shoulder. “Do they curve?”

“Mine doesn’t!” The words leapt out of his mouth like hot sparks from a fire, and he tugged at his cravat as if it strangled him. “And I’ve not had much occasion to observe others.”

“But I have,” a light and lovely voice said from behind them. Cora and Liam snapped away from one another as they spun around. A woman stood in the doorway with flaming red hair and a pleased grin. “And I can assure you, my dear, some do.” Her gaze flicked upward. “But not quite that much.”

“Madame Juliet.” Liam stepped toward her. “I’ve brought my wife so you can clear up a misunderstanding for us.”

“This is the wife, then?” Madame Juliet circled Cora. “Absolutely lovely. I knew she would be.” She dropped a low curtsy when she stood in front of Cora once more. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Norton.”

“And a... pleasure... to meet... you.” Hopefully that did not sound as much like a question as it had felt on her tongue. The woman’s confidence, and the weight of her attention focused entirely on Cora made Cora uneasy. What to say? How to act? Speaking to your husband’s possible mistress not something she’d ever imagined.

Liam cleared his throat. “Madame Juliet, the ton is under the impression that you and I are engaged in an affair, and since you know as well as I that we are not, I was hoping you might put my wife’s mind at ease.”

The madame laughed, a loud, lusty chuckle. “Heaven’s no. He won’t touch me. Will barely look at me. He just sits there, taking notes, sometimes asking questions. I have proved quite useful for him. Even more useful for you, Lady Norton.” She winked. “If he is still a dunce in bed, it is not my fault.”

Liam turned red as a winter berry. “I-we-I mean... Hell.”

“He curses an awful lot for a man who used to be a vicar,” Cora said.

“He used to be a vicar?” Madam Juliet studied Liam as if seeing him for the first time. “Oh, well, that does explain so very many things. Now, my dear”—she linked her arm through Cora’s and sat them both on a small sofa—“please do say you believe me. From the moment Viscount Norton stepped through these doors, he’s thought only of you and what an imbecile he’s been.”

“And every time you step through his door?” Cora sat tall, shoulders back and hands folded primly in her lap. “I have heard about your trips to Hotel Hestia.”

Madame Juliet pulled herself up tall as well, and she seemed to choose her words carefully before speaking. “In those moments, the viscount also thought only of you.”

“Seeing you two together finally is perfect. Quite opposite of one another. I’d love to have your likenesses on my wall. The lady of darkness and shadows and her sun knight, brimming with light.”

Cora glanced at Liam, hoping he understood her unspoken question. Is she always like this?

Liam shrugged as if to say, you become accustomed to it.

“I do realize,” Madame Juliet said, ignoring their exchange if she even saw it, “that my dedication to your husband's lessons have rather put you in a difficult position. I'm sorry for it. Let me make amends?”

“There is no need.” Liam came to Cora's side and held out a hand, no doubt meaning to take her away now that Madame Juliet had confirmed the truth.

Cora pushed his hand aside and kept the madame's gaze. “There might be a need for it.”

A dimple appeared in Madam Juliet's chin when she smiled. “I knew I would like you.” She tapped Cora on the nose as she stood. “When my butler interrupted me, I was with a young fellow who possesses particular... tastes. He is most excited by... attention. More than a little of it. My attention alone will not do. If you help me, you might find, as well, something in it for yourself. As I said, recompense for having ignited rumors all across the city.”

A man who liked the attentions of more than one person? Cora had read such scenes, but... oh, heavens. She stood and backed into Liam's side. “I'm not sure. I don't think—”

“We have, erm”—Liam tugged his cravat—“plans.”

“Yes!” Cora squeaked. “Plans. With, erm...” She looked to Liam for help.

“Hats.”

“Hats?”

Liam shrugged, eyes wide. “Yes, the milliner.”

“There is no hat appointment. Do not take me for a fool.” Madame Juliet waltzed across the room. “Follow me!”

Liam’s hands landed on Cora’s shoulders. “Cora if you believe her, if you believe me , we should go now.”

Did she believe him? Yes, she rather did. Not just because the woman corroborated his story, but mostly because of how uncomfortable Liam seemed around her. With Cora, he was all predatory confidence and steely determination. In Madam Juliet’s presence, he became a fox who knew himself hunted by larger, craftier predators.

What an odd feeling, but... she rather wanted her prowling, confident husband back.

“I believe you.” Cora linked her arm through Liam’s. “And I agree. It’s time to depart. You’ve barely bedded me. I don’t want to complicate things with... with other bodies .”

“God, I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“One, erm, member seems difficult enough to manage without adding another.”

“What would I do with four breasts? And only two hands!”

“Let’s go.”

They stepped toward the exit.

“Do stop dawdling, my darlings,” Madame Juliet called from across the room. “My young man will not wait forever. And I do not see why you’re so fussy about this. It’s

not as if I've asked you to join me in the bedroom."

They stopped midstride, and Cora looked at Liam. With a brow furrowed into the letter V, Liam looked at Cora. Slowly they faced the madame.

"What, exactly, do you intend for us?" Liam asked.

"You are clearly both in need of instruction, and my fellow enjoys an audience."

"Ooooh ," Cora breathed. "An audience . I see."

The madame's laugh glittered like diamonds. "Silly geese, the both of you. What did you think I meant? An orgy? No, no. Neither of you are advanced enough for something like that. And no one touches my young man but me. What he requires of you is not your hands, but your eyes. You won't even be in the same room. Now, will you follow me?" She nodded toward a full-length portrait of a man and a woman kissing on the wall in the far corner of the room. When she reached it, she felt along its edge and it swished open, revealing a dark entrance to a narrow staircase. "At the top of these stairs, there are two rooms used only by my particular clientele. When the fellow I was interrupted with is in luck, both rooms are in use at the same time. He shall be delighted I have found a few spectators for him when he thought not to be so lucky today."

The woman's magnetism drew Cora across the room and toward the staircase. Liam caught her hand, stayed her.

"We will tell her no now if you so desire, and it will be no hardship to me."

"Will you tell me no? After saying so many times you wish only to please me? If I want to... to watch... will you deny me?"

He bit off another curse, and Madame Juliet chuckled again. “Such a dirty mouth. I adore it. If you didn’t belong so fully to your wife, I would take you on as my own. But I see this is better.” She winked, then stepped into the shadows, leaving Cora to share a long, lingering look with Liam.

He still held her hand, and his touch buzzed along the edges of her fingers. He’d caged himself again, every muscle of his body ready to do the proper thing and leave. But she could tell he did not want that. His eyes contained green wildfires, their every flash a spark begging to escape, to blaze uncontrolled.

He stroked his thumb over her knuckles. His gloves were wrinkled, stretched out. “Say what you want, and I will do as you command. Every voice in my head but one very loud one is saying to run. But I... rather think the loud one is right.”

“Who does the loud one belong to?”

“Me.”

“You are a strange man.” She flipped their hands, so they were palm to palm, and then she undid his glove, tugged it off. Did the same with the other and slipped the gloves into her pocket. She threaded their hands together. Better. Skin to skin. “Let us go up the stairs, then.”

He squeezed her hand, and together they stepped into the doorway.

She hesitated, though. Wanting to do something entirely scandalous was one thing and doing it quite another. Different still, doing it alongside the man she’d married. If she let him guide her up those stairs, and if she did this thing with him, it would change everything. No longer sworn enemies as she had promised from the moment he’d left Norton Hall and fled to London to this very brothel. And no longer the distant acquaintances she had envisioned for their future. Also no longer the scared

and embarrassed husband and wife who had begun this journey together.

If she allowed this, they became something else entirely.

Friends? Lovers? Partners of a sort?

Was she ready for that?

He bent over her, and his warm, soft lips brushed against her ear. “If this is what you want, I’m here with you.” His thumb brushed the back of her skull, and his fingers flirted with the sensitive stretch of the back of her neck, stroking up and down, oh-so-lightly. “Do not be scared.”

And whether it was the challenge of suggesting she could be scared or the delicate pleasure of his touch on her body or the warm reassurance of his words, she took the first step on to the staircase and into the unknown with him by her side.

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Chapter Eight

The room was much like the parlor—warm with a roaring fire in one corner, cozy, home-like. In fact, Cora could imagine the redheaded courtesan curled up in that chair in the corner doing rather mundane things like reading a book or planning the house's menu for the week. The bed, however, was quite massive, a four poster with thick velvet curtains tied back revealing silk and pillows and shadows, where sins were happily committed.

The door closed behind her, locked, and then Liam stood beside her. So close but not touching. The air grew heavy between them, expectant. Never before had she felt his presence as she did now—a palpable thrumming at her back that made the slim space between them impossible to pass through. An impossible torment, too, for such a slim space to separate the hard planes of his body from her own curves. The air thick, breathing a chore. Her heart pounding. Impossible. Painful. Pleasure? Time and that sliver of air between them would tell.

Would they simply... watch together? Would he... touch her as well? Why were they doing this? Other than curiosity, of course.

That, they shared, it seemed.

She broke the spell, broke away from him, and they circled the room in different directions, he with his hands shoved into the pockets of his great coat, and her tracing her fingertips over everything—a small clock on the mantel, the edge of a frame, the back of a chair leaned against a wall and—

“Oh.” She rocked back a step to investigate what had only been an odd flash at the corner of her vision.

“What is it?” Liam shrugged out of his greatcoat, flung it across the bed, and joined her.

“There are holes here.” She reached her fingertips to them. “In the wall.”

He cleared his throat. “I see.”

The holes in the wall seemed to glow, growing large and larger. She saw flashes of movement inside them, the pale glow of candles. She heard the low murmur of voices. The air between her and the wall seemed to thicken. She could not look. Could she? She’d peered into many a bedroom, and many charged spaces between men and women’s bodies in the pages of books. But this was... entirely different.

She rubbed a hand up and down her arm. This... real . Trying to suppress the sensation of sparks across her skin, she bit a bloody groove into her bottom lip with her teeth.

Until a solid warmth pressed against her from behind. Liam. So easily he’d broken through that thick-aired barrier between them, like a knife through butter, to press his heated body against hers. He rested his palm against the wall above the holes and leaned into her, his chest brushing against her shoulders, his breath hot on her neck, his body a cage. Her cage.

She should bristle, shove at him. But she couldn’t. Didn’t even want to.

“Go on, then. Look,” he said.

This was it. Her moment to be brave. “Sh-shouldn't you look with me?” Her voice

sounded smaller than she wanted it to.

“No room, darling. You look and tell me what you see.”

She licked her lips and pressed her palms against the wall, leaned forward, the very tip of her nose touching it.

Liam moved with her, his chest and abdomen hot and hard against her back.

She swallowed as his hand landed on top of hers, trapping it against her upper arm.

“Well? What do you see?”

A room drenched in flickering yellow light. A chair. Juliet. And... “There's a man. He's sitting in a chair facing this wall.” His legs open wide, his shirt open, too, a hint of dark hair sprinkled across his exposed chest. His trousers pulled tight across his thighs.

“And?”

“And she's behind him. She's whispering something in his ear. He... he likes it, whatever she's saying.”

Liam's lips touched her ear. “What would you like me to say to you?”

Oh, anything in that tone of voice would do just fine. It sent sparks flying across her skin once more. And this time, she could not rub them away, replace them with other, less dangerous sensations. Her breath hitched as she spoke. “N-now Madam Juliet is sitting on his lap.”

“I should like you to sit on my lap one day. I'm not naive enough to think you

willing, to leave my position behind you, and drag a chair across the room for us. But... one day..." He ran a single fingertip down the length of her neck and hooked it in the back of her gown.

She shivered. What he said could not be true. But it was impossible to respond when he seemed already to have moved on from words like heated drops of scented oil against the skin to touching. More touching. His fingertip beneath the line of her gown her only focal point.

He growled near her ear, "Tell me what you see now."

"Now—"

His knuckles made a path of fire across her back from shoulder blade to shoulder blade.

"Now," she managed to repeat with a hiss, "he's kissing her."

"Where?"

"Her neck."

"Like this?" He pressed his lips to the back of her neck, a long, slow, lingering kiss.

And instead of giving him a proper answer, she moaned. How could something so simple wake her up so entirely?

"Now what?" he demanded, his lips close to her ear.

"Oh..." She closed her eyes on a breath of pleasure. She hardly knew what would be next. So, she opened her eyes and peeped through the hole once more. "Her breast."

Liam's hands teased the top of her gown, and with light pressure, she felt him undoing her tapes. "What about them?" he asked with the same tone he might ask her if she wished for tea.

"The man is touching them." Her gown gaped and slid down one shoulder.

"Like this?" Liam's arm slipped into her gown and wrapped around her ribs, only her shift and stays between them. He cupped her breasts. "Or..." He trailed his hand up the side of her breast and then slipped into her gown underneath her shift, pulling her breast away from the support of her stays and into the support of his warm, confident hand. "Like this?"

What did it matter if he mimicked the man on the other side of the wall perfectly or not? What mattered, the only thing which mattered was that his movements existed, and they existed only for her, that his skin found hers, and his thumb was flicking over her pebbling nipples. This, how it should have been their first night together, how it had been in the garden. This, the promise of the night that had meant ruination for her, had trapped her future in this viscount's capable hands.

She'd not been scared that night, though she should have been, though any woman would have been. She'd been more scared in the weeks after when her wild viscount had turned tame, when he'd caged that part of himself he'd let loose in the garden.

But here her tiger prowled once more, dragging his lips across her shoulder and playing with her breast, and only those two things arcing ecstasy through her, lighting her up with the promise of more.

"Don't stop watching," he commanded. "Tell me what is happening. That is your sworn duty to me right now, Cora. Do not fail me."

It took every ounce of control in her body to do as he said instead of melting into his

frame. But she liked how he'd commanded her, and she liked the idea that they would do this together, her the eyes and him the hands.

"Now what?" Another demand.

She could not deny him. "She's changed how she is sitting on him. Her back is to his front. Her legs are straddled. Alongside his legs. She's reaching behind her. Arching her back. To tangle her hands in his hair. Both his hands"—Liam squeezed, and Cora moaned—"cup her breasts."

Liam's arm, long braced against the wall above them, dropped and joined the other at the front of her body to find her other breast and pleasure it as well as he was pleasuring the first, making her arch into his hold, making her legs give out beneath her. Liam only holding her up as he squeezed and teased, scattering kisses up and down her neck and shoulder.

She wriggled, pressing her bottom against his groin. He was hard and long beneath his woolen fall, and that made her wriggle even more, made her arch and press, attempting to break through the barriers still between them.

One of his hands stroked down her body to cup her hip, to squeeze it hard. "And now?"

"Now he's... he's lifting her skirts. And his hand is beneath them. Between her legs." She could barely speak. Certainly could not complete sentences properly anymore, each of her words punctuated by a breathy pant, by a need that went beyond language.

"More, Cora," he demanded when she stopped speaking.

"She has thrown her head back, and—oh... he bit her neck."

Liam bit her neck, and she screamed, a soft cry that said in a scorching tone more and please do not ever stop . One of his hands wrapped into her hair, and he pulled her head back, swallowed her scream with a kiss. Hard, possessive.

This, the gentle, appeasing man from her first month married?

No. This her masked seducer from the garden.

Two different men. The same man.

He released her from the kiss and nudged her face back to the wall.

“He's doing something I cannot see,” she said, this time not needing to be told to tell him. If he would pay her in pleasure for every description, she did not wish to miss a thing. “Beneath her skirts.”

“I think I know,” he said with a dark chuckle.

Cora had her guesses as well. And they were the same as his, she knew, when he began to ruck her skirt up her thigh and then slipped his hand under the hem, smoothed his hand down her belly, and stroked between her legs. He nipped at her earlobe as he explored her body, seeking, seeking—

She hissed.

“Ah. There it is. Shall I tell you how hopeless I have been?”

“Um, huh, I...” Hopeless? Him? The man who stole her speech with each careful circle he rubbed around that aching bud at the center of her body?

“Because I did not know this even existed until I began to read your favorite sort of

books. The clitoris. Apparently, it's quite necessary to a woman's enjoyment. Tell me, Cora, are you enjoying this?"

"Yes ." A word she, apparently, still had command over.

"God, me, too. I've dreamed of this—of you in my arms, skin flushed, panting, of me who made you that way. It is me, isn't it? And not the man in the other room?"

"Who? W-what other man?"

He pressed his thumb hard against her bud, and she cried out, "Liam!" as bright blooms burst in the darkness behind her closed eyes, as shock waves of pleasure rocked her.

"It's me, then." His voice raw, pleased. "Look again. Tell me."

"She... she's riding him. Her head thrown back. His hands on her hips. His hips, thrusting up."

"Do you want me to—"

"Yes." She spun and wrapped her arms around his neck, surged up on tiptoe and crashed her mouth against his. "Yes. Right now." Every nerve in her body screamed for him, for more, for what she'd just seen and described. She threw her entire body into begging him, tumbling them both backward as his arms came around her, clenching her to him. When the back of his legs hit the bed behind them, he fell, and she fell on top of him. He lifted his knee between her legs, rucking her skirts up above her knees and settling his thigh with exquisite pleasure at the very core of her. She ground against him.

No need for timidity between them. Past that entirely. Past, as well, the

misunderstandings between them. They may not want the same things in many ways, but here, now, they were of one mind, desired only one thing. The beating of his heart against hers, the seeking of his hands along her back and legs, the meeting of their lips for long, heated sips of one another. Only passion and promise and—

“Wait.” Liam pressed his hands onto her shoulders, and distance crept between them, cold and painful.

“Is something wrong?” Difficult to blink away the fog of her lust.

“No.” He ran a trembling hand down her hair. “Nothing except... not here.”

“I don’t understand.”

He pushed her gently to the side and rolled to sit, returning his hands to her shoulders, her neck, as her skirts pooled around her waist, rumpled and ruined. “Not here. In this place, in this bed. I want you in our bed.”

“One surface is as good as another, surely.” She gave a little bounce. “This one’s fine.”

“It’s not. You’re a viscountess and my wife. I have more respect for you than this.” He surged to his feet, tugging her upward with him, spinning her around and securing the tapes of her gown. He grabbed his greatcoat from the edge of the bed, then took her hand once more, and dragged her out of the room.

She stumbled on the stairs and fell into his back. He righted her, and they continued, out the door, into the parlor, and all the way out of Mother Circe’s Nunnery. He helped her up into the carriage, which waited in the alley.

“Shouldn’t we say goodbye to Madame Juliet?” The sun streamed hot and bright

through the windows, and she held her arm up against it.

“No.”

“Of course not. She’s... busy.” Lord, but her mind had been blasted into pieces, each thought a burden to see through to the end. Her body throbbed, an uncomfortable pulse now that the end, the satiating pleasure of orgasm, was not ensured.

“To the townhouse,” Liam told the driver, “and be quick about it.” By the time he sat across from her, stretching his long legs, one foot shaking at the ankle and vibrating the entire coach, the conveyance rolled into movement.

What had happened? They had been perfectly situated to end the nightmare of their marriage, to replace old days with something happier, and he’d... run. At least he’d taken her with him this time. There was that.

Her breasts ached still, and her skin burned. “Liam, I did not mind staying. I do mind, however, being teased into a frenzy, then denied.”

“Me, too.” Truth in the gruff disappointment of his voice. “But, hell, Cora, I’m banishing our previous time together from existence. That night I came to you and made you my wife—it never happened.”

Well, it had felt that way a bit. As if nothing was happening...

“Our next time is our first time, do you understand?” He moved across the carriage and sat next to her, took her hands in his. “And it must be perfect, not in a bed half the men in London have come on.” He lifted her chin with his knuckles, and she found his eyes softer than before. “I want it to be perfect for you.”

Perfect was... nice, but perfect also often happened only because of a control so fine

and exact, not a single detail went unplanned. Was that what she wanted?

She offered Liam a reassuring smile as he swiped his thumb across her lips.

“May I kiss you?” he asked.

She nodded, and instead of the hard, demanded caress from earlier, he sipped at her lips, as if they possessed world enough and time enough to melt into each other forever, to learn the taste and shape of lips not their own, then learn the taste and shape in each and every new expression that twisted them up and down in sorrow and in joy. Watching in the brothel, her need for Liam had burned fast, and now it simmered back to life, a lovely living thing that ran lightly along every nerve. She sighed, and he cupped the back of her head, pulling her onto his lap.

Now, more than before, they mirrored the pose enjoyed by Madame Juliet and her fellow, but everything else was different. Sun instead of shadow, a swaying carriage instead of a steady floor. And even though all of London walked just beyond the window, Cora felt alone. Not alone. Alone with Liam, which, it seemed, was an entirely different thing, a living thing that changed with each breath. When alone, one knew well the steady cadence of each ticking second. But alone with Liam, each second became a surprise, each touch a revelation.

When the coach rolled to a stop, it was too soon. Also not soon enough because clearly Liam did not consider the bench upon which they sat the perfect setting for their new first time together. And she no longer wished to wait. Impatient, yes. Entirely so.

As soon as the coach stopped, Liam threw open the door and swung her into his arms. Carrying her cradled like a babe, he marched them into the townhouse. She clung and laughed and buried her face in his shoulder. He growled, and she stuck her tongue out at him. He scowled, and she wondered how things could ever have been wrong

between them.

“Cora? Is that you?”

Liam stopped, his foot on the very top step, their bedchamber door in sight.

Cora froze, too.

“Cora? Lord Norton?” the voice inquired from below.

Cora closed her eyes. “That’s not my mother, is it?”

Liam glanced over his shoulder and down the stairs. “Yes. Yes, I’m afraid it is.”

“Put me down.”

He jumped to obey her, almost tossing her to the floor.

“Oh heaven’s most offending angels, I look a mess.” Her gown was crooked, and the exposed skin at her neck and shoulders and chest red, well kissed and licked and—Cora groaned.

Footsteps on the stairs. “Cora,” her mother said. “It is you. What are you doing here? And with Lord Norton?” She’d half held out hope that the voice belonged to someone else, but there was that familiar face, the dark hair like Cora’s, the slender frame with rounded shoulders, always stooped. Her mother. No denying it any longer, no holding out hope.

Cora pasted a bright grin on her face. “Mother, what are you doing here?”

Her mother stopped halfway up the stairs, the curiosity bleeding from her expression,

leaving her pale and... slightly annoyed. She unpinched her lips to say, “Am I not welcome in my daughter’s house?” Her gaze flew to Liam. “Am I not welcome?”

“You are, of course, Mrs. Eastwood.” Liam bowed. “At any time.”

“Yes, Mama, of course.” Cora stepped closer, now poised on the stairs between Liam at the top and her mother midway up. “But why are you here when... I am not? And you did not send word to—”

“Who can send word to the flighty Lady Norton?” Her mother laughed, a brittle sound. “I’ve had no idea which grand estate you’ve been at from one day to the next.”

“She has a point,” Liam mumbled.

“Is something wrong with the townhouse, Mama?” Cora asked.

“Your father is home. And he won’t leave. And the Yorkshire house is under renovation. I could not possibly stay there. And the two of you are clearly not using this residence. And you’ve not yet invited me to Norton Hall and—” Her mother’s chin wobbled, and a plea swam in her watery eyes. When she rubbed her upper arm over and over, ducking her head to hide a falling tear, Cora broke.

How many times had she seen her mother brought low by their father? She’d never had many options for escape before, but now she had this home. And Cora should provide her mother a place to run when she needed it. It was a daughter’s duty.

“It’s fine, Mother. You can stay, of course you can stay.” She opened her arms, her mother fell into them with a few shuffling steps, and they ascended the stairs together.

They passed Liam at the top, looking like a statue whose polite grin had been carved

a tad too wide with a few too many teeth showing. He appeared ready to toss her mother down the stairs in order to get to the bedroom as quickly as possible.

She could not blame him.

But her father... she could not deny her mother sanctuary under such circumstances, no matter how inconvenient for herself. And Liam.

Cora led her mother to the smaller bedchamber in the rather modest townhouse, and Liam strode toward his room. Their room. They'd not shared it during their first week married before leaving for Norton Hall. Cora had slept in the other chamber, but now... now they would.

"Oh my." Cora's mother chuckled and backtracked down the hall. "You don't know. But how could you? I'm rather afraid I set myself up in the viscount's chamber."

Liam swung around right outside the door. A growl gathered in the slant of his lips, but he suppressed it. "Pardon me, Mrs. Eastwood... could you repeat that?"

Cora's mother slid between Liam and the door. "My trunk is in here. You see, the bed in the other room is much too small. And the view is, well, there is none. And you were not using this room. But now that you've returned, it certainly makes more sense for me to remain here."

"And how's that?" Liam asked.

"Because this bed is so much bigger, and Cora will need to sleep with me, of course."

Liam's and Cora's mouths dropped open simultaneously.

Cora inched closer to her mother. "Mama, you must know I will be sharing a bed

with my husband.”

“What? Whyever for?” She shook her head. “You are much too delicate and sensible for that. Surely you two do not share a chamber.”

“Can’t say we do, actually.” Liam collapsed against a wall, rubbing his palms down his face.

“Of course not. I’m sure you have an appointed weekly time for marital activities, and...” Her mother had finally noticed Liam’s stance of defeat. She tilted her head, her mouth screwed in confusion. “But perhaps there are other reasons you prefer your chamber to the other?”

Liam looked up slowly, rolling off the wall. “Cora, I’m having another impulsive moment.”

“Right now?” she asked, glancing between him and her mother. “Can you control it?” No knowing what he would do when impulse drove him. That she was quickly learning.

“What in heavens name are the two of you talking about?” her mother demanded.

“A trip,” Liam said, striding toward Cora.

“Where?” Cora barely got the words out when Liam ducked as he passed her, slung her over one shoulder, and made for the stairs.

“I must return to Norton Hall for... estate matters. And I need my wife to attend me. It was lovely seeing you again, Mrs. Eastwood.” He lifted the arm not wrapped around her legs, just under her bum, and waved. “Do enjoy the townhouse.”

“But Liam,” Cora said, a bit dizzy from so suddenly being tossed upside down across a hard shoulder, “I thought—”

“No thinking. This is an impulse.”

He jolted down the stairs, and she wrapped her arms around his middle, clinging and squealing.

“Highly unusual,” her mother huffed from above. But she did not run after them, and when Liam ran outside and yelled at the coachman to harness the horses again and not stop until they reached Norton Hall, she’d begun to wonder... would she ever get to see the arse her face hung right in front of naked?

She grinned. Couldn’t help it. Because clearly she would if her impulsive husband had anything to do with it. She’d been fighting him for so long, it felt unexpectedly freeing to let go, and let him do with her as he pleased.

Chapter Nine

Who could sleep at a time like this? Apparently, Cora could. Not Liam, though. His entire body vibrated. His own damn fault he wasn't basking on a slow-rocking sea of satiation right now. He should have put the idea of perfect right out of his head, but he'd thought their bed, just a short ride away.

And then...

Invasion. That very bed he'd meant to lay Cora down upon so he could taste every glorious inch of her—her mother had slept there.

He groaned, his heel bouncing up and down, vibrating his entire body.

God, his body ached. Too tight and too hot, but—he glanced out the window—Norton Hall was close. And his wife... well, she was drooling, just a bit from the corner of her mouth as she curled up on her side on the seat across from him. He should be holding her in his arms, but he couldn't. If he touched her, he would ravish her, and then... Hell, he'd have disappointed her again. That seemed to be his destiny.

No. He'd been pushed about by destiny too often in his life. Not with this. Not with Cora. He'd chosen her, and he would make their next time, their real first time, perfect.

But... a little touch wouldn't hurt. He reached over and wiped the drool from her cheek with the pad of his thumb and then pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. She

frowned and groaned, and he retreated to the other side of the coach.

She awoke and sat up with a yawn, stretching her arms above her head and craning her neck left and right. She looked out one window, then the other, then gave him her full, unblinking attention. “Are you still in the grips of madness, then?”

“In the grips of lust, yes.”

“You know it’s possible to... make use of a coach.”

“I do. And we will. Not yet.”

She yawned again, hiding her mouth behind her hand. “I suppose it will be nice to be alone for a while. I shall have time to write.”

He could grant her time to write. He’d need time to eat after all. But he’d make sure she wrote near the bed, so he did not have to wait too long to get her back into it.

Her gaze went distant, and she tracked the changing scenery as they passed. Her jaw softened, her lips parted slightly, and those gray eyes slipped away from steel and into a soft fog. Distracted, distant, lonely. She always looked like that when she thought no one was watching.

“Cora, would you have preferred to stay in London with your mother?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No. I’m rather glad she abhors the country. Not much chance of her following us. Though... that is unkind of me. She is always at her lowest when my father seeks re-entry to our lives. I am glad she has a place to hide until he tires of home once more.”

“You’d rather be with your friends, then, at Bluevale and Clearford?”

Her tongue appeared and drew a slow line between her lips before she spoke. “No. I think I’m exactly where I’d like to be.” She rose and crossed the space between them to sit next to him, and even the closeness of her skirts, almost brushing his legs, felt like a caress. “I... I have been so angry with you.”

“I deserve your anger.”

She tilted her head side to side. “Yes and no. I can be a bit dramatic, myself.” In her lap, her tangled hands picked at her thumbnail. “But we are married, and... while I might not believe in the perfection of the married state, I do believe it has its advantages. Our time at Mother Circes taught me that, at the very least, the married state is excellent for... exploration, sating curiosity. If we focus on these aspects, we’ll rub along well together indeed.”

Oh, he’d rub her well, all right. He’d rub his lips against hers, and then drag them between her breasts, then rub his cock—

“Are you listening to me, Liam?”

He blinked. “Apologies. Woolgathering. You were saying?” He needed to listen to her, but all the blood in his body had rushed to his nether regions ages ago, and it hadn’t quite made it back to his brain. Focus . She didn’t believe in the married state. Unfortunate, that. But she had mentioned rubbing.

His tongue on her hip, his cock against—

Focus .

“Liam...” Tentatively, she brushed her fingertip against the outside of his thigh. “I find I desire to explore the realm of physical pleasure, and since I find my husband so very willing, I thought, perhaps, it might be best to explore it with you. Whether you

wish an heir right away or not.”

“Yes.”

“Yes... what?”

He swallowed, her hand in his own. “Yes, I am delighted by everything you have just said and will comply wholeheartedly.”

She chuckled, grinned, then repressed both reactions with a haughty lift of her chin. “Excellent. We could... perhaps... pick up where we left off earlier... right here. Now.”

“No. We wait.”

“Wait. Hm. Can you, though?” Somehow, her lips became pinker, softer, and the look in her eyes damn near killed him. Molten and daring, it nearly melted his resolve. Her gaze flicked down. To where his cock strained against his fall.

“Damn you, Cora. Yes, I can.” He could. He could. Well, he would try his best. Because she deserved it. “Now”—he patted his lap—“put your foot here and tell me why your mother hates your father so damn much she had to commandeer our London home.”

She blinked at her stockinged feet. “You took my slippers off when I was sleeping?”

“To make you more comfortable, yes. They’re just there.” He pointed at the corner of the coach where her shoes tumbled together, forgotten. “Now, your foot, Cora. Turn that way, lean against the wall, and give it to me.” He patted his thigh. “Stretch your leg out and put your foot right here.”

“Why do you want my foot?”

“While I insist on waiting for a proper bed. And perhaps a bath. No reason not to keep desire running high. Every touch can do that, particularly when designed to do so, and I have spent much time learning the art of it.”

“I’d never considered that. Mine is already quite high.”

Music to his ears. His own desire was well-nigh intolerable. But he could wait. For her. He held out a hand. “Your foot, Wife.”

Slowly she rested her back against the side of the coach, making sure her skirts covered her limbs as she lifted her legs atop the seat and placed her feet in his lap. “You keep calling me that. Wife.”

“It’s true.”

“Hm.”

“You disagree?”

“What is a wife? A woman who lives under her husband’s thumb? Who is recognized by law and by the church as merely a possession?” That’s certainly what her mother was. A discarded possession. “I have never desired to be a possession.”

“You are not.” He circled her ankle. So delicate, the blush-pink stocking wrinkled and falling, loose. He reached up her leg and loosed the ribbon only half-heartedly holding it up, then rolled the stocking down, pulled it off. And had to attempt to remember the correct liturgy when baptizing a child to calm down the rage of need that gripped him when his fingers touched her satin skin.

“My mother said my father pursued her with a passion. He wanted her. And then... he did not. Do you understand why I do not trust you?”

“I have said before I am not your father. And the more I know about him, the more I hope I am not. But let us investigate your comparison. He pursued your mother passionately. I have pursued you relentlessly.”

“You see, then.”

“Hm. Yes. But after he had her... what did he do then?”

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the squabs. “Forgot she existed. Until she was with child. Then he fawned over her for being such a good wife. Until I was born. Then he disappeared again. Until I came of age to wed. I wonder that he’s still at the London townhouse deviling Mama. He should have rutted off into the London fog by now. Now that I’m married.” Cradled in the wrinkled mess of her skirts falling haphazardly over her lap, her fingers never quite quit moving. Picking at nails and stroking circles into palms, wringing fingers around her delicate wrists and stroking lines into her gown.

“Well, then I shall not ignore you. Instead of going away, I will stay. Instead of pretending you don’t exist, I shall keep you by my side. And a happy thing it is, too, since it’s what I’ve intended all along. That is... if you let me.”

Now he felt like picking at the cuffs of his sleeves, the pilled wool of his worn trousers, biting his nails. If the last twenty-four hours they’d shared was... All this for nothing. All this for failure as a man, as a viscount, as a husband.

“I think...” Her eyes opened, and her head listed gently to the side as she studied him. “I think I shall let you try. Though I promise nothing. It is likely we are more suited for friendship than anything else. It is likely friendship is all I am capable of

offering.”

Elation, strong and delicious, surged through him. Best not to show it, so he set his hands about something purposeful to temper it by pressing his thumb into the arch of her foot and massaging it. Her eyes fluttered closed again, and her shoulders relaxed.

“You enjoyed this in the tub,” he said. “When I massaged your foot like this. I saw it. Your shoulders sank away from your ears, and your mouth softened. As they are doing now. Why are your shoulders in your ears to begin with, Cora? Not a good place to put them.” He pressed his thumb into her arch again, drew a hard line down to her heel.

She moaned and sank a bit lower.

“Does your father think of your mother as property?”

“Unwanted property. It’s best when he forgets she exists. But sometimes he returns home.”

“Where does he stay when he’s not at home?”

“With his current mistress. He must be between women at the moment. Poor Mama.”

He released her foot and picked up the other, divesting it of its ragged stocking. Her head fell to the side, giving him her profile. A somber, serious series of curves, dips, and angles, some of the tension melting away under his touch.

He’d tried hard to be good at every role he’d entered into during his life, and he’d mostly failed. At least everyone around him thought him a failure.

But this... he did only what felt right, natural—tracing circles into her, massaging

tightness from her muscles—and he found success.

“I wonder sometimes,” she said in a dreamy voice, “if things would have been different between them had I been a boy. I’m an only child. An only daughter. God, apparently, has a sense of humor. My father would have liked my mother better had she done her one job better—produced a son.”

His hand froze on her ankle. “Cora, look at me.”

She did, her eyes cold and chaotic at the same time.

“I was a horrid vicar,” he said. “I’m positive every success I managed to cobble together occurred only because my family made sure it did. My Oxford degree, the testimonial from my college regarding my fitness for the role, my examination with the bishop... I bumbled through, but it didn’t matter because everyone knew my destiny from the moment I was born. But despite my tenuous grasp of Latin and my complete disregard for liturgy, I do know one thing pretty well about God.”

She poked his arm with her pointed toes. “That was a rousing endorsement of your expertise. Do enlighten me.”

“He is not laughing at us. I believe God would like us all to be happy, or at the very least, to find peace in our lives, a purpose that makes the world better.”

Very slowly, she pulled her feet from his hold.

Cora possessed depths. That, he’d always known. The bold, fearless woman boiling over with passion was not a mask. It was the only bit of herself she allowed the world to see. Because below that... something softer, something hurt, something weeping.

He wanted to reach for her foot again, to knead out of her body that soft weeping bit

of herself she hid so well, but he folded his hands in his lap instead.

“Tell me about your poetry.”

She did not look at him. “It is not the kind discussed in polite circles.”

“So you’ve given me to understand. Is it like Byron’s Don Juan ?”

“Hm. More like the Earl of Rochester and Charlotte Smith produced a literary love child.”

His head tilted to the side. “Who? And... who? And did they really have a love child?”

“You said you’d been reading. But clearly you have not.”

“Novels. Not poetry. Always found poetry dull. Can’t read two lines without my attention wandering.”

“An arrow to my heart, Lord Norton.”

“I have always enjoyed tales of Robin Hood, and I am quite clever with a bow and arrow myself.”

“I know.” The night they’d kissed, the night they’d been caught, he’d dressed as Robin Hood. “What you do not know is that I almost attended the masquerade as Maid Marian. But then Prudence convinced me to come matching her.”

Liam whistled. “I knew you were perfect.”

A smile flickered at her lips, then died. “The Earl of Rochester and Charlotte Smith

are both poets. Dead. And he much more scandalous than she. I believe I have a copy of his works at Norton Hall. If you are truly attempting to educate yourself, I will lend it to you.”

“Remember, I do not read poetry well. But... you may read it to me.”

“No.”

“Read your poetry to me, then.”

“No. It is not written with men like you in mind.”

“What kind of men are in mind when it is written, then?”

She snapped her attention out the window. “Oh, look. We’re almost to Norton Hall. I see the roof over the trees.”

She could not so easily distract him. “Tell me about Charlotte Smith. She who is not so scandalous.”

“She writes poems of high feeling. Set in nature. They make me ache.”

“Recite one of those for me?” She had the kind of voice that likely wrapped up the lines and rhymes of a poem in perfect syllables and inflections.

“You are determined, I see.”

“I am.”

She took a deep breath, then began.

Huge vapours brood above the clifted shore,

Night o'er the ocean settles, dark and mute,

Save where is heard the repercussive roar

Of drowsy billows, on the rugged foot

Of rocks remote.

When she'd paused for several seconds, he knew she'd give him nothing else.

"That sounds... sad."

"Merely truthful."

"I disagree. I find the ocean to be... bounding with energy, coursing with raucous life."

She snorted. "The ocean is older than us. It has witnessed much sorrow and will witness more."

His turn to snort. "I'm going to take you to the sea on a sunny day, and make you laugh ten thousand times. We shall leave the Charlotte Smith at home that day, I think."

She hid a smile.

Outside the carriage, the forest gave way to a long green lawn, and Norton House appeared, its white stone facade and tall columned chimneys. He'd never thought to live in this house, with its gray and white stone, arched windows, and orange

chimneys. A lovely, old place. He'd enjoyed visiting as a child. He'd always known it was part of him, his family's birth right and responsibility, but it had never felt like his. It belonged, more, to his much older cousin, the heir. But now it was Liam's. Because of apoplexy and a riding accident.

The accidental viscount—that was him. This house only his because of tragedy.

Yet he could not feel the disorienting sense of not belonging as he usually did when approaching the hall.

Because this time Cora rode, expectant by his side, and he saw the house from a new perspective. So isolated and quiet, it offered the perfect opportunity to ravish his wife. Over and over and over. Then some more. Without interruption.

“Cora,” he said as the coach started down the long drive. “Once we get inside, I am going to carry you upstairs to our bedchamber. I am going to have the maids prepare a bath in your room, while I strip you bare in ours. Yes, ours. We did not share it before, but now we will. Any objections?”

She shook her head.

“Excellent. I am going to bathe you because I've been thinking about it since cornering you in the tub at Bluevale. Or I'll join you. Would you like that?”

She bit her lip, nodded.

“Then once we are pink and clean, I will dry off every inch of you and lay you upon my bed. Then do you know what happens?”

“I hope I do.” She didn't try to hide her grin this time. “It will be nice to have such solitude.”

“Such opportunity.”

“Every empty room a possibility.”

They grinned at one another like fools.

He started to hand her stockings, but then he snatched them back, leaving her arm hanging in the air. He slipped them into his pocket, the toes hanging out like little flags of surrender.

“It’s a novel experience,” Liam said, “to be of one mind with you. I rather like it.”

She pursed her lips but slipped her shoes on bare feet. “What are you going to do with those stockings?”

“Haven’t decided yet. You’ll know when I do.”

Her breath caught, and she licked her lips, but then the coach slowed, and she blinked away the lust. She sat firmly upright, her back a marble column of wrinkled muslin. “Liam.” A hesitation, a short cessation of breath, then, “In the interest of being of one mind with one another... what I seek at Norton Hall is not... a marriage. Not days at the beach and reading poetry to one another.”

“What is it you want, then?” He worked carefully to keep emotion from his voice. The coach had stopped, but neither of them would leave it until he knew her intentions, knew what battle lay ahead for him to fight.

“An exploration. With you. Of the body and its many pleasures. Only that. You must understand that happy endings are nothing more than fantasy. If some possess them it is because they are the sort who happy endings are made for.”

“And I’m not the sort.”

Something in her face shattered into a thousand sharp and pricking pieces. “You are.” She inhaled, and it sounded more like a sob. “I am not.”

He was about to argue, to deny vehemently, but her gaze flew over his shoulder, and whatever she saw there made her mouth drop open soundlessly.

He turned. “Bloody hell.”

A woman stormed out the front door of the house, her skirts held wide. She had light, wispy hair and a short, wide frame, and a little duckling line of children marched behind her.

“Liam!” the woman called, almost running now.

“Mama?” Liam opened the carriage and stepped down, and his mother swamped him. So did the ducklings, until he was lost amid a sea of hugging arms and kicking legs, a wind of welcomes and other happy exclamations. His family. He would have laughed with a quick bubble of surprised joy. Any other time. But now, when he wanted only his bed, his wife, and a house empty but for servants who knew not to poke about? He wanted to melt into a puddle of disappointment, right into the gravel.

His mother pushed him out at arm’s length, and the ducklings—his brother Henry and sisters Mags, Mary, and Bethy—backed away, still circling him, studying him as their mother did. The entire army of them lived in Scotland with her second husband, Angus Murray, who ambled just that moment out the door and into the fray, his tall, broad frame towering over his tiny wife, his strawberry-blond hair and beard neatly trimmed. He gave a hearty chuckle and waggled his fingers at Liam. No, not at Liam, at a spot behind Liam.

Cora poked her head out of the coach, and Angus rounded all the others to hold out a hand to her, a sparkle in his eye. She took it and let him help her to the ground.

“Lovely to see ye again, Lady Norton,” he said in a thick brogue.

Liam’s mother glanced at Cora, then back to Liam. “I see the rumors are unfounded.”

“What rumors, Mama?” Liam said. “And what are you doing here?”

“The rumors about your marriage. About your... activities , Liam.” She slapped his upper arm. “That is why I am here. The things I’ve heard .” Her gaze felt lethal. “But if they were true, then you would not be here now with your wife.” Mrs. Murray patted her son’s cheek a bit more roughly than necessary. “You have not answered my letters. Gossip reaches Edinburgh, you know.” She floated to Cora’s side and took her hands. “Are you well, darling? Is my son treating you as he should?”

“Well, he abducted me, yesterday... today? Time has rather become impossible to segment. But, no, perhaps Liam is not treating me as he should.”

His mother and Angus threw their heads back in laughter.

Angus pounded Liam on the back. “You’ve married a woman with a sense of humor. Excellent work, my boy.”

Liam’s smile more closely resembled a grimace. “And just how long are we to have the joy of your company?” The lust that had gripped him since the brothel had thawed considerably since setting his boots to the ground. Parents could do that.

“Some while, I hope,” Angus said. “A fortnight at least. Took us a blasted fortnight to get here, after all. Bad roads and...” He pointed at the children one after another, counting under his breath. “How many of ye are there now? Twelve? Sixteen?”

“Five, Papa,” Bethy said. “Including the baby.” She looked at Liam. “Flora is sleeping, and we dare not wake her up because she screams like a banshee.”

“Just so.” Angus ruffled Bethy’s hair. “It’s impossible to count ye all. Ye’re simply so wiggly one loses track.

“Well, come inside.” Liam’s mother draped one arm around his waist and the other around Cora’s, steering them toward the house. “Come along, come along.”

“Are you welcoming me into my own house?” Liam shared a quizzical glance with Cora behind his mother’s back as she tugged them through the door.

Cora widened her eyes, and he thought he knew exactly what words were tumbling through her mind. Because they were likely the same rattling around in his.

I wish to be alone to write, and you wish to be alone to ravish me. But all these people are now here, and shall we have to travel to the very depths of the sea or the top of the highest mountain to find solitude?

He lifted one shoulder, then dropped it, biting his bottom lip, a series of expressions that meant let us plan an expedition forthwith .

She sighed, clearly understanding, and he felt it to his bones.

Chapter Ten

Kidnapping one's wife should lead to a considerable amount of time alone with her. But Liam had not seen Cora since the day before, just after their arrival at Norton Hall. Instead, he'd been staring at the white and red mottled face of his estate manager, the dour Mr. Edmonds, who considered Liam, mostly, as a bug on the bottom of his shoe. If he could scrub Liam away with the thorough application of a boot scraper, he likely would.

"You are not attending, my lord," Mr. Edmonds said, each word echoing down the long hallway alongside the snap of his boot against the floor.

"I am attending, just not to what you've asked me to attend to. We solved the problem of hiring a new gardener ten minutes ago. In my study. Once you started in with 'Lord Norton, you were not born to,' I left the room. I thought you'd understand such a heavy-handed hint, but here you are"—Liam sighed—"still going on about my woeful inexperience within the peerage."

Mr. Edmonds caught up with him and set his smaller legs to Liam's long stride. "But you were not born to it, my lord."

"But I was born with a brain, and that seems to be the important bit. I'm learning. I've not ruined the entire estate yet. Surely I deserve some praise for that?"

The only praise Mr. Edmonds offered was a tight, loud sniff. And when he started in again with, "My lord, you must understand you're not prepared to," Liam shut off his born-with brain to block out the man. If Liam was a bug on Edmonds' shoe,

Edmonds was a fly forever buzzing in Liam's ear. Do this, be that, such a pity you can't. Liam didn't mind the chores of being a lord. He quite enjoyed the responsibility, the purpose of it all, but to have every decision and action questioned... if he could grow ten feet tall and smash Edmonds beneath his boot, he would. Where was the boot scraper?

No such fanciful solutions in reach, he threw open the gallery door at the end of the hallway and inspected the changes he'd ordered. The long gallery which had previously housed the Fletcher family art had been stripped of its paintings and sculptures and decorated in the current fashion. Because Cora had expressed an admiration for the room and because she had seemed lighter and brighter here. The only painting left on the walls was one that had made her laugh several long weeks ago. Yes, the room was exactly what he'd asked for. Nearly perfect except—

Mr. Edmonds' gasped, rushing around Liam and into the room. "Robbers! We've been robbed, my lord. The family art! It's gone !" The last word a wail that somehow suggested the missing art was all Liam's fault.

Well, this time Edmonds had the right of it.

Liam clapped him on the back. "No robbery. I've had the art moved."

"You've what?" Edmonds stormed across the room. "Where's the statue of the hounds?"

"In the attic."

Was Edmonds emitting that high-pitched whine?

Liam guided him toward the sofa. "Have a seat, man. Breathe."

As soon as Edmonds' arse hit the furniture, he popped back up. "Have you no sense of pride? No decency? To demolish generations of—"

"Bad taste in art?"

Edmonds fisted his hands at his sides and shook like a dog until the red washed away from his cheeks and his breathing returned to normal. "It is in your best interest, the best interest of your title and your progeny, to return this room to the way it was."

"No. Lady Norton needs a room all her own, a study, and she likes the light in here, likes the length of it for pacing. And I've demolished nothing. Simply moved things around a bit." He scratched at the back of his neck. Guilt prickled there like gooseflesh. Had he demolished something important to his heritage? He'd hate for Edmonds to be right.

Edmonds strode for the door. "Your grandmother will have much to say about this."

"If you plan on tattling, Edmonds, you'd better get to it."

Edmonds did not get to it. He turned in circles, mouth open, head shaking. "The room will have to return to its original state."

"Perhaps I was too subtle, Edmonds. Leave. Now." Liam's confidence surged at the steel in his own voice. His title had power; he could very well exercise it.

Edmund spun toward the door in bristling indignation. "Your grandmother will ensure the room is put to rights."

Liam waved him down the hall. "Give the old bird my regards!" Then he dropped to the sofa in the gallery with a growl. Edmonds' lectures, his conjuring of Grandmother, his disapproval and disappointment, it all rolled together with the

frustration that had been coursing through him since their arrival yesterday.

His hopes of ravishing his wife immediately and thoroughly popped like a soap bubble. Instead of pleasuring her on the stairs, he'd shared tea with his family. Instead of bathing her, cleaning every delicate inch of her skin with his own damn hands, he'd made sure the nursery was in working order. And instead of sharing an intimate dinner for two in his chambers with his wife, he'd sat at a long table with her and six others.

Liam had harbored high hopes for after dinner, of whisking his wife upstairs and having his wicked way with her, but his mother had occupied much of Cora's time and attention, and Liam's stepfather had poured a constant stream of chatter right into Liam's ear. And that prickling guilt had kept him seated in the parlor, crowded round with family. Liam couldn't give offense to the man who loved his mother, who had picked up the pieces of his mother's heart, and put them back together, the man who adored Liam's brother and sisters as if they were his own children.

But Liam had not risked eternal damnation through the act of abduction only to be parted from his prey at his very destination.

He'd visited Cora's bedchamber last night. Well, almost. He'd stood with an ear pressed to the door that connected their rooms and raised his hand to knock. And Angus had strolled by whistling a merry tune. Liam had dropped his hand and waved. Awkwardly. Once his stepfather disappeared around the corner, he raised his hand once more, but there came his mother, yelling after Angus, and Liam had cringed and whipped his arms behind his back. He nodded, she winked, and when she disappeared, he beat his head against the door. An effective knock in that it succinctly displayed his emotional state. But she did not answer, so he'd tried the door, found it unlocked. And he'd found her sleeping, curled on her side on top of the covers, her head pillowed on her folded hands.

She, no doubt, had needed that sleep, as had he. He'd realized it was better that way. He refused to be close to exhaustion the next time he stripped her bare and tried his hand at bringing her body to life. She deserved more than yawns and sleep-heavy touches. She deserved his entire attention, his entire brain lighting up over the perfect way to light up her body.

Good intentions, however, did not lighten physical frustration.

But this turn of events was not all bad. It had given him time to inspect the surprise he'd begun for Cora before they'd both run off from Norton Hall like children escaping punishment. He stood in the middle of her surprise now, turning in slow circles, analyzing every corner of the room. When he had first arranged the surprise, this transformed space would have been perfect.

But he knew his wife better now. And the room, while lovely with its long row of windows down one side, lacked an essential quality he now knew necessary for Cora.

He went off in search of the butler and found him in his pantry.

"Pickings," Liam said.

"Yes, my lord?" The butler had a way of speaking without moving a single muscle, as if he conserved his energy for some inevitable emergency, and with the most economical movements possible, he stood from the silver spread across the table.

"I need a desk. A large writing desk with a large comfortable chair. Both stylish, naturally. For the art gallery. Well, Lady Norton's room. And bookshelves all along one entire wall. Perhaps also a wardrobe with a lock on it. Shelved."

"Yes, my lord. Anything else?"

“Make sure the desk is well stocked with writing supplies. Quills, paper, sand, inkwells. Everything she might need.”

“Lady Norton is an avid correspondent?”

Liam gave a brief half grin. “Something like that.” He slapped his gloves on his thigh and strode from the room. Now to find his wife and invite her to take a ride with him. He needed to move, to feel the wind in his face and a challenge in his muscles. The wind wouldn’t be disappointed in him. His horse would pass no judgment. And perhaps neither would Cora. “Where is Lady Norton?”

“In the gardens, I believe.”

Liam trotted off, down the stairs and out the back of the house into the gardens. They had been expertly laid out by some ancestor, sectioned into ordered rows, tree-lined paths, and shaded bowers, all giving way eventually to wide, rolling lawns that extended to a lake and boathouse. The first thing he heard was not the songs of birds but the cries of his brothers and sisters. Young Henry bolted up to him, grabbed him around one leg, and tugged so hard he almost brought Liam to his knees.

“Henry, do be careful,” his mother called, running up with baby Flora in her arms.

“It’s fine, Mother.” Liam steadied himself. “He’s trying to see if he can topple me. Usually, he can, but I have my mountain boots on right now, and you know what that means, Henry.”

The five-year-old groaned. “Your mountain boots are no fair.”

“Not fair? Did I not give you some to wear as well?”

The boy nodded until his hair flopped about his ears.

“Well, if you wish to be as steady as a mountain like me, put them on.”

Henry mimicked putting on a pair of boots, then wiggled his feet into the ground in a wide stance. “Try me.”

Liam put his hands on the boy’s shoulders and pretended to work very diligently to move him to one side and then the other, to topple him backwards. Liam grunted and groaned and pretended the boy would not wobble. And then he stopped with drooping shoulders and a sigh and wiped the pretend sweat off his brow with his sleeve. “See, I told you those boots are excellent.”

Henry giggled, then ran off.

“Where are the girls?” he asked his mother. “I hear them but do not see them.”

“Take a few steps into the rose garden, dear, and you’ll see them gathered round Cora like bees buzzing about a hive.”

Liam did as she said, and there they were, a sweet little trio of bees indeed, leaning on their queen.

“Cora keeps looking longingly at a notebook she was writing in when we arrived, but she continues to let the girls bully her into telling stories.”

“And where is Angus?”

“At the lake, swimming. He does not mind the cold. Never has.”

“Neither have I.”

“You should join him.” Something odd and low in her voice, something a bit nervous

he'd never heard in her tones before. "He was just saying this morning how he hopes the two of you can grow closer while we're here."

"I would like to know your husband better, too." He didn't want his mother thinking he disapproved of her second husband. The marriage had happened so quickly, but a year after his father's death, and then his mother had moved Henry and the girls to Scotland, where Liam could not follow, married as he'd been to his living. "I would join him, but I must steal away my wife."

His mother chuckled. "Of course. We are intruding and should not have come. But you would not believe the rumors I heard on the southern winds from London. I felt in my bones something had gone wrong. You would never act as they were all saying you were acting."

He did not contradict her. The rumors were wrong, but he had done wrong, and he would not deny it.

"I know you better," she said. "And I know you are eager to steal away your wife, but you'll have to peel off the terrible trio to get at her first."

"The girls have made a fast friend of her already?" What the hell, he'd missed a lot in the last day and a half.

"She gave them flowers at the wedding and made stout supporters of them all."

Liam rubbed his palms over his face. "I apologize for how busy I've been since arriving. I barely took a breath without Mr. Edmonds needing something from me." Or berating him.

"The life of a lord," his mother said with a sigh. "If I could have kept you from it, kept you in your uncomplicated little role as a vicar, I would have."

He squirmed because he'd been rather glad to put the vicarage behind him. He'd been bored, had felt trapped, everyone expecting a particular sort of behavior from him he'd never been sure he could perfect.

"Mags! Bethy! Mary!" His mother hitched Flora higher on her hip and waved her arm at the girls in the distance whose heads had popped up like foxes peeking out of their dens. "Leave Lady Norton be now and come along. No neglecting lessons even while visiting."

A chorus of groans as the girls stomped toward their mother with stooped shoulders and crossed arms. Liam patted each of them on their heads as he passed them on his way to Cora, who watched his approach with wide eyes that slowly narrowed the closer he came. She reached for the notebook lying closed next to her on the bench. Once she'd settled it on her lap, she bent over it, opening it and plucking a stubby pencil from behind her ear.

He took a step toward her, then hesitated. After all this time of chasing, he had her. And now he hesitated? Now his boots rooted to the ground?

Yes, now. Because after the bathtub, the brothel, and yesterday's conversation in the coach, he saw her differently. Wanted her differently, even. If she'd told him a week ago she wanted a physical relationship and friendship, he might have settled for that. It fit the parameters of a viscount's relationship with his viscountess, and it assuaged his masculine pride. It allowed him to give her what she desired yet also fulfill his duties. Friendly fucking—good enough for an accidental viscount and a banker's daughter, even one with interesting reading habits.

But he knew her better now, and that... changed things. Because he admired her passion for her art and found himself strangely overcome by the odd urge to hug the wounded daughter of rather questionable parents. He wanted to please her... outside of bed as well as in it.

“Are you going to stand back there all day, watching me?” Cora spoke without looking up from her writing.

He jumped, cleared his throat. “Ah, I’ve been thinking.”

She glanced at him briefly over her shoulder. “Can you think seated?”

“It’s not a superior thinking stance, but I can give it a try.” He rounded the bench and sat beside her on the opposite end, draping an arm over the back of it.

“It may prove beyond your capabilities. It’s an advanced thinking position, after all. I’ve mastered it, but you...” She heaved a sigh. “We shall have to see. May I inquire as to the nature of your thoughts, my lord?”

“I was wondering if you slept well last night.”

“I doubt that. But I shall answer your question, nonetheless. Yes, I did sleep well. Unfortunately.”

Concern scooted him closer to her. He bent to peer into her face. “Unfortunately?”

“Hm. Yes. I had rather hoped my sleep might be disturbed.” She unbent from her writing and lifted a single brow. “But it was not disturbed. Not once.”

He pulled at his cravat. “You expected me?” He’d done another thing wrong, hadn’t he?

“Of course not, my lord. Why would I? The events leading up to last night certainly suggested nothing of the sort—an abduction, a visit to a brothel, my very clear agreement to allow you entrance to my bedchamber.”

“I tried. You were asleep.”

“You could have woken me up.” Her voice contained the frosty snap of a winter wind.

But his ire was up now, too, and he countered it with a gust of his own. “And you could have come to me. Things are not as they were, as we thought they would be. My family is here, my brother and sisters running about, and Mr. Edmonds has become my shadow.”

“The estate manager?” Her face softened. “Well, you must do your duty toward the estate, but...” Her voice became a whisper. “You could have woken me up.”

On impulse, he reached for her hand, dragged it into his lap. “I’ll remember that.” He grinned.

“There is nothing to grin about, my lord.”

“There is. We just argued with one another instead of running away. I think that’s progress.”

“I suppose it is. Shall we pat ourselves on the back?”

“I’ll pat yours if you pat mine.”

“And we can do this patting without our clothes?”

Damn. How could a single question make him hard? “Frankly,” he managed to say through his sudden and choking lust, “I don’t see how patting can be done with clothes.” He needed her. Now. Her hand in his was small and graceful and gloved in lace. He wanted to strip that glove from her body with his teeth. Not here, though.

Clutching her hand, he stood tugging on her to follow, but she stopped halfway, grasping for the notebook falling from her lap.

She shook his hand away and lowered to the bench once more. “Not just yet. I need to finish this scene.”

He groaned and paced before her. “Write, then. Quickly.”

“I can’t write with you pacing like that.”

“What scene is it?”

She blushed, a pretty rush of pink across her cheeks that made her look like spring itself. “A kiss.”

He secured his seat beside her once more in a large swoop that brought his chest up against her arm. She startled, her eyes large and gray and luminous.

“Can I help?” he asked, sounding a little cheeky, giving a little cheeky smile, too.

He could see the no , right there on her pursed lips, and his hopes plummeted.

“Yes,” she said, a shocking answer.

Thank God. No time to waste. He cupped the back of her neck, focused in on her lovely pink lips, and—

She placed her hand over his mouth. “It is a soft kiss. A chaste one.” She scowled, dropping her hand to her lap. “There must be no hint of the bedroom in it.”

“You dislike heated bedroom kisses?” He snorted. “A falsehood if I’ve ever heard

one.”

“It is not about my personal tastes. I think you can guess how I feel about those sorts of kisses. And those who listen to my poetry like them as well—kisses that are passionate and wild and stormy. Not... not...”

“Chaste and soft and innocent?”

She growled, her gaze ripping up the notebook perched on her thighs.

“Well,” he said with a chuckle, “let’s see if I can help you discover the pleasures such a kiss might hold.”

She raised a brow. “Do you think you can manage? At the brothel...” She shook her head. “Never mind. I remember the night we consummated our marriage. Of course you can.”

A direct hit to his pride, that. He kept his hand around her neck and finished the journey he’d begun earlier. This time she did not stop him, but he stopped himself, just as their lips were about to brush. “You shall pay for bringing up the past, my lady.”

“How?” The word a breath.

“I shall kiss you until you forget it.” He tightened his hand on her neck and pressed his lips to hers, keeping the kiss light while his hand held her hard. Not too hard. Just enough for her to know he was in charge. “A good kiss, I’ve been led to understand, is all about the journey. You must be relaxed and open to whatever happens next.” He ran his knuckles down her neck, and she shivered, her jaw relaxing. “There you are, Kitten.” Still, he kept the kiss soft and gentle, slowly tasting her, learning her, letting it unfurl like a flower on a spring morning, holding back the heat growing all over his

body.

He must hold it back. She'd asked for sweet. Innocent. And he'd give her that. For now.

He kissed her until she kissed him back, her lips moving hesitantly against his, then with more focus as she attempted, it seemed, to put the shape of his mouth to memory. The gentler his touch, the more insistent hers. When her tongue flicked out to flirt with the seam of his closed lips, a shudder of desire ripped through him, and he pulled away, wrapped his hands like shackles around her upper arms.

"You're veering far from innocent," he said between panting breaths.

"To hell with innocent." Her hands curled around his neck, and her fingers dug into his cravat.

Impossible to tell who kissed whom first. He crashed down as she surged up and teeth and lips collided, melted, gave, and took. The remnants of the walls misunderstanding and shame had built between them broken down, blown away. And like the garden night when they'd first kissed, like in the darkness of the brothel bedroom, nothing stood between them. Not even a veil. Not even shadows. Only sunlight and blooming roses.

He pulled her closer until their bodies met, until her curves spilled against his hardness. Her hands curled against his chest, and he parted her lips with his tongue, swept it inside for a taste of her. She met him, fought him for control, then ceded it, relaxing once more and letting him guide where they most wished to go. When she bit his bottom lip, letting it slide roughly between her teeth, his cock leapt.

"What do you want?" he rasped.

“To... to...” Her hands curled and uncurled beneath the folds of his cravat where they’d crept. The woman who’d read all the words about wanting had no idea how to form those desires with her lips. Made him feel less of a novice, less of a bumbling fool. They would bumble together. And instead of it being not so bad, it might actually be... glorious. He’d ensure it.

“Yes?” The word a demand just at the shell of her ear, low and ragged. “Say it. What do you want?”

“A bed.”

“Well, then let us find one.”

He swooped her into his arms as he stood and made for the house, the door still open to let in the late summer air.

He kissed her as he entered the house, and said against her lips, “I wish to God I’d told you of my shame. I wish to God I’d not been such a fool.”

“Me, too.” She nudged his nose with hers and found his lips once more. “Me, too.” When she kissed him this time, she used a slower rhythm, a pace made to last instead of one destined to burn hot and quick. Yes, this pace was good. This the pace of a man and woman who had all their lives to learn one another.

He traced the tips of his fingers across her bodice, over those breasts he saw in every damn dream. Slipping his fingers beneath the fabric curving over her shoulder, he tugged, pulled the gown down her arm until the bodice edge flirted with the rosy hint of her nipple. In these shadows, they were as they’d been during their first kiss—wild and hungry and uninhibited—and he would take up where he’d left off that night. But take it further because now he could.

He carried her across the drawing room and into the hallway without breaking the kiss.

“Lord Norton.”

Liam kept walking. Mr. Edmonds could swallow hot—

“Lord. Norton.” Mr. Edmonds’s voice rose to miraculous heights.

Liam stopped, sighed, set Cora on her feet. “I’m busy, Mr. Edmonds. Make it quick.”

“You are never too busy to pay proper attention to your duties. Remember that.” The estate manager stood before Liam, his hands propped on narrow hips, his elbows jutting out like wings ready to flap his disapproval. “There is an issue you must attend to.”

“What is it?”

Mr. Edmonds glanced at Cora. “We should converse in private.”

“My wife is included in that.”

“No. Unless it is a concern under a woman’s purview, she is not. It is not done to include the viscountess in estate business.”

“You are a tedious man,” Liam said, pinching the bridge of his nose. He turned to Cora. “I apologize for the interruption, but I must meet briefly with Mr. Edmonds.”

The estate manager nodded briskly, then marched back down the hallway. “I’ll await you in the study.”

“You should fire him,” Cora said.

“I want to.”

“Then why haven’t you?” She crossed her arms under her breasts, and he had to tear his gaze away to focus on her words.

“It would displease my grandmother. And though the man is a prick, he does know the estate better than anyone. I would be a fool to throw that away because I dislike him on a personal level.”

Cora snorted. “How long will you be?”

“Hopefully not long at all.” He leaned in to kiss her, and the echo of children’s laughter careened toward them from... somewhere. He jolted away from her. Better to wait for privacy. He lowered his voice. “And when I join you, we shall do whatever you like.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Whatever you like . That should be your personal motto.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you are a chameleon, changing your colors to please whoever needs pleasing. You brought me here to find solitude, yet we are ensconced once more within a chaotic family bosom. You kissed me in the garden because a duke told you to. You agreed to marry me to please my mother. You are running off with Mr. Edmonds because he says for you to—”

“I have duties, Cora. I cannot ignore them.”

“No. You cannot. I too have much to attend to.” She offered him a weak smile, then

returned to the drawing room, left the house through the still open door that led to the garden.

She wasn't going to the upper stories, then. Wasn't headed off to find a bed and wait for him.

He'd mucked things up again, hadn't he?

Chapter Eleven

Back in her bedchamber. Alone. As she ever had been at Norton Hall, and this time convinced as she had been before that her husband had entirely forgotten about her. She could hear him in the room next to hers through the connected door. Soft footsteps and sliding drawers, the creak of the bed and the slam of a door. She pressed her fist into her belly to calm it, to silence the flutterings, and she rested her forehead against the cool glass of her window. She needed him to ravish her so she could get on with living, with writing, with the contentment she'd always found in solitude.

Yes, solitude. That, her true desire. And she could continue with it once she'd purged this man from her blood, placed him precisely in a jar labeled friend. That, the best jar for him. The world was telling her that. Her mother taking up residence at the townhouse, Liam's disappearance last night, this morning, and this afternoon—all of it served as a solid reminder she was not a wanted woman. No matter what Liam said, how he tried to convince her, she had not been born for it.

She would take what pleasure she could from him—when he finally remembered she existed—and remind herself all the while of how temporary it would be. That way, he could not hurt her when he lost interest, as he surely would do. She had not expected it to happen so soon. Perhaps she should have, though.

“Has the excitement from the brothel worn off?” she asked her window reflection. “Has he not come because he no longer wants to?” Because he no longer wanted her. Easy enough to believe.

“What wants to what?”

She swung around, crossing the loose edges of her dressing gown over the front of her body and holding it closed with both arms wrapped tight about her middle.

“Liam! I did not hear you enter.”

He leaned against the door frame, wearing nothing but his trousers and untucked shirt, the sleeves rolled up past his elbows. With a lazy grin, he crossed one leg over the other at the ankles. “If you’re talking about me, I can give you a list of things I want. A lengthy one. Starting with—”

“No. I was speaking of... a character. In the poem I’m writing.” She found the tie for her wrapper and secured it, then returned her attention to the window and her silent, watching reflection.

He was reflected in the glass now, too, pacing toward her. He stopped inches away, when she could feel the heat of his body at her back, see him towering over her in the window’s glass. His hair reflected bright against the night sky beyond, and he settled one hand, large and warm, at the curve where her shoulder and neck met. He rubbed it up and down, his gaze hot on her reflection first before dropping to the top of her head, caressing the profile of her face and curve of her breasts below.

Without a touch, he made her breathless.

Worse, he’d stolen her strength, and heaven help her (but she did not think it would), her weak-legged body ached to fall back against him. Why did he touch her so, yet keep such a distance? Those few electric inches between her back and his front might as well be miles. He bent and placed a kiss on her neck, searing her. The kiss closed her eyes, wrenching control from her the moment his lips met her skin. She released control gladly and shivered as he drew a line down her spine, let her head fall to one side to more easily give him access to the part of her he’d already claimed.

“I want to show you something,” he whispered in her ear. He snuck a hand around her waist and pulled her tight against him. The hard length of his shaft pressed against her bottom.

“I should very much like to see that .” She rolled against it in case he did not understand her words.

He held her fast, laughed, and pulled her head back against his shoulder to kiss her. “I should very much like to show you. But not right now.”

“Do not play with me.” She wiggled, trying to escape, found herself tightly caught, a fox in a velvet trap. She reached a hand up to cup the back of his head and force his lips down to hers, taking a brief hard kiss. “Either release me or toss me over your shoulder and throw me onto the bed. Have your way with me and do it now . Or do nothing to me at all.” Show her he wanted her or leave. Everything in between a game she did not wish to play.

“Gentle, you little hellcat,” he said with a chuckle.

“If you remember correctly, being gentle was the problem to begin with.”

Another chuckle as he knelt to retrieve her wrapper. “Indeed. But not yet . Soon.” He helped her don the wrapper once more, his fingers lingering on her as she slipped her arms inside the sleeve, as he secured the tie around her waist. “ That is not why I came here.”

“Ravishing me is not why you came here? What other reason could you have?”

“I have something to show you.”

Her gaze flicked to the meeting point of his legs. “And you’re sure it’s not that?”

“Hellcat. Temptress.” He threaded their hands together, finger interlocked with finger, and pulled her toward the door leading to the hallway.

“Not a good enough one apparently,” she mumbled before saying with a sigh. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

A few candles flickered on their sconces along the walls, and dim light danced with shadows down the hallway. But Liam led her with ease up the stairs and down another hall to a room she recognized even in the dark.

“Why are we in the portrait gallery?”

“Portrait gallery no longer. I’ve had the paintings moved. And the statues. No more dog arses here. The paintings were not safe to begin with. All the sunlight flooding through the windows. And keeping the curtains closed meant we could not enjoy the sunlight.” He hung his head and ran a hand through his hair, down his neck. “I’m rambling. The point is the paintings have been moved, and now we can enjoy this room. You can enjoy it.” He walked about the room. Several candles had been left lit, including one in front of a large mirror on the other side of the room. Reflected by the mirror, the small flame exploded light across the long room. He’d planned this.

“I had it refashioned for your use,” he said. “We used only furniture from other rooms, I’m afraid. I wanted it ready now, but you can, of course, replace the pieces with something more to your liking.”

She half listened to him, drinking in the details of the room—the rugs, the small sofa, the large mirror and the desk placed beneath it, bathed in the candle’s glow. She padded across the room and ran her fingertips across it. Large but elegant with curving legs and made of some dark wood, silken and cold to the touch. A large

wardrobe rested against the wall to the left of the desk.

“Here.” He spoke from directly behind her, and she faced him. He held out his hand, palm up. “There’s a key for the wardrobe. For you.”

With a feather light touch, she placed her fingertips on his palm, seeking, finding not soft, warm skin but the hard iron of an object. A key.

“Why?” But even as she asked the question she knew. “You cannot mean for me to—”

“Easily be able to hide things? Why not? You are allowed your secrets. The wardrobe is lined with sturdy shelves. You may put on those shelves whatever you wish. Anything you wish to keep safe. Or hidden. Even I do not have a key to it. But I would not mind borrowing one or two of whatever might be hidden there.” His eyes burned brighter than the candles.

She could not look away from them. Did not know how to. So many things seemed out of reach, including the one thing that usually came so easily to her—words. “I do not know what to say. I cannot quite comprehend you would do this for me.”

“I do not want you to think I am ashamed of you. And I know you have a hard time trusting my words, so I hope this shows you I mean what I say.”

She hid her face in her hands. The dark a comfort, the solitude that contained her there, familiar. Rarely in her life had she needed words of gratitude, had she been forced to contain the fervor of such a feeling inside her. When the Merriweather sisters befriended her was the only other time she could remember.

A hand on her shoulder. “Cora, are you well? Have I done something wrong?” A small laugh. “Don’t answer that. The odds are high I’ve muddled things once more.”

“No.” She dropped her arms and looked over her shoulder. “This is wonderful. Perhaps the loveliest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

“That can’t be true. It’s a room and a desk and—”

She twisted around and cupped his cheek, said softly, “And it is the loveliest thing anyone has done for me.”

He leaned into her touch, and his throat bobbed. “Good. I finally did something right.” But hesitation wavered at the very edges of his words. “You like it, then?”

“I love it.” She cupped his other cheek and rose up on tiptoe. She kissed him, and as soon as their lips touched, he kissed her back, his arms winding around her waist and pulling her close.

Oh, how his kiss shattered that solitude she’d sought out so recently. How it illuminated the darkness. His touch candles burning her body, and sighs of his breathing carrying away her worry.

She did not hate him.

She did not need him.

Life would be simpler if she never kissed him, if she let him know in no uncertain terms she did not want him, wanted more the distant marriage she’d said she wanted months ago.

But need and want... they traveled different roads. Want wandered the valley of his lips and the heated apex of her legs. Need traveled the stormy seas of trust.

Oh, to perdition with boats. She’d never liked travel by sea.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body as close to his as two sheets of paper in a pile. His arms tightened around her, muscles flexing, hands sliding lower down her body, curving over her bottom, and—

She gasped, cried out as he lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he walked them backward until she felt the cool slide of the desk against her backside. His lips never left hers, even as he held her, moved her, settled her on the smooth, sturdy surface and ran his hands through her hair. He found the base of her plait and grabbed it, tugged her head back until her neck arched for him, and then he kissed down her chin, ran the tip of his tongue down that arched neck. Each touch and taste slammed a door shut on her doubts. And when he bit the neckline of her shift and dragged it down her shoulder, coherent thought scattered altogether.

His hands were on her breasts, newly revealed in the night air, and traced fingertips over every inch of them, tweaking her nipples and nipping with gentle teeth. “Am I cursed to only ever see these beauties in moonlight?”

She dragged her nails up and down his back, urging him closer, but he could come no closer, his muscular thighs biting into the edge of the desk. Her desk. His gift. She tightened her legs around his hips and pulled her body to the very edge of the desk to meet his body, to roll against the thick, hard shaft bulging against his fall.

His fall.

He’d been so careful with her before that she’d taken his lead, touched him only how he’d touched her—with tepid care. Now she could return his wild abandon, and she smoothed her hands around his ribs and down the sides of his legs before sneaking them up under his untucked shirt and onto the burning skin of his abdomen. A blacksmith’s anvil, his torso—hot and hard—but covered with a smattering of crisp hair. She trailed her curious, seeking fingers down the ridges of his abdomen and found the buttons of his fall.

“If you are cursed,” she said, fumbling with those buttons, “then so am I. Shall I never see the full length of you in the sunlight?”

He groaned as her fingers brushed his erection, and his head fell forward, his face burrowing into her neck, his breath warm and coursing yet more heat and need through her. He dragged his forehead along her bare skin, breathing her name there.

“Cora.” He left a claiming kiss on her collarbone. “Cora.” Another kiss on her chest just above the dip between her breasts. “Cora.” A line licked between her breasts, her name a hot moan.

This what they’d started in the garden. This what she’d wanted from him. This what he’d been promising her since following her to Bluevale. This, her undoing. Or her rebirth.

She shivered, and that seemed to shake the last of his buttons free beneath her clumsy fingers. His shaft sprang free, and she hesitated. He froze, his every muscle coiled and waiting. A first for her. She’d seen pictures and read so many descriptions. She’d debated with the other library ladies the best names for a man’s member, including member . Gherkin, aubergine, shaft, cock. None of them mattered because what roared to life most in her mind had nothing to do with those other words. She could think of only one possessive syllable.

Mine.

Was this the way men felt when bedding their virginal wives? Aroused by the idea that no man had seen her as he saw her now? This man, her husband, had tried, but failed with three other women. But Cora the victor.

She wrapped her hand around him, and he bucked against her, hissing with pleasure. Or pain? She reared back to look at his face—eyes closed, jaw tight, eyelids

fluttering. She flicked her thumb over the head of his shaft, he bucked again.

“I’ve never felt anything better,” he said. Each word seemed to cost him an effort. Pleasure then.

She ran her fingers up and down it, explored the rest of him, stroking down his muscled, inner thigh for a moment before finding his shaft once more. Each movement made him wild, and soon he jerked against her over and over again, cursing her, blessing her, begging her, his arms chains so tight she could never leave, and then he cried her name, his hand a fist in her hair and surged against her, his entire body shuddering, his shaft pulsing, where their bodies pressed together becoming wet and warm. He cursed as he came, holding her tighter and tighter until he went limp, his body curving around her, his ragged panting slowing into deep breaths.

How odd to feel his body react to her touch, to swell with need and rest with release. In the books she read and poems she wrote, men had the power; they moved the world to take what they wanted and made women feel things they had been told they shouldn’t. Made them want to feel those things. Oh, this sweet man said he was the same—abductor of women and seductor of wives, taking what he wanted with abandon.

Why then did she feel as if one touch of her fingertips could bring him to his knees, as if he offered her everything, all he was? What to do with such delightful power?

She chuckled and curled into him, stroking her fingers up and down his heaving chest, making herself small in his embrace though she felt a goddess, wild and—

“Hell,” he hissed, lifting from her. “Hell, I apologize, Cora.” Shadows hid his expression, but his voice rang with tones that put her on edge. “God, I’m...” He stepped out from between her legs and scooped her into his arms like a babe. In

seconds, they were in the hallway, heading toward their rooms. Each step he took another curse that would scandalize his former parishioners. She chuckled again, holding tight to his neck and trying to guess his mood. Apologetic, clearly. Discomposed. But why?

“Liam?”

His jaw twitched.

“What has you deviled?”

Another twitch, then he spoke, barely moving his lips. He kicked open her bedroom door and placed her on the bed.

She propped herself up on her elbows, blinking, seeking him in the shadows. “You’re upset again, you volatile creature. Come back.”

He moved toward the door instead. “You deserve the best, Cora, and I keep humiliating myself in front of you.”

“What should you be humiliated by?”

“I couldn’t—” He bit off the word, tried again. “I couldn’t control myself and came in your hand like the absolute inexperienced buffoon I am.”

“Liam, that’s not—”

“I will get this right. You deserve perfection.” He sailed through the door connecting their rooms, and it shut behind him with a click that echoed through her body.

“Next time.” She fell to the mattress. “I thought now was next time.” She growled

and yelled loud enough for him to hear beyond the wall. “I like that, you nodcock!”

She flipped over and stuffed her face into her pillow with a little scream. Not that it made her feel any better. He’d made her feel alive tonight, he’d made her feel wanted, desired. How could she not write brilliant poems sitting at that desk from now on? She must merely run her hand down the grain, remember how she’d made him come with just a touch. Yes, the desk clearly boded well for her success.

And he thought he’d ruined it? Thought she deserved better? Because he’d lost control?

What utter rot.

Her body hummed with desire still, unfulfilled and impatient and—oh! She flopped to her belly and groaned into the blanket. Despite everything—the room, his words, his chasing her—he’d walked away! Again! Fixated on some unknowable, likely impossible perfection .

Yet... if he walked away from her now, it was not because he didn’t want her. It was because he wanted her so badly, he’d lost control.

She tried not to smile. Couldn’t help it. She wanted to make him lose control again.

But first, she must do something nice for him—convince him to release his fears and succumb to the passion that roared between them, no matter how imperfect it might be. They could work on perfecting it together.

Chapter Twelve

If Liam so much as looked at his wife, he grew hard. And if she touched him, he spent in his pants. And if he weren't such a damned-to-hell green boy, he'd be able to pleasure her without losing himself in the process. Without making a fool of himself.

He could do better. He would do better.

He would first, however, figure out why there was a pig in the parlor.

He stood in the doorway, head tilted, mouth floundering—open, closed, open, closed—until he finally said, “Why?”

The parlor's occupants looked up at him. Excluding the pig, who snorted about under the large, round table where they broke their fast.

Bethy flung herself atop the porcine intruder, wrapping her arms around its neck and holding fast despite several objecting snorts. “Oh, please do not send her back out into the cold. She's with child.”

“With children, more like,” his mother mumbled. She sat near the fire, knitting something, a familiar picture from Liam's childhood.

Very well, he now knew the why, but... “How?” He stepped farther into the room.

“We discovered her wandering about this morning.” Cora's voice drew his attention away from the pig. She sat before the window, curtains pulled back to either side of

her and sunlight streaming in. Perhaps because of their garden interlude, he always thought of her as a lady of the darkest hours, her hair black as midnight and her joys and fears a shadowed mystery. But this morning, she had become a lady of the light, glowing, gorgeous. A black cat basking in a sunbeam. Still a bit aloof, naturally, but that, as well as how well the sun loved her, drew him across the room to her side.

Another day, another opportunity to get this damn thing between them right .

He drew his fingertips down the side of her face first, and then he tipped her chin up, kissed her on the lips, but oh-so-lightly, leaving more the warmth of his breath than the pressure of his lips. Her creamy cheeks went pink in a rush that darted straight to his cock.

“Good morning, Cora,” he whispered, each word climbing from his throat with effort. Then clearing his throat, he left her side and knelt beside his sister and freed the animal from her adoration. “You stole someone’s pig?”

Bethy scowled at him. “We saved someone’s pig. And since they lost her, we should keep her.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“Told you!” Henry lifted his head from his book and stuck out his tongue at his sister.

With a sigh, Liam said, “Does anyone have a loose ribbon at hand? A long one, preferably. I’ll have to lead the animal back to Coxston.” Surely someone in the village would know who the pig belonged to. “Or at least put her in a cart and drive her back.”

“You shouldn’t do it yourself, Liam,” his mother said. “You’re the viscount. Tell someone else to do it.” Oh, likely right, that. Viscounts were supposed to solve

challenges by directing others to fix them. Disappointing, that.

Cora jumped to her feet. “Oh, but I was hoping to go to the village today. I thought perhaps we might go together?” Her gray eyes said more than her lips did, and his body tightened. “I’ll retrieve a ribbon and help you.”

“Very well,” he said, rising slowly to his feet. And it was. He could start over, make her forget his failure last night.

Cora flashed him a pretty smile, small and shy, as she passed him and ran out the door.

Bethy scowled at the pig and patted its head. “Poor sweet girl. Tossed out into the cold world. I shall always remember you.”

“Take a cart at least,” his mother said, focused on her knitting. “And be careful. I was just telling Cora there’s a boxing match in Coxston today. Your father—” Her hands froze, then set to work at a quicker pace. “Apologies. Lola kept me wide awake last night, and I’m a bit muddled this morning. Your stepfather was there early this morning, and the streets are already crowded.”

A boxing match. A thrill ripped through Liam. “I’ll be careful, Mother. These things usually do not start until evening. We’ll return before then.” Unfortunately. He found the butler, asked to have a cart prepared, then changed into his riding clothes. He met Cora coming down the stairs, and they returned to the parlor together.

Cora wore a pelisse of deep blue. She’d flung a ribbon over one arm and plopped a bonnet onto her head. “Here we are.” She held the ribbon out, her face blank. “Um. I’ve never caught a pig before. Not even one so docile. How is it done?”

He tugged the ribbon from her hand. “Let me. Unlike you, I was raised in the country

and have met a pig or two in my time.”

“Oh, thank you.” Her voice breathless and lovely. “I’m much more familiar with a nice pair of matching bays than I am with farm animals of any other variety.”

“No doubt those that carry you about London,” he said, tying the ribbon around the pig’s neck. How the hell would the ribbon stay put when the animal’s head was smaller than its neck? “Only the ears to hold it on,” he mumbled, standing and brushing his palms on his thighs. “Are you ready, my dear?” He held his elbow out to Cora, and she took the ribbon from his grasp, ignoring his invitation of escort.

Bethy followed them into the hallway, her head hung as the pig trundled obediently behind Cora and Liam. “I’ll miss you! I’ll never forget you!” The last thing Liam heard from his sister was a girlish sigh, heavy with sorrow.

“Will she ever get over the loss of the pig she knew for a few hours?” he asked as they left through the front door.

“No girl ever does. Hold this.” Cora handed him the ribbon to tie those attached to her bonnet and dangling on either side of her face.

“I’d rather those ribbons,” he said. “Let me secure it.”

“No.”

“Please.”

She flashed him a curious, almost grin, then turned away. Was she... challenging him? To do what?

As he tried to puzzle it out, she very slowly finished tying the bow beneath her chin,

then seemed almost... disappointed. What had she wanted him to do? Insist he tie the ribbons? Pin her against the nearby cart and kiss her until she gave those ribbons up to him?

He shook his head and strolled toward the waiting cart with a sigh. "For the best I didn't tie them, I suppose. One touch of your skin, and I'd likely have to go inside and change before we took Bethy's beloved into town."

Cora caught up with him easily. "You're upset about last night?"

"Aren't you?"

"Not at all." His legs stopped working so quickly, he tripped over his feet, almost fell flat on his face.

Cora laid a hand on his arm, steadying him. "Are you well?"

"There was a hole. In the drive. I tripped."

She glanced beneath their feet. "I see no hole."

He pushed her forward. "Or a stick. A rock. Who knows? You were saying?"

She glanced at the waiting stable boy and bit her lip, shook her head, leading the pig to the young man, who lifted her into the cart. Liam helped Cora onto the bench up front and then settled in beside her.

"I do not believe you," he said. "You're trying to save my pride."

She peeked at him from beneath her bonnet. "Am I? Why do you think that?"

“You laughed. More than once.” He clicked the reins, and the horse jerked the cart into motion.

“Did I? I cannot remember much of anything.”

“Because it was nothing memorable. Except as yet another moment to add to my long list of humiliating sexual experiences.”

“Is it humiliating?”

“Of course it is. You should know, well educated as you are. You touched me, and I came undone.” He shook his head. “A man’s not supposed to come undone with a single touch. He’s supposed to be able to wait, to help a lady to her pleasure first.”

“A gentlemanly philosophy, to be sure, but... I found the entire experience... utterly exhilarating.”

He snapped his head around to study her, mouth parted. A fly could buzz between his lips, and he’d not care. “But you found no pleasure. I could not wait long enough to give you any.”

She snorted, sat up taller. “How can you tell me what I felt? I took much pleasure last night. The pleasure of your kisses, the pleasure of your gifts, the pleasure of the knowledge that I can undo you completely.”

He tipped her bonnet back, revealing a soft wave of hidden curls and a cheek pink with blushing.

A tiny corner of his shame disappeared like fog in the sunlight. “You enjoyed that, did you?”

She swatted his hand away. “Quite.”

He chewed that little morsel of truth over and over. But it never made sense with everything else he knew to be true. “I don't understand. It was my duty to bring you to completion, and I failed.”

“Can you fail if you do not try? Afterwards, you simply left me. Carted me to my room, dropped me to my bed, and left . And I hated that because you'd promised to seduce me, but suddenly, I felt like it was the first time between us again. You left me then, too. But this was worse than the first time because the first time—”

“I actually got the job done.”

“Yes. But the first time, you were so stony-faced and controlled, and I had no idea that you actually liked the thought of me in your bed, in your arms. Last night I knew no other reality. I touched you, and you lost control. Your body showed me the truth of your desire. That is why I have decided without a single doubt that last night was better. And”—she flicked a glance his way, then resettled her gaze on the road before them—“I wish you would not berate yourself as you do.”

“I want everything to be perfect for you.”

“But what if it is like poetry?”

“What do you mean?”

The corner of her lip quirked up. “My first poem was rubbish. My second one as well. And my fiftieth if I'm honest. Still now, I am not perfect. But I am much, much better at it. I am so good at it, I have received a standing ovation. More than once.”

Oh God, now he was imagining an audience surrounding his bed, peering at them,

him , as he peeled layers off his wife, kissed and licked her, thrust into her. A standing ovation? They were more likely to publish their critical notes in the London Gazette .

Her hand landed on his thigh, and her gaze—soft and serious—made him melt more than the sun. “Perfect takes time, Liam. And effort. It requires practice. I am willing to practice, to risk getting it wrong, fumbling about a bit. We can’t be embarrassed if we refuse to shame one another for needing to learn.” She fumbled with the cuffs of her gloves, pulling them up and straightening her fingers to make the fit of them precise. “I don't see why we should not. We are married, and you will need an heir. Best to get that out of the way.”

“Out of the way?” He’d been enjoying her little speech, agreeing with everything until that .

“Yes. Once I have done providing you with an heir, I may move on. So may you. We shall be... amicable then.”

“Why do I get the idea that you plan to move on without me ?”

She shrugged. “It may happen that way. Or it may not. The point is we will be free of obligations, and we shall be able to do as we wish. Men and women do not do well when they are tied to one another for life. I do not believe man is a monogamous creature.”

“Radical idea, that. But I should not be surprised. Do you intend to take a lover?” He squeezed the reins, pulled them too tightly, and the horse snorted, reminding him to remain focused. Oh, Liam was focused. On the idea that his wife might creep into some other man's bed. His wife .

His Cora.

His aloof little beauty who didn't bloody believe man had been made to be monogamous. He'd deal with that irritating detail later. He needed to remain focused. On knocking any idea of taking a lover out of her head.

She shrugged. "There is no telling the future, and I will not discount any possibility." Said as if she were describing the weather, her tone flat, almost uninterested.

She might take a lover.

Like hell she would.

Another impulse reached out a claw and clutched him hard. Most men took mistresses and didn't mind if their wives did too as long as the lady had provided the heir and the spare first. In this, at least, Liam apparently had no desire to be like most men. As most of his impulses did, this one came from Liam alone, from the same place that had rearranged the art gallery and taken his wife to a brothel. This purely Liam desire insisted on faithfulness to his wife and her faithfulness to him.

Most of his impulses ended in ruin, but he couldn't shake it, he must give into it.

The trouble would be getting her to give into it, too.

He must get rid of the pig and get his wife to bed. Immediately.

The pig snorted.

Cora jumped, squeaked, as if the pig were a disapproving chaperone who'd caught them stealing touches when and where they shouldn't be touching at all.

Liam snapped the reins. "I hope this pig is destined for the breakfast table."

“Bacon?” asked Cora.

“Got it in one.” He had an errand to do—return the pig to its rightful place. After that, he would put every one of his recent lessons to good use, pleasuring his wife until she could no longer even say the words take a lover. Until then, he needed to distract his body from the closeness of her body. “Tell me about the poem you're writing.”

“I haven't written it yet, and I do not talk with people about these things until they are ready to be shared. Entirely ready.”

“Very well, then. Keep your secrets.”

“Oh, but I have no more of those. Not from you.”

Her words could have knocked him out of the pulpit. He liked them better than any he'd ever heard, and he'd once read an entire well of words out loud every Sunday. These words, few as they were, made him feel like... like he'd discovered the last unexplored corner of the world, and only he would ever know the treasures found there. The sky glowed a brilliant blue, the fields around them waved green and yellow in the gentle wind, and that wind whipped notes of Cora's scent to him often enough to drive him wild with need.

Return the pig.

Return home.

Make up for months of disappointment by locking Cora in his room until they'd practiced so much they'd discovered what perfect could be like.

And then with words barely audible over the bird song twittering around them, she said, “It takes place in Scotland. My new poem does. During the reign of Bonnie

Prince Charles.”

There he went again—tumbling from the pulpit. Apparently, he need only remain quiet and patient, and she’d come to him with little details and offerings he’d grab up with greed.

When her silence extended into a breath, pregnant with expectation, he found the first words that floated to him. “That is quite... Sir Walter Scott of you.”

She swung to look at him. “You’ve read Scott?”

“Hasn’t everyone?”

“True.”

“Why that time and place?”

“Because it is... more romantic. It is much more believable that something romantic might happen in the past than now.”

He scoffed.

“You do not agree?”

“Not particularly. I do not see why one location and time is any more romantic than our own.”

Her turn to scoff.

“But I trust you know best,” he said. “Now, do go on.”

“I don’t know if I will.”

“But you have me hooked. Will you really leave me in anticipatory misery?”

She curled her fingers over the edge of the bench. “Two lovers separated by family loyalties.”

“Romeo and Juliet. A classic subject for a romantic poem. I knew it would be good.”

Cora sat up a bit straighter. “And the girl is—”

“What is her name?”

“Her name? Well... she does not have one yet. Names do not signify.”

“Do, too. Names signify very much.”

“Then you name her.”

“What is she like?”

“Lovely. And intelligent.”

“Then you should name her Cora,” he said.

“No, she is nothing like me. She is an optimist.”

“Yes, not like you at all, then. Perhaps you should name her Daisy. Because she’s a creature of the sun if she is an optimist.”

Cora tapped your chin. “Perhaps so. Should you like to name my hero as well? He is

a Scottish laird.” She glanced at him sideways. “Should I call him Liam?”

“Absolutely not. The heroine is not Cora, so the hero must not be Liam.”

She sighed with a bit of frustration. “I wish you would not say things that make me want to kiss you.”

A third tumble from the pulpit in less than an hour? He’d be bruised and broken from her affection soon, and giddy about every bump.

“Since I have no idea what those sorts of things are,” he said, “I cannot stop myself from saying them, and—” He bit off the sentence. “Hell. The road running into the village is already crowded.” People on foot and horseback, riding in carts, rowdy and loud and all with a single destination in mind—the fight. “I wonder who is fighting...” No use wondering since he couldn’t stay to watch.

Return the pig.

Return home.

Wife. Room. Bed.

No. Clothes.

“I think we might need to go on foot from here,” he said.

“I did not know fights were so popular. Where have all these people come from?”

“All over. The fighters must be well-known and well matched to draw this kind of crowd.” He searched his mind for some clue he’d picked up before leaving London about who might be trading hits this night. Nothing made itself known.

Her hand settled over his on the reins, small and warm and offering less than he wanted to take. He wanted to take everything.

“Would you like to see it?” she asked. “The fight?”

“I cannot.”

“Of course you can.”

“This is my parish. My former parish. These people know me as a well-behaved vicar.”

“Except for the widow. And her children.”

“I do not need a reminder of that, thank you.” He released the reins and flipped his hand, curling hers up in his palm. It was so small there and fit within his own like a rare gem. “And after I was a well-behaved vicar here, I became a responsible viscount. These people do not want their Vicar Viscounts to reveal vices.” He grimaced. “I cannot stay and watch. I am supposed to be a sober and serious individual.”

She tilted her head, studied him, the brim of her bonnet shadowing her eyes. “And you're not?”

“By necessity, I am.” If not by desire.

“So much experience controlling yourself.”

“And yet I seem to lose all control where you're concerned.” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles before releasing her hand and taking the reins once more. “Come. We'll bypass the crowds and go straight to someone who can help us.”

“And who is that?”

“A friend.”

He took a small road that skirted the perimeter of the village and ended at a cottage sitting squat and happy on the edge of the village. A cottage he knew well. Took his first steps in the garden behind it. Puked out the upstairs window when he got foxed for the first time on stolen wine. He winced. He’d never been fit for the church, always taken more pleasure in earthly delights and little sinful adventures than in the prospect of heavenly rewards. Being a viscount suited him better by far. But still... damn he wished he could go to that fight.

He helped Cora down from the cart and cleared his throat. “I grew up here. The old childhood abode.”

Her head swung left and right, as if by inspecting every inch of the building and its surroundings, she could inspect every inch of him as well.

The door swung open, and a man of mixed race wearing a black suit stepped into the sunshine, shielding his eyes against it.

“Becket!” Liam called, hooking his arm through Cora’s and pulling her forward.

“Liam?” His old friend strode toward them, his face wide and bright with welcome. “And who is this?” Becket raised his brows as he studied Cora.

“This is my wife, Lady Norton. Cora, this is Coxston’s vicar and my old friend from divinity school, Mr. Becket Greene. And where is Mrs. Greene?”

“At the bakery, picking up some things before the crowds become too thick.” Becket slapped Liam on the shoulder. “What brings you here? The fight? I know how you

like a good one.” He mimicked punching Liam’s gut several times.

“No, my friend. A pig.” He led Becket around to the back of the cart. “Do you recognize her?”

Becket chuckled. “Morning, Daisy.” He patted the pig’s rear.

“Daisy?” Cora choked.

“That’s this lady’s name. She belongs to the Skelton sisters. Seamstresses. They stole her from the butcher a few months back. No one knew she was pregnant then. But the Skelton sisters threatened to refuse service to the butcher’s wife if he insisted on cutting Daisy up. The entire ordeal the talk of the town for a while, but now we all treat Daisy like a pet.” He patted her rump again, and she oinked, turned, and butted his hand with her snout.

“Daisy,” Cora repeated, blinking up at Liam. “Well, I can’t use that name now.”

“Oh, that name’s set in stone.” Liam held back a laugh. “Don’t worry, no one will know she’s named for a pig.”

Becket eyed them, then shook his head and headed for the cottage. “I’ll return Daisy to the Skeltons. Will you stay for tea? Mrs. Green would love it. She’ll return within the hour. She has nothing but good things to say about you, Liam. If I didn’t know how well she loved me, I’d be jealous.”

“Praise from your wife is praise of the highest sort. I’m honored. But we can’t stay.” Liam hovered right outside the door. It would not feel like returning home if he entered. He’d always felt a bit out of place there. The surroundings too tight, though they’d fit his father perfectly.

“I will come to meet Mrs. Greene later if she would like that,” Cora said. “But I am afraid we have someplace to be.”

Yes, they did. Liam’s bedchamber.

“I do wonder if you could help me, though, Mr. Greene,” Cora said.

Becket bowed low. “Anything you ask is yours, my lady.”

Cora’s eyes glowed bright. “Clothes, Mr. Greene. I need clothes.”

Chapter Thirteen

They stayed all afternoon with the vicar and his wife, and when they finally left, it was not entirely in their own clothes. Cora wore a gown new to her, a bit too short and a bit too snug about the bust. Mrs. Green, when she'd returned home, had been happy to loan an old gown and had helped Cora change clothes. The gown fit, mostly, as they stepped into a darkening village just as the sun began to droop in the sky.

Liam strolled at Cora's side with a lazy sort of lope, hands shoved in pockets. He suffered a similar, tight-fitting predicament. While he and Mr. Greene were of a height, they were not of a similar build. Mr. Green had the slender physique of a scholar, and Liam's shoulders were broad and thick and, frankly, straining the hard-working stitches of his friend's shirt.

"Keep your head low, Cora," he hissed, tipping his hat low over his face. "While we're here, we can't be recognized."

"I don't see why not. You can be who you are without worrying about censure. So, you like to watch a good fight now and then. That does not make you an irresponsible boulder. You hold yourself to unreachable standards, Liam. Let's have some fun." She took his hand, squeezed it.

He squeezed hers back, pulling her close to his side as he slipped them both through a break in the crowd around the inn. "I should not have allowed this. You should not be here. If the magistrate gets wind of the fight, there'll be trouble. Matches are illegal, Cora." He hissed the last bit.

“Would you have come if I were not with you?”

“No. Because they are illegal .”

“But you would want to.”

He did not answer that.

“Keep the hat low and no one will recognize you. No one will think to look for the former vicar, current viscount at a boxing match. Remember, Liam, it’s illegal.”

He snorted, and her mood surged up to the skies. Despite his worry, the world seemed electric, charged with the excitement of the forbidden. What excellent research for her poem! She had no knowledge of battles, of men crowded together on a field, and she’d been using her experiences on the packed London streets to draw the scenes. This would prove so much more useful.

“How does the magistrate not already know? There are so many people here!” And many wearing superior silks and quality boots. London swells with... “Are those fishing poles slung over their shoulders?”

“It’s part of the game. Pretending they’re here for a bit of innocent sport. Participating in a violent sport instead.”

“Then we should have a fishing pole.”

He stopped, swung around, and she slammed into his chest, looked up into his sizzling and astonished green eyes. “You’re... enthusiastic about this.”

“I am.”

“You, who remain calm and aloof every other time, are vibrating with eagerness.”

She shrugged. “It’s exciting. I’ve never seen boxing before. To know we are not supposed to be here...” She exhaled a whoosh of breath. “I suppose I like the thrill.”

His worried slash of a mouth curved into a wicked grin. “God, you’re adorable.”

She leaned into him, her lips lifted so they almost touched his chin. “And you’re not supposed to say things to make me want to kiss you.”

“And I have no idea what those things are, so I either take the risk of displeasing you or remain silent. Shall I button my lips closed?”

Oh, heavens no. She couldn’t have that.

She licked her lips. Plump, soft, kissable. He cursed, squeezed her hand, and dragged her away from the inn. “I need a drink. The fight will not start yet. Pub’s down this way.”

“Have you been to one before? Not a pub. A match.”

“Many times. You could call it my secret vice.”

A secret vice. Wonderful. “Tell me more.”

They pushed their way through a door down the lane, and he found a table at the back of the room, hidden in a corner.

“Sit,” he said, swinging her toward a chair and pulling his hat brim low. When he sat, he raised his free hand. A barmaid ambled up, and he kept his face hidden. “Two ales.” The woman left, and he peeked at Cora from under the brim of his hat. “Glad

you kept your bonnet.”

“It is exhilarating to be in disguise. Come. I know you think so, too.”

He grinned. Just a flash before it disappeared again. “We have to be careful.”

The barmaid returned and snapped two tankards onto the table as Liam snapped several coins beside them. She left, and Liam took a long pull of his drink.

Cora wrapped her hands around her tankard and sniffed it, took a sip. “Quite good. Stronger than small beer.”

“Drink slowly.”

She did, studying his throat as he swallowed. Mr. Greene’s cravat hung limp around Liam’s neck, and she could see more of that part of his body than usual. She had learned so much about him in the last half hour, and she wanted to know more, but where to start?

“Secret vices, Liam,” she said, swiping a droplet of ale from the outside of the tankard and sucking it off her thumb.

Liam’s gaze followed her movement from tankard to lips. He seemed to have stopped breathing.

Fair. Because her breath caught in her chest watching him watch her.

“You,” he growled. He leaned across the table, drawing her forward, her heart beating in her ears. “You are my secret vice.”

She shivered and leaned back into her chair. “I cannot be a vice if I am your wife.”

“Even if I would throw over all my obligations and responsibilities to make you smile?”

She licked her lips. “Perhaps... perhaps then, yes. But the boxing matches , Liam.”

He fell into the back of his chair with an exhale. “I was not a particularly steadfast student. I spent as much time as I could following the matches. Most men like to bet on the outcome. I wanted to see the movements. I admire the skill. Once I began as my father’s curate, I stopped. This is my first since then.”

“You are an enigma, surprising me at every turn.”

“I am not. I’m a simple enough man.”

“A simple man would be predictable. He would admonish a wife like me, turn his nose up at boxing matches, and when he did have hobbies or vices, he would not care if others knew. Because he is a man. And easily forgiven. But you behave in the exact opposite manner. You accept me as I am, yet you are wary of how others perceive you. You accept others’ flaws but chastise yourself for having any.”

The lusty curve of his lip had disappeared, replaced with the frantic look of a hunted rabbit—all wide, darting eyes and twitching jaw. “I hate to disappoint.”

“Do you know why I did not tell you? Why so few women would tell their husbands about the books they read if they read books like I do? Because I feared judgment. More, I feared you’d despise me. You did not. Yet you fear the judgment of these townspeople should they discover your penchant for flying fists.”

He took another swallow of his ale, plunked it on the table, wrapped both hands around it. “I told you about my father discovering me in the graveyard. What happened after that was almost worse than being discovered with my shaft in hand.

First, my father locked me in a room off the side of the church. For... a day or so. I don't really know. He left me in there with... nothing. Stripped the room of every last item."

The man sounded like a villain from one of her own poems. She sipped her own ale, waiting. Please, God, let the story improve.

"He said nothing. Not a single word. He simply marched me into the church, shoved me onto a pew, then cleared out the smaller room, and shoved me inside. Slammed the door closed"—he inhaled a shaky breath as he pushed a shaking hand through his hair—"and left."

She scratched a nail into an old indentation in the tabletop. "Did he say anything? When he returned?"

"No. Not a word for two months. Not to me. In every other way, he was the same to me he'd always been, neither loving nor mean. But me... I was changed. I think. Two Liams. One determined never to shove others into rooms of my making, and the other desperate to earn a word from my father, even if it was a yelling one. I suppose I've been that way since then. Refusing to judge others because I know... I know I am not good enough to judge anyone."

Her fingers became claws as each beat of her heart somehow enlarged it. It pressed against her ribs, too big, too full.

"Cora," Liam said, leaning back in his chair, "you've gone red as a berry. And if you claw your nails into the table much longer, you'll leave new dents in it. Well, more dents in it. Breathe?"

She exhaled with a whoosh, flattening her palms against the table. That exhale, a breaking damn releasing a flood of words. "That self-righteous, addlebrained, son of

a—”

“Cora,” Liam laughed.

“I curse him. And his children.”

“Which is me.”

“And his—”

“Children’s children’s children? I’d prefer you not curse our own progeny, as hypothetical as they are. Breathe.” He slid his arms across the table and covered her hands with his.

She breathed. But more than air coursing in and out of her lungs, his hands steadied her. “You are a miracle, Liam.”

“ Shh . You’ll sound as if you like me.”

She did. Lord help her, she did. She flipped her hands beneath his so they were palm to palm, and then she flipped them again, taking his hands with her so hers rested atop his. So her hands locked his hands to the tabletop.

“We must start a club,” she said.

“The sexually frustrated club?”

“Oh, no. Not that at all. The horrible father’s club.”

He pulled away from her, folding his arms across his chest. “My father was a fine man. He simply saw me for who I am.”

“Caring, funny—”

“Impulsive, restless, flawed. He was right to do what he did. In his capacity as vicar, he’d seen many a young woman, many a young girl... ruined. So have I. Had my father not locked me in an empty room, who knows how I would have turned out. Perhaps I would have ruined that young girl in the graveyard. I would have been forgiven. She would not have.” His head fell forward, chin to chest, but still he spoke, “I know I sound terribly radical, but—”

Her chair screeching across the floor broke his word in two. She rounded the table and plopped down into his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck as his arms came around her, soft and hard at the same time, understanding and protecting.

She kissed him. In front of everyone who cared to see and to the cheery huzzahs of a few voices raised high across the tavern. She kissed him because she had to, because she’d never felt a need so strong in all her life. Food, sleep, breathing—luxuries compared to kissing Liam. She cupped his cheeks in her hands, made a thorough job of it, tasting the bitter ale and something all his own, wishing she had stripped her gloves off first so she could feel the glinting stubble roving across his jaw.

At first, he was all too still, but then he removed his hat and held it over their faces. Apparently, so he could deepen the kiss, part her lips with his intrepid tongue and curve it into her mouth. He made a sound in his throat like a large cat’s purr, and she moved her hands behind his head, sank her fingers into his hair, pulling him closer.

The table shook as a loud bang echoed across the room, popping them apart.

The waitress stood above them, scowling. “We’re not that kind of establishment. If you’d like to get a room, you may pay for one. Otherwise, I’ll have to start charging them all for a show.”

What seemed a hundred eyes blinked at them from behind her.

Cora ducked her face into Liam's neckcloth and then his chest as he stood and placed her on her feet.

"We're going," he said. "Apologies. Did not mean to make a scene." He tugged her toward the door, and when they stepped onto the street, they dragged in matching breaths. "That was... something." He wiped sweat from his forehead and replaced his hat on his head.

"How does that gentleman do it? Madame Juliet's young man. Who likes to be watched. I found it disconcerting."

He held out his arm, and when she took, he guided her down the street. "Did you? But you initiated it." He spoke through a smile, and each step fairly bounced.

"I am glad I tried it." Better to make it appear as if she'd given into a sudden impulse than to admit the truth—the desire to kiss him had not been physical. It had come from the heart and perhaps even deeper, from the soul. "Is it time yet? Can we go to the boxing competition?"

He chuckled. "A bout, Cora. You must use the correct terminology." His arm came around her waist, and he kept her close to his side as they made their way back to the inn.

So many men, so much taller than her. In her skirts and bonnet, she rather stuck out. "I don't suppose women are allowed at such things," she whispered, huddling into his side.

"Too dangerous. But women fight, too. Sometimes."

She gasped. “They don’t!”

“They do.”

“I have heard some ladies take boxing lessons in the privacy of their own home. For healthful exercise. But fighting? Like the men do? Will there be women fighting tonight? I should like to see it.”

“I like to see you lit up like this, Cora. Eyes bright, excitement tumbling from your lips. Do you think I will ever make you look like this? Alive and eager?”

She stumbled, and his strong arm around her waist steadied her. “Y-yes, I think you might.”

The inn appeared before she could figure out what she felt, the coaching yard more crowded than the streets, and Liam pulled her even more closely to his side.

“Out behind the inn,” he said, dropping his mouth to her ear to whisper, “there’s a field out. That’s likely where they’ve gathered. We’ll keep our distance.”

“Don’t you want to get close? To see their movements? You said you enjoy the skill of it.”

“Not with you here.”

What had happened to her usually jocular husband? He’d become scowly and growly. And heaven help her, but she found it rather arousing. A pulse low and insistent in her body insisted she kiss him. Again. In front of everyone. Again . And it was not only this new grumpiness that tended a growing fire in the pit of her belly. He’d said once he’d recognized a bit of his own loneliness in Cora. Well, she recognized something in him, too. She’d always known she was not good enough for her father,

unwanted by her mother. He too had felt something like that all his life. He too had sought, in his own fashion, a way to fit into the world.

The knowing thawed her. Made her wonder if she, Cold Cora, could... fall in love.

No. Surely not. And certainly not with Liam Fletcher. The man she would take as lover. The man she would take as friend, possibly. The man who just happened to be her husband but would be no more . Of course not.

He guided her around the side of the inn toward the stable, and he took her beyond those, where a line of trees rose up before them. Normal trees, but for the cheers and jeers rising from their tops. Liam led her through the trees and toward the noise until they entered a small clearing, hidden from sight. A mob of men crowded around its edges, screaming and cheering, whistling and laughing. In the center of their chaotic circle, a square ring had been marked off with rope. Inside of it, two bloodied men circled each other.

Cora bounced up on toe and spoke near his ear. “I thought you’d said it hadn’t started yet.”

“I was wrong. They’ve been through several rounds. By the look of that fellow’s face, they’re near the end.”

That fellow’s face looked horrid—swollen, sweaty, and bloody. “They look like they’re dancing.”

“Jackson’s style emphasizes footwork. Oh!”

One of the fellows inside the ring reached out, quick as lightning, and slammed his fist into the other fellow’s face. Cora cried and curled into Liam’s chest as his arm tightened around her. But she didn’t stay hidden long. When she peeked out once

more, the man who'd been hit now retaliated without mercy, fists flying as his opponent dropped to his knees, then hit the dirt in a heap.

"Is he dead?" Cora whispered.

Liam stretched his neck to see. "No. But he's lost. There's another fight soon, but it's time to go home. We came. We saw. Time to leave." But something shot along his limbs and charged his voice, and when she looked up at him, it was to see his face come to life, every inch of it.

"Not yet." She wanted to stay longer, to see him like this longer.

His jaw softened, and she could tell—she was close to victory. He'd let them stay.

"Cheat!" The cry rose from the crowd surrounding the ring, and a ripple blew through it, several men falling backward as another large body careened into them. "Cheat!" the voice said again, but now with so many bodies fallen, Cora could see its owner—a large fellow with ham-shaped fists and spittle clinging to his chin. "I want my money back!"

"Bloody h—" Liam grabbed her around the waist and dragged her toward the trees. "We're leaving."

No arguments from her now.

She scrambled to keep up but found herself knocked by a rampaging force, out of Liam's arms and to the ground. A large body lay heavy as a boulder on top of her. She pushed at it, trying to pull air into her empty lungs. "Liam!" His name a quiet wheeze. But the body lifted off her, and a drunk man stumbled away, and she tried again. "Liam!" Louder this time as she surged to her feet, looking around. Where had he gone? The man who'd fallen into her must have separated them.

The crowd had become a living thing, undulating around her like an uncontrollable ocean wave, and her bonnet... where had it gone? The dirt beneath her boots empty except for feet shuffling by. Shoulders knocked into her, moving her about. Moving her farther from Liam?

The trees. She must get to the trees. Liam had tried to take her that way, toward safety. She took one step.

And found herself stuck, her wrist caught in a hard, meaty vise behind her, her body jerked backward and into the arms of a large man with foul breath.

“Good afternoon, pretty thing,” he drawled.

She tried to hide her nose in her shoulder, pushing and wriggling, and if she had claws, she’d have scratched his eyes out. “Unhand me!” Where was Liam? The angry crowd had consumed him, swallowed him whole. She growled, struggling. “Unhand me!” If this were one of her poems, a bear would come charging out of the woods and devour this man. He’d have to exit stage left, pursued by a bear, no matter the species did not reside in this county. Oh, where was a bear when you needed one? Or a husband. Better a bear than this horrid drunkard.

“Liam!” she cried, her voice more pitiful than before.

“Don’t struggle, little lass.” The man’s breath made her want to retch, and his touch on her hip made her want to become a bear herself. With teeth and claws to teach this beast a lesson.

“Cora?” Her name like a miracle, rising above the rumbling of the fights that had exploded like wildfires all around.

She saw him then. He held another man by the cravat and slammed a fist into his

face, and then he looked up and called again. “Cora! Damn all these ruffians to hell! Where are you?”

“Here! Here!” Still, she fought, using her legs now the beast had pinned her arms to her sides. Her knee made contact, and he screamed, eyes bulging wide as teacup saucers.

The foul beast dropped to his knees, his hands folded over that particularly sensitive part of him. She’d read a man could be disarmed that way, but she’d not thought it would be so easy. Excellent. She wouldn’t wait so long to try it next time. She stepped around the man, headed for the trees.

And another man appeared before her. “Afternoon, sweetie. Lost?”

Not another . “If you lay one hand on me, you sniveling pig’s snout, I will not only curse you and your children, but your children’s children’s children.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Huh? Never mind. I like them feisty.” He lowered his mouth to hers.

She hauled her leg backward to kick him, but something—someone—hit him before she could finish the deed. Two bodies hit the ground at the same time, and the top body wasted not a breath before slamming his fist into the brute’s face.

Straddling her assailant, Liam punched the man. “That.” Twice. “Is my.” Three times. “Wife.” He reared back for a fourth, but she caught his arm, and when he met her gaze over his shoulder, his eyes were wild, wicked, murderous.

“I want to go home. Please, Liam.”

He stood without shaking her arm away and stepped over the groaning man as if he

were a bit of refuse on the street. Pulling Cora close to his side, he led her into the trees. “Are you hurt?”

“No. Someone separated us.”

“I couldn’t find you.”

“I couldn’t find you. And a man waylaid me.”

“And what does he look like? I’m going to kill him.”

“I, erm, incapacitated him before he could hurt me.”

“How?”

“I kicked him. Between the legs.”

“Clever woman.” He kissed the top of her head and held her more tightly. Behind them, the crowd still delighted in chaos. “The magistrate will come. We must get home.”

She didn’t argue. Now that they walked in silence toward the vicarage, her mind could think of only one thing—Liam slamming his fist into another man’s face. Liam tossing words into the air that sounded like fact but in actuality possessed the killing edge of a dagger’s blade.

That is my wife.

It was the first time she’d actually felt those words to be true.

Cora was his wife, and he quite liked it that way.

So did she.

Chapter Fourteen

Liam barely felt his bloody knuckles as Cora poured the whisky into matching tumblers. She set them and the decanter on the small tray the maid had used to carry up a poultice and clean linen strips, and she carried everything over to the wingback armchair he sat in near the fire. Setting the tray on the small table to his left, she uncorked the decanter once more, poured a bit of the whisky on the linen, and knelt before him.

She settled her hand, palm up, on his thigh and curled her fingers a bit, bounced them back out straight. “Your hand, please.”

He gave her the unbruised one.

“The other.” She lifted a brow, waited.

With a sigh, he gave in, placing his palm against hers.

She hissed, her fingertips hovering over his knuckles, busted and flecked with blood.

And then he hissed because she pressed the whisky-soaked linen into his wounds.

“I must clean it,” she said softly.

“Of course. You have no injuries, do you? I can send for a doctor.”

“None whatsoever.”

“Good.” He cleared his throat, unsure what to say next. Her tender touch brought him to life and rocked him into a hazy, sleepy state at the same time. She’d never taken such consideration over him before, never seemed to care enough about him to tend to any wound he might have. She’d appeared... too distant, too sure of their independence from one another to take any interest.

Now she knelt before him, rubbing salve into his wounds and binding them tightly with clean linen.

“Liam,” she said, watching her hands twist the bandage round and round, “you were magnificent today.”

“I was terrified. Fights are like that.” He rubbed his weary eyes. They’d returned later than expected, dawdling on the path back home and stopping to watch the last dying moments of the day bleed color across the sky. He’d been content to have her happy and safe on the bumpy bench beside him, anxious to extend that moment of quietude as long as possible after the fracas of the boxing match. “They break out at any moment. Unpredictable. Men’s blood already boiled by the violence. And when money switches hands, or fails to, things turn nasty. Dangerous. God, Cora, when you were ripped out of my hold, I panicked. It’s my job to keep you safe.” He leaned forward and cupped her cheek, his hand all but swallowing the side of her face as he urged her to lift it and look at him.

She did, tilting her head the smallest bit into his palm. “I am safe.”

“Should you like to learn to throw a punch? I admit that, knowing you could, would give me great comfort.” Particularly since she did not seem inclined to remain by his side indefinitely. If he could not convince her to stay, he could at least have the satisfaction of knowing she knew how to lay a man out flat.

“I would like that very much. Then I shall know how to protect myself with knee and

fist.” Cora tied the ends of the bandage in a tight bow. “There. Now, were you hit? Need I inspect any other bit of you?”

“You can inspect every single bit of me.” He slunk in the chair, stretching his legs out long, one of them sliding with a quiet hush against her skirts.

Her breath caught, and the corner of her mouth twitched up. “I was hoping you’d say that.” But she dropped her hands away from him and looked across the room.

They were alone. Finally.

She was not hiding from him. Finally.

And he was going to bring her body to the trembling edge of pleasure until she shivered over it and fell into his arms.

Finally.

He picked the tumbler of whisky she’d poured him and took a bracing sip. This, his first real test of his recently acquired education. The brothel had been impulse. So, too, had their fumbling in the portrait gallery. This would be quite, quite meditated. The whisky burned going down.

He would make her burn.

He leaned forward and slipped his hand around her neck, fingers sinking soft into the hair at her nape. He nudged her nose with his, intending to kiss her. Instead, he told the truth. “I want to please you, Kitten, make you purr.”

“I want you to as well.”

“But I am”—he swallowed, wishing for more whisky—“doubtful.”

“Of?”

He licked his lips. “My ability to do so.”

The touch of her fingers on his neck, a sudden caress, made him shiver. She smiled, like they shared a secret, naughty and joyful and just between them two. “I do not doubt you at all. There is heat between us. We have proven that. And when I remember how tenderly you touch me at times... and how quickly I made you come... when I think how much you want me.” She shivered. “I cannot wait for more.”

How had she known exactly what to say to give him courage? How had she known exactly what to say to make him feel invincible?

He nudged her nose with his once more, and with his lips brushing soft and light against hers, he said, “I am going to kiss you now.”

Then he did, a lingering, slow, sparking sort of thing, hotter than the fire. He pulled away, a mere breath, her already heavy breaths fogging the air between them. He tugged her to her feet and kissed her again, walking her backward toward the bed. One foot and then the other, legs and skirts and lips parted, tongues seeking until she bumped up against the bed and gave a slight gasp. He wrapped an arm around her waist and lowered her to the mattress. Her hair spread like spilt ink across the quilt. Her chest rose and fell with little pants. He brushed away a lock of hair caught on her lips, pushing it behind her ear and kissing her temple. Every move gentle. Every move, slow, savoring.

No panicked rush now. She’d given him the courage to move at a more prowling pace, and he set a knee on the bed beside her, lowered his body over her soft curves,

and licked her lips, tasted her tongue, thanked God for Cora Fletcher, Lady Norton.

She'd found courage, too, and her graceful fingers flitted about his body—neck and shoulders, hair and chest. When she fisted the linen of his shirt and tugged, he captured her wrist and held it tight against the mattress. She regarded him with a brow crooked in curiosity.

“All for you tonight,” he said. “Lie there, Wife, and let me please you.” A quick nip at her lips led to a line of kisses over her chin and down the long line of her neck. Pulling down her bodice, he released each breast and kissed them, nipping and licking. Before leaving them, too. His hands spanning her waist, he placed a single, singeing kiss near her navel. Too much material between them, fully dressed as she was, but he lingered there, holding her, promising to give her everything.

Then he slid off the bed, hit his knees, and dragged her hips to the mattress's edge. He hooked her legs over his shoulders and grasped the hem of her gown. She bit her lip, and her hands fisted in the quilt. Beautiful. He lifted her skirts above her shins, above her knees, and resting them across her hips so her legs opened wide the very center of her body to his perusal. He ran his hand up on a stocking-clad calf, then down again. Up and down, up and down, first palm, then the backs of his fingers, watching how each stroke and caress tensed her face, then relaxed it. Every touch flexed a new expression over her features.

He kissed the inside of her thigh and raked his fingers down the exposed length of them from hip to knee and back up, flirting with that little button at her center he hoped would drive her wild. Then he kissed a line up the inside of her thigh to her very core. When she moaned, he tightened, feeling impossibly hard already. But somehow, he put the demanding need of his body away.

To focus on her.

“I have wanted to do this for so long,” he whispered against her skin. “I have imagined it and dreamed of it. What will you taste like? How will you sound? I’m going to find out.” He wasn’t asking permission. He wasn’t waiting for her to give it. He simply licked the seam of her sex, and she shivered. “Cold? I’ll warm you.”

She reached for him, sinking her hands deep into his hair, taking the fever of his need a pitch higher.

Not now.

Now her . He kissed her cunny softly, and her hands made fists in his hair, pulling him closer to her center. He licked, and she moaned, and his hands clenched gently around her thighs. Better that than losing control. She did not seem to mind, though. She made the cutest little moans and squeaks.

“You like that?” he asked.

“Yes,” she breathed.

No more gentleness from his hands, then. His fingernails dug into the meat of her thigh, and then he smoothed his palms around to cup her bottom. He kissed and kissed and licked and sucked until she writhed beneath his touch, until she called his name, pleaded.

“Liam... do something. God, just do something.”

“Not yet.” He nipped at her inner thigh. His entire body had gone hard with a need that felt fatal. But still he focused on her. Only on Cora.

She growled and thrashed, but still she did not come. And Liam needed it. Needed it for her .

Flattening a palm against her belly, he smoothed it up until he found a breast, and as he kissed her cunny once more, he rolled her pebbled nipple between thumb and finger. He kneaded her arse, and holy hell, the woman felt like perfection everywhere he touched and tasted—breast, backside, and sweet, sweet center. Wine and honey and heaven.

“Liam,” she moaned, “Oh, oh. Oh, I’m so close to... to something .”

His hands tightened, and he exhaled a rough breath across her cunny. She shivered and moaned but still did not come. What did she need? What did she like? How could he give it to her?

She liked to feel wanted. Hadn’t she told him that? Yes, now time to show her he’d listened.

He slid back up her body, keeping one hand at her center and the other kneading her breast. He found her lips and kissed her hard, then said hot and near her ear, “Touch me.”

“W-what?” A barely there and stuttered word as her body stilled beneath his.

He did not still. He worked his thumb in slow circles around that most sensitive bit of her. “Touch me to see how much I want you, how much I need you right now.” When she did, no doubt, he’d lose control, embarrass himself again, but it did not matter. What mattered was that she knew , she believed .

Her fingertips trailed down the length of his body, sparking like matches against his skin, their heat leaving the marks of her progress on his chest, his abdomen, his hip. And then she palmed his cock, and he almost damn well exploded. He threw his head back and growled a curse or perhaps a prayer to help him keep control.

“Yes,” she breathed. “You do want me.” There should not be a single note of surprise in her voice, but there was.

And it enraged him. He kissed her again, needing to show her, needing it more than breath, and they connected everywhere—lips to lips and hands to the places on their bodies that screamed for release.

“I do want you,” he said between hard kisses, his hand working quickly and methodically between her legs. Continuing to circle with his thumb, he slipped first one finger and then another into her. She bucked against him, and he met her movement. “I do. Now come for me, Cora. C—”

She broke to pieces with a cry, her back arching off the bed, her hands pulling at his hair, lighting up delicious pin pricks of pain across his scalp. She shivered, her hand shaking and pulsing against his cock where still she held it. He would come, too. He bit the side of his tongue to somehow control it, but she said his name in the softest, breathiest way as she floated back to the bed.

She lay like a velvet gown puddled on the floor with the smallest sated smile upon her lips. He’d put that there. He knew how she felt now, when she’d caused him to lose control—elated.

And powerful. And like, for the moment at least, he was impervious to mistake making.

He gathered her body into his arms, scattering kisses across her face. He was hard and ready, but he could wait, could let her have this moment. She turned into his embrace, touching him lightly, half asleep. Together their hearts pounded, and together their breathing ripped ragged through the air. And together their bones melted heavy into the bed as he stroked his fingertips through her hair.

“Next time, you too,” she said, nuzzling into his chest.

“As you wish.” He kissed the top of her head, and when he moved to leave, she wrapped arms strong as chains around him.

“Stay. I want to stay here.”

Not a chance in hell he’d let her go anywhere but his bed tonight. He placed another kiss to the top of her head where she smelled of something warm and floral—a flower in a summer garden. “I’ll return shortly.” He needed to clean up, and he needed to coax her out of her stays. And she might need cleaning, too, and what an excellent opportunity for exploration that would prove.

He found the washbasin and submersed one of the linen bandages into it. Then he exchanged his clothes for a dressing gown and fished out the linen, wrung it out, and returned to the bed. Nudging her leg aside with his knee, he cleaned her slowly. She made little, sleepy, mewling noises that shot straight to his still-throbbing cock. To his heart, too.

“So very pretty everywhere, Cora,” he whispered.

She chuckled, the smallest sound when her mirth should be loud and echoing.

“Sit up.”

With his help, she obeyed, but sleep swayed her from side to side. “I’ve always wondered. About that. Did you”—she yawned—“enjoy it?” His wife, it seemed, reacted peculiarly to finding release—she seemed to drift on the pleasure into sleepiness.

“Yes. More than I can say.” The tapes at the back of her gown fell easily beneath his

touch, and the gown slid off her shoulders. The stays proved just as simple to remove, and when he pulled her to her feet so everything but her shift might slide down her body and to the floor, she leaned into him, her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder. Still, she trusted. He hoped he was worth it.

By the time he'd laid her back down, he knew they would go no further for now. She'd fallen into a deep sleep, satiated and sweet. He held her close and nuzzled her temple with his nose. Any man who thought of his naked wife as often as he did should want more than this. Any man who walked around as hard and as often as he did, because one roll of his wife's pretty eyes made him want to strip her bare, should find no satisfaction in quiet moments.

But this quiet moment felt more like forever than any he'd ever shared with her. So, he held her, and he let his heart feel full with her, and soon, he slept, too.

Chapter Fifteen

Cora considered the concept of shame as she blinked into wakefulness. Outside the window, the sky—seen only from between a sliver of space between two dark, heavy curtain panels—curled fluffy clouds through blindingly blue space. She'd drifted off to sleep like that last night—light and weightless, satisfied in body but oh so satisfied in another way. She'd felt warm, happy, safe, content.

And now, with Liam's heavy arm resting across her waist and his face buried in her tangled hair, she could not shake those feelings, though they were so very foreign to her. She lay trusting in his embrace. Cora stretched and felt her bottom rub against something hard and thick—Liam's shaft. They should have done more last night, but the day had drained her entirely. She barely remembered him undressing her. His tender ministrations seemed but a dream. His hand lay limp on the mattress in front of her—large and strong and with a smattering of crisp, golden hair trailing down the veined forearms, the thick wrist, the lithe fingers. A masculine hand, capable of smashing a man's bones. A husband's hand capable of soothing her and, equally, blooming lightning across her skin. Everywhere he touched, the realization of a dream she never thought she'd live. Only read about. Because men in life, as opposed to those in books, were brutes.

This man, though? Liam? Far from a brute. More of an eager-to-please puppy.

His breath tickled her ear, and a warm shiver of anticipation crept like ivy through her blood.

She peeked over at him, careful that her movements did not disturb him. His white-

blond hair mussed, his expression boyish, his strong jaw relaxed, and his lips, which she'd not paid much attention to before... perfection? His top lip slightly larger than the bottom and shaped like a bow, their shade a happy place between pink and peach, and oh , how they felt on her skin, how they made her feel adored and desirable.

A necessity to kiss him now, to touch him, to wake him up so they could continue what she'd been too tired and sated to continue the night before. Gently, she turned in his arms. Where to begin? He lay on his side, his broad shoulders curved in, one leg draped over her hip. She trailed her fingertips lightly over his shoulder, down his arm, and onto his slim hips. Then she followed the line of his forearm down to the mattress, where his untucked linen shirt pooled between them. Biting her lip, and guided by her thumping heart, she grasped that loose linen and snuck her hand beneath it. Ah, there, the warm, taut skin of his abdomen. Hair there, too. Her fingers followed a trail of it up to his chest.

He shifted, made a husky noise in his throat, and used his leg to drag her closer until no space remained between them. Tangled legs and embracing arms, his nose rubbing against hers, her palms flattened on his chest, stroking. She found his nipple. It felt delicious when he played with her there. Would it feel the same for him? She circled it, brushed the pad of her thumb over it, and Liam's arm's tightened around her, but she wriggled free. He made a sound like a snort, a protest, but she ignored it, pulling his shirt higher, pushing him onto his back.

"You are awake," she said, propping herself on her elbow to look at him.

He pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "And you are here . In my bed."

"Quite convenient."

"Convenient for what?"

“This.” She traveled down his body and pressed her lips just below his navel, gaining a hiss of pleasure for her efforts.

His hands grasped for her, cupping the back of her head, scratching at her shoulder, and she kissed a line up his abdomen, flicking her tongue across his nipple when she reached his chest. The higher she rose on his body, the lower on her his hands wandered, exploring down the length of her spine, cupping her bottom, squeezing and knocking her breath out of rhythm. His breath gone chaotic, too. She yanked at his shirt, hateful thing. It had stood between them too long. No more. Now the time to rip at anything separating them. Including this bit of linen.

She tore it up and over his head, and he helped her discard it. Oh. Oh, what a beautiful man, all lean muscle laid out for her alone. She bent to kiss it only to find herself forced to sit up as he did so, stripping her shift off her in the same movement.

She gasped, and then she moaned as his mouth found her breasts, and the last barrier between them—that frail, pale bit of muslin—fluttered discarded to the floor.

Only his breeches now, and she tore at his fall with trembling, needy fingers. With the last button flicked open, he kicked off the offensive garment and wrapped her up in his arms, flipped them so he straddled her. He’d been above her on their first night together, but it was all different now. That restlessness in his eyes unleashed and shaking through his frame, focused entirely on her. How could a gaze set her ablaze?

His did.

And she delighted in burning.

Delighted more in touching him, in rubbing her palm up his chest, over his shoulder, and down his back. More muscle there, twitching beneath her touch. Had this man married her, bed her the first time, she would not have felt unwanted, unnecessary.

This Liam let his desire for her consume him.

His hands on her breasts, his tongue there, too. As he had last night, he kept one hand on her breast as he glided the other down between her legs, found her clitoris and circled it, stroked his fingers into her sex.

“You’re ready.” His voice a rumble against her neck where he kissed her, marked her.

“Since waking.”

He growled near her ear, “You’re mine now. And I will wait no longer, do you understand?”

“I do.” And what a wicked, wanton, and wonderful reality it was.

“I consummated our marriage before, but now, I’m taking you . All of you. And giving you myself. Do you understand?” He nipped her neck, her earlobe.

She could offer only a breathy sound, a tight nod of her head as an answer.

“Do you understand this is no consummation, Cora? This is a claiming. Me of you. You of me.”

“Yes,” she moaned, clutching at his shoulders. “Please, Liam.” Her body demanded him. “Now.”

His mouth crashed into hers as he placed himself at her entrance. Teeth and tongue and pleading for more, for everything.

Not a consummation.

A claiming.

Yes .

Poised, every muscle tight and straining. He left the kiss only to catch her gaze, holding it with the promise to never let it go. She bit her lip, waiting, waiting, and he—

A knock on the door. “Liam?” a small voice said. “Are you sick? Mama’s worried.”

His jaw ticked.

“Ignore it,” she said, scratching her nails along his back.

But he did not move, remained frozen above her, ready, ready, ready—

“Liam?” the same little voice said. Bethy.

“Do you think he’s dead?” another little voice asked. That one, Mary.

Liam’s eyes blazed with fury.

Cora flung her hands over her face. To laugh or cry, she could not tell.

“Papa says a fight broke out in the village yesterday.” That, Henry’s voice. “He could be hurt.”

“Mama said not to bother him,” Bethy whispered.

“Liam!” Mary bellowed.

“Bloody hell,” Liam said between teeth clenched so hard they’d likely pop right out of his head soon.

“Tell them you’re not dead,” Cora whispered from behind her hands.

“I’m not dead,” Liam shouted. His jaw twitched again.

Silence from behind the door, then, “See!” Bethy cried. “He’s not dead. Liam, did you know we have a new guest?”

“I’m sleeping,” Liam growled. “The guest can go away.”

Cora swatted his shoulder. “Be nice.”

“There is not a man in all of Christendom who would expect me to be nice at this very moment.”

She did laugh then, flinging her arms around his neck and burrowing her face into his chest.

He collapsed on top of her with a deep chuckle.

“I don’t think I should go away,” Mary said. “Cora will want to see the new guest.”

“Later,” Liam groaned.

“Why does she think I want to see the guest?” asked Cora. “And I wonder who it is.”

“The door might not be locked,” Henry said matter-of-factly, as if he’d stated the weather.

Cora sobered, grasping about for the blankets. “Are the doors locked?”

“Hell.” Liam launched to his feet, pulling a blanket with him to wrap around his waist and reaching for the door right as it popped open.

Three sets of eyes blinked up at him, then traveled lower to inspect the blanket. Their heads tilted in different directions, then Mary peeked around Liam’s form and spied Cora. Mary waved.

Cora pulled her sheet higher up her shoulders so only her head remained visible and offered a weak smile, a nod.

“As you see, I am not dead.” Liam pointed a finger down the hallway. “But I am busy at the moment.”

“Busy?” Henry asked. “What are you busy doing with no clothes on? A bath? I hate baths.”

“Go.” Liam stabbed his finger toward the hallway.

“But doesn’t Cora want to see her papa?” Bethy asked.

An odd buzzing sound began in her head. Surely she’d misheard. “My father?”

Bethy’s head bobbed up and down. “Got here just this morning. Tall angry-looking man with a big chin and small ears.”

“Bethy,” Henry hissed, “you’re not supposed to talk about that.”

Liam took a step closer to his brother. “Did the man say he was Mr. Eastwood? Cora’s father?”

All three tiny heads bobbed now.

And Cora felt as if the bed was falling away from underneath her. Her father. Here?
“Why?”

“Dunno,” Mary said, then she plopped two fingers into her mouth.

“Tell him he can wait.” Liam closed the door and almost immediately a volley of footsteps tumbled down the hallway and out of earshot. He rested his forehead against the wood with a groan.

“Why is he here?” The buzzing had stopped inside Cora’s brain, but a chill now crept up her arms. She rubbed at them, unable, no matter the friction of her palms, to rub up some warmth.

“Do not worry about him,” Liam said, straightening and heading back to the bed. “He can wait for you.”

As he pressed one knee into the mattress, she swung her legs off the opposite side of it. “I don’t think I can wait.”

He flopped to the bed with a groan.

“I do apologize, but this is so... so very odd. Why is he here? What could it mean?” She rushed to the door connecting their rooms. “I must dress.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” he sighed, covering his eyes with the back of his hand.

Oh, look at the man, laid out like a swooning heroine. Her feet itched to find her wardrobe, but the rest of her itched for something else. She rushed to his side and dropped his hand away from his face. His mouth parted, and she kissed it, pouring

every last bit of her wanting into it until he rose up on his elbows and kissed her back, a kiss more skilled than it had been in the garden when they'd sealed their fates. They'd been practicing, and it showed, and oh, she had to pull away.

She rested her forehead against his for a long moment, catching her breath, licking her lips, watching dusty morning sunlight turn his hair gold. She groaned as she pulled away from him.

He nodded at the door. "Go and dress. I will, too. We'll see about this new distraction together."

She rushed through the doorway, forgetting to close it behind her, and she heard him yell out as she ran for her wardrobe, "I'm going to make sure that the next time I strip you naked and attempt to claim you, there are no damn interruptions."

And for some reason, her body tight and buzzing with unfulfilled desire, her father waiting downstairs for who knew what benighted reason, she laughed. Not her usual laugh, the bitter sound that said she knew the world for what it was. She laughed with abandon and glee and something that felt suspiciously like hope.

"One more cursed interruption," Liam said, "and I'm going to set fire to Norton Hall." He meant it, too. But mainly he meant it to put some color in his wife's cheeks. They'd gone preternaturally pale the closer they came to the drawing room, where everyone currently had gathered.

Liam had only met the man once, at he and Cora's wedding. Then Mr. Eastwood had been all smiles, hundreds of teeth, and too many nose-to-knees bows to count. The word obsequious came to mind. Liam had barely noticed but for a slight irritation, his entire mind and body preoccupied with his new wife. She'd been pale that day, too. How had her father greeted her at the wedding breakfast? How had he treated her before? Liam could not remember the man exchanging a single word with her.

But considering her mother... considering Cora's pale cheeks... perhaps she preferred it that way.

The door rose up before them like a razor-edged cliff, and he locked their arms together. "You do not have to go in."

"I do not. You're right. But I will."

And then they were sailing into the drawing room, Cora's head held high, her jaw set at the exact angle of defiance.

"Good morning, love," his mother said, raising her cup of tea at him. She sat at the head of a grouping of chairs near an empty fireplace. The children played on the floor behind her, Angus and Mr. Eastwood sat on either side of her.

"You found clothes." Bethy giggled. "That's good."

"You looked like a roman soldier," Henry added.

Mary swallowed a piece of toast. "Cora looked like—"

"Children," his mother said, quiet yet sharp, "no more chatter please."

"I am guessing, Isla," Angus said, pinning the children with a glare, "we have just discovered where the children disappeared to a quarter hour ago."

"So sorry, Liam." His mother winced. "Does it help to know you are not the first man they've accidentally seen in a sheet?"

No, it did not help.

Angus sighed. “They have no sense of privacy, and if a man doesna remember to lock the door...”

Liam cleared his throat. “Perhaps this is not the best conversation to have with a guest present.”

“Father,” Cora said, tearing away from Liam’s side, “such a surprise. What brings you to Norton Hall?”

Mr. Eastwood creaked upward, standing taller than Liam by several inches. His dark hair receded just as many inches from his brow, and it was styled slickly against his skull. The children had not been wrong. His ears were small. He flashed a glance at his daughter, then bowed low to Liam.

“My lord, I thought it time for me to visit my son-in-law. When I heard from Mrs. Eastwood that the two of you had retired to the country for an interlude, I took it upon myself to follow you.”

Who else would follow them? His family, her family, the royal family. Was every mother and father and child to descend upon he and Cora’s interlude and interrupt the bloody hell out of it?

He smothered his rising irritation and summoned a smile. Somehow. “We are delighted to have you, Mr. Eastwood. I’m sure you look forward to many delightful hours with your daughter.”

“I have heard there is excellent fishing here,” Mr. Eastwood said. “You have a well-stocked lake, my lord?”

Cora hid her face, her shoulders slumped a bit, and pink had stolen back into her cheeks, though not the way Liam liked best. Was she embarrassed or resigned?

“I have been told it is well stocked, but I have not yet tested that information myself.”

Mr. Eastwood boomed a laugh and clapped Liam on the shoulder. “We shall have to go fishing, then, my boy.”

Angus stood and stepped between them. “I shall go, too. Haven’t fished in much too long.” Liam’s stepfather was shorter but broader than the banker, and he looked like he wanted to fight.

Irritated or amused? Liam could not choose between the two.

Wait a moment... yes, he could. Irritated. Most definitely. He grasped Cora’s shoulders and guided her toward the chair next to the one her father had recently vacated. “You must catch up with your father.”

“Oh, the girl has nothing to say to me, I’m sure.” Mr. Eastwood stepped around Cora as if she were a dog who might leave unwanted hairs on his newly cleaned trousers. “It’s better to have men about to speak with, isn’t it?”

That was not a question Mr. Eastwood expected an answer to.

Liam answered anyway. “Nay, it’s no’.”

Cora smothered a chuckle behind her hand, then sank into the chair. “You have recently spoken with Mother, then Father?”

“Yes,” he grumbled. “Damn woman tried to lord it over me.” He huffed, looking at Angus as if he expected sympathy from that corner. Angus simply sat down next to his wife once more and crossed his arms over his chest. Mr. Eastwood did not seem to notice no one agreed with him. “She thinks to live in a viscount’s London home? Thinks she’s better than me because of it?”

Cora sighed, hung her head.

“You!” Mr. Eastwood swung toward his daughter. “Ungrateful girl, letting her get the better of me. You should have kicked her out.”

“If mother wishes to stay at our townhouse, she may. It’s not—”

“Yes, she may, but then I may come here . To be with the actual viscount.” He held on to the edges of his jacket and pulled himself up tall.

Liam tried not to blame God too much for making a man like this and attaching him to a woman like Cora. “Is that the only reason you came?”

“It is reason enough. I finally have a son! What are we doing today? I passed a nice little village on my way here, and you know”—Mr. Eastwood winked—“where there’s a village, there’s always a willing little who—”

“Mr. Eastwood!” Liam’s mother rose slowly to her feet. “There are children in this room.” She shook her head. “Not for long. Come, children, let us go where there is more appropriate conversation.”

Cora hurried after his mother and her ducklings. “I do apologize.”

“It’s not your fault, dear.” Liam’s mother patted Cora’s shoulder. “Even roses bloom in horse shit.”

“Mama!” several tiny voices said at once.

Liam’s mother herded the children out into the hallway. “I apologize for the vulgarity. No one is to repeat it. As of right now, the appropriate conversation starts. I don’t want to hear anyone...” Her voice faded, and Liam found himself in possession

of a flustered wife, a snorting stepfather, and an oblivious father-in-law. Hell.

Cora collapsed against the doorframe, and Liam found her side. “Are you unwell?”

“Just tired.” She wouldn’t look at him. “So terribly tired.” And he’d bet it had nothing to do with a lack of sleep.

“I am sorry your mother is so uncivilized,” Mr. Eastwood said. “Must be inconvenient for a man such as you.”

Angus trembled. Angus growled. Angus charged across the room, head lowered. Oh, Hell. Liam leapt, charging after his stepfather to the tune of Cora’s shocked little shriek. Liam pounded into Angus before Angus could reach Mr. Eastwood, and somehow Angus shrank back across the room with him.

“Do not cause a scene,” Liam hissed.

“Ye heard what he said about your mother.”

“And I’d like to punch him, too, but—”

“Of course ye would! Ye’re a good boy.”

“But I can’t. He’s Cora’s father. And a guest here.” And if Liam knew anything, it was that viscounts didn’t allow guests, no matter how odious, to be tackled in their drawing rooms by broad Scottish giants. “Go.” He maneuvered Angus toward the door.

“I’m too angry to go. I think I need to demand satisfaction.”

“No duels! Go to my study. Pace. Talk to the Edmonds. I don’t care. But I am

begging you not to kill Cora's father."

"It's all right. I'd not really notice." Cora was gliding across the room from door to window, her gaze vacant, her jaw set hard.

"That's a nice way to talk to your father," Mr. Eastwood said. "Say, Liam, can I call you Liam, should we fish today? The weather looks good for it."

Angus growled.

Did the man have no fear?

"No," Liam said. "I'm in no mood for fishing. I think it would be best for you to spend a few hours with your daughter. I would hate to get in the way of you two."

"It's no use, Liam," she said, looking out the window. "He doesn't want me. Never has." Those last two words barely audible.

Indeed, Mr. Eastwood appeared not to have heard them at all. He ignored all but Liam. "Hunting, then?"

"No!" Liam shoved his stepfather out the door. "I'm going to go calm Mr. Murray, and you are going to sit in this room and ask your daughter questions and chat with her about the weather and show her you care!" One final shove pushed Angus out into the hallway, and Liam fell out after him. He hurried the other man down the hall. Didn't want to hear his father-in-law reject Cora, prayed he wouldn't say anything too terribly mean out loud.

Once inside his study, Angus paced like a caged lion.

"What were you thinking?" Liam demanded. "You attacked him!"

“He deserved it. He disparaged your mother! And spoke out of turn before the children. Either one alone is a tackling offense. Together?” Angus snorted, cracked his knuckles. “The man is lucky he’s still breathing.”

“I can’t deny it.” Liam pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d wanted to tackle the man, too.

“I will always defend your mother. She’s a rare gem, and I am a lucky man. Few men get a second chance at happiness if they let it escape them once.”

“You are a good man, Angus. Few would take on another woman’s children as if they were their own. And I had no idea you were a widower.”

Angus opened his mouth, closed it, shifted, then offered a smile much weaker than the others. “No’ a widower. Never married until your mother. Only woman who’s ever had my heart.” He paused, his eyes murky with musings, then he finally said, “Your father was a good man, too. He would have done as I’ve done—accepting another man’s child as his own. And ye are much like him.”

“You knew one another?”

“Nay. But your mother speaks of him.” His voice light with a shadow of something more serious shading it. “He would never have tackled anyone.”

“No, he would not have.”

Angus stopped prowling and curved inward. “I...” He shoved a shaking hand through his hair. “I dinna often control my passions. I did so too often in my youth, and I’ve learned no’ to hold back in my old age.”

Liam snorted. “Old age. As if you’re doddering. You would have laid Eastwood flat.”

“Aye.” Angus grinned. “And what a horrid rug he’d make.”

“Aye,” Liam said, imitating his stepfather’s burr, “but a better rug than a father.”

Angus laughed. “God knows I’m proud of ye. Ye’re a good husband. And I’ve embarrassed ye.” He winced. “Let me make it up to ye? How can I?”

“Just don’t kill the man. Until I say you can. And then you must let me have at him first.” Liam dropped into a chair. “Do you know, Cora and I had planned to spend the day much differently than we are. I’m afraid I won’t be able to take two steps now without Eastwood shadowing me.”

Angus towered over him, arms crossed over his chest. “I’ll distract him.”

Liam tilted his head, raised a brow. “Murdering someone is not distracting them.”

“Nay. I’ll play nice. And I’ll keep him away from ye. That’s how I’ll make it up to ye.”

“How?”

“A tour of the house. The stable. Every item of ancestral value. I’m sure he’ll want to view them all.”

“But he’s a bore. Are you sure, Angus?”

“In any possible way,” Angus said. “I’m yours to command. I’ll even keep the children away.”

Liam leapt to his feet and strode for the door. “I accept. And your penance starts now.”

He found Cora and Eastwood right where he'd left them. They sat across from one another, Cora staring a hole through her father's head, and her father reading a book, one leg crossed over the other, foot swinging.

"Oh, there you are!" he said when Liam entered. "How shall we spend the day?"

Cora rolled her eyes, and Liam caught her up out of the chair. "My wife and I will spend the day however we please."

Eastwood uncrossed his leg. "But I—"

"Will certainly enjoy the tour Mr. Murray has volunteered to take you on. An insider's tour."

"That Scotsman is not an insider."

"He is as much as you are."

Cora gasped.

Angus stepped into the room, cracking his knuckles. "It's ye and me, Eastwood, uncovering the ancient mysteries of one of England's most prestigious titles."

Liam weaved his hand with Cora's while her father gaped like a fish. "We're going."

"Going where?" Cora asked.

He made for the door, Cora stumbling after him to keep up.

"But where are we going?" She dug her heels into the carpet. "I'll not budge another inch until you tell me—ack!"

He picked her up and flipped her over his shoulder.

Cora's gasp rang throughout the drawing room and spilled heat along his lower back.

"Put me down! This is terribly undignified, Liam! In front of your family! In front of my father!"

"That's a man who knows how to treat a woman." Eastwood chuckled.

"On that we can agree." But Angus sounded rather surprised at the circumstances.

Behind Liam, Cora's arms moved, and she groaned. But he was too busy absconding with his wife to feel any shame. If they didn't want to witness such displays, they could stay out of his home. He'd do as he pleased here. And what he pleased was an unimpeded hour or two with Cora.

He didn't set her down once he passed the threshold and stepped into the sun, and as he crossed the lawn, she went limp, hanging on either side of him like a rag doll.

"Well back there, Cora?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, quite. Shoulders are underrated modes of travel. And one you quite approve of. I see I must become accustomed to it."

He patted her arse, gloried in her gasp, and carted her toward the lake, not setting her down until he stood just before the boathouse.

"In the mood for water sports?" she asked, hands on hips as she tilted her head back and surveyed the old building.

"Something like that. I have it on good authority this is an excellent place for an

interlude.”

“Oh?” She opened the door and stepped into the musty darkness, batting her lashes at him over her shoulder. “An interlude , as if we’re attending a musical?”

He followed her and shut the door behind them. “Hm. I do intend to make you sing.”

She laughed, and he reached for her, but she darted away. In the dim gray light of the boathouse, with the sun spilling in at the open end, he saw her shadow gliding toward the dock.

“I wish he had not come.” Her shadow hovered at the end of the dock, then stepped over it into a waiting, rocking boat. The sound of gentle splashing, of wood groaning. She sat, her body outlined by the light of the open end of the boathouse behind her. A regal silhouette, but still, somehow, a sad one. “He came here for you .”

“I’ll send him away. If Angus doesn’t throw him out of a second-story window first.” He joined her in the boat, sitting across from her. He could see her better here, her blank face and pinched lips. He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, to hunt for the storms behind the shadows in her eyes.

“Good luck. Once he’s set his mind on a course of action, it’s difficult to dissuade him. I come by my stubbornness naturally, you see.” After a thoughtful moment, she said, “If he were a cruel and violent sort of man, it might be easier to accept his inattention, to fault him for it, to not feel as if it’s my fault. But he’s... jolly. I guess that is why so many women like him. He makes them feel special.”

His fingers wrapped around the edge of the wooden seat, its sharp edge biting into his skin. But that bite not as sharp as her chin lowered in defeat.

“But not you.”

“He wants what he admires, and he admires what he wants. But he’s never wanted me.” Liam took her hand, and she let him, turning her hand so they were palm to palm, fingertips to fluttering pulses.

God, didn’t he know what that felt like. A father could keep your body living and healthy but leave the soul starved. And then you grasped for any sustenance, anything that might fill you up and leave you sated, show you how to be so he’d see you, admire you. Cora spoke for herself, but she might as well be looking into Liam’s own life. He felt her wounds as if they were his own. Because they were. All his life he’d tried to be like others—his father, his peers, his cousin, the peerage. In all that time, he’d never found someone like him. Until Cora. Both lonely and unwanted as they were.

No more. For Cora, at least. Because he wanted her. For her bravery and her quick wit, for her stubborn soul and her kind heart.

His duty to be Cora’s husband? His obligation to make her happy, to please her in the bedroom and out of it? Perhaps. But more than duty now. Something sweeter that Liam had never dared hope for. He wanted to soothe and warm and praise her because she was Cora, and Cora was... the sun and the moon, midnight and noon, wife and lover and friend and... beloved.

“I think,” Cora said, her voice small and gray in the shadows, “my mother might have wanted me if my father had. But he didn’t. So, she found me worthless, too. I used to think being quiet and good and obedient would change things. But it simply allowed them to ignore me more. An obedient girl needs no watching. She watches herself.”

“You? Obedient? Ha.”

A short flash of her teeth. “I decided not to be one day. Or... no... it wasn’t quite like that. I found a way to acquire what my parents denied me. And to use my reputation

to get it. No one suspects a good girl of writing and reciting erotic poetry.”

“Including me, I’m afraid.”

Her eyes glittering, she scooted closer to him until their knees touched. She squeezed his hand, and the smile growing across her lips made him want to cry. Because he’d never seen her like that before—effortlessly happy without reservation or fear. “Do something for me, Liam?”

He’d buy a fleet of rowboats and sit within them, doing whatever Cora pleased if it made her smile exactly like that.

“Anything. What do you wish?”

“Only for you to listen. I’d like to recite one of my poems for you. Now”—she pulled away from him to sit up straight and tall—“row me out into the light.”

Chapter Sixteen

In a ballroom, Liam disappeared—background filler for a play he had no starring role in. In that setting, Cora had always thought him rather... forgettable. He did not stand out for his outrageous good looks like Lottie's husband, Lord Noble. Nor did he attract attention because he had no clue about fashion or grooming like Prudence's husband, Mr. Bailey. Liam knew well how to style himself to appear most pleasing to the largest amount of people, which had the effect of making him rather invisible.

Nothing about him invisible today. His pale-yellow hair slicked back from his forehead, a single lock falling rakishly over his brow. His cheeks glowed from the sun and from exertion, and his broad shoulders strained against the fine linen of his shirt with each strong pull of the oars. His forearms in particular... Well, had he ever been allowed to show those in a ballroom, he might have stood out. Muscular and veined and lightly dusted with golden hair, his sinewy hands maneuvering the oars with capable efficiency.

But more than all that, what made him impossible to ignore, and so much more handsome than she'd ever realized before this glowing moment in the sun—was the way he looked at her. As if she were a goddess come to life, like she was his favorite song, his breathing dream. He looked at her like he wanted her. All of her, the bitter with the sweet, the claws and the kisses.

She could love him.

What a terrible, rogue thought, that. Impossible! She did not believe in love, not really. Her parents... and so many others provided ample reason not to.

But this was not her mother and father, not the practical matches favored by most of the ton and the cits who emulated them.

This was her. And Liam. And that was different.

And that's why she'd offered to recite for him.

But he was looking at her like she'd threatened to throw him off the boat.

"If you don't want me to—"

"No!" He lurched forward, dropping one oar entirely in the lake and rocking the boat.

"Damn." He fished out the oar and then extended his hands toward her, palms flat.

"You sit there. I'll sit right here." He grinned, wiggled his backside into the simple wooden bench, and placed his hands on his thighs. "Go. God, you're brilliant."

"You've heard nothing yet. You can't know that." She lifted her chin. "And what if I don't feel like it now?"

Not even that broke his smile. "You do feel like it. Go on, then. I'm waiting. I'll wait all day. Because you're brilliant. I know it."

She'd laugh if she wasn't already a jumble of jumping nerves. "This poem is not yet complete." She'd been writing it during her first weeks here, before he'd discovered the truth about the library, before he'd run and made her think—

She shook her head. All that was over and done with. All those misunderstandings dissolved in the gentle heat of this August sun, in the gentle passion of this man's green eyes.

She swallowed and licked her lips and began.

No darkness for these words, no flickering candles. Only a steady sun beaming brightly, a soft wind whipping her rhymes upward, and her own soul feeling more like dawn than midnight.

This, the story she should write for Lady Escher. A highwayman, a hidden identity, a count's innocent daughter, a kidnapping, a dark night when all seems lost.

But it wouldn't be. She'd abandoned this poem. She'd take it back up now. Give it a happy ending. Because the count's daughter, no matter how horrid her father, deserved one.

When she'd ran out of words, shyness crept across her skin like a sunburn. "I... I'm not finished with it, but—"

"It's brilliant. I knew it."

"No. It needs work, and—"

"You're brilliant." He tilted gently forward until his knees hit the bottom of the boat, and his hands grasped against her seat on either side of her hips. The boat dipped ever so slightly, changing its balance on the water.

Her heart shifted, too, finding a new balance. She dared to rest her fingertips against his cheek, stroke them down his jaw.

"I could list every little detail about your poem I enjoyed."

"Yes, please."

"But I thought perhaps my lips, my tongue could please you without words. Can you think of anything? Perhaps something that happened around the sixteenth stanza? Oh,

and it also happened last night, didn't it?"

"What a wicked grin you wear, my lord."

He placed a hand on her thigh and began to ruck the material up her leg, looking up at her all the while. "I think I can do better than last night. You deserve it."

"But Liam." The house rose up the hill at a distance, what seemed a thousand gleaming windows peering down at them. "Someone could see."

"Let them." He kissed the top of her thigh. "Let them know how badly you are wanted." Dragging his teeth across the inside of her thigh, he pressed her legs apart with his shoulders. When the tip of his tongue touched her slit, she shook, squeaked, even. A humiliation. The heroines in her poems never made such undignified sounds. Neither did those in the books she'd read. But she could not help it. With lips and tongue and fingers, Liam played her like an instrument he intended to master. And, it appeared, he was a quick study.

Last night she'd loved every touch, had felt the world melt away when he'd brought her to completion, but he'd been learning what did not work for her as much as he'd been learning what did.

And now he knew, and he seemed the kind of man who got straight to the point, discarding unnecessary caresses and gifting her only with those touches that brought her body to life. His palms slid up and down the outside of her thighs, trailing tingles in their wake, and one reached higher, squeezing lightly over her ribs in a way that should not have been delicious. But was. Higher still to slip her breast out of its bodice easily and rub his thumb across her pebbled nipple.

How wanton, how wrong. In the full light of the sun to let him undo her.

But she would not stop it, no matter how many prying eyes spied on them from the windows far away.

Because he touched her reverently as if she deserved worship. And he touched her profanely as if she deserved all the pleasures of the earth. Each stroke of his tongue heightened her pleasure, quickened her breathing, making her throat raw. Her muscles clenched with need. She needed him, and she needed the sensation that he chased through her body. The one she'd felt under his exertions last night, the sensation of flying, of falling, of breaking apart but not breaking at all. Nothing so perfectly whole could be described as a fracturing. Her poet's tongue reached for the right words as the viscount's tongue reached for the right spot. And oh he found it, flicked his tongue against it, sucked it between his teeth, and oh there the flying and the falling, there the not shattering. Floating in an abyss, a warm and electric ocean. No words. Only delicious sensation transforming her.

No words.

No words and no images. No symbol or metaphor or rhyme.

Only the rocking, only the heat, only his hands, and only her heart beating like a poem in her ears.

She'd been wrong—a single word left in that ocean, and she cried it out. “Liam.” Then once more in a hushed whisper as she folded forward so her forehead rested against the top of his head. “Liam.”

His hands on her cheeks, his lips on hers, his inhalation soft yet fervent as if he strove to have her all—touch and taste and scent. He rested their foreheads together and said, “I think it's time to go home. I think it's time I take you to bed. After, of course, I've locked the door.”

“Yes,” she moaned.

He slipped back to sit on the bench across from her and took up the oars once more. He put his arms to work, muscles bunching beneath linen, veins bulging, drawing the rowboat closer to the boathouse. By the time he threaded the boat into the narrow dock, he had a single bead of sweat rolling down his forehead, and she found her desire—so sated and sleepy minutes ago—had roared back to life.

The front of the boat where he sat was in shade, and the back in full sun, and when he stood and put one foot on the dock, then offered her hand to help her out, that hand seemed cut in two. Shadow and light. And for the first time in her life, she sat fully in the sun.

She took his outstretched hand but did not budge.

“Cora?” He tilted his head.

“Here, Liam. Right here. Now.” She tugged on his hand, and the boat rocked gently, but he did not move.

“Here? You can’t mean that. You need a bed. You deserve a pile of pillows and a bath where I will care for you, and you—”

“I deserve here and now. I’m half sick of shadows, Liam. I want you to make love to me in the sunlight. The boathouse and the trees block the view from the house.”

Their gazes caught, his wide and wondering, and hers resolute. With hesitant slowness, he stepped back into the boat and sat. “Are you sure? It’s not perfect.”

Cora hit her knees in the bottom of the boat before him, as he’d done to her earlier. She grabbed his hips and pulled him down, too. The slam of his knees against the

wood sent the boat rocking back and forth, side to side.

“It is perfect,” she said. “Because it is here and now, and it is you, and it is me.” Her hands flew to his fall, and keeping his gaze, holding it steady, she flicked a button free. “If we keep waiting for perfection, it will never happen, and I will... God, Liam, I will expire . Do it now and let us strive for perfect later!”

He kissed her, so hard and fast she didn't see it coming, a clashing of teeth and tongue and demanding hands everywhere they could reach. His body coiled, every bit of it intent on her and only her.

She worked feverishly between their bodies flicking free another button and then another until his fall dropped open, and his trousers sagged around his hips, and his cock sprang free. He yanked his shirt tails from the waist of his trousers, though she could not divest him of the shirt completely with his waistcoat still in the way. No time to unbutton that.

Because he was hard and long and in need of her attention. She wrapped her hand around his cock and tugged gently up, then down, then up again, rubbed her thumb slowly across its head. He groaned and slid to his arse in the boat between her legs, leaning against the bench seat. He pulled her down atop him and stroked his member against her sex. His hands rushed up her thighs, and one cupped her bottom while the other wandered higher to caress her breast.

Pleasure gathered at her center once more, a lazier kind than before. She slipped her hands beneath his shirt and reveled in the taut planes of his abdomen. She stroked her fingertips down the muscle, and every time that muscle flexed because of her , her confidence soared.

She leaned forward and rested her mouth near his ear, whispering, “I undo you, don't I?”

“Yes,” he said, the answer guttural.

“You want me more than anything,” she whispered.

“More than air.” He took her earlobe between his teeth and tugged.

A spike of pleasure shot through her. She gasped and pressed her breasts against his hand. She bit his bottom lip, and he thrust his hips into her.

“Now,” she said. “Now. I’m tired of waiting, and you will not make me wait any longer.”

“No. No more waiting.” And then his hands were running up the inside of her thighs and parting her flesh, and then he was guiding her hips down on top of him, guiding himself inside her.

They had done this before, but that had been like a dream of no consequence, something that hadn’t happened, that could barely be remembered. Decimated in the heady reality of now, in the perfection of how it should have always been between them.

He thrust upward, a quick motion, until he was buried to the hilt. She felt tight and full, and she gripped his shoulders as she ground down harder, deeper on to him. Their movement rocked the boat into a faster rhythm, and she braced her hands on the edge of the bench behind him, lifted and lowered as he arched and thrust to meet her movements.

An awkward rhythm, a moment of learning his pace, but even then the slide of their bodies together washed a lovely headiness over her. Knowing a man must slide in and out, knowing a woman could control it from above him—none of the knowing made the doing perfect.

But he grasped her hips and showed her what he needed, and she kept his gaze under lock and key to show him what she liked.

All of it, really, but when his large hands stretched a thumb toward her center and flicked against her pulsing pearl, she cried out, “Oh, that. Yes, that.”

He grinned. The same Liam grin as always. But better. Naughtier. Victorious. Merciless, too.

They rocked against each other, finally finding a rhythm that suited them both, and the water rocked the boat as the sun shined hot and heady over them. The sun not the only source of heat, though. Nor even the hottest. They produced their own blaze to rival that life-giving star. There, her metaphors. She laughed, throwing her face to the overcast sky.

And when she lowered her gaze to her husband, his face was a rosy wash of pleasure and revelation.

“Your laugh, Cora. God, I lo—” He thrust upward, every muscle in his body going rigid, his hands on her hips clenching, digging nails into soft skin. No pain, though, only lip-biting perfection as she rolled her hips into his and watched him come and knew her own body reached for that same shore.

Her skin buzzed and her core ached, and he felt so very good inside her, but she could not quite reach the pleasure that rippled over him. But when he wrapped his arms tight around her and drew her down on top of him, kissing her cheek, her hair, her earlobe, and murmuring her name, she let herself enjoy it. The steadiness of his arms a pleasure, too, the comforting and reliable rhythm of his heartbeat the best delight because she had not counted on it, had not expected it. When she’d been ignoring Liam across ballrooms, she’d had no idea the type of man he was, the type of woman he made her want to be.

The kind of woman who rocked in peace in her lover's arms and found pleasure in the sound of her husband's laughter.

Impossible to ignore Liam now that she truly saw him.

Impossible not to love him, now that she'd let him truly see her.

Chapter Seventeen

They marched toward Norton Hall as the enemy storms a castle, only with more hand-holding and less weaponry.

“What do you think?” Liam asked Cora. “Do we attack straight on or sneak in from the side?”

“I always recommend boldness.”

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “Of course you do.”

“And it’s likely my father is gone by now. I can’t see him leaving his mistress too terribly long.”

“Yes, but the children are still about.” Too many interferences between them and their bedroom door. Liam wished them all to perdition.

“The children could be anywhere. At any time. We must not let them think they intimidate us. We must show them we are the ones in control, Liam.” She squeezed his hand, set her little chin at the most adorably defiant angle.

“The front door it is, then.”

He ran for it, pumping his legs into action and tugging her along with him. She hiked up her skirts and ran just as quickly, fleet of foot and seducing him in a way he did not know he could be seduced. Because it was not the flashes of long, lithe legs

beneath her lifted skirts that had him hard all over again, it was her little hiccups of laughter, the way she threw herself forward at his side with such gleeful abandon.

He flung the door open and not two steps into the entry hall, a booming voice welcomed them.

“Surely that’s the viscount returned!” Mr. Eastwood cried from... somewhere.

“Sounds like he’s upstairs,” Cora whispered. “In the parlor?”

“No,” Liam hissed. “I think he’s somewhere on the ground floor.” But where the hell was Angus? “Near the back of the—”

A door slammed, and the echo of footsteps chased toward them.

“Up the stairs! Quick!”

“That you, Norton?” Mr. Eastwood possessed such a cheerful voice. But it felt like a harbinger of doom.

“Nay!” Another booming voice joined the first. This one with a rich brogue. “Just me, I’m afraid. Thought I lost ye, Eastwood. The tour’s no’ done yet.”

“Listen here—I came to visit my son-in-law. You won’t keep me from him.”

“Keep ye from him?” Angus laughed, loud and hearty. “I’m preparing ye for him, dear man. Think of how impressed the viscount will be when ye have more knowledge of the family history and wealth.”

Silence.

“Angus has caught him,” Cora whispered near Liam’s ear. She squeezed his hand and tugged him up the stairs. “Come along. Quick.”

They made it halfway up when they heard the patter of little feet.

“Oh no,” Liam groaned, slowing their ascent. With each soft step upward, more of the child came into view. Bethy. With sticky fingers and jam of some sort running down her little apron. She opened her mouth and was scooped up into her stepfather’s arms before she could utter even a single syllable.

“Ye have quite lost your way, Elizabeth,” Angus said. “Ye’re not finished with your tea and were only supposed to be gone a moment. Let me help you find the drawing room, my dear.” He winked at Liam and Cora. “You must forgive me losing track of a child or two. Today I have more than usual to keep in line.” He carried the child off beneath one arm, her legs dangling behind him.

“Norton!” Mr. Eastwood called from somewhere in the house.

“Let me show ye the good silver!” Angus cried as he carted Bethy back to tea.

Cora pretended to wipe sweat from her brow. “That was close.”

“Let’s just hope it’s the only attack,” Liam said.

Cora peered down the hallway in first one direction and then the other. “Empty. It appears we’re safe. For now.”

“Take no moment of solitude for granted.” Liam hummed. “Children are very small. They can fit in places we’d never expect. And your father is crafty.”

“Hm. Yes. Any one of them could be hiding, waiting. We should complete a

thorough investigation of the room before...”

“ Quite thorough. Quick. Make a run for it.”

She released his hand, clutched her skirts with both hands, and they ran as quickly as they could toward the bedroom door, slamming it behind them. They fell onto the bed in a pile of laughter and searching arms. He caressed the curve of her face, and she drew her fingertips up and down the length of his torso, soft touches as their breathing evened out and gentle smiles as they made occasional flashes of eye contact. He cupped the back of her head and pulled her closer, set his lips to hers and—

Knock knock.

They froze, waiting with the sort of fear that drenched a body in sweat.

Knock knock.

Simultaneously, they each lifted a single finger to their lips. Maybe if they stopped breathing and pretended to be sleeping—

“Liam?” Mary asked, her voice muffled behind the door. “Cora? Can we go out to the lake now? I want to take out the rowboat, and earlier Angus said we could—ack!”

“Apologies!” Angus cried. “I’m taking them all outside now. Nae more interruptions, I swear it. Have fun! If ye wake up with a wall before your door, I’ve had to build it to keep ye safe. Yell out the window for a ladder.” The sound of footsteps, which grew weaker as they moved away from the door, and then silence.

Liam hid his face in his hands and groaned.

“Do you believe him?” Cora asked. “Are we truly safe from interruptions?”

“Yes, I rather think we are.”

KNOCK KNOCK. The door shook with the force of the knocker’s inquiry. “Lord Norton, perhaps we could walk to the village. The weather looks to be holding up!”

Cora stuffed her face into her pillow and screamed.

Liam slammed his feet to the floor and straightened his clothes. Murder was a sin. A mighty unforgivable one. But Hell seemed a small price to pay at the moment.

“Whatever you’ve planned with Cora,” Mr. Eastwood said, “I’m sure you can do with me instead. Almost every activity is better with another man at your side. Women are tedious except when you’re between their—”

Liam threw open the door, hand clenched into a fist, arm cocked back to lay his father-in-law flat.

But before he could let his fist fly, a hurtling blur slammed into the man, sending him crashing to the floor with an echoing boom.

Angus lay atop him, panting. “Eastwood? That ye? What are ye doing standing in the middle of the hallway? Didn’t see ye when I came around the corner.”

Liam craned his neck around the doorframe. The corner in question was a good three meters away.

Eastwood shoved Angus off and held a hand to his nose. “My nose hit the floor, you bloody arse! It’s bleeding! Likely broken!”

Angus clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “I do apologize. Let me take ye to cook to fix that up.” He hauled Eastwood to his feet, shoved him toward the stairs, then whispered to Liam, “The children are with their mother, and I’ll drag Eastwood into town.” He waved the back of his hands toward Liam, then disappeared in the banker’s angry wake, mumbling reassurances as Eastwood grumbled complaints.

Liam shut the door, snapped the lock in place, and collapsed onto the bed, face first.

“Were you really going to hit him for me?”

He turned onto his side. “Should I not have? My impulses, you know. Difficult to control at times.”

“I would have liked to see it, actually.”

Liam propped his head up with his elbow. Cora lay on her back, her hair a messy dark halo, and her skirts wrinkled, her hands folded over her belly and a small smile lifting the corners of her lips. He traced that smile with his thumb.

The buzz from the boat was gone now, replaced with something softer, something that could wait, that wanted to because there was so much to do and see in this small stretch of time between them, and waiting seemed the best way to slow it down, to have more of Cora in whatever way he could.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

She nodded. “And I should like to freshen up.”

“Very well. You do that, and I shall arrange for a repast in our room.”

“Excellent.” She rolled out of the bed and disappeared into her room. Would he be able to convince her to abandon that chamber? To sleep and dress and do everything else here with him?

Quickly, he undressed and slipped into his banyan, never looking away from the door separating them. Perhaps if he kept her entirely distracted, she’d never notice she’d not left his room in, oh, however long he needed to convince her. Or perhaps he could find something that needed to be stored in the viscountess’s room. A necessity that required her to move chambers.

But perhaps duplicity was not required at all.

A maid arrived with a tray of steaming tea, bread, cheese, and pears, and Liam sat at the small table before the fire where she dropped the food before leaving. The porcelain of the teapot warmed his hands as he poured the steaming stuff into two cups. Cora was a bit like the teapot—cold and hard and elegantly curved on the outside but brimming with heat on the inside. It steamed forth in her actions and in her poetry, in her arguments and in her defiance. And he would not let it go cold once spilled into the open air. He’d lap it up and call for more and let her know, in every moment, she was wanted. He wanted her company and her conversation and her body.

And her heart.

Love. She needed it like a hungry body needed a feast. Some, denied too long, starved themselves into bones and bitterness. But they could be revived. If she let him, Liam would have the great honor of reviving her.

The door between their chambers opened, and Cora slipped through, wearing nothing but her shift and rose-pink dressing gown, her hair in a long, dark plait down her back.

Most of the time they'd spent together had been fast and desperate, as if time marched more quickly forward when they touched, and if they did not take all the touches and kisses at once, the end would come more quickly than desired.

Not now. Now a lazy river on a hot afternoon, a soft snowfall on a winter morning when there was no place to be, an excellent book on an early evening before a cheery fire.

"Join me," he said, picking up a knife and pear and beginning to peel it.

She sat across from him and took up the cup of tea he'd poured for her.

"Cold?" He winced. He should have waited to pour it.

She inhaled the steam with closed eyes, then took a sip, and shook her head. "It's perfect. But I find I am no longer thirsty." She rose and settled herself in his lap, winding an arm around his neck and taking his lips for a kiss as he settled his hands at her waist.

This kiss, these touches, not of desperation, not of rabid need. She felt the same slowness he felt, and she wanted to drift in lazy sensuality as he did, every touch an eternity, every kiss a lifetime. The silk of her hair as he wrapped her braid around his hand and tugged so he could kiss the lovely slope of her neck. The flutter of her fingers against his chest. The weight of her body against his. Every bit of it driving desire higher like the summer sun warming a lake. It took time, but the building heat proved delicious.

He stood, and—God, yes—she clung to him, scattering little kisses across his jaw with a husky laugh. As he laid her across the bed, she kissed him still, and when he stretched out beside her, he took her lips, deepening the kiss, giving her everything. With a hand beneath her knee, he bent her leg, tightening as the hem of her shift and

dressing gown fell down her thighs to pool at her hips. Long legs, lean and lovely.

“I could spend eternity kissing these legs.”

“Very well,” she said, her voice breathy, “I suppose I shall let you.”

He nipped at the top of her knee, making her laugh. And then he slid his hand down her inner thigh, making her gasp as his fingers parted her. “And do you suppose you’ll let me do this?”

“Yes.” More exhale than word.

“Yes, I will. But first, wait .”

She groaned. “You are not going to leave are you?”

“No.” He pulled his thumb down her shin.

“The door is locked?”

“Yes.”

“Very well, then. I’ll wait,” she said with a sigh.

“You won’t regret it.” He stood and pulled her to her feet as well. Then he hooked a finger beneath the neck of her dressing gown and shift and dragged it until the round of her shoulder was visible. He placed a kiss on it, then dropped his hand to the tie at her waist. Finding the right end, he pulled slowly until both ends hung limp on either side of her. A slow revealing of a beauty he’d long imagined but not yet fully seen. Anticipation buzzing along his fingertips, he pushed the dressing gown off her shoulders, and it fell to the floor behind her. Then he turned his attention to the

remaining shoulder of her shift, and when he began to pull it down, her arm she stopped him, pulled it back up, and nestled close to her neck.

“Not yet,” she said. “We’re not even.”

She set to work unknotting the tie of his banyan, but he did not stop touching her. Could not. So as she tugged and unwound, he rubbed his palms up and down her neck, across her revealed shoulder, growing tighter each second.

The banyan was all he wore, so when the ends of it swung loose at his sides, she could see everything. She stepped back, forcing him to release her. The loss of her like an attack. He needed her again. Immediately. But she was biting her lip as she stepped nearer, tracing her fingertips down his neck, pausing at his chest to flatten her palm against the muscle. With her other hand, she pulled back the edge of the banyan and gave a little gasp.

Her gaze flew to his face, then back to the two small swallows inked forever onto his skin just above where his heart beat. “What are these?”

“Tattoos.”

“Yes, but... why? I’ve never seen...” She caught her breath, bit her bottom lip, traced the birds in flight with the lightest touch of her fingertips.

That touch felt like fire, burning the symbols even deeper into his skin. “Do you dislike them?”

“Not at all. I... why?”

“I met a chap once, a sailor traveling through the village. He had all sorts of them, all over. Each one a different meaning. He had several of these. Said each swallow

represented how far he'd traveled by sea. So many, many swallows. So many, many miles. But the swallow, he said, always found its way home again. So, it means that, too. I didn't think much about it or him after he left. Not until the night before I left Oxford to return here and be my father's curate. All of a sudden, I couldn't stop thinking about it. And on my way through London the next day, I learned where I could acquire a tattoo, and I went there and asked for this." He rubbed his thumb over it.

She kissed the place on his chest still warm from his thumb's heat. "For miles traveled? Or for home?"

"I'm not sure. It was a compulsion. Like I needed to mark the journey."

"What is home for you?"

"I... I'm not sure. I'm not sure I've ever had one." Ridiculous thing to say. He'd always had one. The vicarage. Then Norton Hall. He'd never been without.

But Cora nodded, as if it was not at all ridiculous, as if she understood.

"I acquired the second swallow," he said, "after finding out I was to be the viscount."

"Another journey. Another promise to return home."

He laughed, an airy sort of sound. "But where is that?"

"Today," she said, cocking her head to the side, "it's right here." Her hands covering his heart, her eyes gleaming up at him... God, yes. It was right here. It was her .

He kissed her, slipping his tongue past her lips to taste the tea and something distinctly Cora, something he adored. And she slid her hands down his chest, his

abdomen. He wanted to devour her, but he kissed her slowly, finally removing the sleeve of her shift from her remaining covered shoulder. The shift gave way with ease, and she smoothed her hands up his torso and under the shoulders of his banyan, swept the garment off his body. And then there they were—naked and open to one another in every way. As they always should have been.

Slowly, because everything must be slow in this moment, he set his hands around her ribs and pulled her close, taking in every inch of her. What a gift to be allowed to see her, to be seen by her. Desired by her. His thumbs played up and down her ribs, his fingertips learned the feel of her skin, and he dragged them across her waist as he made a slow circle of her. Everywhere pale, smooth skin, a contrast for her dark hair, and curves that made him grateful for life. When he stood before her once more, she made her own circling perusal of his body, tracing her fingertips down the line of his arse when he lost sight of her, laying her palm flat on the tightened muscles of his abdomen when she stood in front of him again.

He dipped his head to kiss her, spearing his fingers into the hair at her nape. It was like they disappeared into the dark of night, and when she pressed her body against his, skin against skin and heart beating next to heart, he groaned against her lips.

“Cora. This is what I’ve wanted. You are what I’ve wanted.”

What did he expect? Perhaps for her to go wild, for her to kiss him with more urgency.

But she curled her body into him, hiding her face in his chest. “But why, Liam? I don’t understand. Why do you feel such loyalty to me?” Each word was placed methodically against his skin. Her lips, brushed whispers of doubt against his skin, aroused him, but what she said peeled like warning bells in a stormy sky. Something shook her, and he must banish her doubt. He hugged her close, and she hugged him back, asking, “Is it simply your sense of duty? You married me so you are compelled

to please me the way you do your family and your tenants? Being a husband who gives his wife pleasure is merely another of your obligations you are determined to carry it out to the best of your ability?"

He clung to her as he chose his words carefully. "I am a careful sort of man, eager to do things right because, otherwise, I'll muck it up. And I won't lie. Duty had driven me in my pursuit. But it certainly did not in the garden. Our first kiss... entirely impulse. Inadvisable."

"A mistake."

"No. Something can be inadvisable and... right at the same time. Duty has driven me, but... you are no obligation. I knew you before the garden as Lady Prudence's friend, as a young lady on the marriage mart, but it was not until we kissed in the garden that I knew you. Lost, hiding behind a veil, looking for something you could not find. The veiled woman was not Prudence in that moment, nor any particular woman. She was herself alone—unknowable, yet so familiar at the same time, as if she had stepped out of my soul, become a manifestation of my fears, and... I could not stand the idea that this lady in black, the midnight vision of myself might feel as lost as I did, might feel as lonely."

"I do not appear lonely ." She rustled then, poking her chin into his chest to look up at him with one haughty brow raised. "Ever."

He nuzzled her behind her ear. "You do not right now. But then you did, whether you wanted to or not. I thought that night if I could relieve your loneliness, mine would be lessened, too. And so, I kissed you. An impulse, yes. I knew you were not who I'd been searching for. But after the kiss, I knew I'd been searching for the wrong woman, the wrong thing all my life. I have been driven by duty, but you are no obligation. I will always be pleased with you, Cora. Aloof or purring against me, you please me." He took her hand and placed it on his hard length. "Do you feel how you

please me, Wife? Tell me, what can I do at this very moment to magnify your happiness exponentially?"

She threaded her free hand behind his head and pulled him down until their noses touched. "Come inside me, Husband."

He swept her up and into his arms, and she laughed, clinging to his neck, but all laughter ceased as he laid her on the bed, crawled atop her, and kissed her.

Alone together. No boat to rock them. No open sky to threaten rain or discovery. No little hands knocking at the door. No father's bellowing. He must make use of the moment. But slowness still wound through him, and he lowered to her side to love her better, to love her everywhere.

To touch her where he was learning she liked it best. His hand on her breast and hers on his chest. His smoothing down her belly and hers burning his back. He parted her sex as she cupped his neck, and he massaged the place between her legs that made her arch and press against his palm.

Still not enough connection. Still too much space, so he straddled her, one hand still between her legs, stroking in and out of her as his thumb rubbed slow circles around her nub. Her nails trailing down his chest with a moan until he lowered over her to taste her breast, lovely and warm and just slightly salty from the sweat of their lovemaking beneath the sun. Her hands in his hair, pinning him to her. She liked that, then. Excellent. He did, too. So very much. Too bloody much. Because he was spiraling toward chaos again, losing control, and he wanted her to shatter first, as she had in the boat. He needed it.

"Cora, look at me." She did, and words from the poem she'd recited on the boat rose to his tongue. He rubbed her faster, stroked her until she moaned, and then he gave her words back to her. "The man had broken every rule, and yet he loved her so, and

where the rules of the heart began, his name was writ in stone.”

Her words. From her poem.

Her eyes widened in recognition.

He kissed her, and her body bucked, and she cried out his name, her nails digging into the skin at his hips where her hands wrapped. As she shook, he placed himself at her opening. One thrust of his hips brought them entirely together. He froze in rapture for one stolen breath of time, and then he moved, releasing control. She moved, too, and they fought each other for a moment of breathy laughter before finding a rhythm to sink into, and then they rocked together, eyes locked on one another, hands refusing to let go, and as his climax tore him apart, he sank his lips into hers for a kiss that felt more like a ritual, a giving over of the soul into someone else’s keeping.

Cora couldn’t sleep. She lay in Liam’s arms, quite, quite awake. He’d drifted off almost immediately, and she’d been on the edge of satiated sleep as well at first, but then her body had plummeted, not off the cliff of slumber but back into wakefulness. His arm stretched out under her head, and she rolled slightly to kiss the warm skin of his muscled forearm.

It had not been perfect, like Liam wanted. They’d struggled to find a rhythm. They’d laughed through it and found delight anyway. They were learning one another. And not a single other person had been in the room with them. He’d not mentioned Madame Juliet, and she’d not referenced her books. There’d been only him and her, and the sensations they gave one another.

And that had made it perfect. That was what she wanted. Not to compare themselves to others but to forget every other when in one another’s arms.

She rolled to lean against his chest, to kiss his ribs one by one. Why not since she

could not sleep. No. She could think of one other thing she'd like to do. Many others, actually. In fact, she might as well make a list, or she'd forget them all. She removed herself from his embrace and tiptoed to the door separating their rooms. She slipped through into darkness and found a candle and tinderbox. Once she'd brightened the room with a single candle's flame, she sat at her writing desk, readied a quill, and found a bit of paper.

"What are you doing?" Liam spoke dismayed yet sleepy from the door, his banyan hanging open off his broad shoulders, the beak of an inked swallow just barely visible beyond its edge. Quite the discovery, those tattoos. Quite the shock.

"Liam. You're awake. Excellent."

He padded to her side and wrapped his arms around her, settled his chin onto her shoulder. "You scared me. You were gone." He kissed her neck, nuzzled it. "Don't like that."

Every time this man spoke, she felt a little more than before. Where would she end, eventually? No knowing, except that he'd be holding her.

"I was about to compose a list. You can help."

"How so? What kind of list?"

"Of things I'd like to do. Things we would like to do. Together."

He scowled and dropped his gaze to her paper where she'd only had time to write one item. He squinted, and his lips moved slightly as he read. Then he whistled, long and low. "Well, damn. You'd like to do that?"

"Yes. I have often read of it. And you... you did it to me. It felt wonderful. For you to

kiss me there. And I must know if it will feel as wonderful for you.”

“It will.” The words were guttural. “You’d like me to add to this list?”

“You have an education from a source I’ve not had access to. Madame Juliet. I’d like to know what you learned from her.”

He cleared his throat. “She suspected you might.”

“Did you take notes?”

He took the quill and scribbled it across the paper before snapping it down to the desk once more. “There. I’m sure we can come up with more, though.”

He’d added three lines to the paper below her one. “Garden. Drawing room. Stable. These are all locations. And rather public ones at that.”

He kissed the side of her neck. “You make me wish to give into my every impulse. Oh.” He reached across her shoulder and added something else to their quickly growing list.

“Watching? What does that mean? Like at the brothel?”

“No. As in you pleasuring yourself. And me pleasuring myself. At the same time.”

“Ah.” More awake now than she’d been earlier, every atom of her body alive and tingling. So she twisted and wrapped her hands around his neck. “I knew I shouldn’t have kissed you in the garden.”

His head tilted. “Well, of course, you should not have.”

“No, you don’t understand. I knew who you were that night. I recognized you despite the domino. And I knew you were courting Prudence. But I thought, why not? Prudence does not want him, and it will be research for my next poem. And then once the kiss began, there was not a poem existing in the world that I could remember, not even my own. Only kissing existed, only your lips and mine.”

His hand on her cheek was an unexpected comfort, allowing her to continue. “I’ve only been courted once, you know. Before my father decided I needed to marry for a title. A man of my own class, a cit. It was nice, and when he proposed, my father refused. And then my mother declared I was to have a Season. It was the only thing they’d ever agreed on in my entire life. How could I tell them no? How could I tell them I’d rather be courted for myself than hunt someone else for a title? And then when you kissed me... I realized what I really wanted was not courtship but kissing. I craved it, though I had never had it before. I craved... something more basic, I think. Touch. And then we were married, and I did not even have kissing and touching anymore. I hadn’t had courtship before and—”

“Stop. Please.” He closed his eyes. “I will court you. Right now and our entire lives. I will court you every morning, and I will court you every night, and I will kiss you and touch you all you can desire until you feel... whole and wanted because you are, Cora. Some things cannot be explained. Some things just are, and one thing that exists like the sunrise is that I want you. Your body and your mind, your distance and your closeness when you choose to give it.”

She laughed. “An impossibility, but perhaps for just a while I shall believe in impossibilities, in happy endings.”

He nudged her nose with his own. “You have no choice but to believe in happy endings because here I am.”

She threw her arms around him. Her heart felt light and lovely, airy and glad, and she

kissed him to share her giddiness.

“Shall we try something from the list?” he asked against her lips.

“Oh yes. But not the last thing you wrote down. Not that yet. I need to touch you, and I need you to touch me.” Because every time he did, she knew—all the way to her bones, she knew—as she never had before, that she was wanted, that she was loved.

Chapter Eighteen

They finally left the bedroom early in the afternoon the next day. Cora claimed they needed air and light and sustenance, but Liam feared she wished for space. From him, from the churning feelings she must surely feel the same as he did. He welcomed them. They'd been building in him since that first kiss. He'd tried pretending they were called duty and obligation, tried pretending he pursued her for the viscountcy, to redeem himself as a man, but...

All lies.

Better to face the truth now. Easier to breathe that way, especially when he breathed in Cora's scent. Unknown flowers and ink.

He couldn't stop touching her as they descended the stairs, lacing his arm around her waist, kissing the side of her neck, brushing his thumb along the curve of her hip. And she giggled, and she swatted him away, and she hid smiles that seemed to want to burst bright from her lips without her consent. She played at being aloof this morning, but she touched him, too. Tangling her hand in his cravat to drag him into an alcove and kiss him senseless. Hooking her index finger into the waist of his trousers and tugging him closer. Swatting his shoulder, then kissing the very spot as if soothing what she feared she'd pained.

Something very like joy glowed in her, and it illuminated the whole damn room when she looked at him. Him . A man with nothing but a title and determination to give her.

And a happy ever after. He could give her that, the thing she thought she could never

have.

They found Liam's family in the gardens. The children had been set up with easels and paint, and Angus and Liam's mother were reading books nearby in matching wicker chairs, their hands not occupied with turning pages but with clinging to one another in the small space between them. When Cora and Liam approached, they glanced up with matching smirks.

“Ye both look verra pleased with yourselves,” Angus said.

Cora blushed and ducked her head into Liam's shoulder as he placed a kiss on her temple.

“Where is Mr. Eastwood?” Liam asked.

“Sleeping in the village.” Angus snorted, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like and may he never return .

Cora pulled away from Liam to stand behind the children and view their work. She made appropriate little cries of delight, bending over each easel to ask the child questions about their painting. They beamed, and she beamed, and Liam did, too, as his parents returned to their books.

God, he wanted a child with this woman. It would be his and hers, and they would get to watch it grow into whatever it would become. That was one thing his father had not enjoyed, watching Liam grow into his own person. He'd wanted Liam to be a shadow of himself. But Liam would not be that way with his child. He would watch, and he would nurture like a gardener helping a flower bloom. The gardener could not change the flower's nature, but it could know what it needed most and provide it.

He wandered toward the easels and his brother and sisters, feeling much more

pleasant toward them than he had yesterday. He had just spied Bethy's rather lumpy blue teapot on a black painted canvas when Mags turned to look at Cora.

"What is a London Season like?" she asked. A natural question for a fifteen-year-old girl, he supposed, but... to think of little Mags adrift in the tonnish ocean, as vast and cold as it was... he shivered.

"Not for you, Sister," he said, patting her on the head. Trying to.

She ducked and scowled, then returned her attention to Cora. "Are the balls very exciting?"

Cora clasped her hands behind her back. "They can be. They can also be terribly tedious."

"I knew it," Mary whispered.

"I would not find them boring," Megs promised. "Mama says I cannot yet attend the Edinburgh balls. Not for another two years! But I'll be quite on the shelf by that time."

On the shelf? At seventeen? Liam almost laughed.

But Cora cut him a look like a saber through a man's gut before saying, "I was quite on the shelf when I met your brother. Five and twenty, you know. As long in the tooth as it's possible to be."

Liam rolled his eyes, but Cora didn't see because every bit of her smiled at Megs. "Do you know, you are a beautiful girl? You will do quite well in Edinburgh society."

Megs sat up taller, preened.

“But...”

Megs slumped.

“You might enjoy a London Season as well.”

Megs whirled around to face Cora again. “Will you sponsor me? In a London Season?”

Cora nodded. “If you are willing to wait. You see, I am new to being a viscountess, and if I sponsored you too soon, I might not have the connections you need to make an excellent match. But in two years’ time, I dare say I’ll be of some use to you. Can you wait?”

“Yes!” Megs burst to her feet and wrapped Cora in a hug, and Cora, after a moment of startled hesitation, hugged her back, rocking tight into the embrace until Liam’s sister let go. “Did you hear that, Mama? London! What is two years? Two years is nothing when London is at the end of it!” The girl returned to her painting.

And Cora sought out his mother’s gaze.

“Thank you,” his mother said, her eyes suspiciously watery. “You do not have to.”

“I want to. What are you reading?” Cora sat on a bench near his mother and stepfather, and soon they were chatting about books as if they’d always known one another, always had such conversations. And when Henry ran by and pulled on Cora’s sleeve, she laughed, swung him up into her lap for a wiggly hug, which he returned before launching himself back to the ground and into a run. Then easy as breathing, Cora returned to her conversation with his mother and Angus.

This, the same woman who'd hovered hesitantly between groups at Bluevale? This, the woman who sat on the edges of crowds and waited for the dark of night and the weight of shadows to join the fray?

No. This, the woman from the boat yesterday, slinging her words to the wide blue sky and into the warm joy of the sun. This, a woman who did not hide in darkness but who belonged.

And he wanted to drag her off to their bedchamber and show her he belonged to her. But he sat next to her on the bench. Right now, on this blue-green day with happiness everywhere like the wind, she needed to belong to a family more than she needed whatever pleasure he would try to bring her. So, he kissed her temple once more. Because he knew she liked that.

"A family gathering in the garden?" The voice boomed down the path that led to the front of the house. "Good thing I've arrived."

Liam groaned, and Cora became a statue as her father blasted into the familial circle.

"Good afternoon, Father," she said.

But he swept right past her, his attention all for Liam. "Norton, up for fishing today?"

"No." Liam couldn't even look at the man, a dangerous rage simmering beneath his skin.

"You didn't attend dinner."

"Neither did your daughter," Liam said despite his tight jaw and clenched teeth. "Perhaps you should wish her good afternoon."

“Bah. I had years with her. Don’t need more. It’s you I’m here for, Son.”

Cora’s hands had become claws on the chair arms, her cheeks red, her gaze drifted downward. If she’d been blooming moments before, she’d retreated now, right back to the shadows where her father had always pushed her.

Liam faced Eastwood slowly. He was about to shatter the peace, and he never did so willingly. He smiled, nodded, and let annoyances go because it was easier than confrontation, easier than upsetting others.

But Cora was upset now, so Liam stepped up to her father and held his chin high. “Mr. Eastwood, if you have nothing to say to Cora, then you have no reason to remain at Norton Hall. You will leave. Now. And you are not welcome back.”

Cora gasped, but Liam held strong. He’d opened a rift between himself and this other man. Nothing to do now but fling himself into it.

“Do you understand?” Liam asked, raising a brow.

Eastwood sputtered. His cheeks had gone red, and his shoulders bent so Liam seemed taller now. “I do not understand. I—”

“Then you are a fool.” Liam spun around, giving Eastwood his back, and straightened his gloves. “And I’ll not suffer them.”

“I am insulted!” Eastwood sidestepped toward his daughter. “Cora, you will not let him treat me this way!”

Cora shrugged. “I’m afraid the viscount must do as he feels is best. Goodbye, Father.”

Eastwood's mouth hung open, continued to hang open as he backed down the path toward the front of the house. It still hung open when he finally turned, and perhaps it remained that way all the way to the village. The children watched him until he disappeared, and Liam's mother and Angus watched Liam with slack jaws until they noticed Liam scowling at them. Then returned their attention to their books.

"Good riddance," Liam mumbled, reaching Cora's side and leaning over her with a whisper. They were surrounded, but every pair of eyes faded into the garden greenery as Cora's world tilted and righted itself, Cora now its center, his center. "Are you well? Should I have let him stay? I couldn't stand it anymore, how he always ignores you. I've probably ruined your relationship with him, and—"

Her hand settled on his arm. "He ruined it. A long time ago. Thank you. For standing up for me." She tilted her chin up. "I did not need it of course, but... I am grateful, nonetheless. I know it is difficult for you to displease people."

It had been, yes. Always it had been, but now? The easiest thing in the world to state his mind and grasp for what he wanted when it might make Cora happy, too.

"Norton!" A new voice, clear and nasally traveled from the house and into the garden.

"What now?" Liam hissed, snapping upright.

Now, the Dowager Viscountess Norton standing tall and disapproving in the doorway, her hands folded atop a wooden cane. Send one pest packing and another replaced it. Bloody hell, there was no end.

Liam bowed, biting back his frustration and his face. He could not seem to temper his expression, and it most certainly said, quite loudly and without a word, What in bloody hell are you doing here? As well as go away.

Thankfully, he spoke before his expression could. “Grandmother. You’re here. What a surprise.”

“Shouldn’t be.” Grandmother’s gaze settled like heavy chains on Liam. “Edmonds wrote to me. Dire warnings in every word.”

Cora stood, suppressing a scowl. “I apologize Edmonds has startled you. Did you have a comfortable journey?”

“No.” Grandmother punctuated the word with a jab of her cane on the gravel path before setting it down and moving toward them.

Cora rolled her lips between her teeth and took a step forward, opening her arms wide to welcome his grandmother into the circle of family. “Then you must allow us to make up for it. Please take my seat. We are surprised to see you. The number of family in residence keeps increasing, and it is a... joy.”

A nuisance, more like, but Grandmother wouldn’t like the truth. She seemed not to like anything. She wrinkled her nose more with every new sight—Liam and Cora, Liam’s mother and stepfather, even the children—until she appeared more tiny pug dog than person.

She hummed. “A family gathering I see. How... sweet.” But enough poison in her voice to fell them all.

The children ran toward her, the steps growing more hesitant the closer they came.

“Hello, Grandmother,” Meg said, dropping a curtsy. Her sisters and brother followed suit.

His grandmother looked them over, then flicked her hand at them. “The children

should leave.”

Liam’s mother jumped to her feet and ushered them all inside, the only exchange between her and her mother-in-law was a furtive glance and a narrow-eyed response.

His grandmother’s roared to Angus and popped wide. “You. Leave now .”

Angus rose slowly, bowed, then left. Why had neither Angus nor his mother told the old woman to sod off?

No matter. Liam could do so. It went against who he was, who he’d been for so very long—a man who sought to placate and please. But he could not, would not stand by while a peevish woman scattered the few people who’d ever truly accepted him, faults and all.

Liam marched toward his grandmother. “You cannot appear out of nowhere and tell everyone what to do.”

His grandmother raised a brow, whirled around, and marched back inside.

Liam stormed after her, Cora following at his heels.

In the dark interior of the drawing room, his grandmother was inching into a seat.

“Send your mother and her husband away at once,” she demanded.

“No. I will not. They’ve come all the way from Scotland and—”

“If you wish to be a good viscount, if you know what is good for your title, you will send them away. Now.”

Of course he wanted to be a good viscount, but as far as he knew, a good viscount did not throw his family out of doors. “Have you come merely to yell at us?”

“I heard rumors all the way in Bath. You’re cavorting with whores. And your wife is doing who knows what at house parties across the country.”

Cora made a small squeak beside him, and he linked his arm with her, needing her to anchor him, to keep him calm. Impulses were jumping in his blood.

Boot his grandmother out the door.

Ban her from Norton Hall.

Not wise impulses, though tempting.

“I told you not to marry her,” his grandmother said. “A viscount has no obligation to a banker’s daughter, no matter how he’s used her.”

Cora’s hand squeezed his forearm, and she pressed her mouth against his shoulder, likely trapping a flood of choice words behind her teeth.

“Crude,” Liam said. “And immoral.”

She snorted. “You’re no better than you should be. No wonder you ruined and wed a banker’s daughter. Like seeks like, after all. Were you truly of my blood, you’d have married one of the Duke of Clearford’s sisters as I’d asked you to do. I should have known sooner. You never did live up to the standards of this family. Always failing at things that should come easy to a Fletcher. And excelling at those things most likely to disgrace us all.”

A disgrace. A failure. Of course he was. He’d always known it. His father had known

it. Of course, his grandmother had seen it, too.

“It is a wonder,” she said, “I used to think the Fletcher blood had produced such as you.” With a huff that would have come with ruffled feathers if produced by a bird, she looked out the window. “But when I saw you next to that Scottish rogue at your wedding, I knew—I never should have questioned the strength of the Fletcher line.”

Cora’s hand had crept to his shoulder, and it tightened as she whispered, “Why does she keep saying that?”

“Saying what?” But his brain was creaking back over the conversation now and turning over gut-wrenching words.

Were you truly of my blood...

“What are you saying, Grandmother?” he asked, his voice steady and strong, his soul brittle as old bone.

“I’m saying we must do something about your wife. I allowed the marriage because she seemed harmless enough. And talk about you two then was the quickness of your union indicated a love match. Now gossip has shifted, and the Norton name lies in the mud.”

But that did not answer his question.

Were you truly of my blood...

“You will not disparage my wife. Now answer my question. What do you mean about Norton blood?”

His grandmother’s eyes cold and yellow like the farthest stars in the heavens. “You

dare to command me, boy?”

“I am the viscount. Answer me.”

“Yes, you are,” his mother said from the doorway, Angus standing tall behind her. “But had your father not agreed to marry me when he did, you would not have been.”

His grandmother’s cold gaze met his mother’s gentle green one. His grandmother opened her mouth for a long moment, then snapped it shut, and fired words at his mother like bullets. “You admit it, then. You’re a brazen harlot who tricked my son into marriage. And now the esteemed title of Viscount Norton has been usurped by a bastard.”

Certain words had the power to stop time. To stop the functions of the body and natural movements of the earth itself. One such word had just peeled a silence across the room, across Norton Hall, across all of England, likely.

Everything seemed to be leaking out of Liam—blood, breath, life. His lungs had locked up tight, his throat, too, and oh, God, if he did not breathe soon, he might die.

Hands on his chest somewhat quieted the buzzing in his brain, somewhat slowed the racehorse quickness of his heartbeat.

“Breathe, Liam,” Cora said, gently patting his chest. “ Breathe .”

He inhaled, sharp and shaky, his vision still watery, distant, as if he peered into the future through a blurry window. “I... I am... a bastard?”

“No.” His mother strode farther into the room. “No, you are not. You were born almost eight months after my marriage to Norton. You were born within wedlock. You are not a bastard. You are, however, not your father’s son.” She winced. “What I

mean is—”

“Not my father.” So much information in his mother’s little speech to sift through, but somehow the only bit of it he could respond to was that important detail. “Mr. Fletcher, the vicar, is not, was not, my father.”

His mother rocked back a step. “I did not trick him. You must know that. He knew. He agreed.”

“Lies.” Lady Norton leaned over her cane and lowered to a chair. “He would never have—”

“But he did!” Isla’s hands were fists. “I fell in love with A—with another man the summer before my wedding. But my father did not relish a marriage with... that man, not when I could have the younger son of a viscount. He dragged me home, and before I could stop crying, I was married. Henry knew. He was so kind about it. He thought me rather a pitiful creature, struck low by wanton sinfulness, and I hated him for a long time for that, but... we did love one another. In the end. As much as he could love anyone less than perfect. He treated Liam like his own son, never said otherwise. I told him he could break our engagement. He wouldn’t have it. He never thought... neither of us ever would have guessed Liam would become viscount. Henry’s older brother was married, his wife with child. The line seemed secure.” She shook her head, chanced a glance at the dowager. “How did you discover it?”

Lady Norton pointed her cane at Angus, who hovered near his wife. “Look at the man! The man you married so swiftly after my son died. As soon as I saw him at the wedding, I knew. I had decided to keep my silence until your son started strutting about London with harlots. He thinks he can do as he pleases with no repercussions. Perhaps if he were truly of my bloodline, that would be the case. But he’s not. He’s a Scottish barkeep’s by-blow. He must fall in line and do as I say to protect the title.”

“Fall in line?” Cora asked. “What does that mean? Liam is an excellent viscount. He does his duty and cares about doing it well. London was a mistake, a misunderstanding.”

“You must not have a child. That’s what I mean.” His grandmother raised her voice as high as it would go, and Cora backed into Liam’s chest as if physically hit. “Young Henry will inherit after Liam’s death, and the title will be in the right hands once more.”

Cora stalked forward, danger in the set of her shoulders. “You cannot presume to tell me whether I can have a child.”

Liam should stand by her side, but he couldn’t. Because the words Scottish barkeep’s by-blow rang through his head without end.

Angus looked at Liam. How long had the man been looking? But now that Liam was looking back, he could not tear his gaze away. It was like peering into a mirror in a dream, when you were who you always were but also someone different.

Liam’s light-blond hair resembled his mother’s in color, but it waved back from his forehead like Angus’s did. The same hairline, the same thick texture. And like the Scotsman, Liam possessed a tall build, a wide set of shoulders, and powerful limbs. Their eyes both crinkled at the corners when they smiled, something neither of them did presently. And Angus’s lips were shaped into a familiar grim line, likely the same one gracing Liam’s lips.

“You,” Liam said through a thick fog, “are my father?”

Cora whirled and covered her gasp with a hand over her mouth. She studied Angus and made another little sound. “Oh. Oh.”

Liam's sentiments exactly. But he'd also add: bollocks.

His mother had returned to her former lover after her husband's death.

Angus stepped toward the dowager. "I am no' a barkeep, my lady. I am a wine merchant, the most revered in Scotland. Even your London families pay whatever I ask for my vintages."

"Yes," Liam's grandmother said, "and your son is now a viscount."

Wandering toward the hallway, Liam felt as bent and curved as a tree after a storm with high whistling winds. Cora ran after him, following him into the hallway.

He shook his head, held his hand out. "I need to think, to be alone. It's not every day a man discovers he's not who he thinks he is."

"You do not want me to—"

"No. I do not." With his heart thumping in his ears, and every choice he'd ever made in his life rolling through his brain, he left his wife in the cold, dark hallway behind him. Alone.

Chapter Nineteen

Words for her new poem had not come easily to Cora since returning to Norton Hall. She wrote haltingly in what little time she had, worried always that each word would offer readers nothing but disappointment. She felt disappointed, too. She'd never written something she did not like before, but this... It was fine. But it was not hers.

And now, sitting at the desk Liam had ordered placed just so in the art gallery that no longer held art, the words had dried up entirely. Perhaps the problem was that she could not sit. Every time she tried to, she'd pop back up and look out the window. If she stood at the very edge of it and craned her neck toward the front of the house, she could just see Liam. Sitting on the gravel drive, legs stretched out long before him, weight resting on his palms behind him, staring at the house.

What was he thinking? Why wouldn't he talk to her? Why didn't he want her? Oh, she knew what he'd meant. He did not want her right now to attempt to soothe wounds that had so recently been ripped open wide. But her heart felt them entirely differently. Her heart ached. For him mostly. And in fear for herself a little bit.

Because if he did not want her in a time of need, only in times of lust... She forced herself to pick up the quill and scrawl words across the paper. They came haltingly, and she shook her head, blinked to refocus, read the words out loud.

"Nothing sits as dark as night but for the worries of a man in flight. If Liam Fletcher could not see—"

She snapped her quill down. "Curses." She'd written his name on the page. No. Not

his name? Was he Liam Murray? The law said one thing, but blood said another. Which mattered more? A question that did not really need an answer except in Liam's own mind. And heart.

Why wouldn't he let her help him? Be by him?

Cora growled and stood. He could not simply want her in good times and throw her away in bad. He could not sulk in silence. His silence had ripped them apart the first time; she would not allow that to happen again.

She marched down the stairs and out the door and down the drive. He must have seen her coming, but he moved not a muscle, made not a sound or gesture of greeting.

Cora curled her body downward to sit beside him, then pulled her knees up against her chest, and wrapped her arms around them. She settled her chin atop her knees, and after a moment of silence, she said, "The gravel is quite uncomfortable, Liam. How long have you been letting the rocks dig into your arse?"

"I can't feel my arse anymore." Still, he did not look at her.

Infuriating. But also... sad. And... her rage flamed to new heights not aimed at him, but at those who had done this to him. Oh, she'd like to pluck out their eyes.

"You look like you want to pluck out someone's eyeballs." He studied her now, not a hint of a smile about his kissable lips.

"And you do not. What is wrong with you?"

He plucked at a blade of grass daring to peep up between the pebbles of the drive. "You did not marry the man you thought you married."

Her laughter sounded like a mere huff in the whipping wind. “Neither did you know what man I was marrying.”

“It is not funny.”

That squashed her mirth. “I know. I should not have—”

“When you married me, I promised you certain things, and now, beyond my control, I cannot provide those things anymore.”

“And what are those things?” When he did not answer, she said, “See? I have lost nothing. But you, Liam”—she linked her arm into his and leaned against him, her head resting on his shoulder—“I feel like you have lost so much in such a short span of time.” His name. His identity. His family.

“I’m not a Fletcher in any way. This family that I am the head representative of—I share not a drop of blood with them.”

“And yet you are a good representative of them. They have raised you and—”

“Hated me.”

“Then they have been blind. Believe me. As someone who has hated you in the past, I feel as if I can speak from a place of authority.”

“You hated me for good reason. My grandmother hates me because I exist.”

“Which, you must admit, is not a condemnation of you. Again, I speak with authority as someone who has been despised for merely existing. I was not a boy, and you are not a Fletcher. Who knew we had that little unfortunate commonality?” She wrapped her hand around his arm and tilted her face to him. “You were not even in this world

yet, Liam, and your mother made decisions for you which impacted the rest of your life.”

“It is no wonder I've always felt so out of place.”

“And yet you have tried to belong. You dutifully trod the path they set for you.”

“Disappointingly.”

“That is because it was not your path. They forced you on it, and you did the best you could. Better than I would have done. I think I would have jerked about like those big balloons in a strong wind. You tried only to please.”

“My entire life spent trying to please people I never had a chance of pleasing.” He gave a bitter laugh. “No matter what I did I was destined to fail because I did not carry their blood. Because my mother had loved another man. A wasted life. Perhaps you were right, Cora.”

“About what?”

“Some people are born for happy ever afters, and some are not. Perhaps, had I been allowed to be plain Liam Murray, I could have found a happy end.”

Her own words took the shape of a blade, a dagger, tiny and deadly, and split her open ear to navel. What he now saw as truth, she hoped with every fiber of her being was only... her fear. Her doubt.

He sat cold beside her, alone despite her nearness. Too much cold. She shivered. Her bones clattered together, and she had to shift away from him and rub her palms up and down her arms to save a bit of her own heat.

She folded her hands atop her knees, swallowed, and spoke as steadily as she could, her gaze now trained on the house rising tall before them. “You do not think Liam Fletcher can have a happy end?”

“I’m a fraud. I should not be living in that house. I should not be carrying a title meant for another man, meant f-for”—his voice broke, and he closed his eyes—“for my brother, Henry.”

“You are not a fraud,” she snapped. Because what could she say about Henry? Liam had the right of it about that. And... She could not see her belly with her skirts covering her knees. The material billowed out and stretched from just beneath her bust to her knees. A dip only between thighs and belly, a dip only where she’d once imagined her flat stomach growing round with Liam’s child.

The dowager had asked her not to conceive. Had demanded it. And if Liam wished the title to pass to the rightful heir...

“What am I going to do?” he demanded. “How can I stand in Parliament and lie? How can I take what belongs to my brother?”

“You did not make the rules that allow you to wield a lord’s power, even though you are not one by birth. But”—she shook her head—“you are one by birth because according to the laws—”

“Enough. My head hurts.”

Hers, too. She pressed her fingertips into her temples, then stood, and held a hand out to him. “Come inside with me. Lottie often gets megrims, and I know how to—”

“No. No nursing can help.” He brushed her hand aside as he stood and walked away from Norton Hall. “I need to move.” And he did, each step taking him farther away

from her.

“Liam...” she called, her voice soft and beckoning.

He stopped and looked over his shoulder. His face pale, his usually strong frame bent and bowed. “Thank you, Cora, for trying to make me feel better. This is an absurd situation, and the people who knew the truth should not have allowed me to bring an innocent woman into it, should not have allowed me to force you to live a lie along with me.”

“Liam, I don't care.”

“I do.”

She took a step toward him but only one, a halting one. “We shall figure it all out together. I'm quite good at keeping secrets about who I am. I can keep your secret, too.”

“I don't know if I can.” He left, down the drive and past the gate and who knew where into the world.

Without her.

Damn him.

They broke him. They broke her optimistic, grinning, golden husband, and she wanted the man she'd married back!

She stormed into the house, yelling, “Angus! Isla! Angus!”

Instead, she got the dowager, who popped her head out of a room, wearing a

disapproving glare. “What is all this undignified ruckus?”

Cora hissed at her, then ran up the stairs. “Angus! Isla!” When she found the wing housing their rooms, she cried their names again, and before the echoes of her voice stopped ringing, a door inched open, and Isla peeked out.

“We were just packing,” she said.

“We’ll be gone shortly,” Angus said, pushing the door open wider and standing behind his wife.

Cora shook her head. “I need your help. I need Liam and a coach.”

Isla blinked. “Liam? Isn’t he... sitting on the drive?”

“He’s left.” Cora looked to Angus. “Do you think you can hunt him down and drag him back no matter how much he might argue?”

Angus cracked his knuckles. “Aye, my lady.”

“Isla, will you pack his trunk?”

“Yes.” She stepped hesitantly into the hallway. “Cora... I did not mean to cause any hurt. I was young and lost. And I had no way of finding Angus. My father... Marrying Henry was the best option at the time. My only option.”

Of course it had been. How many books had Cora read about a lost and ruined woman? How many poems had she written herself. Love-wrecked woman in the real world as well as the imaginary one, and Cora could not blame any woman, for long, for doing what she must to survive.

She nodded. "I know."

Tears welling in her eyes, Isla stepped back into her bedchamber and shut the door, turning either to her tasks or to her husband's chest to weep.

Cora rushed to her study, the old art gallery Liam had rearranged. She had no husband's chest to weep on, so she must get to work instead. And now she knew the words she must write to teach Liam Fletcher that no matter who you were, you could write a happy ending for yourself.

Chapter Twenty

Who the hell was Liam Fletcher? Liam Murray? A vicar's son or a wine merchant's. A bastard or a viscount. He'd not thought you could be both. Apparently, you could if your mother happened to marry at the right time. Hell, what did any of this mean? Well, it certainly explained why his father hated him. Why his father had treated all his children with kindness, but why Liam had only ever seen disappointment in his eyes. Why he'd been so worried over Liam's soul no matter how well Liam acted, how well he behaved himself. It also explained why his siblings resembled his father, and he did not.

Was he a fool for not seeing it sooner? Yes, likely.

But he would never have thought his mother... He shook his head and picked a blade of grass, a spare little thing that grew between the gravel of the drive. Then he flicked it at the vicarage sitting squat in front of him. He'd traded one drive for another—the humble dirt path that led up to the house of his childhood.

He'd belonged in the vicarage as much as he belonged now in Norton Hall—not at all. He should have always been a plain William Murray, wine connoisseur. Had Angus ever planned to tell him? If given the time, would he have walked up to Liam after breaking his fast one day and said, Why good morning, but did you know I am your father? Oh yes, your whole life is a lie, and you're not even English. Well, half English but you have Scottish blood, too, my boy. And then he'd thump Liam on the back, and Liam's blond hair would turn red, and he'd develop a brogue, and... He groaned.

“Liam, is that you?” The voice made Liam jump and turn.

Beckett stood behind him with his wife, Mrs. Greene, his black garb crisp and fresh, and her gown and bonnet sensible and clean. They regarded him with looks both worried and, he could not help but notice, slightly amused.

Liam scrambled to his feet. “Evening, Becket. Mrs. Green. What hour is it?”

“Just before sunset,” Becket said, studying Liam from the tip of his dusty boots to the top of his bare, sweaty mop of hair. “When did you get here?”

“No idea. A few minutes ago.” The screaming numbness in his legs said otherwise. Hours. He’d been sitting in front of the vicarage for hours.

“You could have gone in, my lord,” Mrs. Green said. “It used to be your home.”

Liam offered a weak smile. “I did not wish to intrude.

“But what are you doing here?” Becket asked.

“Becket,” Mrs. Green stepped in front of her husband. “The man is in no state for an interrogation. Come inside, my lord, and I’ll put on some tea.” She hurried ahead of them into the vicarage, and Becket followed.

Liam did, too, at a slower pace. He tripped over the threshold, as if the very house he’d grown up in had risen up to kick him out. As if it didn’t want him back inside.

“Feeling’s mutual,” he mumbled.

“Do you need a hand?” Beckett asked from inside. He stood in shadows, a tall, lean part of them with glittering, kind eyes and an outstretched hand. Liam could imagine

his father standing just there. But he'd never stretched out a hand. And though he'd often smiled, the expression had never extended to his eyes.

Hands, skeletal fists on the doorframe, Liam found the strength to push inside, to follow his friend to the kitchen, and to plop into a chair as Mrs. Green poured him a cup of steaming tea and placed a plate of biscuits on the table before him.

"Stay as long as you like, my lord." She placed her hand on Becket's shoulder and squeezed. "I'll be upstairs."

It wasn't until Liam finished his entire cup of tea, his throat raw from the heat, that he could speak. "I'm a bastard." He laughed, a short bitter thing. "Not really? My God—apologies for the blasphemy—but it's so damn—apologies, Beck—confusing." He dropped his forehead to the table with a thunk .

"You're going to have to explain," Becket said. A screech of wood against wood as Becket pulled out the chair and sat.

Liam sat up and tipped his empty cup toward Beckett. "Got anything harder?"

Beckett poured him another cup of tea, Liam took a sip, and then he did as his friend had asked and explained. As best he could, at least. When he'd finished, he felt empty but no clearer on how to move forward with living another man's life.

"No wonder I was never a good vicar," Liam said, a pitiful ending to his pitiful tale.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I barely completed my degree. I knew more ribald jokes than I did Latin. I never wrote an original sermon in my life."

“Few do.”

“But I never even considered it.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

“I always wondered why I could not be more like my father. Now I know. It’s rather simple, really. He was not my father.”

Beckett laughed, pounding a fist on the table and making the china shake. “If every son turned out the image of his father, there would be much less strife in the world. My own father would be a lot more pleased with me.” For a moment, he watched his fingernail scratch a line into the worn kitchen table. “You were not a bad vicar because you did not share the blood of the man who raised you. You were not a bad vicar. Do you know the Liam I remember from Oxford? He was not a dunce. He worked harder than the rest of us at something that gave him little joy. If he could not learn Latin, it was simply because he did not wish to sit still long enough to learn it. And if he never wrote an original sermon, what of it? He knew the right sermon to read every week, and he knew to keep it short.”

“Another fault, that. A few sentences, and I was letting the flock loose.”

“And they were likely grateful for it.” Beckett reached across the table and placed a warm hand on Liam’s shoulder. “I, too, shorten my sermons”—his grin widened—“and this is what I feel called to do with my life.”

“There are other things.”

Beckett propped his chin on his hand and rested his elbow on the table. “Do tell.”

“Women. There were no women. Not really. Not for long.” He snorted. “But I

wanted there to be.”

“Liam, we’re not Catholic.”

Liam rubbed a palm down his face. “I used to feel guilty for my desire. My father said... Mr. Fletcher said... who cares what he said, actually.”

“That’s the spirit. Truly, Liam, you do not think men of the cloth are virtuous souls, do you? You’ve met many of them. You’ve met me. Clarissa and I knew one another quite well before the bans were read.”

“You’re not taking my misery seriously.”

“I am. I am sorry that your life has been moved about by winds beyond your control. I am sorry you lived with a man who agreed to be your father but did not act fatherly toward you. It was cruel of him. Once he agreed to raise you, he should have let you into his heart. If you ask me, you were a better man of God than he because you have such an open heart, a heart that seeks joy and gives it.”

Liam snorted, a rough exhale of sour breath that wrinkled his nose. “I need to go home and bathe. I’ve been... stewing in my own misery all day.”

“I can tell.” Beckett smacked his palms on the table and pushed to standing as Liam wobbled to his feet. “Whatever blood you were born with, whatever choices were made for you, remember you get to choose now.” He threw the front door open.

Liam winced in the dusty sunlight. “Why are you so good at vicaring?”

“Because I actually want to do it. I’m far from perfect, though. You’re much more suited to viscounting. Do you enjoy it more?”

Liam nodded, rubbing his temples where a pounding had begun.

“See, then—neither of us were born to be what we are, yet, we’re rather good at it, I think.”

“Hubris... even I know that’s a sin. You might not be so good at vicaring after all.”

“You’re barely two months married and out here staring down a house instead of weighing down your wife’s bed when a lord’s main purpose is procreation. Maybe you’re not so good at—”

“And you curse. I’ve heard the foulest language pass between your lips.”

“And you kept a collection of pictures in your trunk at Oxford that would make a brothel owner blush.”

“Hm. Perhaps I’ll show them to her and see if you’re right.”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing.” Liam slapped his friend on the back. “Thank you.”

“Do you feel any better?”

“Not at all.”

“Naturally. You just found out you’re a bastard.”

Liam groaned and set his steps toward Norton Hall with a wave. He should feel better, shouldn’t he? Beckett had the right of it in so many ways. A man who chooses to raise a child should show that child love. But Liam had been denied. Accepted,

then denied. And Liam's whole life dedicated to winning what he hadn't a chance of winning—that man's love and approval.

What did this new discovery change? He'd always thought himself a fraud, and now he knew it to be true. What now? Did he go to Scotland to learn how to be a Murray? Give up having children so a true Fletcher could inherit the title? That meant giving up Cora's bed. Oh, he knew there were things they could do to avoid that risk.

Risk? He'd never thought of children that way. He'd looked forward to having them, playing with them, running through the halls and gardens and picking them up when they fell. This lie didn't change only his name. It changed everything. It changed him , changed his future.

And what did it mean for Cora, who had married one man and now found herself shackled to quite another. Cora, who reveled in the pleasure of loving and being loved, mind and soul.

And body.

What would she do when Liam could no longer give her that because he could not risk conceiving a child?

For a moment, he broke into a sprint, his body needing to scream in some way. Pumping arms and legs, racing heart, and gasping lungs. The wind whipped what might have been tears into oblivion.

Cora deserved better than the life he could give her now.

But she was yoked to it, to him.

A rock or stick beneath his boot reached up and grabbed him, yanked him down. For

a moment, he fell through the air, arms flailing. He might be falling forever now, the sky flipping, and the ground rushing up over and over again each morning when he woke alone and remembered.

His shoulder hit the ground first, and then his head bounced off the dirt road. He lay there for a moment, breathless, thoughtless. Then he crawled to his feet and stood, dusting his trousers off and setting off toward home once more.

Home. Cora had asked him where home was. He hadn't known then, and he damn well didn't know now.

By the time Norton Hall rose before him and the sun's descent had painted the sky purple and pink, he had given up on finding answers. He knew only the deadening weight of defeat. He'd given all of himself always to be who they needed him to be. None of it mattered.

He needed food and sleep and—

“What in hell...?” What he did not need was Angus marching down Norton Hall's long drive with a burly footman beside him. “Angus.” He growled the name that felt for some inane reason like traitor on his tongue.

“I'm in no mood for a father-son chat, Mr. Murray,” Liam said as the Scotsman and the footman neared.

But they did not appear in the mood either. They marched right past him, parting so he could pass between them. But he didn't pass between them because they hooked their arms with his and dragged him in a circle until they faced Norton Hall, and he faced the gate at the end of the drive.

“What in hell,” Liam sputtered. “Let me go.”

They did not. They dragged him toward the house as if he hadn't been going there all along.

"Angus, what are you doing?" Liam thrashed and dug his heels in, but they held him tight.

"Hold fast, Gregory," Angus said to the footman. "We're no' to let him loose till we reach the coach."

"What coach?" Liam cried. "Release me!"

Angus just grunted and held on tighter. "Steadfast, Gregory. Remain steadfast."

"Yes, sir," the footman said.

"Release me, Gregory, or I'll replace you."

Angus grunted, holding Liam tighter. "Don't listen to him. I won't let him fire ye."

"And you think you hold any influence over me?" Liam kicked at a rock, seeking purchase, escape. It sailed up into the air and plummeted down right onto his head. "Hell, that hurt."

Angus smothered a laugh.

"Do not laugh," Liam cried. "You who have lied to me from the beginning! You are my father, and you knew, and you pretended to be a stranger."

Gregory gasped.

Hell, he'd be providing the servants with gossip for tomorrow's breakfast.

“Aye,” Angus said softly and in the gentlest brogue.

Liam gave up. He let his body go limp. Perhaps if he didn't fight and made himself an immovable weight, the other two might give up as well. They did not. They simply dragged him toward the coach he'd failed to see waiting in the courtyard to the side of Norton Hall. They threw him up into the waiting coach, and before Angus could slink away, Liam grabbed his wrist, held him tight.

“Is it true? Are you really?”

Another soft, “Aye.”

“Did you really love my mother?”

“Aye.”

“You couldn't have. Otherwise, you wouldn't have let her—”

“Sometimes forces exist that are stronger than love. We were young. Her parents took her away, and I had nae idea where she'd gone. My father died, and I had to take over the business. I never even looked at another woman after her. And when she showed up in Edinburgh twenty-six years later, it was like a miracle. It was... the moment I had been dreaming of for over two decades. And she was looking for me, and she had the same questions ye have, and I had the same questions for her. We were angry, and we wanted answers. But we could no' stay angry at one another long when we'd loved so hard. We forgave ourselves and each other and decided to spend the rest of our lives being happy. I'm sorry.”

“So am I.” Liam released Angus's arm, throwing it away, throwing the man away.

“I'm so verra sorry, Son.”

“Don't call me that.”

Angus paled, nodded, and shut the coach door, draping the conveyance in shadows despite the bright light of the day surrounding it. Only then did Liam see Cora, holding her breath in the corner on the opposite seat. Her gloved hands were wrapped around the edge of the seat, and her face was pale and quiet.

The coach rumbled into motion. “Liam... I'm—”

“What is this? Why have I been dragged into this coach?”

Tentatively, as if she walked a tight wire, she crossed the space between them to sit beside him on the forward-facing bench. She folded her hands primly, slowly in her lap. “I am afraid it is a kidnapping. A viscount napping? No matter the terminology, I have abducted you.”

The corners of his lips twitched with something like amusement. Gone as quickly as it had dared to come, poured over with bitterness that weighed the corners of his lips down. “What for? And where are you taking me?”

“A place called Whitwood Manor. The Earl of Whitwood's country seat and home to Lady Escher outside of the London Season. I had to pore through Debrett's for far too long a time to discover that bit of information. I'm not exactly sure how to get there, but we'll figure it out. And as for why”—she straightened her spine—“you need to escape. Your family, your heritage—”

“Not my heritage.”

“Stop saying that. It is yours now, no matter whether it should have been. At Bluevale, I needed escape, though I did not realize it. And you helped me to it. Now I am helping you. At least you're not unconscious while it's being done. Though I must

admit I considered it. It might have been much easier for Angus to haul you about that way. Excellent job hiding, by the way. He searched for hours and could not find you. Where were you?"

"The vicarage."

"Ah. I told him to look there. He must have missed you."

"And why did you not wait for me to sleep to carry me off?"

"It was an impulse. I remembered how well yours usually turn out for us and decided to give in. We shall see if mine are equally successful. And"—she dropped her gaze to her lap—"I need to fix you, and I'll do so now."

After several moments of silence in which evening shadows flickered across the empty seat between them, he finally said, "Fix me?"

"Yes. You said the most un-Liam-like thing today, and I hated it. It made me so terribly sad. That is saying something since the poems I write do not lack for tragedy. Neither has my life."

He'd crushed her. He'd crushed her again . Of course, he had. He'd only ever been a disappointment, a stain on the world.

She scooted closer, and then closer still, until her skirts flirted with the edge of his thigh. And then the soft lace of her glove smoothed beneath his stubbled chin, and she turned his head toward her and angled it down so he could see better into her face. What had he always seen in her eyes? The haughty distance of a cat. The cold ice of a careful woman.

Ice melted, distance vanished.

Nothing but warm worry now and something more, brimming like tears set to spill.

“Whatever you are thinking in that brain of yours”—she pushed a lock of hair off his forehead and trailed her fingertips down his face, his ruined cravat, to set her palm on his chest—“it is overly dramatic. I do not know what you are thinking, but I do know. Stop thinking it.” She leaned forward and reached up just a bit to touch her lips against his, and how could everything in the world be wrong when something like this was so absolutely right?

He should back away from her, from everything she was offering him with that kiss, but he felt more like a selfish bastard than ever, and he cupped her cheeks, pulled her closer, and deepened the kiss, finding in it everything he'd ever needed, everything he could be but wasn't.

Then he ripped away, tried to put distance between them if she no longer would.

But she wrapped her hands around the insides of his unbuttoned waistcoat and dragged him closer. “No. I won't let you run.” She spoke so close to him he could feel the heat of her words. “You ran after me. Now I will run after you. So sulk if you must, Liam. I understand the need for it at times. But if you have a spare moment between sulks, you might consider reading this.” She bounced across to the opposing bench and picked up a leather satchel. She opened it and pulled out a pile of papers, which she set on his lap. They sat like feathers, precariously perched. His breath might blow them away.

Her breath would not, though, because she stayed on the bench across from him, settled into it as far from him as she could get. “It is the poem I promised Lady Escher. It is done, and I could not have finished it or even gotten this far without you. Without you chasing me and loving me even when I did not want it. Now I will return the favor. Read it or not, I do not care.” She shoved her chin in the air, attempting to prove a clear lie true. If he didn't look at her but for her face, she'd have him

convinced. But her fingers, long and agile and strong and resting in her lap, plucked at the folds of her skirt.

He picked up the top page and read the words, her letters swooping like birds in black ink across it— Midnight Garden .

“None of us get to choose the lives we’re born into,” she said, looking out the window. “You are no different from any of the rest of us.”

The paper was cool, the ink a road his fingertips could not help but travel.

“What matters, Liam, is what you make of your life. How you shape it.”

“I’ve let everyone shape it for me.”

“Well, now you must take control. Can you do that? You promised me a happy marriage. And I know you can deliver that promise. But I suppose the question is now... do you want to? Because whatever life you choose for yourself now, it must be because you want it, not because others want it for you.”

Of course he wanted it, wanted her, but there was duty to consider, his brother’s rightful inheritance. But Cora’s happiness was his solemn duty, too.

She was so lovely in the early evening gloom, determination shaping her jaw and hope glowing in her eyes.

He had no way of knowing what the future held. But today, tomorrow, on this road going where she wanted to go, he chose Cora’s happiness over everything else, flipped open the first page of her manuscript, and read in the dim light.

Chapter Twenty-One

Cora had fallen asleep two or so hours after the sun had risen and snored through the next two hours of travel. Liam welcomed the adorable little snorts and grunts. They kept him from wallowing in his new reality. She started to stir after they stopped in a village, then rolled forward again with more precise directions to Whitwood Manor, Lord Escher's estate. Though, apparently, it was not his estate yet. Viscount was a courtesy title for the man who would one day be Earl of Whitwood. Jacob, the coachman, had discovered much on their directionless journey toward Whitwood Manor, a destination Cora found by scouring through Debrett's.

God, she was clever.

The snoring stopped, and Liam missed it.

"Did someone die?" Cora's voice curled against his skin, groggy and sleep-roughened, yet offering comfort he refused to take. How could he take anything else from her? Liam's heart tripped, ached.

He knit his ribs closed to contain it.

"Yes," he said. "Liam Fletcher died." He had every right to still be upset. He could wail and curse all he wished. He had almost thirty years of a life to rearrange, the new shape of himself to figure out, to fit into the world. Somehow.

"Quite dramatic. I shall have to model a hero after you." She grabbed her satchel and pulled out her manuscript, thumbed through it, then placed it safely back in and

pushed the satchel to the side. She looked out the window, blinking in the late afternoon sunlight. “Are we there? Are we close?”

“We should be. Jacob stopped in a nearby village to ask directions. But there was some hesitation in the road earlier, as if we might go another way. We did not. And here we are.”

“Very good. I apologize for sleeping. It is quite boring to watch someone read. Usually. But it was more that it was an agony to watch you read what I’d written. Better to sleep and ignore it entirely.” She began to fiddle with the folds of her skirt. She would not look directly at him, only every now and then glancing his way.

“You want to know if I read it,” he said.

Now, finally, she met his gaze, her own gathering currents of energy as if she might strike him, anyone, down with a mere look. He must choose his words carefully because if her eyes held danger, the softness of her cheeks and jaw, the pink blush stealing across her cheeks held fear. Soft yet strong, vulnerable but always fighting, her face like an open sky, containing multitudes.

A lightness bloomed inside him he had not thought possible this morning. It opened up his ribs, allowing him to breathe a little better than before. How could she do that to him? Lift him up out of the darkest place.

He scooted out of the corner so he sat directly before her, then leaned into the space between them. It seemed too vast, yet a small hinge at the waist brought them so closely together. He took a deep breath, filling in that new space between his ribs with the scent of Cora. “It was lovely.”

Her lips twitched. “Lovely.”

He nodded.

“Merely lovely ?”

“I mean no insult. It was quite entertaining.”

“Entertaining.” Now her entire face appeared to be twitching. “This is the poem I will give to the world, the one they will all know me by, love me for. And—” Her mouth snapped shut. She tilted her head to the side.

“And?” he prompted.

“Nothing.” No more twitching. She rested her hands calmly in her lap.

“It was really rather good, I promise. It is only that I missed the one scene.”

Her brow furrowed, then arched up in a quick bounce. “Oh. That scene. With the throbbing and the lightning rods. You know it could never happen. My personal poems are secret, but this poem is meant for everyone to read. But... you are right. I missed it, too. It felt wrong, untrue to myself to leave it out. It’s a shame, but”—she sighed—“being exiled sounds like such a bother. I suppose there is all that time alone I could look forward to.”

The little liar. She’d miss her friends, the Merriweather sisters, the library ladies, if not her family. “It is a shame. The throbbing and the quivering are my favorite parts. I’d like to attend one of your midnight readings. What are they like?” If he could keep her talking about herself for the rest of their lives, he would. Then he would not have to think about himself.

“They are, have been... necessary. When all the women gather in the darkness to hear me speak, it is not a gift I give to them. It is for myself. Because for half an hour or

more, with every heart beating to the meter I set, I feel... loved. I pretend I do not need affection, that it is trivial, and I am above it. But... that is as far from the truth as the sun is from the place where we stand upon the earth. I do need love. And I need to believe there's joy in my future. No matter how much I roll my eyes and seem to scorn such ideas. I fear my soul is shaped by that very need.”

She pulled the fingers of her gloves until they stretched out flat, and then she tugged the wrist of the glove to tauten them against her fingers once more. “It is just when you do not think something is possible, you harden yourself against it, pretend it is not necessary for survival. It is a bit of a blind way of living. I chose to be blind for a long time. But when I agreed to share a bed with you, I gave you a... a key, and you unlocked the bit of me that longed for love. Now I am raw with need, and it has nothing to do with my also very real desire to have your lips all over me. I find... now... I need you to love me.”

The expression on her face, which looked a little bit like she was doing something incredibly difficult that needed all her concentration, shifted into a glare she aimed at him. “I’m quite annoyed with you for doing this to me. It is not fair . I had well protected myself, and then you came along, and now everything feels... more than before. I feel so very open and un protected. Before your grandmother came along and broke you into pieces, damn her, I felt that openness without the fear. Because you were there as”—she huffed a laugh—“my knight of the Sun, protecting me. I knew you would not allow me to get hurt. But now I worry you've opened the door and will simply walk away. You will not stand sentry in any number of assaults attempting to drag down my soul.”

How could simple words do everything to him all at once? Speechless with admiration because this woman sitting before him knew how to turn a phrase. He’d read her work and found each word and imagine stark and simple and true. God but he wanted her to read to him in a dark room filled with candlelight just as she had read to all those women for all those years.

He felt amazed, too, that she had shared her words with him in the sun, no hood to cloak her face. She had let him love her in the fierce burning light of day on a boat swaying with their need as much as with the wind and water. Everyone else she asked to love her in the dark while hidden.

What was he to do? His duty to his family or his duty to her happiness?

“What's happening?” she asked. The coach had begun to slow, and he'd not even noticed. She stuck her head out the window. “Is something wrong, Jacob?”

“I'm not sure where we're at, my lady,” he called back. “But there are some folks just up the road, and I thought I might ask them.”

“I'll do it,” Cora said, jumping out of the coach as soon as it stopped. She spared Liam not even a glance as she shut the door. Clearly, she wished to distance herself from him. And why not? She'd laid her soul between them as neatly as she laid words on paper, and he'd given her nothing but silence so far.

He stepped out of the coach and followed her down the rutted dirt road. Ahead of them to the side was a field bordered by a rock wall. And at its end stood two figures. A woman stood on top of the wall, her skirts rucked up to reveal her stockings and half boots and somehow knotted between her legs, leaving her freer to move about than she would have been with her skirt swinging between them. A man stood on the ground at the end of the rock wall. His hands were on his hips, and he scowled up at the woman. She rested her hands on his shoulders and laughed down at him.

“Perhaps we should not interrupt them,” Liam whispered as he caught up with Cora.

“It's only a small question.” Cora raised her hand and picked up her pace. “Pardon me!”

The lady on the wall snapped upright, wobbled a little bit, and the man's hands came around her hips, steadying her, his scowl becoming thunderous.

The woman on the wall waved. “Good afternoon.”

“Come down, Sarah,” the man said. “I told you we'd be caught.”

The woman—apparently named Sarah—placed her hands on his shoulders again and jumped, and he guided her safely to the ground. She bent over at the waist and unknotted her skirts. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, you can,” Cora said. “We're looking for Whitwood Manor. For Lady Escher.”

“You're on the wrong road,” the man said. “But I can put you right. He's our neighbor. I am Lord—”

The woman hit him on the arm, silencing him. “We are Mr. and Mrs. Brown.”

He scowled. “We are not.”

“Yes, but, Xavier, they do not know us. And since you're so fearful of being caught on the road, I thought you might prefer hiding our true identities.”

His scowl disappeared, and his lips quirked to one side, quivered. “Damn, you're clever. No wonder I married you.”

“And you're quite adorable when you realize that. I am lucky it happens several times a day.”

His scowl returned, but it was accompanied by a deep blush sweeping across his cheeks as he lifted his hand to rub his knuckles up and down the back of her arm.

Liam cleared his throat. “Would you be very irritated if I asked you what you were doing? On the rock wall?”

“Yes,” the scowly Xavier said.

“I was going to ride on his shoulders,” the cheery Sarah said at the same time.

“There are a million other places you could ride on my shoulders. Why did you have to pick a wall near a road?”

“Because if there’s no one there to see, if there’s no risk of being caught, it’s not as daring.” She patted his cheek. “You know that.”

His mouth couldn't seem to decide whether it wanted to scowl or smile, and ultimately, he seemed to tame all expression whatsoever by flattening it into a line and turning to Liam. “You must go back the way you came for a bit. At the other end of this wall, you'll see the road forks. The other road is more difficult to see. That's why you missed it. Looks as if you're about to drive into a wall of trees. It's a road, though. And it will veer off from this one and take you to the right place.” He wrapped an arm around his wife’s waist.

“Thank you,” Liam said.

The man and woman nodded and returned to the end of the wall as Liam and Cora returned to their coach. He opened the door and looked back at the odd pair. The woman once more knotted her skirts and climbed atop the wall. The man stood below her. She made a little circle motion with her finger, and he turned around and offered her his hands. She took them, gave a little hop, and landed on his shoulders. They wobbled, then righted themselves, and when the man faced the coach, he looked as if he'd never scowled a day in his life, didn't even know how to. Their laughter echoed up into the sky. Hers, a chirpy lightness and his, a deep booming. They fit well

together.

Liam stepped up into the coach and shut the door behind him. As he settled across from Cora, he tried to find the right words to give her after the ones she'd given him earlier. That man and woman, clearly not Mr. and Mrs. Brown, clearly a bit worried about being recognized. The man, at least. They were clearly not who they pretended to be. Their clothes had been fine, well-made, and their voices cultured. Quality, educated. Likely members of the ton. If he'd actually been raised to be viscount, he'd know them.

But he hadn't and so he didn't. He suspected they had been raised to their positions. And yet they stood on walls, tied skirts between legs, and played circus acrobats in a wide, open field. They'd made a story for themselves different, likely, from the one they'd been given at birth. Could he?

When they finally found Whitwood Manor, Cora rather wished they hadn't. A shadow had begun to loom over her, and if she could only see what cast it, she might not be quaking with fear. But she was quaking as the coach door opened, and she and Liam stepped onto the ground. Still the shadow loomed, following her like a monster in the dark. The door of the large house gave way like magic, and they were standing inside, the shadow standing with them. Then there was a butler eager to bring them to Lord and Lady Escher, and Cora should not have felt as she'd rather jump into a lion's mouth. They were a viscount and his viscountess, no different from Liam and Cora, except Lord Escher would one day be an earl and his viscountess a marchioness. But what did it matter? Wasn't Cora trying to show Liam that those things—the birth things one could not control—did not matter in the face of intent, defiance, purpose.

Yes!

Yet still—if a lion had appeared, she might have jumped right between his teeth. Here

are my bones, good sir—chomp away!

The butler opened the door at the end of a set of stairs and a long hall and a turn or two, and Cora just saw the soft fall of blue skirts close to buff riding breeches and boots.

She stepped back. The shadow loomed in her heart. She must face it and could do nothing else until she had.

When she did not enter the room, the butler blinked at her, kicked his head to the side.

Liam mirrored his expression, and thank God, he was still capable of an emotion other than gloom, defeat, bitter anger. She stumbled backward. Liam followed, a hand reaching out until it wrapped around her wrist.

“Cora,” he said, “are you unwell?”

“Yes. We must leave.” She raised her voice and found the butler’s tight-lipped face. “Apologies. Please do give my regards to your lord and lady and—”

“No! No, no.” Liam spoke loudly, too, and to the butler, though he looked nowhere but at Cora. “Wait a moment, please. No apologies yet.” He pulled Cora into an alcove. Sunnier there. All windows and sunlight and Liam peering down at her with not anger, but worry. “What is wrong?”

“This.” She held her arms out wide. “All of this. Horrid idea. To march up to someone’s home when you’ve only met them once? To shove a manuscript into a lady’s face to prove a point? Even this”—she patted the satchel slung across her shoulder, the manuscript within it—“is not right.”

Ah. There. Light cast upon the shadow at her back, in her heart. She could see now. She understood. And the shadow dispersed, leaving only light.

“I told you,” Liam said, “it’s lovely, remarkable. Everyone will love it.”

“Yes, they will, and that is all I’ve ever wanted, for everyone who hears my words to love me through them, but... I do not think I need that any longer.” What a revelation to happen between one breath and the next. No, not so quickly and unexpectedly. The truth had been rising to the surface since Liam had read her poem, since she’d seen the way Mr. and Mrs. Brown looked at one another as if no one else existed, as if no one else was needed. Oh. She must say it again. Out loud. “I don’t need that any longer.” She laughed, she smiled, she kissed her husband. “It’s not even right. I don’t want to.”

“You’ve lost me, I’m afraid. It’s all you’ve wanted. What about Daisy and—”

“You love me.” And it was all she truly needed—the rare gift of shared love, another heart to build an entire world with. She no longer needed the anonymous adoration of thousands. She had Liam. Needed only his heart adoring her and hers adoring his.

A silence stuttered between them during which she held her breath. He’d not said it, but she felt it, even now when he was dour and sulking and broken. She placed her hand on his chest, over his heart, and felt the firm beating of his heart. It beat for her. She knew it. A real love, too. Not one that lasted only until she extinguished a candle. She had no need for the love of strangers when she had this man’s heart.

“I do,” he said, gently pushing a lock of hair away from her face. “I love you.” He kissed her. The softest touch of lips against lips as his hands cupped her cheeks. His thumb rubbed along her cheek bone. And his eyes, green as moss, held something she’d not seen from him since learning the truth—confidence, cheer, passion.

“I love you so much it’s like a physical thing, heavy in my chest when you are sad and full of light when you are happy. I love you so much I hate myself for not being who I should be.”

“It does not matter.”

“It does. But we will not discuss it now. Now is for you. Your choice. Are we taking your poem to Lady Escher or not?”

“No. We’re not.”

“I beg to differ.”

Cora jumped into Liam’s arms at the strange man’s voice, and Liam pushed her behind him, standing tall and with a broad chest to face the newcomer. Two newcomers.

A man with an affable grin and Lady Escher.

“I rather like poetry,” the man said. “Who are you, by the way?”

The butler cleared his throat. “Viscount Norton and the Viscountess Norton.”

Cora curtsied, Liam bowed, and the other couple mirrored them.

“Lady Norton,” Lady Escher said, “this is my husband, Lord Escher. I must say, this is certainly a surprise. What brings you here?”

“I love a good surprise.” Lord Escher bounced his heels up, then back down.

“I...” The strap of the satchel holding her manuscript dug into her shoulder, heavy as

a

boulder. “I finished the manuscript you asked for, but I have decided not to publish it.”

“Oh.” Lady Escher blinked. “Did I do something to upset you? I know you were wary of a happy ending.”

“No,” Cora said. “Nothing like that. In fact, I’ve rather changed my mind about those, too. I have simply... changed my mind.”

“May I still read it?” Lady Escher, it seemed, could look as impish as her husband.

“Not yet. I must make some additions. Once it is ready, though, I will invite you to the reading.”

Lord Escher shuffled closer to Liam and elbowed him in the arm. “Married to a lady of literature, are you? Me, too. We’re lucky, you and I.”

The corner of Liam’s lip quirked up. “I agree.”

Lord Escher examined Liam from top to bottom. “By any chance, do you fence?”

“I do.”

Lord Escher rubbed his hands together. “When we are next both in London, we must meet at Angelo’s.”

Liam sized up the other man. “Indeed. Do you prefer—”

Lady Escher leaned closer to Cora, cutting off the men’s conversation. “I am sorry

you have changed your mind, but I look forward to your recitation. And since our husbands seem to have taken a shine to one another, perhaps we might meet as friends while they slash at each other with pointy sticks.”

Cora laughed. “I should like that very much.”

“Will you stay for tea?”

“I’m afraid we must leave.” There was still a tangle at Norton Hall, and no number of kind smiles could unravel it. Only Cora and Liam could do that. Together.

They held hands as they left Whitwood and climbed into the coach. Liam sat next to her, draping his arm around her shoulders as the vehicle lurched into movement. They rode in silence for several minutes. Each one seemed to pull him further away from her, deeper into his sour mood once more. She wanted to run to London, to anywhere but Norton Hall, but they must return. Everything felt unfinished.

They must return together, ready to tackle the mess they’d left behind. How could she rouse him? How could she give him the courage he’d given her?

Ah. Yes. She knew.

“Liam?”

“Hm?”

“I love you. Entirely too much for my own good, I’m sure.” She’d told him earlier that he loved her, not quite the same as what she’d just said.

“I had begun to suspect something of the sort.” He kissed her forehead.

And it was not enough. She needed more. She needed to celebrate this small victory between them. And, remembering the brothel, she lifted her skirts and straddled his lap. Without words, she kissed him. And he kissed her back, no hesitation, their lips moving in sync, finding a natural and immediate rhythm of giving and taking, asking and knowing.

His hands found every spot she liked him touching her the best—her neck, her hip, her breasts—and did exactly what she needed to arc her desire higher than ever before. He raked her skirts up her leg as he consumed her with a hot kiss, deeper than before. She needed him now, so she fumbled with his fall, ripped at it really, as her fingers lost all ability to move when he nipped at her earlobe, sending spirals of pleasure right to her core.

But there—done. Fall open and his shaft in hand, and his jerking beneath her touch as he kissed her harder, even harder, than before. She welcomed every demanding kiss, every demanding touch. She demanded, too, tangling her hands in his hair as he shifted her in his lap so her legs ran alongside his, spread wide, and his chest pressed against her back, and his hands slid first down her thigh, then up, then between her legs to cup her sex. He remembered the brothel, too. His shaft was caught between them, and he grounded it against her arse.

More. She needed more. He needed more, too, and they worked without words until her legs were folded beneath her on either side of his body and he was slipping inside her, filling her. Perfection. Perfection, too, how she rode him, how they found a rhythm. No fighting and learning this time, no fumbling and figuring out. Instead, the rolling measures of two bodies in harmony, reaching... reaching for release as he reached around to cup her breast with one hand and tease her nub with the other. Flames licked through her as she slid up and down his length, as he met her movement every movement as if he could read her mind. As if they shared one mind.

And when his thumb thrummed over her clitoris with a thrust of his cock, she cried

out, cried his name, cried her joy. Only three things left of her as her body disintegrated into pleasure—happiness, pleasure, and Liam.

But he did not care if she'd come. He whispered in her ear, "Again." A growl, a demand as his hands continued to play her body like a pianoforte.

She could not come again. Too exhausted. Too heavy with satiation, but—"Oh! Liam." She hissed with renewed pleasure.

He curled his hand in her hair and pulled her head back to kiss her neck, the underside of her chin and jaw. Then he devoured her mouth and demanded once more, "Again," before thrusting faster and harder, and she arched into his movements and—an unexpected delight that nearly killed her—shattered once more as he cried her name and found his own release. "I love you," he said, shuddering beneath her with his own release. "I love you."

She laid her head on his shoulder to whisper into the rough skin of his jaw the words to a poem she'd never understood before.

Nothing in the world is single;

All things by a law divine

In one spirit meet and mingle.

Why not I with thine?

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "And what's that supposed to mean, clever one? You can't throw poetry at a fellow after you've muddled his brain. Possibly forever."

“It means I love you. Possibly forever. Muddled brain or not.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Do you remember the plan?” Cora asked, looking into the cheval glass in their bedchamber. They’d arrived at Norton with the early morning light, and it bled through the window now, spilling across the pale skin of her décolletage and threading gold into the dark strands of her hair.

Liam stepped behind her. “It’s barely a plan. A better question might be where is the whisky?”

“But do you remember it?”

He kissed the side of her neck, her pearl earbob knocking against his chin. “I do.” Now the time to take what he wanted for himself, damn others’ opinions and desires. Now the time to carve a life for himself because if Cora could stop at the finish line and turn her back on what she thought she’d wanted to grasp fully, what she truly desired, so too could he.

So too must he. To deserve her. She’d found strength in his love for her, and he would find strength in her love for him. No more running. No more scraping and bowing and pretending.

She slipped the other earbob on and faced him, looking fresh and beautiful in a gown of crisp green. More importantly, her eyes glowed with hope and a determination that made him want to lock the door and forget their families existed.

She straightened his cravat and pushed a lock of hair behind his ear. “It will not be

long until we are alone. As we'd originally planned."

He grasped her wrist, tugged her closer. "It is not a simple thing we do, no matter how simple the plan seems."

"I know." She looked down.

And he could not stand to see her waver. "We will take control, though, Cora, you and I. We cannot live our lives doing as they please, letting them move us about."

"Just so." The smile she lifted to him punched a hole through his gut. So bright, so confident. "We will figure everything out as we go along." She offered her arm, and he took it, and together, they left the room and marched toward the stairs and down them.

The door they strode for was open, and they sailed into it without a single hesitation. Everyone was gathered. Liam's grandmother resided on one end of the room, and Liam's mother and Angus occupied the other.

Liam tugged at his cravat. "Ah. I see even the children are here." They were dressed in evening finery, sprawled across the floor at the back of the room, looking at books. He leaned over to Cora. "Did we mean to invite the children?"

"What is this about?" The dowager hurtled toward them. Did she even need that cane?

Cora stepped forward to greet her. "Thank you for gathering. Now, we would like you all to leave."

"Leave?" the dowager sputtered. "Then why call us here?"

“Not just this room,” Cora said. “This house. It is time everyone returns to their homes.”

The dowager slammed the end of her cane into the floorboards. “I have every right to this house. More than you or your husband.”

Liam’s mother stepped forward, her gaze skittering to the children who watched with eager anticipation, books forgotten. “Not here. Let me send them upstairs first. I didn’t know this was to be an ambush. I would never have let them come.”

“Do we have to leave?” Henry asked.

“Yes.”

The girls groaned.

Henry stomped toward the door. “We never get to stay for the interesting bits.” He left, though, a dutiful son, and even after he disappeared into the hallway with his sisters. His mother closed the door, shutting off the children from whatever was to come, but Liam could not shake the image of his brother from his mind. Those crossed arms, that pouty lower lip—an expression Liam knew well that meant I do not wish to do what I am doing, but I see no way out of it .

“What does Henry want?” he asked slowly, letting the word weigh heavy on his tongue.

“Henry is a child,” his mother said, “and he is not yet ready for the responsibility of adult conversations.”

“That’s not what I meant.” If Liam crashed about doing only as he pleased, he’d hurt others as he had been hurt before. Pleasing had its place. But the person doing it had

to be strong enough to understand when to bow and when to stay steady and strong, who to seek smiles from and who to refuse. A child with his entire life ahead of him? A child still rosy with hope but already chafing under the shackles of growing up, of obeying those who knew better... a child like that should have some say. No one had ever asked Liam what he wanted at all. Except for Cora. Henry shouldn't have to wait two decades to find someone who cared about his dreams and desires.

Liam should get what he wanted.

But so should Henry.

Liam placed his hands on Cora's shoulders, stepped into the soft gray fog of her eyes. "I want to have children with you."

Her smile stretched far too small and sad. "I want that, too."

He faced his mother, and yes, Angus, too. "And I want Henry to live a life of his choosing."

Another smack of the cane against the floor. "If you weren't so selfish, he could have the life of a viscount one day!"

Finally, he turned to the dowager viscountess. "I will give him the education of a viscount. If he wishes it. I will keep him by my side and include him in every decision I make. If he wishes it. If he does not, I will watch him make wine and praise him. Or adventure across the world or write poetry or... do whatever pleases him. And I will praise him, and if he is never viscount, I will still treat him like one. And as I do that, I will do what pleases me, which is loving my wife and giving her children. Which is running this estate and making it stronger. Oh, and it will also please me to fire Edmonds."

“You cannot!” the dowager roared.

“I can because the law says I can. I must live this life because of choices someone else made for me.” He glanced at his mother, her pale face, her shaking hands. “I understand why you had to. But I will not let Henry’s choices be taken from him.”

“If you have a son, you strip him of one choice.” His grandmother’s voice quaked with rage.

Her words slammed into him like an ax. “I know. And I hope he forgives me for it.” He could not sacrifice Henry’s desires, but he also could not sacrifice his own. No easy answer.

“But perhaps,” Cora said, taking his arm and hugging it tight, “we will have all daughters.”

He stroked his knuckles down her cheek. “I would like that very much. Now that’s settled, let us return to business.” He clapped his hands. “Grandmother, you may take a room at the inn and leave for Bath at your leisure. Mother, Angus, you and the children may stay—”

“What?” the dowager screeched. “They stay and I leave?”

“Surely you can find your way to the door, Lady Norton,” Liam said. “I’ll wait.” And he did, studying the ceiling until the door shut, loudly, behind the woman who was not his grandmother. Once she was gone, he could breathe a little easier. “That’s better. As I was saying, you may stay until you are ready to leave, but Cora and I—”

His mother rushed forward and clasped her hands to her chest. “I know, I do. We should never have come. I am... I am...” Her shoulders shook until she crumpled into tears. “So very sorry.” Each word a sob louder and more incomprehensible than

the last.

Liam wrapped her in his arms. “I know,” he whispered in his mother’s ear. “I do. We will visit you in Scotland. When I am ready.” He hugged her tightly until the sobbing stopped, and then he hugged her one more time, dropping a few final words past a wispy gray curl and into the shell of her ear. “I love you.”

She was smiling through her tears as she pulled from his embrace. “I love you so very much, dear boy.” And when she gave way to tears once more, it was into her husband’s arms. Angus shared a look with Liam over his mother’s head, and damn but it almost felled him. Because in that man’s eyes, shaped so much like the ones Liam saw every day in the looking glass, Liam saw what he’d always wanted from his father—pride.

The look rooted Liam’s feet to the floor, even after he and Cora were alone.

“Are you well?” Cora asked.

He nodded. “I did the right thing.”

“The best thing you could do, I think.”

“What now?” he asked. “Shall we retire upstairs?” He snaked an arm around her waist, feeling lighter than he’d thought possible a mere five minutes ago. He slipped his other hand into the silky hair at her nape, tangling, tightening, tugging until her chin tilted up, arching her neck toward him. He kissed a line down it and spoke into the hollow between her collarbone. “We’ve had another victory, and you’ve set a tradition for how we celebrate those.”

“Now? After such a dramatic scene of family conflict?” She gasped as he tightened his arm around her waist, pulling her full against his body.

“Absolutely now. One thing you should know about me Cora—with you, I am insatiable.” He kissed her lips, and she sighed into it.

She sighed a word, too. “No.”

“No?” He pulled away to frown down at her. “Cora. Yes. That is the word you were searching for. Better yet, no words at all. Just action. Running straight up those stairs, hand in hand and—”

“Running, yes. But not up the stairs. To London . More precisely, to Hotel Hestia.”

“Hotel... but why?”

“Because I should like to be someplace we can be entirely alone. Please, Liam? People, and by people I mean family, can find us here. But we might hide, for just a bit, at Hestia.”

Alone. Hidden. Sounded like heaven. “Yes, well, we have learned there’s much to do in coaches.”

She ran up the stairs. “Excellent. I’ll tell my maid. Have the coach readied. And I’ll grab our list. We can add to it in the coach.”

“Excellent plan. Just give me a minute to fire Edmonds.” He leaned against the newel post and watched as she climbed the stairs, tossing a saucy grin at him over her shoulder.

“Liam?”

“Yes?”

“I think we ought to return to Circe’s. There’s much we can learn there. Together.”

His heart pounded, and his already hard body tightened further, a bow string pulled to the breaking point. “You’re going to be the death of me, love.”

At the top of the stairs, she leaned on the newel post and looked down at him, becoming a mirror to his own lazy lounge at the bottom of the stairs. He’d never seen her like this—free and purely happy, glowing and close to a goddamn giggle.

“And you’ll be the life of me.” With a bounce, she sauntered off.

Good thing, too, because she didn’t see him melt like a green boy into a puddle of lovesick goo.

No, not lovesick. Love returned and multiplied, casting over his chosen life like the first rays of a sunset on a new and hopeful world.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

May 1821

Behind her veil, Cora raised her voice. The final lines of the poem needed just the perfect intonation. She paused, and every woman inched closer, holding their breath. She had them, their undivided attention, their devotion, so she gave them what they'd come to this obscure dark corner of a Mayfair home for—a happy ending.

“The sun threw diamonds on a calm sea, and the boat on the horizon brought him home to me.” She bowed her head.

Silence. Then applause, the muffled clap of gloved hands and the soft slap of slippers against the floor as the women stood, their admiration propelling them to their feet.

Cora pulled the brass snuff from her pocket and extinguished the candle nearest her, then stood in darkness as the women flooded out of the room, leaving her alone.

Not alone. One set of hands clapped still, and she lifted her veil and pushed it back, searching the darkness.

“God, you’re brilliant,” Liam said from somewhere behind her.

She gasped and jumped, and his arm snaked around her waist, pulling her tight against his body.

He whispered in her ear, “I would very much like to make love to my brilliant wife. Right here. Right now.”

She tangled her hands in his cravat and pulled him down for a kiss. “How did you find me?”

“I’ve learned to read that paper which says where you’ll be reading.” He nipped at her ear. “The one Prudence and Bailey print.”

“Clever man. I thought you had business tonight.”

“It’s done. Now my only business is you.” He stole her lips once more. Dangerous to do this here and now. But the dark hid them well. A thrill traveled up her spine, and she flattened her hands against his torso, smoothed them up to his hard chest.

He flinched, hissed.

She pulled back. “What is it? Are you hurt? Have you let Lord Escher best you in fencing again?” She unbuttoned his waistcoat and tore at his shirt.

“No, no. My business... It took me to the docks. Cora”—he laughed, brushing her hands away as she slipped them under the shirt—“I’m well. It’s only that—”

“There’s a bandage!” The linen wrapped around his chest was warm. “You are hurt.” She pulled him to the edge of the room where a sole candelabra offered the only remaining light.

“I’m trying to tell you. I got another swallow. That’s what I was doing tonight.”

A swallow? “Oh!” She curled her fingertips into her palms. The candlelight flickered shadows onto his face. “May I look?”

“Of course. It’s a bit... angry at the moment.”

Slowly, she unwound it, positioning him so the light illuminated the revealed skin. There—new ink pricked into his skin. A third swallow, red and raw, took flight with the first two. The new bird appeared much like the other two but not quite.

“Why?” she asked. “If the first two swallows were promises to return to yourself, does the addition of a third mean you still feel... out of place?”

“No. It’s more that I think of each bird as... as me . There was the vicar me, then the viscount me. They will always be part of who I am, but now I am just... me , no matter what title I hold or what plans I make. The third swallow is a promise to always stay true to that.” His grin grew wicked. “There’s a slight difference in this third one. Did you notice?”

“No.” She leaned closer than she had before. “I see no difference.”

“You don’t? Look right there, at the bird’s wing.”

“Ah. Yes. It’s a bit more elaborate and... the line is broken. The wing is not whole as it was in the others. A mistake?”

“No. A C.”

“A... sea? Liam, it looks nothing like the...” But then she saw it. Not waves, but—

“Like the letter. C for Cora. Right at the base of the wing, helping the bird take flight.”

“Liam. You will not make me cry. I do not cry.” But she was crying. He wiped a tear from her cheek and kissed her, and she said through the tears. “Let me fix the bandage, you dear, foolish man.”

She bandaged him back up and felt the heat of his gaze on the top of her head with each circle she made round his body. When she was done, he pressed her back against the wall next to the candelabra and leaned low enough to kiss her.

But did not.

“Who is he, Kitten?”

“Who is who?” Liam’s lip was impossibly full and lovely and oh, she wanted to taste it.

“The dangerous gentleman in your poem—all dark hair and craggy brow, a scar curving around his brow. The blasted hero of your poem.”

“Oh. He is based on a gentleman I’ve seen talking to the maids at Hotel Hestia. I think he might have a position of some importance there. He cuts quite the romantic figure.” Liam snorted, and Cora drew a line down his jaw with the very tip of her finger. “You are not jealous, are you?”

“Certainly not.” He placed his palms on the wall on either side of her head and sank his body into hers one delicious inch at a time, starting with his hips and ending with his lips. “I already have my happy ever after. Other fellows deserve theirs, too.” That last word a whisper before the kiss.

Time gave way to lips and breath and tongue, to hearts beating wildly and seeking hands dipping in and out of shadows and candlelight. Darkness held steady around the edges of the room, but still she could see so well.

“You are my light,” she breathed as he kissed his way down her neck and parted her legs with his knee.

“And you are mine.” Each of his words hot against her skin.

She used to be shadow only, no flickering light to guide her way, but now she felt the truth of what he said. She was Liam’s light, and she loved to banish the shadows that formed on her husband’s brow as he banished the shadows for her. And like the candle glow flickering beside them, dancing light and dark together, they wound their bodies up in each other, no care for where the shadows ended and the light began.

The End

Thank you for reading First Comes Courtship!

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:50 am

The ballroom was perfect, all dusky purple blooms and candlelight. Its corners brimmed with music, and its center, swirling with perfect dancing bodies, might as well have been the center of the known universe. And Tabitha and her friends were the discarded debris of some passing comet. Detritus no one noticed, no one looked for through the lenses of powerful telescopes or even more powerful quizzing glasses. Old, plain, penniless, unfashionable, and—stars above, no!—outspoken debutantes were ignored or acknowledged with disdain and then forgotten.

Why then did the Duke of Collingford's gaze rake over Tabitha like she was some sort of errant servant, visible only because she'd done something wrong? He couldn't possibly know . Could he? No. He could not.

Tabitha shook herself free of his searing consideration and returned her attention to her friends.

“What were you saying, Jane?” she asked.

“Gathering wool again, Tabby?” Jane said. “What about this time?”

“I know!” Lillian bounced up and down, her blond curls bobbing. “You’re counting things again. You always do at some point during a ball.”

Tabitha shook her head. “I can’t help it if there’s an unimaginable number of candles lighting ballrooms. One can’t help but wonder how many. And it’s always good to know how many doors there are.” And where they were located. “But no, that’s not it. I—”

“I don’t,” Lillian said, rearranging a curl that had fallen over her eye.

“Don’t what?”

“Wonder how many candles. Or doors. Ever. That’s only you, I think. I know . You were trying to remember what color Lady Jersey wore at Almack’s a month ago.” She leaned closer as if expecting something.

Tabitha knew exactly what she wanted. She unlocked a few trunks in the attic of her memory and peered inside. She had put it away. How unnecessary. Lady Jersey wore lavender a month ago. “Why would I do that?”

Lillian shrugged. “Because you can. If I had a memory like yours, I’d use it all the time.”

Jane shivered. “I think I’d try to forget all the things my mind wanted to remember. I wouldn’t want to get”—she waved her hands around her head—“cluttered. Oh, I know what you were thinking of, Tabitha. It’s the stars again.” She lifted a perfectly arched chocolate brow. “You’re always thinking of the stars.”

“No.” Tabitha raised her voice, using the tone she used with her younger sisters and, well, parents, too, to ensure no one interrupted her again. “Maybe a little. Think on it. If this ballroom were the universe, what would we be?”

Jane frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Tabitha waved toward the crowd of dancers shimmering in the candlelight. “They are the planets whirling on their certain paths toward their destinies. We are”—she shrugged—“dead stars. At best. Our time for shining has come and gone. Yet, somehow, we still remain. Not that anyone notices.”

Jane whistled. “My, you’re in a sad state tonight.”

She was in a sad state. She'd discovered her youngest sister Maggie hemming her own dresses before she'd left for the ball. And in the carriage this evening, her Papa had once again mentioned selling the paintings. They had been in the family forever, acquired by her ancestors from renowned painters of each generation. Was she to be the reason they'd lose them, too? Apparently so.

Unless she could find a husband.

Lillian frowned. "If we must apply your celestial metaphor, I'd rather think of us as..." She tilted her face toward the ceiling and pressed her lips thin. "As-of-yet-undiscovered stars."

"No, planets!" Jane brightened.

Lillian bounced once more. "Suns!"

"If we speak too loudly," Tabitha grumbled, "we'll be stoned for knowing such things exist."

Jane tapped Lillian on the shoulder. "Quick, we must raise Tabby up before she crashes completely." She leaned in and dropped her voice. "What say you to a dare?"

Lillian clapped her hands. "Excellent! I've not had one in a while."

"I'm in the middle of an ever ongoing one, as you may remember. I'll pass." Tabitha crossed her arms over her chest.

"Ooh, yes, Tabby," Lillian said, "tell us how it went last time. At the garden party, wasn't it?"

Tabitha slipped a glance across the room to where the duke still stood, his profile in hard-jawed relief to the softness of the room and the gaiety of the dancers.

“Yes, Lady Fitzsimmons did not know we’d been introduced before. Couldn’t even consider that it would be possible such a personage as the Duke of Collingford could have ever been introduced to an old maid with such an unfashionable appearance as...as... now what was her name again?” Tabitha patted the back of her coiffure.

It wasn’t her fault she’d been born with wild red hair. And it wasn’t her fault those sorts of locks happened to be considered the worst of the worst to the fashionable minded. And it certainly was not her fault no one remembered who she was despite the very fact that her extremely identifiable hair should make her unforgettable.

“So, for the fifth time in my life, I was formally introduced to the duke.”

Jane held out her index finger. “The first time you gave him your true name, yes?”

Tabitha nodded. “And the second time as well.”

Lillian held out her thumb and index finger, then popped out another finger. Three fingers for three introductions to the duke. “Then we dared you to seek a third introduction and give a different name,” Lillian said.

Tabitha sighed. She reached over to Lillian and lifted fourth and fifth fingers. “I can’t believe the man doesn’t realize what’s going on.” He must be dreadfully dumb. Or dreadfully full of himself. “I’ve been Imogen, Mary, Tabitha, of course, and yesterday I gave him the name of Miss Priscilla Pickles.”

“No!” Jane and Lillian exclaimed together.

Jane chuckled. “What’s equally unbelievable is that the women introducing you have no clue you’re lying.” She shook her head. “How?”

“I suppose either they know but don’t wish to make a scene, or they don’t know and are trying to hide the fact they do not have Debrett’s perfectly memorized.”

Lillian studied the duke. “The garden party was yesterday, yes?”

“Mm,” Tabitha answered. It hadn’t been too bad. She enjoyed being outside more than she enjoyed balls. She enjoyed looking at a pale blue sky and knowing that once the dark of night fell like a blanket across the country, everything hidden by daylight would appear—bright sparks far above, out of reach to all but the imagination.

Lillian’s voice cut through her thoughts. “Seek out a sixth introduction.”

Tabitha blinked and refocused on the conversation. “A sixth…”

“Introduction!” Jane exclaimed. “Perfect, Lillian! Tonight.”

Tabitha smoothed her skirts despite the complete lack of creases, avoiding her friends’ eyes. “So soon? Again? Surely, he’ll notice if I do that. Then the game is up.”

“But what will happen then is what I’d like to know,” Jane said.

“I don’t think I would.” She rather liked the game. She didn’t want it to be over. Their dares lent a levity to the tedious ton events, made them enjoyable. And what would happen when he found out? Those cutting eyes would slice her in two—or more—pieces. Or worse, he’d make sure she paid for proving him a fool. “I think Lillian had the right of it at first. It’s her turn.” She tapped her bottom lip. “What should you not like to do, Lillian?”

“I’m not afraid. Do your worst!”

Jane wiggled her eyebrows. “Dance barefoot.”

Lillian sucked in a breath, then let it out with a chuckle. “I would if anyone would ever ask me to dance.”

Jane elbowed her friend gently in the ribs. “They would if you weren’t always so quiet, if you didn’t always look at the floor, and if you had friends other than the plain spinsters standing before you.”

Lillian gasped. “You’re not plain!”

Jane looked across the ballroom. “I’m sure my stunning beauty has simply intimidated all the men. That must be the reason for my singularly unsuccessful first season.”

“That is a better explanation than many,” Lillian insisted.

Tabitha smiled warmly. “We love you, too, Lily. But Jane is right. You’re perfectly lovely. With that golden hair and slim figure, you look as if you stepped off a fashion plate.”

Lillian blushed. “My figure is too boyish to attract a husband. Or a dance partner.”

Jane took Lillian’s shoulders and turned her about, then she straightened her posture, pushed her chin up, and turned her back around. “There. Now.” She pushed her away from the wall that was their home and toward the edge of the dancers.

Lillian sank low and pushed back toward Tabitha.

Jane pushed her right back out into the light. “No. This is your dare. You stand there, chin high, shoulders back. Meet the gaze of every man who comes your way, and say yes to the first one to ask you to dance.”

Lillian’s gaze dropped to the floor, then bounced back up. “What about my shoes?”

“Keep them this time,” Tabitha hissed. “But next time.” She raised both eyebrows. “Barefoot.”

Lillian's face beamed red, but she straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin, and turned toward the dancers.

"Think she'll do it?" Jane asked.

"Yes." Tabitha had no doubt. Lillian had everything Tabitha did not—looks, money, and the normal accomplishments of a woman. She could sing, play pianoforte, paint watercolors, and—though Tabitha had never seen it—in all likelihood, she could needlepoint pillows for every room in her future husband's house. And she wanted a husband, a safe marriage, and a man to love. She wanted children. So did Jane.

Tabitha wanted everything else. She wanted to know everything simply for the sake of knowing it. If she could do some good with that knowledge, well, that would be nice, too.

Because she had much to atone for.

And she couldn't do that if she remained unwed.

And she would likely remain unwed because she was who she was, and she wasn't a Lillian. Ah, the ironies of life.

Tabitha glanced at Jane. "Has your brother come to town yet?"

"No. But do not worry. I will introduce you to him when he does. He needs a wife like you." Her face scrunched up. "He only needs a wife, really, but he would be lucky to have a wife like you."

"He's a practical sort, yes? Willing to marry for practical reasons?" Tabitha knew this. She and Jane had discussed the issue more than once, but she seemed to need the reassurance this eve.

“Oh, yes! Practical is the only state of being Edmund knows.” She smirked.
“Speaking of impractical—”

“We weren’t speaking of impractical. We were speaking of practical . They are antonyms.”

Jane waved her hand. “Yes, but the idea of one always brings about the idea of the other. So, as I was saying, speaking of impractical things... What about your sixth introduction to the duke?”

“I cannot. Not tonight. Perhaps in a week or so.”

“But you must!” Her face fell, and she placed a hand solemnly over her heart.
“You’ve been dared.”

A smile twitched at Tabitha’s lips, but she suppressed it. If Jane knew she was tempted even a tiny bit, she’d poke until she got her way. “I can’t. If the duke realizes I’ve been playing a joke on him, he could ruin me. He is just the type who would do so.”

“Hm.” Jane nodded. “Likely.”

“And then I would never get a husband.” And though she didn’t like it, she needed a husband more than she needed the invigorating levity of a dare, more than she needed the knowledge she craved.

“I think even my brother would balk at the fact you’ve been tricking a duke. He is a good sort but not much on fun.”

Tabitha grimaced. “Sounds like it will be a joy to be married to him.”

“My apologies beforehand. At least we’ll be sisters.”

There was that. Tabitha took her friend's hand and squeezed. "My greatest hope." She meant it, too.

Jane pointed at the dancing couples. No, not the dancing couples. She pointed at a man and woman—Lillian—standing on the edge of the dance floor. "Someone's asking Lillian to dance."

"It appears so."

The man bowed before Lillian. She curtsied and blushed, and then he led her out onto the dance floor.

Perhaps the man would fall in love with Lillian. And perhaps he had a brother with enough blunt to get her family out of their financial difficulties. Her father's title was old enough and prestigious enough, after all. Only her stupid hubris had drained the family coffers. And she must refill them. She needed to marry and fast. The man did not matter as long as his pockets were deep enough to atone for her sins. She'd never had much chance of a marriage built on the heart anyway.

Her hands shook, and her chest constricted, so she inhaled slowly, then exhaled and turned her eyes to Lillian, who was dancing and laughing. It was enough to release the tension. A little bit. She grinned at her friend.

Then she met the duke's eyes across the crowd. He did not look away, and his gaze burned with something she did not care to translate.

The hum of strings floating in the air stopped. The couples stopped dancing and gentlemen escorted their partners from the floor. Still the duke's eyes focused on her alone. No. It could not be. She looked over her shoulder. Nothing there but wall. She looked over the other shoulder. Still wall. She swallowed and slowly turned to face him.

But he had moved. He was striding across the ballroom, cutting through the crowd, heading straight toward her. Her heart fell to her feet, and a small gurgling sound escaped her throat.